

**T.R. IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS INSTITUTE
DEPARTMENT OF CIVILZIATION STUDIES**

MASTER'S THESIS

**THE HOLISTIC APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION
IN IMĀM ABŪ HĀMID AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S SYSTEM OF THOUGHT**

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140401012

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Dr. RECEP ŐENTŪRK

ISTANBUL 2017

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that the work has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification. I confirm that the work submitted is my own, except where explicitly stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the means of knowledge acquisition put forward in Imām Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s theory of knowledge, with particular focus on those elements that would, today, be deemed prelogical in light of modern epistemic convictions. I will argue that such means are not prelogical or irrational, as they have been described in several places, but are the natural epistemic dimension of an extensive and sophisticated metaphysical theology that differs significantly from the metaphysical outlook (or lack thereof) that motivates such pejorative labeling. I will further argue that Imām al-Ghazālī’s inclusion of these means is not a symptom of intellectual weakness or ritualistic bias, but a valuable illustration of the wholistic nature of Islamic thought, in which the metaphysical, the physical, the epistemological, and the ethical are all treated as inextricable facets of existence whose separating boundaries are, in many cases, impossible to delineate. Thus, Imām al-Ghazālī’s conviction that seekers of knowledge should conduct their search through metaphysical, spiritual, and ritualistic means does not detract from, but rather lends coherence and strength to his theory of knowledge, which has become canon within the vast intellectual tradition of his faith.

Keywords: Imām al-Ghazālī, theory of knowledge, knowledge acquisition, prelogical, holistic worldview

FOREWORD

The concerns of the student are universal concerns, bearing great importance for all of humanity. This is because education constitutes the primary means by which humans grow and develop both intellectually and morally, thus its strength or weakness determines the health of human societies. The foremost of the concerns of the student is the question of *how* we learn, which cannot be answered without first addressing the plethora of epistemic matters that underlie it. Surely every great thinker must at least consider the fundamental issues related to knowing and learning before allowing themselves to move on to other philosophical exertions, where they may then assert knowledge. Historically, many such thinkers have spent a good deal of time and a considerable amount of space in their written work trying to come to conclusions on and express their own epistemological understanding before exploring other topics. Amongst them is Imām Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, a genius and perhaps the most influential educator of his era, whose intellectual light has served to illuminate minds for centuries.

The entirety of Imām al-Ghazālī’s work can be viewed as an educational project: a groundbreaking and comprehensive effort to reform the way Muslims act by reviving the pathways by which they attain knowledge. Though, as far as I am aware, he has no known works that are exclusively devoted to the philosophy of education, pedagogical discussions intersperse his works and concerns about education seem to be at the forefront of his mind. In the process of his own intellectual growth, as he describes it in his autobiography, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Muḥṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, it is clear that he took epistemology to be the first step of philosophical understanding. All this stands to emphasize the significance of the question of what knowledge is and how it is acquired, both in general and in his works in particular.

As a student, I myself have been consumed by these questions, which do not seem to die down if they are not granted serious consideration. For this reason, I took the opportunity to explore them by making them the focus of my thesis research. I then made the locale of my research the works of one who might have something significant to

contribute in the way of answering them. Imām al-Ghazālī’s influence on Islamic thought is undeniable; it was my intention to open myself up to his works and allow that influence to work on me by exploring the vast fields of thought that his works cover. The texts I consumed were extremely enriching, yet, over the course of my research, I found that in their modern reception, sometimes even by their translators, a disservice was sometimes done to his pedagogical ideas in particular. I came across the terms “irrational” and “prelogical” and felt it necessary, in my exploration of these ideas, to address criticism along such lines. Thus the first goal of my work was to learn through my readings, the second to share my findings as I had formulated them. The third was this act defense - though it is perhaps unnecessary, as the works have spoken for themselves for nearly a millennium.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Recep Şentürk, who, on top of providing his utmost support in this project and throughout my time at the Alliance of Civilizations Institute, was the cause of my coming to Turkey to study and thus the door to all of my learning here. Repaying the value of even one priceless letter of what I have learned due to his efforts and through my many wonderful teachers is beyond my ability, so I must declare bankruptcy from the vast debt that I owe, and offer these humble thanks and apologies for my inadequacies as a student instead. Thanks are due to my teachers at the Institute, as well as to the administrative staff, for their kind guidance these past few years. I would also like to thank my entire family, whose support renders my life as a student possible, and to whose prayers I owe my prospering therein. Most importantly, I thank my wonderful parents, whose upbringing of myself and my siblings has been a blessing above all blessings, and my sisters and brother, who are my closest and most beloved companions in life. I hope this work proffers of some small benefit, and all success is from Him.

Nimet Cebeci

Istanbul, 2017

ABBREVIATIONS

A.H. :	Anno Hegirae (after Hijra)
Diss. :	Dissertation
Ibid. :	In the same source
Repr. :	Reprint

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“Ask the people of remembrance (the scholars) if you do not know”
[16:43]

“Say: are those who know and those who do not know equal?”
[39:9]

“Allah raises those who believe and those who have been given knowledge whole
degrees” [58:11]

INTRODUCTION

The chief objective of any reader of nonfiction is to learn. That is, perhaps, what brings you here. Reading constitutes one of the primary routes to knowledge open to us today. There are, of course, other means, ranging from the pedagogical to the technological to the pharmaceutical, but where do we draw the line? Which modes of knowledge acquisition are accepted as being efficacious in a given time period or cultural milieu? Is, for example, displaying respect for one's teacher a legitimate means of knowledge acquisition? Within the epistemology of Imām Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, it is. For Imām al-Ghazālī, the medieval Muslim scholar widely known as the "Proof of Islam," the quest to attain knowledge is not limited to the simple mental process of gathering and storing information, but is a metaphysical, ethical project tied up in the very fabric of existence and man's role within it. His view is shared by many of the Muslim scholars who preceded and followed him, who constitute the Islamic orthodoxy he himself is a proponent of; it is thus, to a large extent, representative of the Islamic approach to knowledge acquisition.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the means of knowledge acquisition put forward in Imām al-Ghazālī's theory of knowledge, with particular focus on those elements that would, today, be deemed prelogical¹ in light of modern epistemic convictions. I will argue that such means are not prelogical or irrational, as they have been described in several places, but are the natural epistemic dimension of an extensive and sophisticated metaphysical theology that differs significantly from the metaphysical outlook (or lack thereof)² that motivates such pejorative labeling. I will further argue that Imām al-Ghazālī's inclusion of these means is not a symptom of intellectual weakness or ritualistic bias, but a valuable illustration of the wholistic nature of Islamic thought, in which the metaphysical, the physical, the epistemological, and the ethical are all treated as inextricable facets of existence whose separating boundaries are, in many cases,

¹ G.E. Von Grunebaum, **Introduction to Ta'lim al-Muta'allim: Tarīq al-Ta'allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning**, by Al-Zarnūjī, 1-17 (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947), 12.

² - in that these labels seem to arise from the scientism and physicalism dominating much of the Western intellectual world, particularly the realm of philosophy, with the rise of secularism in educational spheres worldwide. Belief in the existence of the metaphysical is often an anathema to those who espouse these worldviews.

impossible to delineate. Thus, Imām al-Ghazālī’s conviction that seekers of knowledge should conduct their search through metaphysical, spiritual, and ritualistic means does not detract from, but rather lends coherence and strength to his theory of knowledge, which has become canon within the vast intellectual tradition of his faith.

The thesis is composed of an introduction and five primary chapters. The introduction will offer some biographical information about Imām al-Ghazālī and point to the immense role he played within his knowledge tradition. In it, I will also make some points of clarification that will be useful for my reader to bear in mind throughout the thesis - what I have called ‘disclaimers.’ Chapter One goes on to introduce the concepts of knowledge and learning in Islam by relaying the immense significance they carry therein. It also points out the normative tone that dominates Imām al-Ghazālī’s understanding of knowledge, thus beginning the discussion of the holistic nature of the Islamic worldview by drawing a connection between the ethical and the epistemological. Chapter Two provides the prerequisite cosmological background necessary to understand Imām al-Ghazālī’s epistemological thought. In doing so, it points to the inseparability of the metaphysical and epistemological under an Islamic worldview. Chapter Three sets out Imām al-Ghazālī’s theory of knowledge, approaching the question of what knowledge is from several angles, using more than one descriptive framework, as Imām al-Ghazālī himself does across his various works. Here, we will again see that the Islamic metaphysic and ethic pervade his epistemology, and color all his notions related to knowledge. Chapter Four turns from the content of Imām al-Ghazālī’s conception of knowledge to its sources. I describe these using a tripartite division, distinguishing between the primary, secondary, and tertiary sources of knowledge. Empirical knowledge appears within this model only as a tertiary source - a crucial point to note when we consider the differences between Imām al-Ghazālī’s understanding of knowledge and that of those who label the metaphysical elements of his epistemology “prelogical.” Chapter Five expands upon the sources of knowledge by listing the means that can be used to derive knowledge from them. Here we will find many means of knowledge acquisition that are, again, discordant with modern scientism and physicalism, which will give us a

sense of the root reason for the mislabeling of the kind Von Grunebaum and others are guilty of in secondary sources describing Islamic epistemology. This discussion will come to a head in the conclusion, where I bring to bear both Imām al-Ghazālī's and my own arguments to show why the terms "prelogical" or "irrational" cannot be used to describe the means of knowledge acquisition that feature in his work and in the larger Islamic epistemic he represents. The term "prelogical" is an adjective that means: "preceding or prior to the development of logic or logical reasoning; designating ways of thought based on myth, magic, etc."³ It is more specific than the term "illogical," giving the meaning of something (a thought or theory) that precedes the conception of a system of logic, likely emerging in an intellectual setting that is devoid of logical thinking. But the means of knowledge acquisition included in Imām al-Ghazālī's epistemological thought and, in fact, the entirety of his system of thought, does not precede the application of a system of logic - Imām al-Ghazālī was a master of Aristotelian logic.⁴ Thus, the designation is inaccurate. One could not even call the means illogical - they do not contradict the laws of logic, but the laws of nature, which are, in our time, (imprecisely and incorrectly) conflated.

My goal throughout these chapters will be to show that, given the philosophical context in question, the means of knowledge acquisition Imām al-Ghazālī includes within his educational thought are not prelogical at all, but are efficacious within their proper metaphysic, thus are perfectly consistent. We will see that his worldview blurs the boundaries of what should be, to the modern mind, a purely epistemological discourse, layering it instead with metaphysical, ethical, and material theories such that each of these fields becomes a part of the others to form one overarching philosophy. The result is an intricate network of thought: a holistic worldview that does not leave any realm of human life or facet of existence unexamined, woven so that its individual threads are discernable, but inseparable. Imām al-Ghazālī maintains logical consistency within this

³ "Prelogical." In *Oxford Living Dictionaries*. Accessed March 3, 2017.
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/prelogical>.

⁴ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, (N.p.: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

worldview in setting out his ideas about how knowledge should be acquired, thus the metaphysical elements of his epistemology cannot fairly be said to be “prelogical.”

Imām al-Ghazālī

Biographical Background

As I have said, My focus in this thesis will be on the philosophy of education put forward by 12th century scholar Imām Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, whose views I will show to be representative of the holistic tendency that typifies Islamic thought. Before beginning, it will be useful to provide some biographical information about him, tracing, briefly, the intellectual path that molded him into the scholar he was. Imām al-Ghazālī was born sometime between the years 1054 and 1057 C.E. in the town of Ṭābarān in the district of Ṭūs in Khorāsān.⁵ The biographical information derived from Muslim sources⁶ describes his childhood as a difficult one, stating that he and his brother Aḥmad were orphaned at an early age, and that “the boys’ father, a simple man with a great love for scholars” left them in the care of a “devout and learned Muslim elder to ensure that his sons would receive an education in the religious sciences.”⁷ Financial need “forced them to enter a madrasa for care. Thus, they entered into Muslim learning not for the sake of God, as al-Ghazālī is quoted as saying, but for the sake of food.”⁸ In Ṭūs, “beside laying the groundwork for his forthcoming career as a jurist through the guidance of a local Shāfi‘ite scholar named Aḥmad al-Radhkānī, Ghazālī joined the circle of the most eminent exponent of Sufism in Ṭūs, Yūsuf al-

⁵ Ibid, 25.

⁶ I make this distinction because many modern Western sources on Imām al-Ghazālī will question the accuracy of the biographical sources available to us from the Islamic civilization, though I will not be operating under the same skepticism in this thesis. Such a discussion is only related to the topic at hand tangentially.

⁷ Hamza Yusuf Hanson, "**Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam.**" Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, by Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, translated by Kenneth Honerkamp (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2015), x.

⁸ Griffel, **Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology**, 25.

Nassāj.”⁹ Thus, Imām al-Ghazālī’s intellectual influences include a spiritual dimension beside the more typical juridical dimension from an early age.

At the age of twenty-two, “he traveled to Nīshāpūr...where he entered the Nizāmiyya College and began studying with Imām al-Ḥaramayn Abū l-Ma‘ālī l-Juwaynī, arguably the greatest theoretical jurist and theologian of his age...[who] had perhaps the greatest influence on young al-Ghazālī’s thinking.”¹⁰ Under the guiding hand of his eminent teacher, al-Ghazālī became, like Imām al-Juwaynī, a proponent of the Shāfi‘ī school of law and the ‘Ash‘arī school of theology.¹¹ Though he was widely considered a brilliant student, he was also said to be proud. ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī (d. 1135 C.E.), a biographer of al-Ghazālī, said of him: “he had a vain pride and was blinded by the ease with which God had provided him to handle words, thoughts, expressions, and the pursuit of glory.”¹² Still, Imām al-Ghazālī was not without spiritual training at this time, nor was Imām al-Juwaynī the only formative figure he encountered in Nishāpūr: he also “attended the circle of the important contemporary Sufī Abū ‘Alī al-Farmadhī, a direct disciple of the most eminent name of Sufī thought in the early Seljuq period, Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072).”¹³ The link to Imām al-Qushayrī is significant in that it represents Imām al-Ghazālī’s spiritual lineage. Just as it was in his adolescence in Ṭūs, we find here the dual-influence of the scholarly and Sufī - an education that was both intellectual and spiritual.

Imām al-Ghazālī is said to have continued his studies with Imām al-Juwaynī until the latter’s death in 1085, at which point he “ventured on his own as a scholar and soon ascended to prominence in the Muslim world of his time.”¹⁴ Eventually, he would draw the attention of Nizām al-Mulk, the grand vizier under the Seljuqs for nearly 30 years, who was “second in power only to the Seljuq sultans Alp-Arslan (reg. 1063-72) and

⁹ Tobias Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, by Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society) xi.

¹⁰ Yusuf Hanson, "**Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam.**" Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xi.

¹¹ Michael E. Marmura, "**Translator's Introduction.**" Introduction. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, by Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, (Provo: Brigham Young University), xvi.

¹² Griffel, **Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology**, 26.

¹³ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xvi.

¹⁴ Yusuf Hanson, "**Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam.**" Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xi.

Malikshāh (reg. 1072-92).”¹⁵ Imām al-Ghazālī “was given in succession the pre-eminent rank of ‘Imām of Khorāsān’ and ‘Imām of Iraq’, and was quickly sent by Nizām al-Mulk to take over as the head of his Nizāmiyya college in Baghdad.”¹⁶ The momentum of having been al-Juwaynī’s student fueled his meteoric rise and in his limited time at the Nizāmiyya he quickly entered the upper echelons of Islamic scholarship. His influence extended beyond the classroom as well: the sheer “number of books he is thought to have written...is staggering.”¹⁷ It was during this time that several circumstances, including his meteoric rise and role at the college, compounded to cause a “personal crisis which engulfed Ghazālī from the beginning of 488/1095,” when “his level of engrossment in worldly life began to dawn on him.”¹⁸ The competitive academic environment he had come to dominate was corrupting; spiritual hypocrisy was rampant amongst his colleagues, who, as religious scholars, were responsible for the spiritual well-being not just of themselves, but of the community. He observed that “rather than humbly serving God by seeking to enlighten and fortify their brothers and sisters...they had become enamoured with themselves, setting themselves up as celebrities and authorities in all fields, engaging in public debates for their own glory.”¹⁹ Nor did he exclude himself from this criticism, writing in his autobiography:

“I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was not directed purely to God, but rather was instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige. So I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire, unless I set about mending my ways.”²⁰ These worries finally came to a head in 1095, when “Ghazali suffered a nervous collapse” which left him unable to speak.”²¹

This “psychological collapse unfolded over a six month period and was only resolved by a total change of direction...he left everything behind...(and) embraced the

¹⁵ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 27.

¹⁶ Mayer, *Introduction to Letter to a Disciple*, xvi.

¹⁷ Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 35.

¹⁸ Mayer, *Introduction to Letter to a Disciple*, xviii.

¹⁹ Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazali's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 4.

²⁰ Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl wa'l-Mufṣiḥ bi'l-Aḥwāl* (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2015), 100.

For translation, see: Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*. Translated by Richard J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999). Originally published as *Freedom and Fulfillment* (n.p.: Twayne, 1980), 79.

²¹ R.M. Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School* (Durham: Duke University, 1994), 2.

anonymous way of life of the dervish.”²² Imām al-Ghazālī secured long-term provisions for his family, left his post, and set out on a long, solitary journey, ostensibly to make the pilgrimage the Holy Cities. Before this, however, he secretly made his way to Syria, “where it is said he intended to become the disciple of the great contemporary Sufi master, Naṣr al-Maqḍisi.”²³ After spending two years in Damascus and a brief time in Jerusalem, he “fulfilled the duty of the Greater Pilgrimage in 490/1097, only to be drawn back to the caliphal capital by the ‘appeals of his children’. With this his wandering ended - though not his seclusion, which he clung to in some form...till 499/1106.”²⁴ For nearly 11 years, “he lived the life of asceticism, pursuing the mystic’s way. It was also during this period that he composed his *magnum opus*,” the *Iḥyā’*.²⁵ He was pressured to come out of isolation by Fakhr al-Mulk, the son of Niẓām al-Mulk, who had come to fill his father’s position of grand vizier, and was directed to return to the Niẓāmiyya college in Nīshāpūr. His stay there, however, was short: “as early as a year later, the great man made a final move to his childhood home of Ṭūs where he set about realizing an ambition to found a Sufi ‘monastery’ (*khānaqāh*). Here he would die barely four years later aged only fifty-three, leaving behind a contribution whose reverberations continue in Islamic thought till now.”²⁶

A Mission of Revival

I have provided this extensive biographical information on the subject of our case study because his life’s trajectory is a demonstration of “the essential attributes of Imām al-Ghazālī’s greatness: his profound authenticity, humility, and introspection, and his sincere desire for purity of heart, not just for himself, but for others as well. He undertook an arduous journey of self-knowledge, gleaned much from it, and wanted to share the fruit of his spiritual labors with others.”²⁷ He was brought up in the dominant educational

²² Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xix.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, xxi.

²⁵ Marmura, "**Translator's Introduction.**" Introduction. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, xviii.

²⁶ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xxii.

²⁷ Yusuf Hanson, "**Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam.**" Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xxii.

system functioning in the Islamic world at that time and during his career as both a student and a teacher Imām al-Ghazālī was afforded the opportunity to see its flaws up close. He was at the center of the intellectual life of the time and had his finger firmly on its pulse, writing avid criticisms of the corrupt, soulless scholarship that had become dominant amongst his peers. He developed a “violent contempt - born of personal acquaintance - for any spokesman for religion who hypocritically fails to implement its real message in his own inner life.”²⁸ Religious knowledge was the key to securing the salvation of the entire society, but those whose duty it was to preserve and produce it were using it as an avenue to money and political power. His writings on this topic are extensive and spread throughout his work, and at times so extreme that there appears to be little hope:

“The guides to the way are the learned who are the heirs of the prophets, but our age is void of them, and only the superficial remain, and Satan has mastery over most of them. All of them were so engrossed in their worldly fortunes that they came to see good as evil and evil as good, so that the science of religion disappeared and the light of guidance was extinguished all over the world.”²⁹

But Imām al-Ghazālī, after his spiritual crisis, made it his mission to reform the intellectual sphere he dominated by reviving the ethical, spiritual element that he considered to be the beating heart of the religion. He writes in the introduction to the *Ihyā’*, arguably his most important work, “the knowledge of the next life according to which our predecessors walked and which God, in His book, called discernment, wisdom, knowledge...has been quite forgotten. This is a calamity in religion and a grave crisis, [so] I considered it an important duty for me to compose this book in order to revive the religious sciences.”³⁰

This brings us to a crucial point about Imām al-Ghazālī: he is strategically trying to impact change, thus this should be at the forefront of our minds in considering his texts: his work should be read as a program for the moral reform of his society through

²⁸ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xxv.

²⁹ Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**” in *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2011), 8-9. For translation, see:

Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**. Translated by Kenneth Honerkamp (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2015) xli.

³⁰ Ibid, 9. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, xli.

education. In the *Ihyā'*, for example, "his principal and almost exclusive concern is with the adjudication of religious and moral values...it must not be forgotten that his book on knowledge in the *Ihyā'* was intended to serve as an introduction to Muslim religious practice and dogma,"³¹ so that even its extensive chapter devoted entirely to knowledge does not put forward an unalloyed epistemology. If we were to generalize Imām al-Ghazālī's overall goal, we might say that he sought "to revive Islam at large through its mystical dimension. The basic aim was to counter insincerity through systematically internalising the religion."³² True religious knowledge (which, to Imām al-Ghazālī, is the highest form of knowledge) had to be lived, and the heart, as the seat of identity within Ghazālīan psychology, was the organ through which this was accomplished. His project of revival thus "synthesized the heart and the head of Islam, accommodating intellect and devotion within the same person without dissonance."³³ Though there have been some that read this as an exclusively Sufi agenda, Imam al-Ghazālī's "dedication to the moral good of the wider community and the benefit of the common believer is still to the fore...[and] while key texts prove Ghazālī's commitment to the highest arcana and doctrines of Sufism, his mysticism is distinctive in ultimately sub-serving the renewal of Muslim society in general."³⁴ If we explore his work, we find the signs of his efforts: he often puts forward varying, sometimes competing, philosophical schema to deal with the same topic in order to make a point or strategically aim his emphasis and not necessarily because that particular framework is the exclusive way of understanding that topic. Take, for example, the varying scheme of the levels of existence between the texts *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna'l Islām wa'l-Zandaqa*, *al-Muṣtaṣfā min 'ilm al-Uṣūl*, and *Kitāb Sharḥ 'Ajā'ib al-Qalb* from the *Ihyā'*. Martin Whittingham notes of these frameworks that "the details of a scheme of levels of existence in a given text by al-Ghazālī are not as important to him as the underlying point he seeks to make, which differs from text to

³¹ Franz Rosenthal, **Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam** (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 95.

³² Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xx.

³³ Yusuf Hanson, "Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam." Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xxv.

³⁴ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xxi.

text.”³⁵ To a modern philosophical mind, this is rather perverse: a framework describing the levels of existence should be purely ontological, and should plainly set out the philosopher’s own, single view. But Imām al-Ghazālī is not, or is not only, a philosopher.

The reason I have emphasized this is so that we, in examining his work, remember not to take his every turn of phrase, nor the hyperbole he often employs for urgency, directly at face value: Imām al-Ghazālī’s work must be analyzed in the context of his program of revival. He was thoroughly invested in a project of molding minds at various levels of society and he writes accordingly. Sometimes the differences in his various works arise from differences in the theological threats they were meant to address and counter, which, during his time, were many.³⁶ At other times, the differences in content arise from the differences in the intellectual states of the audience being aimed at. These variations “are not directly contradictory so much as differing in their presuppositions and purposes.”³⁷ In *Mīzān al-‘Amal*, Imām al-Ghazālī himself describes his teachings as being divided into three levels: “transmitted dogmas maintained through communal partisanship (*ta‘aṣṣub*) in public contexts such as debates; teachings shared to a greater or lesser degree with disciples; and finally doctrines secretly believed to be the truth, shared only with others with the same level of understanding.”³⁸ There is a strong precedent within Islamic thought to avoid sharing all of knowledge indiscriminately, especially with those at beginning stages. The Prophet ﷺ is related to have said, “No one speaks to a people on a matter that their intellects cannot grasp without that causing trial and tribulation among some of them.”³⁹ One of the important educational principles Imām al-Ghazālī advocates is catering one’s teachings to one’s students, as it is unacceptable “to delve deeply with the commoners into the complex realities of the sciences; rather, one should limit himself to educating them in the [fundamentals] of worship, in the duties of the profession they practice, and fill their hearts with longing for

³⁵ Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān: One Book, Many Meanings* (N.p.: Routledge, 2007), 25.

³⁶ Mayer, *Introduction to Letter to a Disciple*, vii-xxvi.

³⁷ Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān: One Book, Many Meanings*, 128.

³⁸ Mayer, *Introduction to Letter to a Disciple*, xvi-xvii.

³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 212. Found in the introduction to Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 1:11. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 166.

paradise and trepidation of hellfire, as evidenced by the Qur’ānic discourse.”⁴⁰ This is to avoid giving rise to confusion and doubt, “for doubt at times affixes itself to the heart, and it becomes difficult to free [the heart] from it, so [the heart] loses hope and perishes.”⁴¹ Rather than risking the spiritual life of that person, one should be careful to provide knowledge as one would medicine: according to the state of the person to whom that medicine is being administered, and in acceptable dosages.

An Indelible Impact

Imām al-Ghazālī’s program of revival was successful, and it is for this reason he is widely considered the *mujaddid*, or renewer - prophesied to come at the head of every century - of the 6th of Islam (A.H.).⁴² Historically, he was “the undisputed figurehead of the revived Sunnism of the Seljuq period,”⁴³ but his work did not merely revive, it also synthesized. Imām al-Ghazālī “radically elevated classical Islamic discourse in jurisprudence, theology, and spirituality, and firmly embedded Aristotelian logic and philosophical ethics into the Islamic tradition.”⁴⁴ Nor was his impact limited to his own time - far from it. The massive influence of his works, their benefit and usefulness to Muslim students and scholars, continues through to our time, nearly a millennium after his death. In particular, the story of the intellectual upheavals he experienced, as well as his “distinctive spirituality, born of crisis as it was, has powerful relevance for the modern reader.”⁴⁵ The mark Imām al-Ghazālī left on the intellectual landscape of Islam runs deep; considering the sheer number of people impacted by his work, rather than diminishing, this mark has deepened over time.

I singled out Imām al-Ghazālī’s philosophy of education as the subject matter of this thesis over the pedagogical theories of many other scholars because of the modern relevancy he carries, the passion with which he views issues of knowledge and learning,

⁴⁰ Ibid, 215. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 168.

⁴¹ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 168.

⁴² Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, vii.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Yusuf Hanson, "**Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam.**" Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, x.

⁴⁵ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xxiv.

and the deep self-reflection with which he writes. The fact that Imām al-Ghazālī occupies a position of orthodoxy within the Islamic knowledge tradition was also an important consideration, as this makes him a suitable candidate to represent it. Within Sunni Islam, 'Ash'arī theology is the majority held creedal system, and the Shafi'ī school is one of four dominant Sunni legal schools. Al-Ghazālī, as a traditional scholar of Sunni Islam and an established teacher of these schools of thought, was part of a recorded chain of scholarship reaching back from his teachers to the Prophet Muḥammad himself ﷺ. Moreover, he had a remarkable “ability to strike a balance between retaining individuality and independent thought on the one hand, and, on the other, the importance of maintaining the community in conformity with an orthodoxy that is, nonetheless, rooted in an individually realized knowledge.”⁴⁶ This gave him the ability to set the tone of the orthodoxy he represented, while not making his creative intellect a victim to blind imitation.⁴⁷ Although some have attributed to him some extreme intentions with regards to philosophy or Sufism, “his Sufism...[was] both derivative and normative. The *Ihyā'* is mainly a reiteration and summation of the works of scholars who preceded him, such as al-Junayd (d. 298/910), al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072)...Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/998), and others.”⁴⁸ As for accusations regarding the Ancient Greek philosophical thought that echoes in his works, Imām al-Ghazālī offers his own defense: “As a matter of fact, some of them were my own original ideas - and it is not farfetched that ideas should coincide, just as a horse's hoof may fall on the print left by another; and some are found in the scriptures; and the sense of most is found in the writings of the Sufis.”⁴⁹ He goes on to argue, essentially, that a true word is a true word, no matter who utters it. In line with the saying of the Prophet ﷺ, Imām al-Ghazālī considers “wisdom [to be] the lost object of

⁴⁶ Yusuf Hanson, "Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam." Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xxiii.

⁴⁷ Walter James Skellie, "Translator's Introduction." Introduction to *The Marvels of the Heart*, by Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (Louisville, USA: Fons Vitae, 2010), xi.

⁴⁸ Ibid, xviii.

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa'l-Mufṣiḥ bi'l-Aḥwāl*, 80. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 69.

the believer; he seizes it whenever he has the opportunity.”⁵⁰ Many who have studied his works believe that his propensity to integrate what he deemed to be acceptable from the philosophical traditions outside of Islam was a positive change. Others have claimed that his repudiation of certain philosophical ideas or tendencies ended the age of generative Islamic philosophy. Though the nature of his impact can be disputed, that is not our concern here; what is significant for the purposes of this thesis is the immensity of impact, which is indisputable.⁵¹ For these reasons and others, Imām al-Ghazālī is an excellent case study in the quest to understand the Islamic approach to education.

Disclaimers

Representation is Relative

After having emphasized to such an extreme degree the representative nature of the material before us, it will add a degree of balance to the argument when I remind my reader that there is a limit to how representative a thinker from within a religion is of that entire tradition, even when pulled from an orthodoxy. Imām al-Ghazālī is an excellent representation of the Islamic knowledge tradition, but representation is a relative matter. Without delving too deeply into a postmodern mentality of skepticism about identity, let me simply state that we are studying the example of a single scholar from a specific time within the history of the Islamic Civilization, whom some from within his tradition, both during his time and after, have criticized and even rejected.⁵² Thus, we ought to take Imām al-Ghazālī’s theories as an example of Islamic thought without considering them to be exhaustively representative of it.

Caution around Linguistic and Terminological Usages

An important thing to consider in approaching Imām al-Ghazālī’s works in English, as we are, is that the ability of translations to accurately portray the meaning intended by the author is limited. One of our translators, Kenneth Honerkamp, quotes the

⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 188. Paraphrased from a *ḥadīth* found in al-Tirmidhī, 2687. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 144.

⁵¹ Yusuf Hanson, “**Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam**.” Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xi.

⁵² Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 54.

phrase “*traductor traittore*” (translators are traitors) in his preface to *The Book of Knowledge* to serve as a reminder of this fact to himself and to his readers.⁵³ The true, intended meaning of a text, particularly scriptural texts, is crucial in all of Islamic thought,⁵⁴ but it is particularly important in the context of transmitting knowledge. Imām al-Ghazālī expresses a worry about confusion occurring even within the Arabic language due to the misuse of terms: “when terms are distorted from their requisite outward meanings without the safeguarding of the tradition that has been transmitted from the master of the law [the Prophet Muḥammad] ﷺ, and without even a minute rational proof to justify it, then people can no longer rely on or trust these terms.”⁵⁵ His worry is not unfounded, as terms are bound to change with time; the development of the Islamic sciences certainly bears this out. The term *fiqh* provides a pertinent example: Imām al-Ghazālī discusses the varying meanings of this term in several places throughout his works. It is central to any understanding of Islamic epistemology, yet remains extremely unclear, with several meanings hovering in the background every time it is used, and more so when it is used without some indication or specification of the intended meaning.⁵⁶ From this we ought to derive a kind of caution about terminological usage in the epistemological discourse we are about to enter into. The limitations of language in transmitting knowledge is a valuable things to keep in mind throughout our discussion. It leads us to the conclusion that learning cannot simply be an act of the limited human intellect, nor can it be conducted simply through the limited means of language: coming to know - the act of knowing - involves more subtle faculties. Imām al-Ghazālī holds that that faculty lies in the heart and that it is ultimately within God’s power to place knowledge therein.

⁵³ Kenneth Honerkamp, “**Translator’s Preface.**” Preface. *The Book of Knowledge*, by Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (Louisville: Fons Vitae) xx.

⁵⁴ Because is not relativistic about truth and holds a correspondence theory of reality. The first lines of the famous creedal text, the *‘Aqīdah al-Nasafīyyah*, are: “The people of reality say that the real essences of things exist in reality and that the knowledge of them is verifiable as real in contradiction to the Sophists.” See: Sa’d al-Dīn Al-Taftazānī, **Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafīyya** (Istanbul: Fazilet Neşriyat, 2015) 56-8. For translation, see: Sa’d al-Dīn Al-Taftazānī, **A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī on the Creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī**. Translated by Earl Edgar Elder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 5.

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm,**” 138. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 101.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 23, 120. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 5-6, 87.

Imām al-Ghazālī's Writings are Motivated by his Agenda of Revival

Setting asides obfuscation arising from issues in translation or shifting terminological sands, there is the larger issue of Imām al-Ghazālī's rhetoric, which requires a degree of familiarity to navigate. I will provide two further disclaimers on this front. The first is that, as we have seen previously, Imām al-Ghazālī has a normative agenda and will not put forward his innermost philosophical conviction if he feels it to be contextually inappropriate. The knowledge he is focused on, the center of his epistemological thought, is religious knowledge. Even though we are going to be discussing a topic my reader may believe ought to be purely epistemological, this is simply not how knowledge is addressed in Imām al-Ghazālī's works. Nor is he unaware of this; it has simply become his conviction, after years of study, that the highest form of knowledge is knowledge of God. He comments on the efforts of those who take other than religious knowledge as their focal point in the following way:

“If you were cognizant of the degrees into which knowledge is categorized, and you knew the [true] value of the knowledge of the abode of the hereafter, it would be clear to you that the knowledge that they have occupied themselves with is of little value with regard to [true] knowledge; its true value is what is applied in actions accomplished for God alone, when it is undertaken with the intention of drawing close to God”⁵⁷

This is not to say that Imām al-Ghazālī did not operate on the basis of a thoroughly elaborated epistemology - there are places in which the normative element of his theory of knowledge takes a backseat to the epistemological element, such as in the explanations of thought found in his *Muṣtaṣfā* or *Qisṭāṣ*. It is simply that he does not always set it out for the reader as such. Recall that Imām al-Ghazālī employs multiple ways of approaching the same issue across his various works in order to achieve specific impacts in varying discussions. All of this might confuse the reader of his works, or the reader of a humble treatise like this one, covering some portion of his thought, so it will be useful to bear it in mind going forward.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 186. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 142-3.

“Is” Statements that are not Ontological

The second warning about Imām al-Ghazālī’s rhetoric is related to a linguistic usage that does not translate from Arabic into English: the seemingly casual use of ontological statements of the form ‘knowledge *is* such-and-such,’ where a definition is not what is intended. In English, “is” statements of this kind provide either a definition or a description and can mean one of two things: knowledge *is*, at its essence, such-and-such, or, a *quality* of knowledge is such-and-such. But this format seems to carry a wider meaning in its Arabic usage. There are many instances, occurring both in Imām al-Ghazālī’s own expressions and in the texts he provides as evidence, where a concept is associated directly with a word in what appears to be a blatant ontological attribution (knowledge is light, knowledge is reverence), but when examined closely in context, the exact nature of that attribution becomes fuzzy. How is knowledge both light and reverence? Is reverence a descriptor of knowledge? Are these statements both expressing separate epistemological principles? Do they conflict? These questions arise and hang in the air precisely because Imām al-Ghazālī employs this sentence structure not necessarily to set out a one-to-one relation between the subject and the noun now associated with it, but to connect two concepts in a wider variety of potential relations. For example, in Arabic, the fruit or result of a thing can be related to it by using this sentence structure, so one should not understand from the sentence ‘knowledge is such-and-such’ that knowledge is in essence such-and-such or that knowledge is, amongst other things, such-and-such, but that a *product* of knowledge is such-and-such. My evidence for this will be less than direct, because Imām al-Ghazālī takes for granted that we will be able to understand his usages and does not clarify them; we can fairly assume that the audience of the *Ihyā’* would have been students and teachers of the Islamic sciences and thus would have a thorough grasp of rhetoric on top of their native level fluency in both the Arabic language and in Islamic thought in general. But for the modern reader, there are points where the layers of meaning intended by such statements, immediately visible to Imām al-Ghazālī’s contemporary audience, are sifted and become visible to our weaker sight:

“It seems that the linguistic origin of the term [intellect] applies to that innate inclination [the capacity of the intellect], and likewise its actual function. It was only applied to the sciences [the object of that function] in that it is its fruit, in the same manner a thing is known by its fruit. It is said, ‘Knowledge is ‘reverence’ [in the heart]; and the scholar is the one who reveres God.’ For reverence is the fruit of knowledge, thus it [the term intellect] applies figuratively to meanings other than innate inclination.”⁵⁸

Here Imām al-Ghazālī is engaged in a linguistic discussion of the designations of the term “intellect,” or *‘aql*, but our interest in the quote is that it serves to show the multiplicity of meanings attributed to this single term. First, *‘aql* refers to the capacity of the intellect (an essential definition of the term), then *‘aql* it refers to the function of that capacity (a quality of the thing described), then *‘aql* refers to the sciences, which are its fruit, because “a thing is known by its fruit.” It is the latter usage, which Imām al-Ghazālī here describes as figurative, that I am interested in stressing, because it is unusual to English speakers. The point is also of general interest to us because the multiplicity of meanings expressed in these types of blatant statements is a linguistic byproduct of a worldview whose concern is never merely ontological, but reaches beyond this to the results and interrelations of things.

Moreover, Imām al-Ghazālī himself devalues reliance on ontological statements and terminological frameworks in order to understand a concept. He is a proponent of experiential knowledge, as we will see in Chapter Three, and as such, believes with deep conviction in types of learning that bypass the mental capacities entirely. In the following quote, he seems to express this, discouraging excessive reliance on philosophical statements or terms to arrive at the full understanding of a “reality,” particularly within the field of epistemology: “the great majority of these confused statements [on epistemology] have arisen from the ignorance of certain groups of people who sought to know realities through words and terms, whereupon they wandered about as a result of the confusion that constitutes the technical terminologies of the people, terminologies that are but derived from words and terms themselves.”⁵⁹ What this amounts to is, again, that we ought to be careful taking Imām al-Ghazālī’s every word as an expression of his

⁵⁸ Ibid, 316-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 257.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 327. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 266.

philosophical convictions. A reader of Imām al-Ghazālī ought to maintain the same flexibility in understanding the expression of his ontology as he displays in expressing it. Otherwise, it will seem to us that Imām al-Ghazālī lacks precision in his thought, or that he holds many varying views about what knowledge is, and we will struggle to distinguish between or situate these ideas. Simply put, when Imām al-Ghazālī writes that ‘knowledge is light,’ we should not understand from this that knowledge is exclusively or merely that, and the same holds for the many examples of this kind of statement one comes across in his numerous works.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF KNOWLEDGE IN ISLAM

Knowledge and its pursuit are central to the Islamic faith. It is related that the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ said, “Whoever travels a path seeking knowledge; God will [guide him] to travel a path that leads to heaven.”⁶⁰ Imām al-Ghazālī also relates the following from him: “Any aspect of knowledge a man studies is better for him than the world and all it contains.”⁶¹ In the Arabic, there are several key terms that can be translated as knowledge across different epistemic frameworks, however, *‘ilm* is the one used in these *ḥadīth*, or prophetic traditions, and may be the most clear and easily accessible in the context of this thesis. *‘Ilm*, then, represents a fundamental pillar of Islam’s history, its social mores, its ritual and legal practice, its body of ethics, its spiritual teachings, and, of course, its intellectual tradition. As Franz Rosenthal puts it, “*‘ilm* is one of those concepts that have dominated Islam and given Muslim civilization its distinctive shape and complexion. In fact, there is no other concept that has been operative as a determinant of Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same extent as *‘ilm*.”⁶² It cannot be overstated: knowledge pervades every aspect of Islam, even determines and upholds it, since it is by knowledge that the content of religion is known and acted upon.

⁶⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm,**” 34. Found in Muslim, 2699. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 14.

⁶¹ Ibid, 35. Found in Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, **Jāmi‘ bayān al-‘ilm wa-faḍlih**, 255. Alternatively cited as a saying of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 14.

⁶² Rosenthal, **Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam**, 2.

1.1. The Normative Nature of Knowledge and Learning

1.1.1. *In Islam, all Acts are Normative*

In order to understand the significance of knowledge, it is important to keep in mind that within the Islamic worldview, every act a human being undertakes is normative and that knowledge and learning are no exception. In Islam, God's divine care and mastery encompasses all of existence, thus His Law guides every stage of human life and regulates all facets of human interaction in and with the world; in seeking salvation, every action has significance, and all of human activity is subject to divine judgment.⁶³ Taking this metaphysic to be true, every aspect of human existence on earth has an inherent moral quality that is embodied in a ruling derived from religious law, falling on a spectrum from forbidden to obligatory, with neutral as the midpoint between the two. The Islamic metaphysic gives rise to its ethic, and that ethic is a sign pointing back to the metaphysic, thus the two layers of thought or existence are, within that worldview, inseparable. The effect of this is to bring all of reality under the purview of religion - that is to say, under God's dominion - and is why, for Muslims, a normative tinge colors every realm of philosophy and every element of human life. Imām al-Ghazālī's admonition to his student in the short treatise *Letter to a Disciple* that "all that you say and do, or do not do, should be following the paradigm of the Law,"⁶⁴ reflects this outlook.

1.1.2. *Knowledge and Learning are Normative Because they are a Means to Proper Conduct in all Other Acts*

Knowledge and learning are normative in that it is the means to understanding the law, and thus to proper worship. The pervasiveness of law and its wholesale applicability to all action and belief clearly demonstrate the significance of the Islamic sciences (those

⁶³ Von Grunebaum, **Introduction to Ta'lim al-Muta'allim: Tariq al-Ta'allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning**, 13.

⁶⁴ Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, **Ayyuhā'l-Walad** (Istanbul: Dār al-Shafaqah, 2015), 94. For translation, see: Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**. Translated by Tobias Mayer. (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2005), 22.

disciplines or bodies of knowledge that developed historically within the tradition) of law and jurisprudence. In order to attain that knowledge, one must possess a suite of auxiliary sciences, such as grammar, logic, and rhetoric, as well as supplementary sciences, such as hermeneutics.⁶⁵ Before one even comes to the content of religious law, one must first establish one's belief by learning creedal matters, which are expanded upon within the wider field of theology.⁶⁶ Seeking a base minimum of knowledge about "creed, acts, and [acts] to abstain from"⁶⁷ is incumbent upon every Muslim as an individual obligation; this is the knowledge about which the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ said "seeking knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim."⁶⁸ Imām al-Ghazālī adds to this the knowledge of the internal, spiritual states underlying outward acts,⁶⁹ whose dissemination is a primary goal of his magnum opus, the *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, or *Revival of the Religious Sciences*.⁷⁰ Seeking knowledge beyond that is incumbent upon the larger society as a communal obligation.⁷¹ As an act undertaken by the morally responsible agent (humankind), seeking knowledge has its own rulings - it is an individual or communal obligation, or, depending on the discipline in question, may take other rulings - but is also the means by which the rulings of all other acts are determined and understood. It is thus the key to a fruitful religious life:

"through it God is obeyed, by it He is worshipped, by it His unity is affirmed, by it He is lauded, and by it He is approached with piety. By it family ties are maintained, and by it the lawful and unlawful are known. Knowledge is the leader, and deeds his followers."⁷²

The obligatory nature of knowledge and its resultant moral weight moves it far beyond purely epistemic boundaries into the normative and ethical.

⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī, "**Kitāb al-'Ilm**," 65. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 40-1.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 61. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 36-7.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 57. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 32.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 35. Found in Ibn Māja, 224. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 80. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 53.

⁷⁰ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xx.

⁷¹ Al-Ghazālī, "**Kitāb al-'Ilm**," 146. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 107.

⁷² Ibid, 46. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 23.

1.1.3. *The Act of Seeking Knowledge as Worship*

The normative weight and general significance of knowledge is further emphasized when we note that seeking knowledge is not simply a means to proper worship,⁷³ it is itself an act of worship in Islam. Imām al-Ghazālī writes: “seeking knowledge is the worship of the heart, the prayer of the innermost mystery (*ṣalāt-as-sirr*), and inward intimacy with God.”⁷⁴ Just *how* it is an act of worship is a subtlety that is difficult to grasp, which the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ themselves grappled with, as the following *ḥadīth* implies:

“When it was said to him, ‘O Messenger of God! Which are the most worthy of acts?’ he responded, ‘The knowledge of God.’ Whereupon it was said, ‘We are asking about acts [of devotion].’ So he ﷺ responded, ‘Knowledge of God.’ Whereupon it was said, ‘We are asking about acts [of devotion] and you reply with knowledge.’ So he ﷺ said, ‘Verily a minimum of acts [of devotion] will be of benefit if accompanied by knowledge; whereas great quantities of acts [of devotion] will be of no benefit if accompanied by ignorance.’”⁷⁵

Knowledge is in many places compared to ritual practice by the Prophet ﷺ, as well as the scholars who are, by his own statement, his proper inheritors.⁷⁶ It is, moreover, described as being superior to various weighty supererogatory acts.⁷⁷ The seeker of knowledge is a worshipper par excellence: if his intention is as it should be, his intellectual work is God-directed no matter what its content. If knowledge is in and of itself worship, it is virtuous in and of itself. Imām al-Ghazālī explains that the virtue of knowledge relative to other qualities is obvious, but clarifies that virtue is also an essential quality of knowledge: “knowledge is virtue in itself and in an absolute sense without attribution.”⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid, 25-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 7-9.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 181. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 138.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 27. Found in Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, **Jāmi’ bayān al-‘ilm wa-faḍlih**, 214. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 9.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 22. Found in Ibn Māja, 224; al-Tirmidhī, 2682. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 5.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 37, 130-1. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 16, 95-6.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 47. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 24.

1.1.4. *The Act of Seeking Knowledge as an Ethical Pursuit*

If Imām al-Ghazālī’s motives in writing about education were primarily ethical and the way he describes knowledge is constantly colored by a normative tinge, this is an indication of that fact that, in Islamic thought, the act of seeking out knowledge is an ethical project.⁷⁹ Thus, Imām al-Ghazālī’s epistemological ideas, even in works wholly reserved for the subject, such as *The Book of Knowledge*, are all expressed “in a semantic field defined by an ethical perspective.”⁸⁰ The most basic knowledge that one will gain about the world is to recognize that it is imperfect, passing, and ephemeral; someone who fails to see this “lacks even minimal insight.”⁸¹ Knowledge of the paltriness of the world forces the person possessed of perception to seek out other than it: the hereafter. Knowledge of their contrast drives one to spend one’s worldly life in order to gain the best in the next life, and further knowledge provides one with the tools to do so. Seeking knowledge thus becomes the means of traversing the ethical path through this life and, as such, is practically the equivalent of ritual worship. A strong proof of this is the very telling *ḥadīth* transmitted through Abū Dharr, that the Prophet ﷺ said:

“Attending a gathering in which there is knowledgeable discourse is superior to praying one thousand cycles [of prayer], or visiting one thousand sick [people], or attending one thousand funerals.’ It was then put to him, ‘O Messenger of God! Even [better than] the recitation of the Qur’ān?’ To which he ﷺ responded, ‘Does the recitation of the Qur’ān render any benefit without knowledge?’”⁸²

There are countless other narrations from the Prophet ﷺ and his companions, as well as the great scholars of the past comparing learning and the pursuit of knowledge to whole nights spent in devotion, *jihād*, and other supererogatory acts.⁸³

Another bond tying the ethical and the epistemological together is that, in Islam, an ethical life sanctifies and legitimizes the knowledge possessed by a person. As stated

⁷⁹ Honerkamp, "Translator's Preface," xxix.

⁸⁰ Ibid, xxx.

⁸¹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 223. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 175.

⁸² Ibid, 35-6. Found in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 1:67. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 15.

⁸³ Ibid, 31, 38, 36-7 (respectively). Examples can be found in Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi‘ bayān al-‘ilm wa-faḍliḥ*, 108, 142-44, 159. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 12, 17, 16 (respectively).

above, knowledge drives one forward on the path of life, which is delineated by ethical boundaries. When knowledge fails to do this for a person, and when religious knowledge in particular is not acted upon, an apparent contradiction arises that confuses others. For this reason, knowledge that does not give rise to action is described as madness.⁸⁴ An unethical life taints the heart and obscures the knowledge therein, dimming its light until one is left in darkness.⁸⁵ Scholars, in particular, who do not lead ethical lives cause others to be distanced from knowledge and the religion; despite Imām al-Ghazālī’s injunction that one should take truth wherever one finds it, the people are naturally repulsed by those who do not practice what they preach, and are at risk of rejecting whatever they say.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the masses see the scholars as being best of them - their leaders - and take the knowledgeable as models to follow; when the scholar is morally corrupt, the people tend to follow him or her in what he or she does, and his or her “admonition...rolls off the hearts like raindrops off a smooth stone.”⁸⁷ If one lives an ethical life and works to build one’s character, however, one’s knowledge is legitimized, validated, and beautified; for this reason, “Ḥasan [al-Baṣrī] used to say, ‘Clemency is the minister of knowledge, affability its father, and humility its raiment.’”⁸⁸

1.1.5. The Significance of Epistemology

In emphasizing the normative nature of knowledge, we should not unwittingly ignore the depth and pervasiveness of epistemology in Islam. Even if we were to leave aside its normative component, knowledge as a purely epistemic category would still have to be attained by every human in order for them to formulate their worldview, since knowledge and epistemology have primacy in the realm of philosophy. The scholars of Islam throughout history maintained this view and, as a result, a practice developed amongst them of beginning comprehensive texts with a chapter on knowledge. This custom, “which, it seems, had its most conspicuous beginning in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī,

⁸⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā’l-Walad*, 90. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 16.

⁸⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 225. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 177.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 216. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 169.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 235. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 185.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 280. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 225.

reached its high point with al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) and the ‘Book of Knowledge,’” introducing his *Iḥyā’*.⁸⁹ The reason for its emergence was that, within the Islamic knowledge tradition, “logic and, above all, speculative theology had established once and for all that epistemology was the basis of scholarly activity and had to be discussed first.”⁹⁰ In describing his own quest for knowledge, Imām al-Ghazālī writes of the precedence he necessarily gave epistemology: “I began by saying to myself: ‘What I seek is knowledge of the true meaning of things. Of necessity, therefore, I must inquire into just what the true meaning of knowledge is.’”⁹¹ The form this inquiry took defined Imām al-Ghazālī and molded his life’s work. Like many seekers before and after him, his quest for knowledge allowed him to formulate his entire worldview; it is therefore impossible that his theory of knowledge could be limited to the epistemological alone. In considering Imām al-Ghazālī’s vast body of work, one must understand that knowledge was a cornerstone of his understanding of reality, and the educational mission he takes up as a result colors every aspect of his writings.

1.2. Knowledge as Both Means and End

1.2.1. *Imām al-Ghazālī’s System of Valuation*

With this normatively-tinged ontological statement, we arrive at Imām al-Ghazālī’s dual valuation of knowledge: knowledge as a means and knowledge as an end.

He explains to his reader that

“a valuable object that is sought after can be classified as either that which is sought for other than itself, or that which is sought for itself, or that which is sought for other than itself and for itself as well. That which is sought for itself alone is of higher value and superior to that which is sought for other than itself.”⁹²

Knowledge is something that is sought for its own value, in and of itself, as well as “a means to the abode of the hereafter and its delights as well as a path to proximity with

⁸⁹ Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, 94.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 49. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 55.

⁹² Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 47. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 24.

God, for there is no means of approaching Him but through it [knowledge].”⁹³ Imām al-Ghazālī refers to the former as the “the science of [spiritual] unveiling” and the latter the “science of [proper] conduct.”⁹⁴ The kind of knowledge that is an end in and of itself is, in this world, the knowledge of God, which is in a sense a precursor to the highest blessing of paradise - being in the presence of God - and it is only after death that complete and perfect knowledge of this type, or of any type, is attained.⁹⁵ Reaching paradise becomes the most important goal of human life, with the underlying goal of closeness to God there, as well as before that in the world:

“The most exalted rank with regard to humanity is eternal bliss [in the hereafter]...one will only attain the incumbent actions through the knowledge of how to complete them. The foundation of bliss in this world and the next is therefore knowledge; it is thus the most excellent deed of all.”⁹⁶

As an agent with free will, one may choose not to pursue knowledge at all, or to pursue it for the wrong reasons, but this is done at the risk of otherworldly punishment: “Whoever does not turn toward the goal, or respond to it; or who responds for his own self-interest, with no intention of exemplary conduct or servanthood, rather for personal gain in this world, is among the companions of the left hand and those lost on the path, [and] for him, boiling water will be the welcome and burning in fire.”⁹⁷ Salvation is thus intimately tied to learning. Knowledge - the knowledge that Imām al-Ghazālī is interested in and makes the subject of his educational philosophy, whether we consider its function as a means or take it to be an end in of itself, all centers on proximity to God and is thus not limited to the purely epistemic, but is fundamentally normative, not to mention its deep metaphysical implications.

⁹³ Ibid, 48-9. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 24-5.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 14. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, xlv.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 194. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 150.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 48. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 25.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 200. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 155.

1.3. Why We Ought to Examine Educational Philosophy in Islam

Naturally, if knowledge is central, education, as the means to it, is equally so. Imām al-Ghazālī takes this to be self-evident, “for if knowledge is the best of undertakings, then acquiring it is a quest for that which is most excellent, and teaching it is a means to attaining [what is] most excellent.”⁹⁸ There is no human project with more precedence, nothing one can pursue that is superior to knowledge; the Companion of the Prophet Abū l-Dardā cautions that one “be either a scholar, or a student, or one who listens; do not be a fourth [i.e., none of these], lest you perish.”⁹⁹

1.3.1. Islamic Theories of Knowledge and Education Remain Largely Ignored in Modern Academia

With this evidence before us, we see clearly that knowledge and education play a truly crucial role in shaping and perpetuating the Islamic worldview. It goes without saying, then, that their study would be central to the field of Islamic studies. As Avner Giladi points out in his article on Islamic Educational theories, “the status of education, its goals and contents, its organizational patterns, its methods, and the thinking about educational problems all reflect basic characteristics of the culture being studied...so that its importance far exceeds the confines of the history of education.”¹⁰⁰ Yet, “Studies of this kind...have not been carried out in the context of Islamic culture...[and] aspects of the history of Islamic education, such as educational theories, have not been dealt with thoroughly.”¹⁰¹ While much has been written on the emergence and content of the Islamic sciences, surprisingly little secondary material has been written on the Islamic conception of knowledge and learning, and the role that conception plays within the religion. This neglect is not due to a lack of interest in the connection between education and the development of religious societies, but is specific to the study of Islam, as evinced by the

⁹⁸ Ibid, 49. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 25.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 37. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Avner Giladi, "Islamic Educational Theories in the Middle Ages: Some Methodological Notes with Special Reference to al-Ghazali." *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* 14, no. 1 (1987), 3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

fact that “not a single important monograph on the educational philosophy of any Muslim thinker has been published in the West of the kind devoted, for instance, to the theories of Plato, of St. Augustine, or of Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, the Maharal.”¹⁰² For those seeking to understand Islamic epistemology and pedagogy, the primary sources are many, spanning various disciplines, but the secondary sources analyzing them are few, as are translations of those primary sources into languages more accessible to non-Arabic speakers. The deplorable lack in the material available on Islamic education in Western languages represents a fundamental weak point in the study of its civilization. This thesis is a modest attempt to begin to fill that gap.

¹⁰² Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO: COSMOLOGICAL CONTEXT

2.1. The Intertwined Corporeal and Spiritual Realms

Imām al-Ghazālī’s theory of knowledge is tied intimately with his cosmology; in order to understand the former, we must briefly touch on the latter. The most basic element of Imām al-Ghazālī’s conception of the universe is that he sees the world - all that God has created - as existing on the planes of the physical and metaphysical: “Know that the cosmos is two worlds: spiritual and corporeal (*rūḥānī wa jismānī*).”¹⁰³ These realms are also referred to as the *‘ālam al-malakūt* (the world of the dominion, or the spiritual world) and the *‘ālam al-mulk* (the visible or corporeal world), respectively. Though they are distinct, they are not separate spheres, but rather are connected; they are layered upon or permeate one another such that it is possible to access one from the other. In the context of earthly life, man’s senses dominate his untrained consciousness, thus he will experience this as movement from the physical world to the metaphysical one: “The visible world is a ladder to the world of dominion...if there were no relationship and connection between the two worlds, climbing from one world to the other would be inconceivable. Hence, the divine mercy made the visible world parallel to the world of dominion.”¹⁰⁴

2.1.1. Movement Between the Corporeal and Spiritual Realms Constitutes the Path of Religious Life

Imām al-Ghazālī adds a normative element to this purely ontological discourse by equating the movement between the visible world and the world of the dominion with travel on the straight path.¹⁰⁵ “The straight path” is the phrase used in Islam to describe

¹⁰³ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*. Translated by David Buchman (N.p.: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 25.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

the moral path through earthly life that is the means to earning paradise and avoiding the hellfire in the next life. By equating this path with the gradual raising of the human consciousness beyond the senses to the spiritual, Imām al-Ghazālī equates the ontological and ethical imperatives that drive man in his earthly existence. From the beginning of his existence, man is in need of his Creator from an ontological perspective (that is, in order to exist). The normative association Imām al-Ghazālī makes brings to light a second need - need from a moral perspective - since man is incapable of progressing on the path he must walk without the guidance of his Creator. If he wishes to make the journey from the purely physical to the spiritual realm, he needs to be aware of and understand both. This is where the “divine mercy” Imām al-Ghazālī mentions above comes in: God created the physical world parallel to and a sign of the metaphysical world as a mercy, so that we might reach one from the other.¹⁰⁶ According to Imām al-Ghazālī, this mercy is expansive, as no part of the physical world is excluded from symbolic relationship: “there is nothing in this world that is not a similitude (*mīthāl*) of something in the world of dominion.”¹⁰⁷ God uses the means of both the physical and the metaphysical realms to guide man, to provide him with knowledge so that he may safely make the journey to the hereafter. Thus God’s guidance of mankind is not limited to the scriptures He sends to His messengers, nor the prophets He raises from amongst their ranks to guide them - besides the books of revelation there is also the book of creation, by which God also teaches and guides man. In this way, God is always the primary cause of whatever knowledge reaches man, and the other means discussed are His tools, and are always secondary.

2.2. The Heart as the Seat of Knowledge

So how does man come to know, and where does this capacity exist in him? The answer to the second question is straightforward: in Islamic psychology, the heart is the seat of knowledge. Imām al-Ghazālī elaborates on this somewhat: “know well that the

¹⁰⁶ Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān: One Book, Many Meanings*, 50.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, 27.

entity that is striving toward God to realize proximity is the heart, not the physical body; nor do I intend by the heart that perceivable flesh [in the chest], rather it is a hidden mystery of God’s intimate secrets, that is not apprehended by the senses, and a subtle entity of His subtleties...in the terminology of the law, it is referred to as the heart.”¹⁰⁸ This subtle, immaterial reality that houses our innermost being can also be called the spirit or the soul, but very little can be said about it ontologically beyond what we see here. This is because God declares the precise nature of the soul to be beyond human comprehension in the Qur’ān, and Imām al-Ghazālī adheres to the common practice of Muslim scholars by maintaining a public silence on the topic.¹⁰⁹ We have mentioned the two layers of existence which man simultaneously inhabits: the material world and the world of the dominion. The physical heart exists in the material world, and the heart that is the knowing center of man, that contains his identity and can be called his soul, exists parallel to it in the world of the dominion.

2.2.1. Four Part Terminological Matrix of the Soul

There are many models used to describe the heart in Islamic philosophy and several terms used to refer to it. I will explain the terminological framework that seems to be preferred by Imām al-Ghazālī briefly in this section so that our references to the heart can be properly understood later on. In Book 21 of the *Ihyā’*, *the Marvels of the Heart*, Imām al-Ghazālī tells his readers: “know that there are four names that are used in these chapters” for the soul.¹¹⁰ These are: ‘heart’ (*qalb*); ‘spirit’ (*rūḥ*); ‘soul’ (*nafs*); and ‘intelligence’ (*aql*).¹¹¹ Each shares in the meaning of the word ‘soul,’ which al-Ghazālī defines as: “a subtle tenuous substance of an ethereal spiritual sort (*latīfa rabbāniyya rūḥāniyya*), which is connected with the physical heart. This subtle tenuous substance is

¹⁰⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 201. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 156.

¹⁰⁹ T.J. Winter, “**Foreword**.” Foreword to *The Marvels of the Heart*, by Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (Louisville, USA: Fons Vitae, 2010), v. See also: Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 202. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 157.

¹¹⁰ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb**” in *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*. Vol. 5. (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2011), 13. For translation, see: Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**. Translated by Walter James Skellie (Louisville, USA: Fons Vitae, 2010), 5.

¹¹¹ Skellie, “**Translator's Introduction**.” Introduction to *The Marvels of the Heart*, xvi.

the real essence of man.”¹¹² Imām al-Ghazālī goes no further than defining his term and makes it clear that he will not be revealing the specifics of his metaphysic of the soul here, or, potentially, anywhere else:

“We will guard against trying to explain...[its true nature] for two reasons: first, because it deals with mystical sciences (*‘ulūm al-mukāshafa*), and our aim in this book includes only the knowledge of proper conduct (*‘ilm al-mu‘āmalā*); and second, because to ascertain it calls for a disclosing of the spirit (*rūḥ*), concerning which the Messenger of God did not speak, and therefore no one else should speak.”¹¹³

Imām al-Ghazālī himself warns us off this path of digging too far into the metaphysic of the soul, which is “a marvelous and lordly (*rabbānī*) affair, the real and ultimate nature of which most intellects (*‘uqūl*) and understandings (*afhām*) are unable to grasp.”¹¹⁴

Returning to our framework: Imām al-Ghazālī uses all four terms interchangeably, as the context demands, to refer to the soul. But each term also has an outward, physical definition of its own, which is not common to the others. These more literal definitions are, respectively, “the corporeal heart, the corporeal spirit, the appetitive soul, and intelligence.”¹¹⁵ Imām al-Ghazālī explains the whole framework in the following excerpt:

“So now it is made clear to you that there exist the following meanings of these names: the corporeal heart, the corporeal spirit, the appetitive soul, and intelligence. These are four meanings that are denoted by four terms. There is also a fifth meaning, which is that subtle tenuous substance in man that knows and perceives, and all four of these names are successively applied to it.”¹¹⁶

The following chart serves to illustrate it more clearly:

¹¹² Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb*,” 14. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 6.

¹¹³ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 6.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 16. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 7.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 18. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 9.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 18-9. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 9-10.

Term:	Heart	Spirit	Soul	Intellect
First Definition:	The physical, corporeal heart	The physical, corporeal life-force	The appetitive soul	The intellect
Second (shared) Definition:	The soul: the “subtle tenuous substance” that is the essence of man			

Imām al-Ghazālī chooses to use the term ‘heart’ to refer to the subtle tenuous substance throughout this text; I will do the same, but note that these terms can be used interchangeably. Again, Imām al-Ghazālī makes it clear that he is not interested in expounding an ontology of the soul, or doing anything beyond stating its definition: “whenever we use the term ‘heart’ (*qalb*) in this book we mean by it this subtle tenuous substance...[but] what we propose is to mention its characteristics (*awṣāf*) and states (*aḥwāl*), not its real nature (*haqīqa*) in itself, for the science of practical religion does not require the mention of its real nature.”¹¹⁷ We will do no more than skirt around the ontology of the soul, for it is not our topic here, though we do need to refer to the soul to understand how knowledge enters into it.

2.3. The Passage of Knowledge into the Heart

2.3.1. *Imām al-Ghazālī’s Spectrum of the Extra-mental and Mental Existence of Intelligibles*

The first question, that of *how* man knows or comes to know, is a much more complicated one, and the subject of this entire thesis. For the sake of situating ourselves, let us set out some key principles here. In the 21st book of his *Iḥyā, Sharḥ ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb*, Imām al-Ghazālī provides us with another framework, this time for the *degrees* of

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 14-5. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 6.

existence, which are four.¹¹⁸ This second model blends ontology and epistemology, and will help us understand the passage of intelligibles into the seat of knowledge. These four degrees represent the kinds of existence a thing may have and can be used to mark its progression from God’s knowledge to ours: the first degree is “existence in the Preserved Tablet...real (*haqīqī*) existence follows this, and it is followed in turn by its imaginative existence...the existence of its image in the imagination. Its imaginative existence is followed by its intellectual existence...the existence of its image within the heart.”¹¹⁹ The Preserved Tablet is a record of all of God’s revelation and the content of His decree for His creation, which exists in the world of the dominion. It represents a portion of God’s knowledge, and would contain a reflection of every existent thing, both physical and metaphysical, such that their existence therein precedes, is simultaneous with, and follows their actual (*haqīqī*) existence (that is, their existence in the Tablet is maintained as long as the Tablet exists, irrespective of the status of their existence in external reality). The content of reality is available to be perceived by the human senses, both internal (mental) and external (sensory). Once it is perceived, there is a subtle but significant distinction between the existence of a thing in the imagination vs. its existence in the heart. In Imām al-Ghazālī’s psychology, the imagination is a faculty of the brain,¹²⁰ but knowledge inheres in the immaterial heart, which is the agent of knowing. Knowledge is not knowledge, but is mere perception until it is grasped by the heart. Imām al-Ghazālī expounds this view across his works; “for him, knowledge had degrees and dimensions, as well as an existential import that demands realization in the heart of the agent of knowledge.”¹²¹

¹¹⁸ If it is difficult to understand these two frameworks in relation to one other, think of them as complementary: one determining *how* something exists (either corporeally or immaterially) and the other *where* it exists (i.e., the specific material or immaterial “place” it inhabits within those two realms).

¹¹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb**,” 75. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 58-9.

¹²⁰ Skellie, “**Translator's Introduction**.” Introduction to *The Marvels of the Heart*, xxiii.

¹²¹ Yusuf Hanson, “**Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam**.” Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xxi.

2.3.2. *When the Pattern Breaks: Divine Inspiration*

However - and this is crucial - the transfer of knowledge need not follow a direct, linear path through these degrees of existence. God may interfere and directly reveal knowledge to man from the Preserved Tablet: “whenever the veils are lifted between the heart and the Preserved Tablet, the heart sees the things which are therein, and knowledge bursts forth into it therefrom, so that it does not have to acquire its knowledge through the avenues of the senses.”¹²² From this perspective, the physical world itself and the senses are veils separating us from this more direct path of knowledge acquisition, which is a kind of inspiration or revelation.¹²³ Yet the latter could hardly be called education, though it constitutes a gain in knowledge, as it is granted by God as He wills without the external means generally associated with the process of education. Whatever the route the knowledge takes to reach it, man’s heart is a blank canvas,¹²⁴ which is filled by God how and as He wills, whatever the means He uses to instill that knowledge there. The heart that is the seat of knowledge is, at birth, pure and unmarked.¹²⁵ Imām al-Ghazālī quotes the following verse in relation to this: “*And fear God. And God teaches you* [2:282].”¹²⁶ God teaches man: He is the primary cause of knowledge entering the heart, no matter what its path, and the secondary causes can vary according to His will.

2.3.3. *Another Way of Understanding the Process of Learning: the Metaphor of the Heart as Mirror*

The heart is the seat of knowledge, and in its capacity as such, it is like a mirror which reflects in it the true nature of things: this is knowledge. As al-Ghazālī describes it, the dynamic is as follows: first, there are things available to be known – these are the intelligibles (*ma’lūmāt*), which are the object of man’s knowledge. Then, there is that

¹²² Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb*,” 77. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart*, 59.

¹²³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, 9.

¹²⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 110. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 83.

¹²⁵ Ali Gurbetoğlu, “*Gazālî’de Bilgi ve Değer Anlayışının Eğitim Açısından İncelenmesi*,” (Unpublished manuscript, Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, n.d.) 11.

¹²⁶ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 233. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 183.

which comes to know them: the heart, metaphorically referred to as a mirror. Finally, there is the act of knowing, which is intelligence, or knowledge as the verbal noun - knowing. Imām al-Ghazālī illustrates this using the metaphor of a mirror:

“Even as the mirror is one thing, the forms of individuals another, and the representation of their image in the mirror another, being thus three things in all, so here, too, there are three things: the heart, the specific natures of things, and the representation and presence of these in the heart. The ‘intelligible’ (*al-ma‘lūm*) is an expression for the specific natures of things. ‘Intelligence’ (*al-‘ilm*) is an expression for the representation of the image in the mirror.”¹²⁷

The heart receives and contains knowledge, and its knowing is in its reflecting the knowledge that God brings to bear upon it. The “usual path which knowledge takes is from the Preserved Tablet through the other stages of existence to the heart, or spiritual centre of the individual.”¹²⁸

2.3.4. *Still Another Useful Metaphor: the Entry of Intelligibles into the Heart from Two Doors*

Imām al-Ghazālī uses many illustrations to describe the heart and its functions; one of these portrays it as a pool or well into which different streams of water flow.¹²⁹ Still another metaphor he uses to depict the way knowledge comes to be reflected in, or enters, the heart: it describes two doors that open into the heart and allow knowledge to enter it from different sources. He writes that “the heart has two doors. One door opens toward the world of spirits (*‘ālam al-malakūt*)...the other door opens toward the five external senses that are tethered to the visible material world.”¹³⁰ The access we have to the realm of spirits is through our hearts and the door that opens up to them from it. The door opens out to the corporeal world, and involves the use of the five external senses, but also the five internal senses, which are housed in the physical brain according to Imām al-Ghazālī, and which facilitate both empirical and a priori knowledge.¹³¹ The door

¹²⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb*,” 47. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart*, 35.

¹²⁸ Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān: One Book, Many Meanings*, 24.

¹²⁹ Bülent Çelikel, “*Gazālī’nin Eğitimi Görüşü*,” PhD diss., (Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, 2006) 27.

¹³⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb*,” 77. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart*, 60.

¹³¹ Skellie, “*Translator's Introduction*.” Introduction to *The Marvels of the Heart*, xxiii.

opening to the spiritual realm allows revealed knowledge to enter into the heart, and this is its exclusive entry point. As Imām al-Ghazālī notes, “the fact that the door of the heart is opened to the acquisition of knowledge through the senses is a thing you understand,” but the door opening to revealed knowledge is harder to grasp, as it is metaphysical, and our door is nothing but a metaphor to help us grasp something beyond us.¹³² The confusion around it is exacerbated by the nature of the realm of spirits itself, which is “boundless, consisting of those secrets hidden from the sight of the eyes and perceived only by insight.”¹³³ We will discuss the nature of that insight in Chapter Four, when we examine the sources of knowledge.

¹³² Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb**,” 77. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 60.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 45. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Marvels of the Heart**, 40.

CHAPTER THREE: IMĀM AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

3.1. What is Knowledge?

3.1.1. *There are Countless Ways in which Knowledge is Understood*

When wading into the vast epistemology of the Islamic knowledge tradition, the issue of what knowledge *is* can be approached from many different angles; knowledge is described in numerous different ways in Islamic thought, and it would be near impossible to offer a simple, single-sentence definition, even as a starting point for this thesis. Imām al-Ghazālī discusses this problem in his *Mustaşfā*, where he suggested that perhaps, “no definition of ‘knowledge’ was, in fact, possible.”¹³⁴ I include the following long tradition related by Imām al-Ghazālī to illustrate the range of epistemic, ethical, and metaphysical themes that surround knowledge, and to give the reader a clear evidence of the importance of knowledge in Islam at the time of the Prophet ﷺ:

“Mu‘ādh b. Jabal said, concerning [the excellence of] teaching and seeking knowledge, and I have seen it narrated directly from the Prophet ﷺ, ‘Pursue knowledge, for pursuing it is reverence to God, seeking it is devotion, studying it with others is glorification (*tasbīh*), searching it out is striving in the path of God, teaching it to one who lacks knowledge is charity, bestowing it freely on those worthy of it brings proximity [to God]. [Knowledge] is an intimate companion in solitude, a friend in retreat, and a guide to religion; it heartens one in ease and difficulty; it is a vizier among noble companions and a close friend among strangers; it is a guiding light on the path to heaven. God elevates people [through knowledge], making them leaders, lords, and guides who are followed on the path of excellence; they are exemplars in goodness, their traces are followed closely and their comportment is closely noted; the angels seek out intimate friendship with them, and with their wings stroke them; every [creature] of the field or the desert seeks forgiveness for them, even the fish and the sea snakes of the oceans, the wild animals of dry land and its grazing beasts, [even] the heaven and its stars. All this because knowledge is the life of the heart [protecting it] from blindness, the light of eyesight [protecting it] from darkness, and the strength of the body [sustaining it] from weakness. The servant attains through it the stations of the upright and the loftiest degrees. Reflection on it equals fasting, and studying it with others equals devotion [i.e., supererogatory prayers] through the night. Through it God is

¹³⁴ Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, 48.

obeyed, by it He is worshipped, by it His unity is affirmed, by it He is lauded, and by it He is approached with piety. By it family ties are maintained, and by it the lawful and unlawful are known. Knowledge is the leader, and deeds his followers. Those who will be happy are inspired by it, and those who will be miserable are kept from it”¹³⁵

The content of this long tradition can and has been expanded upon in volumes, but to pick from all of this one facet and designate it the singular “understanding of knowledge in Islam” would be arbitrary and inaccurate. For that reason, the most we can do, particularly in our limited space here, is indicate certain useful themes to ground our discussion and proceed from there.

3.1.2. *True Knowledge is Knowledge of God*

Imām al-Ghazālī puts forward several overarching frameworks describing knowledge across his various texts, but a foundational idea for each of these is that true knowledge is knowledge of God, since, “for Imām al-Ghazālī, the quest for truth was ultimately a search for God.”¹³⁶ He asserts this in the *Book of Knowledge*, stating that “the most noble and the true goal of all the sciences is the realization of God.”¹³⁷ This is because the quest for truth is a quest to understand reality as it is, and God, as the Creator of the universe and the Ultimately Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), is at the center of that quest. Recall what we have said as knowledge being both a means and an end. The best of knowledge that is a means to an end is knowledge whose end is proximity to God, that draws one closer to Him. Knowledge that is an end in and of itself is the knowledge of God itself. In either case, for knowledge to be considered true knowledge, God must be its object.

3.2. **The Division of Knowledge into the Knowledge of Conduct and the Knowledge of Unveiling**

Expanding upon this dual understanding of knowledge, Imām al-Ghazālī writes in *The Book of Knowledge* that true knowledge “can be divided into knowledge of one’s

¹³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 46. Found in Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi‘ bayān al-‘ilm wa-faḍlih*, 268. It is also described as a statement of Mu‘ādh b. Jabal himself. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 22-3.

¹³⁶ Yusuf Hanson, “*Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam*.” Foreword. *The Book of Knowledge*, xxi.

¹³⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 194. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 150.

conduct (*mu'āmalāt*) [with people and God] and knowledge of unveiling (*mukāshafā*) [of the unseen realm].”¹³⁸ The former, knowledge as a means, is what Imām al-Ghazālī calls the knowledge of the path to the hereafter, and it is “that which in itself is essential to the religion.”¹³⁹ He dedicates the entirety of his magnum opus, the *Ihyā'*, to the content of this first category: the knowledge of proper conduct with mankind and God, and the internal meanings underlying that conduct’s external forms - that is, “the marvels and wonders comprised in the beliefs and actions, and their benefits, which render hearts lucid, pure, untainted, sanctified, and sound so they can ascend to God’s proximity and partake of the gentle winds of His beneficence.”¹⁴⁰ The latter category, the knowledge of unveiling, is knowledge that is an end in and of itself, and “the science of [proper] conduct is merely a path that leads to [that] unveiling.”¹⁴¹ What is this knowledge? The most straightforward description to be found in *The Book of Knowledge* is the following:

“Here I mean the knowledge of unveiling which is interpreted as a light that appears in the heart when it is cleansed and purified of blameworthy traits. Through that light, certain matters are unveiled. Previously, one used to hear the names for these matters, and then imagine vague meanings for them without clarity. Then at the moment they [the meanings] become clear, such that realization (*ma'rifa*) can be obtained of the essence of God (s), His eternal consummate attributes, His works, His wisdom in the creation of [this] world and the hereafter, and His preference for the hereafter over [this] world...”¹⁴²

It is best described as an unveiling, the end result of attaining religious knowledge and spiritual training, though it is ultimately granted by God and thus may occur without these requisite processes or withheld even when they are completed. It is experiential: one cannot attain it by hearing it described or understanding the way it works, only through the experience itself. During that experience, a “cover is raised until the evident truth in these matters manifests [itself] as clearly as if it were seen by the eye, leaving

¹³⁸ Ibid, 56. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 32.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 81. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 54.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 117-8. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 85.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 14. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, xlv.

¹⁴² Ibid, 76. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 49. On this topic, see also: ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin Al-Qushayrī, **Al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah**, (Damascus: Dār al-Yamāmah, 2014), 450-2. For translation, see: ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin Al-Qushayrī, **Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism**. Translated by Alexander D. Knysh. (N.p.: Garnet Publishing, 2007) 323-4.

therein no doubt whatsoever.”¹⁴³ This knowledge is the end goal of the Sufis, and the science of *taṣawwuf* focuses on its attainment through spiritual purification.

3.2.1. *The Extent to which the Knowledge of Unveiling can be Spoken of or Understood is Limited*

The knowledge of unveiling, or “esoteric knowledge (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*)...is the culmination of all the fields of knowledge...The smallest share of it is to affirm its veracity and consent to it for those who have a share in it...the smallest penalty for whoever denies this [knowledge] is that he will be afforded no part of it.”¹⁴⁴ A minimum requirement of attaining it is firm belief in the reality of its existence, though the content of such knowledge can only be referenced laterally. This is because no amount of words can convey anything but a peripheral understanding of it, since it

“is not the knowledge written in books, nor does one graced with something of it speak openly of it except with people similar to him, who are associated with him, through counsel or in secret. This is the hidden knowledge that [the Messenger of God, ﷺ] intended by his words, ‘There is a knowledge with a hidden aspect, none know of it but the people of the realization of God most High; when they speak of it, those heedless of God pay it no attention.’”¹⁴⁵

The difference between knowing this type of knowledge by having it described to one and knowing it through experience is like the difference between understanding the causes of good health or satiety and actually being in good health or satiated.¹⁴⁶ One ought only to describe the knowledge of unveiling in words to the people capable of understanding and, eventually, achieving it. Imām al-Ghazālī cautions that it is “not permitted to record in writing, although it is the ultimate aim of saints and the ultimate aim of the sincere.”¹⁴⁷ For this reason, the knowledge that is an end in and of itself (and

¹⁴³ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 78. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 51.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 75-6. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 48-9.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 78-9. Found in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 1:175. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 51.

¹⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 99. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 78.

¹⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 24. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, xlv. See also: Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā’l-Walad*, 95. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 24.

therefore of the highest value)¹⁴⁸ is not the subject of Imām al-Ghazālī’s *Book of Knowledge*, nor does it feature heavily in any other of the other discussions of knowledge that intersperse his many texts. He refers to it, as we have seen in the quotes above, only to point it out and gives his readers nothing more than rudimentary descriptions. If we take Imām al-Ghazālī’s word for it, he had been granted some portion of this knowledge, more than he writes on the matter:

“In the course of those periods of solitude things impossible to enumerate or detail in depth were disclosed to me. This much I shall mention...I knew with certainty that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way to God Most High, their mode of life is the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethic the purest...all their motions and quiescences, exterior and interior, are learned from the light of the niche of prophecy.”¹⁴⁹

It is highly likely that he would have shared more than this with his elite students verbally, but, as he says, the extent to which such things can be conveyed is limited.

3.2.2. *Imām al-Ghazālī’s Works Primarily Take into Hand the Knowledge of Proper Conduct*

The type of knowledge with which Imām al-Ghazālī concerns himself in his writing is the first category, what he calls the knowledge of proper conduct (*‘ilm al-mu‘āmalā*). This then divides into two categories, knowledge dealing with outward states and knowledge dealing with inward states.¹⁵⁰ The first as encompasses the aspects of man’s external life - the form of his ritual acts, the ethics of his conduct with others (which I will refer to as social ethics), securing the health of his body through proper living, and, generally, the organization of his material life. The second deals with the aspects of his internal life - the meaning behind his ritual acts, his relationship with God, securing the health of his soul by building virtue and avoiding vice, and, generally, the organization of his spiritual life.

¹⁴⁸ Since “that which is sought for itself alone is of higher value and superior to that which is sought for [something] other than itself,” Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 47. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 24.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 105-6. For translation, see: Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 81.

¹⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 13-4. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, xlv.

3.3. The Classification of the Sciences

3.3.1. *Imām al-Ghazālī's Criteria in Ranking the Sciences*

Imām al-Ghazālī spends a good portion of *The Book of Knowledge* subdividing and ranking the various disciplines that fall under these categories, classifying them as communal or individual obligations. There are many religious sciences to be organized, as “Islam as a whole underwent an exceptionally rapid phase of scholastic elaboration in which a powerful armoury of religious sciences appeared such as Ḥadīth, jurisprudence and Kalām theology...through which the religion became radically formalized and systematized.”¹⁵¹ Just as with understanding the nature of knowledge itself, there are many ways to approach the division and ranking of these sciences, and Imām al-Ghazālī applies a few criteria in his various categorizations. Typically, “the (Muslim) philosophers classify sciences on the basis of their epistemological nature and according to the different grades of their subjects, while al-Ghazali applies an external criterion - their usefulness in attaining religious ends beyond themselves.”¹⁵² He ranks them on the same normative spectrum that the *sharī‘a* uses to classify all human acts: on a scale from required to forbidden, with each of the sciences labeled as praiseworthy or blameworthy on the basis of their relative benefit or harm. This is Imām al-Ghazālī’s primary consideration in valuing the disciplines or sciences: he writes that “the sciences are of varying gradations. Some carry the servant along on his path to God, others support his quest in one way or another; they also have well-ordered stages arranged according to proximity and distance from the objective and they have guardians who uphold their integrity.”¹⁵³ He applies the same criterion - that is, the benefit of each discipline - to secular fields of knowledge (*‘ulūm ghayr shar‘iyya*), which, when employed in the service of human well-being, become normative (read: religious).¹⁵⁴ Thus, the blameworthy-praiseworthy knowledge divide is not in line with the secular-religious

¹⁵¹ Mayer, *Introduction to Letter to a Disciple*, ix.

¹⁵² Giladi, "Islamic Educational Theories in the Middle Ages: Some Methodological Notes with Special Reference to al-Ghazali," 7.

¹⁵³ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 192. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 148.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 62-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 38.

knowledge divide; rather, “the blameworthy category...is that in which there is no benefit, neither in religion nor in the worldly life, or its harm overcomes its benefit, like the knowledge of sorcery, talismans, and astrology.”¹⁵⁵ This provides some explanation for the fact that one of the common prayers of the Prophet ﷺ was to seek protection from knowledge that does not benefit.¹⁵⁶

3.3.2. *The Instrumental Sciences*

Some sciences, both secular and religious (*shar‘iyya*), are instruments for attaining others, and should not be looked down upon as insignificant, especially by “one whose goal is [proximity to God, who] will seek - without a doubt - the closest [science] to his goal...Given this, it is inappropriate for him to regard any of the sciences with disdain.”¹⁵⁷ Nor is specialization in these fields to be looked down upon, “for those [scholars] who take on the responsibility for these fields are similar to those men who man the fortresses and those who reside and serve therein...not one of them will go unrewarded as long as their intention is that the word of God be raised to its utmost; not the acquisition of spoils of war.”¹⁵⁸ This work is considered a communal obligation, thus it is not necessary for every scholar to be expanding the horizons of every single field at the same time: he or she must have a high level grasp of them and may then specialize beyond this in one or two.

3.4. Metaphors Used to Describe Knowledge

3.4.1. *Knowledge is Life*

Beyond these practical divisions, knowledge is described using several metaphors, each highlighting its importance and value. The first of these compares knowledge to life, something God Himself does in the Qur’ān, calling knowledge “spirit

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 144. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 106.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 116. Found in Muslim, 2722. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 84.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 196. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 152.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 197. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 152.

and life in His words...*And is one who was dead and We gave him life and made for him light by which to walk among the people like one who is in darkness, never to emerge therefrom?* [6:122].”¹⁵⁹ Imām ‘Alī, the cousin of the Prophet ﷺ and one of the four righteous caliphs that led the Muslims after his passing, said in verse: “the people are dead and the people of knowledge are the living.”¹⁶⁰ The life that knowledge maintains is the life of the soul - of the heart. Imām al-Ghazālī relates the following on this point: “Fath al-Mawṣilī asked, ‘Will not a sick person who is prevented from nourishment, water, and medicine die?’ They said, ‘Indeed.’ He said, ‘The heart likewise, when it is prevented from attaining wisdom and knowledge for three days, dies.’”¹⁶¹ Ignorance, parallel to this, is linked with death: “ignorance of God Most High is the heart’s deadly poison.”¹⁶² A soul marred by ignorance is diseased, and it can only be healed at the hands of the knowledgeable, who are, in most cases, able to cure it, but only if the diseased person seeks out a cure.¹⁶³ Imām al-Ghazālī argues that many of the ignorant suffer from an incurable disease, because receptivity to knowledge requires certain basic characteristics and capacities, which a good number of people lack.¹⁶⁴ In order to avoid this, one must establish a diet of the right kinds of knowledge and pursue them throughout one’s life; if one does not, one’s end is clear. Spiritual death is the fate of anyone who starves their heart of knowledge, though this threat is, for most people, veiled by the concerns of external life. This is very dangerous, for the worries of the world are like fear, which, in the moment of injury, blinds us to the pain of wounds, but when we recover from the fear, we are awakened to the pain and the seriousness of our state. Similarly, the pain and death of our hearts become stark when the worries of the world are lifted at death.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 306. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 249.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 28. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 10.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 30. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 11.

¹⁶² Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Muḥṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 117. For translation, see: Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 87.

¹⁶³ Al-Ghazālī, **Ayyuhā’l-Walad**, 107-8. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 44.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 107-10. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 44-8.

¹⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 30. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 11.

3.4.2. *Knowledge is Light*

As seen in the verse listed above, together with being described as life, knowledge is very often described as light. Another Qur’ānic example is verse [2:257], *He brings them out from darkness into the light*, in which darkness signifies ignorance and light, knowledge.¹⁶⁶ Imām al-Ghazālī relates that Ibn Mas‘ūd said, “Knowledge is not a question of the quantity of narrations [one cites], it is a light cast into the heart.”¹⁶⁷ There are countless examples of this comparison being made, and they not limited to relating knowledge itself or the content of knowledge with light, but also describe the knowledgeable (scholars) and the intellect itself as lights. Light is often used to describe elements of the unseen, both in the Qur’ān and in the Islamic tradition at large. Imām al-Ghazālī has an entire text devoted to commentary on what has come to be called the Verse of Light (*ayat al-nūr*) - one of his most esoteric works, the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. Because it attaches to so many referents, the metaphor is difficult to fully grasp, let alone parse or explain. Imām al-Ghazālī warns his readers about such matters, writing that they are “a matter of the domain of the science of unveiling” whose “discussion in the domain of the knowledge of conduct is inappropriate.”¹⁶⁸ Here, it is sufficient to note that it is pervasive, perhaps nowhere more so than in Islamic epistemology: knowledge *is* a light cast into the heart by God, through which it sees - that is, understands.¹⁶⁹

3.4.3. *Knowledge is Happiness*

Finally, knowledge is happiness - that is, happiness is one of the fruits of knowledge. Imām al-Shāfi‘ī, one of the great Imams after whom the four schools of legal thought are named, said, “The nobility of knowledge is such that, whoever it is attributed to, even in an insignificant amount, is joyful, and whoever it is withheld from is distraught.”¹⁷⁰ We have said that knowledge is life and ignorance is death, and

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 306. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 249.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 185. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 142.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 307. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 250.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 312. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 253.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 32. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 13.

knowledge is light and ignorance is darkness, so it will be easy for my reader to see why knowledge might be happiness and ignorance, misery. Knowledge is both a means to achieving ultimate happiness and a pleasure in and of itself.¹⁷¹ Imām al-Ghazālī speaks of the Joy of Comprehension, *farḥ al-tafaṭṭun*, experienced by students, which may be increased by anticipation if the teacher intimates certain teachings rather than relating them outright.¹⁷² The unadulterated pleasure associated with knowing and the discomfort and pain of ignorance is something known through experience - it is a piece of experiential knowledge that the modern reader is likely to have in common with Imām al-Ghazālī.

3.5. The Nobility of Knowledge

3.5.1. *Mankind's Intellect Sets him Apart from all of Creation*

One of the most prevalent qualities of knowledge, mentioned throughout Imām al-Ghazālī's discourses thereon, is the nobility of knowledge. The reason for this is that the source of man's nobility lies in his ability to know: his intellect is the capacity that sets him apart from other created beings, both worldly and otherworldly,¹⁷³ and the means by which he distinguishes himself in relation to his fellow man.¹⁷⁴ With regards to the first element, man's nobility relative to other created beings, the distinguishing factor is that humans have the ability to reason and in reasoning, to perceive the consequences of their actions and act knowingly rather than being driven by desires and natural impulses alone.¹⁷⁵ Thus the intellect provides the foundation for free will, and it is man's intellect that allows him to take on the mantle of vicegerency on earth - the *khilāfa* granted him by God.¹⁷⁶ The second element of nobility, what allows a person to distinguish him or herself from other humans, is achieved by acting on what the intellect elucidates. The

¹⁷¹ Rosenthal, **Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam**, 241.

¹⁷² Al-Ghazālī, "**Kitāb al-ʿIlm**," 211. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 165.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 29. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 10-1.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 26-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 8.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 312, 314. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 253, 255.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 52-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 28.

intellect allows man to approach God through willing obedience, gaining His pleasure and increasing in nobility. Thus the intellect lies within humankind as both a latent capacity, which grants man his innate nobility, and as a potential to be actualized, which grants man his earned nobility. We will find this borne out in the references to the intellect in the ḥadīth, in which the nobility of knowledge is linked to both the capacity to know - that is, the intellect itself - as well as knowledge gained and acted upon - that is, the content of knowledge. Imām al-Ghazālī explains that it is the capacity of the intellect that is meant in the following tradition related from the Prophet ﷺ: “God created nothing more honored by Him than the intellect,” while it is the content of knowledge that is referred to in this tradition: “Increase in intellect, you will increase in proximity to your Lord.”¹⁷⁷ Man’s proximity to his Lord is the measure of his ultimate nobility, and, according to a prophetic tradition, the intellect (when acted on in the best way) is what determines this.¹⁷⁸

3.5.2. *The Relationship between Knowledge and Prophecy*

The nobility of knowledge is further established by its association with prophethood. The association can be made loosely, by noting that the prophets sent by God to mankind throughout history were sent as guides, and therefore necessarily as teachers. It can also be made using textual evidence, for example with the oft-quoted ḥadīth, that calls the scholars the heirs of the prophets, as there is nothing higher than prophecy, and no bond stronger than that represented by ties of inheritance.¹⁷⁹ God Himself poses this truth as a rhetorical question, commanding the Prophet ﷺ to ask, in verse [39:9], *Say, ‘Are those who know equal to those who do not know?’* The scholars carry out the mission of education begun by the prophets; they are the guides who now channel guidance safely to the port of understanding for the society at large. Imām al-

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 315. Found in al-Ṭabarānī, **al-Mu’jam al-kabīr**, 8:283. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 256.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 308. Found in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, **Nawādir al-uṣūl**, 242. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 250.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 22. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 5.

Ghazālī relates another tradition in which the Prophet ﷺ tells his followers that he was sent as a teacher.¹⁸⁰ Through their association with one who was the best of mankind and with all the other prophets, those who possess knowledge surpass the mere worshipper as the light of the moon outshines that of the stars.¹⁸¹ In Islam, even the category of the martyrs, whose ultimate sacrifice is immensely rewarded, is outranked by the scholars, whose ink, it is said “will be weighed against the blood of the martyrs, wherein the ink of the scholars will prove weightier than the blood of the martyrs.”¹⁸² One who dies seeking this most noble of things with the goal of reviving the religion, dies with but one step separating him and the prophets in heaven.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 42. Found in Ibn Māja, 229. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 19.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 26. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 8.

¹⁸² Ibid, 31. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 12.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 36. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 15.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

4.1. The Primary Source of Knowledge

4.1.1. *God is the Primary Cause of Knowledge Entering the Heart*

It should now be more than obvious to my reader *why* knowledge is sought from the Islamic perspective, but not yet *from where*. There are several sources of knowledge - what Mayer calls “the channels of knowledge.”¹⁸⁴ We have mentioned that the primary source of knowledge is God, the Cause of all causes. Every other source of knowledge is a secondary means, which the Muslim lends no causal credence to without attributing its creation at every instantiation to God.¹⁸⁵ Recall the Qur’ānic evidence Imām al-Ghazālī cites in this context, verse [2:282]: *And fear God. And God teaches you.*¹⁸⁶ Another Qur’ānic reference to this is expanded upon in a ḥadīth:

“After reciting His words, *So whoever God wants to guide, He expands his breast to [contain] Islam* [6:125]. Someone asked, ‘O Messenger of God, what is this ‘expansion’?’ He replied, ‘When the light descends into the heart, it expands its center so that it becomes spacious.’”¹⁸⁷

This could refer to the direct unveiling of meanings to the heart, or to the creation of the light of the intellect (that is, the capacity to perceive meaning) therein. In his autobiography, *The Deliverance from Error*, Imām al-Ghazālī seems to understand the latter meaning from it, because in relating the same tradition, he adds to it the following commentary: “it is this of which the Apostle - God’s blessing and peace be upon him! -

¹⁸⁴ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xvi.

¹⁸⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 275. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 221. See also: Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Edited and translated by Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press: 2000) 165.

For an overview of Imām al-Ghazālī’s theory of causality, see: Eiyad Al-Kutubi, “**Al-Ghazālī’s Cause and Effect**,” Renovatio. Last modified April 28, 2017, Accessed April 30, 2017. <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/al-ghazali-%C4%81-%C4%ABs-cause-and-effect>.

¹⁸⁶ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 233. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 183.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 285. Found in al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, **al-Mustadrak**, 4:311. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 229.

said: ‘God Most High created men in darkness, then sprinkled on them some of His light.’ From that light, then, the unveiling of truth must be sought.”¹⁸⁸ This interpretation seems to refer to the capacity of the intellect as a light by whose means the truth is understood. We saw elsewhere that this process could be bypassed by God revealing knowledge directly to the heart. However, regardless of whether God, in teaching, guides knowledge into the heart through the external means of learning or reveals knowledge to it directly, it is He Who is the primary Cause of this illumination. We may think of God’s teaching - His acting as the primary cause - as the trunk of a tree representing the sources of knowledge. Beyond this, the trunk breaks off into two main branches: reason and revelation, which then separate further into smaller branches (we might, for example, consider empirical knowledge, or knowledge derived through logical proof two branches of reason, while the signs revealed in nature or experiential knowledge gained through spiritual purification¹⁸⁹ might be branches of revelation). An analysis of the true nature of reason and revelation in Islamic thought, without even entering into their complex interplay, could fill volumes. For the purposes of this thesis, it is sufficient for us to have a basic grasp of what they are.

4.2. The Secondary Sources of Knowledge

4.2.1. Reason

By reason, we mean the “inherent inward quality by which humankind is differentiated from the animals, and through which they comprehend the true nature of reality,”¹⁹⁰ what we referred to above as the capacity of the intellect, whose seat is in the heart. It is through this capacity that man comprehends: the intellect is the lens that filters all sensory inputs from the world outside of himself, adds to these depth and dimension through the internal senses (the various mental processes comprising thought), and

¹⁸⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 80. Found in al-Tirmidhī, 18; and the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, 2:176. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 58.

¹⁸⁹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 302. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 243.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 326. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 266.

provides him with a view of the content of reality. Imām al-Ghazālī considers the intellect to be crucial: it is “the source of knowledge, its point of origin and its foundation; knowledge springs forth from it like fruit from a tree...[like] vision from the eye.”¹⁹¹ He does this in many places - uses the metaphor of eyesight to help his reader understand the nature of the intellect: parallel to our physical capacity to see, there exists our internal capacity to comprehend.¹⁹² The strength of the intellect varies both within a person - it may change as he or she grows, or works to expand it; or may fade as he or she ages, or fails to train it.¹⁹³ It also varies between different people - some have been created with stronger intellects than others, just as some have been created with stronger eyesight than others.¹⁹⁴ Many suffer from impaired intellects - a very dangerous condition. Blindness of the intellect threatens a person’s well-being more than physical blindness, for the intellect directs the human much the same way a rider guides a mount: blindness in the rider, the guide, has worse consequences than blindness in the mount.¹⁹⁵ As Imām al-Ghazālī points out, the impairment of the intellect is referred to as blindness in the Qur’ān as well, in verse [22:46]: *For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts which are within the breasts.*¹⁹⁶ Blindness of the intellect leaves the soul in a state of infancy, its growth permanently stunted by its inability to consume the knowledge it thrives on.

4.2.2. Revelation

The prophets, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ being the foremost of them, were granted the most powerful intellects of all mankind - those who make judgments to the contrary by comparing the Prophet’s ﷺ intellect with their stereotypes of rural Bedouin

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 305. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 247.

¹⁹² Ibid, Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 313. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 255.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 321-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 260-2.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 260-2.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 319. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 260.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 260.

are sorely mistaken.¹⁹⁷ The prophets were sent to guide mankind; their intellects perfect and correct the flawed intellects of those they lead.¹⁹⁸ This serves to protect the knowledge that is revealed to them by lending it additional strength. However, that revealed knowledge - revelation being one of two main branches of our tree representing the sources of knowledge - reaches them through a capacity beyond reason. The prophets were possessed of complete intellects and were given, in addition to this, the ability to grasp knowledge beyond that available to reason alone. Imām al-Ghazālī describes this as a stage in which “an eye is opened by which a special perception of certain perceptibles is had; from the perception of these reason is excluded, just as hearing is from the perception of colors, and sight from the perception of sounds.”¹⁹⁹ Again, both reason and revelation are God-given, but we may consider the latter to be, putting a metaphysical reality rather facilely, granted directly. What the prophets have access to through this capacity - revelation from God - is certain knowledge, in which there is no doubt.²⁰⁰ Revelation represents reality in a manner truer-to-life than the conclusions of the intellect alone, as “it was related from Ibn Mas‘ūd in a report stemming from him and also traced back to the Prophet, ‘There are two realities only: speech and guidance. The best speech is the word of God, and the best guidance is the guidance of the Messenger of God ﷺ.’”²⁰¹ Though Imām al-Ghazālī does not delve into a classification of the kinds and degrees of revelation (which are many) in *The Book of Knowledge*, he does relate the experience of revelation to the category of experiential knowledge hovering in the background of his epistemology. He asserts that true knowledge of prophecy can only be achieved by pursuing the experiential knowledge gained through spiritual purification, because that is the only thing that can give one a taste of what the prophets

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 323. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 263.

¹⁹⁸ Al-Taftazānī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafiyya*, 206-9. For translation, see: Al-Taftazānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī on the Creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafi*, 127-9.

¹⁹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 128. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 93.

²⁰⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 275. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 220.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 295. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 238.

experienced.²⁰² Thus “direct personal evidence of the reality of the prophetic faculty is actually provided through the practice of Sufism...Sufism provides certain privileged individuals with direct proof that prophecy is possible, and the continuing presence of such individuals in the midst of Muslim society amounts to...on-going evidence for the faithful.”²⁰³ This was how Imām al-Ghazālī cured his own doubts about prophecy, over the course of a spiritual journey that his intellect alone could not help him complete.²⁰⁴ For man, whose intellect is like his eyesight, the content of revealed knowledge transmitted to him by the prophets and their heirs, the scholars, is the light that, falling upon the world, allows the eyesight to see: “the relationship of the Qur’ān and the law to this innate inclination [the intellect] in guiding it to the unveiling of the sciences related to it is like sunlight to eyesight.”²⁰⁵ Just as man is blind without his eyesight, without the guiding light of revelation he is also effectively blind: when bereft of revealed knowledge he is left in utter darkness and his ability to see (that is, reason) is of no use to him.

4.2.3. *Knowledge Must be Sought through Both*

A comprehensive understanding of reality as it truly is requires that man be open to each source of knowledge; they do not work in opposition, nor do they work in isolation. One without the other is incomplete: “it is a delusion...to think that reason can alone and by itself attain to the fullness of truth, for the guidance of revelation is required. For this, one needs reason and revelation together; the one cannot do without the other.”²⁰⁶ Thus, neither the intellect nor revealed knowledge alone suffice a Muslim seeking knowledge: only in combination do they produce fruit. The first reason for this is that, barring the direct experience of having something of the unseen revealed to him (an unlikely occurrence without high level spiritual training and purification), and perhaps

²⁰² Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 107-8. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 82.

²⁰³ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xx-xxi.

²⁰⁴ Mayer, **Introduction to Letter to a Disciple**, xx. See also: Burrell, David B., CSC, "Creation." In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, edited by T.J. Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 151-2.

²⁰⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 313. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 255.

²⁰⁶ Frank, **Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School**, 11.

even then, a person first establishes his or her faith in prophecy through the function of the intellect. Such a person, when faced with the claims to revelation made by the prophets or with the transmitted knowledge passed from the scholars to him or her, is moved “to investigate and to contemplate. It robs him of calmness and contentment...it impresses upon him that death is surely coming, that what is after death is hidden from the eyes of mankind, and that what the prophets related is not beyond the realm of possibility. Thus it is judicious to abandon any procrastination in discovering the truth of the matter.”²⁰⁷ It is the intellect, searching for truth after being faced with the possibility of revealed knowledge, that establishes the foundation for faith. Imām al-Ghazālī follows a mind through this thought process of reasoned faith in detail in the following passage from *al-Iqtisād fī l-I’tiqād*:

“It is incumbent upon us, without a doubt, to know whether we indeed have a Lord. And if we do, is it possible that He is a sayer in order to command and forbid, assign obligations, and send messengers? And if He is a sayer, is He powerful so as to punish and reward if we obey or disobey Him? And if He is powerful, is this specific person truthful in saying ‘I am the messenger to you’? If this becomes clear for us, then it is definitely incumbent upon us, if we are rational, to be cautious, look out for ourselves, and devalue this perishing worldly life in relation to the everlasting hereafter. For the prudent is the one who prepares for his hereafter and is not deluded by his worldly life.”²⁰⁸

A person who reaches intellectual maturity with the coming of age of the body is able to open the eyes of his insight to the bright lights of reality - the created world, which is a mosaic of the signs of God. What does he understand from it? How does he deal with the claims of revealed knowledge he comes across therein? The verification of such claims at this stage is through the affirmation of the intellect. This is why the first religious obligation on a person reaching puberty is knowing affirmation of the creed of Islam.²⁰⁹ Thus faith and reason are intimately linked; as the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said that “a person’s worthy character...is not complete until his intellect is made whole,

²⁰⁷ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād fī l-I’tiqād*, (Damascus: Dār Qutaybah, 2003) 17. For translation, see: Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazālī’s “Moderation in Belief”*. Translated by Aladdin M. Yaqub. (N.p.: University of Chicago, 2013) 8.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 18. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazālī’s “Moderation in Belief,”* 9.

²⁰⁹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 56-61. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 32-7.

whereupon his faith becomes whole...”²¹⁰ Imām al-Ghazālī describes both man’s reason and his propensity to seek out and understand his Creator - his faith - as being innate tendencies laid in him by God; reason, then, is necessarily involved in the process of returning to knowledge of Him.²¹¹

The second reason that the intellect must be brought to bear on revealed knowledge is that a powerful mind is necessary to understand and interpret revelation, otherwise revealed knowledge cannot be trusted or acted upon.²¹² Thus students of knowledge must work to hone their natural ability to reason through the study of grammar, logic, and rhetoric during their youth before moving on to more advanced religious sciences.²¹³ A person who approaches the religion without a sharp, active intellect will fail to grasp anything but its external shell, and will be forever cut off from its true depth and the beauty of its countless meanings.²¹⁴ This is because the *sharī‘a* without the work of the intellect applied to it is like an eye without light cast upon it.²¹⁵ Furthermore, blind devotion to revealed truths without insight or experiential knowledge is heavy on the student of knowledge, a fact Imām al-Ghazālī opines towards the end of *The Book of Knowledge*, writing: “the realities discussed here should be apparent to anyone who regards them with the light of insight, but [they are] opaque and burdensome, however, for one who takes only from the readily available transmitted reports and initiated customs.”²¹⁶ This is not simply his opinion on the matter - he quotes the following ḥadīth as evidence for the importance of the intellect in understanding the religion: “The Messenger of God ﷺ said, ‘O people, comprehend your Lord and counsel one another to engage the intellect [in their affairs], through this you will grasp what you

²¹⁰ Ibid, 308. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 250. Another ḥadīth affirming this: “It was also related on the authority of Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī that the Messenger of God ﷺ said, ‘There is a firm support for all things, and the firm support of the person of faith is his intellect,’” ibid. Found in al-Zābidī, **Ithāf**, 1:456.

²¹¹ Ibid, 317-8. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 258-9.

²¹² Ibid, 140, 326-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 103, 265-6.

²¹³ Ibid, 65. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 40.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 320. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 260.

²¹⁵ Mehmet Ayman, **Gazzali'de Bilgi Sistemi Ve Şüph**e. (Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 1993) 74.

²¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 319. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 259.

have been commanded to do and what you have been forbidden to do.”²¹⁷ From this, from the many instances in the Qur’ān where mankind is told to use his reason,²¹⁸ and from the various galvanizing pieces of evidence Imām al-Ghazālī produces on this matter, we see that man’s intellect must be brought to bear upon faith for his religion to be truly realized. Still, “reason alone is incapable of fully grasping all problems or of getting to the heart of all difficulties.”²¹⁹ There is a balance to be achieved between reason and revelation, between independent thought and submission to the word of the prophets, which the true scholars strive to achieve; they add to this balance the kind spiritual work that opens the horizon of experiential knowledge up for them and reveals to them the hidden meanings behind the apparent knowledge they already possess.²²⁰

4.3. Some of the Tertiary Sources of Knowledge

4.3.1. Knowledge is Taken from Men

As we move from the secondary sources of knowledge to the tertiary sources, we are moving from the general to the specific. One source of knowledge that features on both sides of our tree (in that it relates to both reason and revelation) is the guidance God reveals to humankind through humans. Whether derived from reason or revelation or both, much of knowledge is passed down through people, and thus sought from people. A primary source of proof for this is the Qur’ānic verse occurring at both [16:43] and [21:7], “*So ask the people of the message [who have knowledge] if you do not know.*”²²¹ We have seen previously that the people of knowledge - the scholars - are the heirs of the

²¹⁷ Ibid, 306. Found in al-Zābīdī, *Ithāf*, 1:452. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 249. See also: Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 265.

²¹⁸ A (not exhaustive) list of these verses, as well as other similar mentions of reason from the Qur’ān: [2:44, 73, 76, 164, 170, 171, 242], [3:65, 118], [5:58, 103], [6:32, 151], [7:169], [8:22], [10:16, 42, 100], [11:51], [12:2, 109], [13:4], [16:12, 67], [20:54, 128], [21:10, 67], [23:80], [24:61], [25:44], [26:28], [28:60], [29:35, 63], [30:24, 28], [36:62, 68], [37:138], [40:67], [43:3], [45:5], [49:4], [57:17], [59:14], and [67:10].

²¹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 85. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 71. See also: Imām al-Ghazālī’s description of his own crisis of skepticism, which is only cured by “the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast.” Ibid, 54. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 57. This is further described in Mayer, *Introduction to Letter to a Disciple*, xiii-xiv.

²²⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 290. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 233.

²²¹ Ibid, 34. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 14.

Prophet ﷺ, and as such, inherit from him the work of guiding and teaching the society at large.²²² Without them and the knowledge they convey, the path through this life to the next is treacherous, almost impossible to traverse safely.²²³ All of humanity walks that path, though precious few are competent guides. The stations of those on it are four: “a man who knows and knows that he knows, he is a scholar, so follow him; a man who knows yet does not know that he knows, he is asleep, wake him; a man who does not know and knows he does not know, he is seeking correct guidance, so teach him; and a man who does not know and does not know he does not know, such a person is ignorant, shun him.”²²⁴

This brings us to the question of authority in Islam. God’s guidance of mankind by means of his fellow man occurs through the prophets and, as an extension of this, through their heirs or emissaries, the scholars.²²⁵ The prophets have absolute authority within their communities, and those that follow them bear a part of that authority, but not all of it. On this point, Imām al-Ghazālī quotes the following statement of one of the early Muslims: “Whatever came to us from the Messenger of God ﷺ we accept wholeheartedly, whatever came to us from the Companions [some matters] we take from them and [some] we decline, whatever came to us from the Followers; well, they are people and we are people.”²²⁶ Though their authority is not absolute, we follow the teachings of the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ because they are reflections of the content of prophecy.²²⁷ The true scholars, likewise, embody the traditions of the Prophet ﷺ and are also vessels of his guidance. The person walking the path of knowledge, with its many pitfalls, necessarily must do so with a guide. Guides are authoritative figures, who have the requisite wisdom and knowledge to navigate both themselves and others to

²²² Ibid, 22-4. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 5-6. See also: Al-Ghazālī, **Ayyuhā’l-Walad**, 101-2. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 34.

²²³ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 8-9. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, xli.

²²⁴ Ibid, 220. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 172.

²²⁵ Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 88. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 72.

²²⁶ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 291. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 234.

²²⁷ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 234.

safety. Imām al-Ghazālī expresses the common Islamic theme of reliable chains of scholarship when he comments that the guide is someone “who has been the disciple of a person possessed of insight whose discipleship is part of a chain leading back to the Master of the Messengers ﷺ.”²²⁸ Only the truly knowledgeable scholars will lead a traveler on this path aright.²²⁹

However, in order to be truly knowledgeable, it is not sufficient that one should display a strong grasp of the various concepts that make up the sciences: the true scholars are those who act on their knowledge and lead ethical lives informed by it, otherwise what they know cannot properly be called knowledge.²³⁰ The true scholars of the past combined their vast knowledge of jurisprudence and theology with knowledge of ethics and spiritual purification; they lived ascetic lives of righteous servanthood to God, seeking through their knowledge and teaching His Countenance.²³¹ From such people, a diligent student can learn the external content of the sciences, but he or she can also learn good character by emulating them and can even derive experiential knowledge simply by being in their blessed presence.²³² The state of the teacher is reflected in the student just as an engraved stamp marks soft clay,²³³ so the student must be cautious in selecting the person he or she takes as a guide,²³⁴ for the blind cannot lead the blind.²³⁵ Once a student has found a teacher in whose knowledge and moral stature he or she trusts, he or she becomes pliable in the teacher’s hands, giving precedence to the teacher’s opinions over their own much as the patient allows the physician to determine his care.²³⁶ Yet even such transformative teachers do not command the absolute obedience of the believer: that kind of obedience is reserved for the prophets alone, as they are the only infallible humans.

²²⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā’l-Walad*, 102. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 36.

²²⁹ Ibid, 101. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 34.

²³⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 217-8. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 171.

²³¹ Ibid, 90-2. For Imām al-Ghazālī’s description of the danger posed by corrupt scholars to the health of the society, see: Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 215-6, 227-8; and Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā’l-Walad*, 112-3.

²³² Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 64, 267.

²³³ Ibid, 216.

²³⁴ Ibid, 232.

²³⁵ Ibid, 190.

²³⁶ Ibid, 187-9.

Imām al-Ghazālī relates from Ibn ‘Abbās: “Knowledge can be taken from any given person, or declined, except from the Messenger of God ﷺ.”²³⁷ This is a very delicate balance; corruption amongst the scholars is rampant in Imām al-Ghazālī’s time,²³⁸ and though he did much to guide and revive, the preservation and transmission of knowledge in our time is in a far, far worse state.²³⁹

4.3.2. *Knowledge is Taken Wherever it is Found*

Though the danger of the corrupt scholar is serious, the wise student takes true knowledge wherever it may appear; God’s signs can be found throughout creation. Paraphrasing a ḥadīth, Imām al-Ghazālī writes: “wisdom is the lost object of the believer; he seizes it whenever he has the opportunity.”²⁴⁰ If he recognizes something true on the tongue of a liar, he does not deny or reject that truth simply because of the place where it was manifested: like a piece of real gold amongst counterfeits, knowledge maintains its value regardless of its proximity to falsehoods.²⁴¹ Truth, being ultimately delivered by God, may be manifested wherever He pleases. It is His wont to send forth “gusts of grace,” and the Prophet ﷺ commanded his followers: “put yourselves in the way of them!”²⁴² If the gusts are knowledge, then the student must take them as they come. Partisan, wholesale denial of what people outside of our intellectual or religious circles say corners us into denying the very truths that make up our ideologies - to abandon those truths in order to protect them is foolishness.²⁴³ Imām al-Ghazālī acted on this principle throughout his life; from childhood, he was driven by an innate desire to know the truth

²³⁷ Ibid, 290-1. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 234.

²³⁸ Ibid, 8-9, 142, 208-9. See also: Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 124. Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 91.

²³⁹ Ibid, 218, 237. Translation: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 171, 187. See also: Yusuf Hanson, **"Imam Al-Ghazālī: the Proof of Islam."** Foreword. The Book of Knowledge, xxiii.

²⁴⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 188. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 144.

²⁴¹ Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 78-84. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 68-70.

²⁴² Ibid, 55. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 58.

²⁴³ Ibid, 80-81. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 69.

as it was, not adhere to the claims of others out of blind, “servile conformism.”²⁴⁴ His life’s work reflects this practice in that it was highly assimilative:

“He is wholly uninterested in intellectual partisanship for its own sake and his concern is always with validity and intellectual merit wherever it may be found. He thus rarely rejects a school’s teachings outright. Rather, at the exoteric level he fiercely suppresses whatever in them he deems at odds with the formal norms of *religio revelata*, but as the esoteric level of his thought is approached...elements of these very doctrines are absorbed and enrich his thinking. The broad trend is thus to rescue insights from ‘heretical’ contexts and integrate them into a totalized Islam.”²⁴⁵

Imām al-Ghazālī had a uniquely powerful mind, one fit for the great task of separating the wheat from the chaff when it came to the truth value of the claims of different schools of thought. Perhaps this is beyond most students of the Islamic sciences, but his recommendation for them is still that they seek the truth at every opportunity, wherever it may be found. The intelligent man, as ‘Alī was reported to have said, does not locate the truth by identifying the knowledgeable man - he identifies the knowledgeable man through the truth.²⁴⁶

4.3.3. *The Place of Empirical Knowledge in Imām al-Ghazālī’s Epistemology*

The type of knowledge that forms the backbone of the scientific worldview, empirical knowledge,²⁴⁷ features in the Islamic epistemic as an offshoot of reason.²⁴⁸ Imām al-Ghazālī refers to the empirical sciences as *‘ulūm al-tajārub* and describes them as “the sciences derived through the observation of events and circumstances as they arise.”²⁴⁹ The content of this branch of knowledge is not stable, as it is bound to vary according to the measurement and the perception of the person deriving it from his or her surroundings, not to mention from the changes in those material surroundings.²⁵⁰ The Islamic understanding of causality leaves the mainstream Muslim (if he is apprised of his

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 47-57. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 54-9.

²⁴⁵ Mayer, Introduction to **Letter to a Disciple**, xvii.

²⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Muḥṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 78-9. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 68.

²⁴⁷ Honerkamp, “**Translator’s Preface**,” xx.

²⁴⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 315. Translation: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 256.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 314. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 255.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 322. Translation: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 262.

creed) underwhelmed with the causal connections of the material world that form the content of empirical knowledge: if God wills, the “laws” of physics may be broken at any instant, as they are nothing more than *‘ādāt*, or correlations He tends to create in the physical world as a part of His *sunna*.²⁵¹ Empirical knowledge takes these rather shaky correlations as its foundation, thus it has limited functionality in the Islamic worldview. Moreover, this branch can never be a source of knowledge of the hereafter or of any metaphysical reality; such a thing could only be achieved if “some of the dead were to return to us and apprise us of those beneficial, accepted deeds that bring us to a station of proximity to God, and of those [deeds] that distance us from Him, and also about the dictates of faith.”²⁵² Interestingly, both modern physicalists and the pagan Arabs in the time of the Prophet ﷺ (rather impertinently) challenge those who believe in life after death to produce evidence of this kind.²⁵³ While they wait for this, they might consider that, from the perspective of Islamic epistemology, apodeictic proofs (based on pure reason) are stronger than empirical proofs in the human attempts to reach theoretical conclusions about metaphysical realities.

To Imām al-Ghazālī, the material sciences have an important role to play in improving man’s material life on earth,²⁵⁴ but should not and cannot venture beyond this into the realm of metaphysical truths. This is because they are necessarily limited to knowledge about one half of a thing’s existence: its physical existence, never its existence in the spiritual realm.²⁵⁵ Moreover, they are subject to and checked by the power of reason.²⁵⁶ He does admit that empirical knowledge can be more easily established in the heart due to its immediacy and relative ease of verifiability, opining that “the theologian who has acquired knowledge from books and oral transmissions would most likely deny this and not call his own soul to account over the disparate states

²⁵¹ Ibid, 112-3. Translation: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 80-1.

²⁵² Ibid, 118. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 85.

²⁵³ Qur’ān [17:90-3], and Mark Johnston, “**Personal Identity: Are We Ontological Trash?**” In *The Bloomsbury Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Barry Dainton and Howard Robinson, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 389.

²⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 115. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 82.

²⁵⁵ Ayman, **Gazzali’de Bilgi Sistemi Ve Şüphesi**, 56.

²⁵⁶ Gurbetoğlu, “**Gazālī’de Bilgi ve Değer Anlayışının Eğitim Açısından İncelenmesi**,” 4-5.

it encounters.”²⁵⁷ This, however, is relative to the intellect’s affirmation of revealed truths; knowledge of the kind Imām al-Ghazālī is (quietly) most interested in - experiential knowledge of the hidden realities behind creation - blows the kind of certainty acquired through empirical verification or reasoned proof out of the water, so to speak.²⁵⁸ The degrees of certitude acquired through these different sources (intellectual and revealed) give us the basis for yet another framework describing knowledge set out by Imām al-Ghazālī: “Ascertainment by apodeictic proof leads to *knowledge* (*‘ilm*). Intimate experience of that very state is *fruitful experience* (*dhawq*). Favorable acceptance of it based on hearsay and experiences of others is *faith* (*īmān*). These, then, are three degrees, or levels, of knowledge - ‘*God raises in degrees those of you who believe and those to whom knowledge is given.*’”²⁵⁹

4.3.4. *Angels as Messengers that Deliver Knowledge to the Heart*

If we transition to the revelatory side of our tree of knowledge, one of its branches - a secondary cause that God employs to teach mankind - is the use of angels to deliver knowledge to the heart.²⁶⁰ These otherworldly creatures are a part of God’s creation just as humans are, but unlike humans, they are not capable of disobeying God and act exclusively in His service.²⁶¹ Note that belief in the angels is one of the necessary elements of Islamic creed;²⁶² their multifarious roles are described in numerous places throughout the Qur’ān.²⁶³ One of these is that they are a means by which God inspires the hearts and, in formal prophecy, sends the message of His words to the prophets, since “*it is not God’s wont to speak [directly] to a human being, unless by inspiration or from*

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 274. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 220.

²⁵⁸ Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 98-99. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 78; and Whittingham, **Al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān: One Book, Many Meanings**, 99.

²⁵⁹ Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 108. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 82; Qur’ān [58:11]. On the primacy of the certainty of the intellect over that derived from mere empirical knowledge, see: Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 200. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 155.

²⁶⁰ Michot, “**Revelation**,” 183.

²⁶¹ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, “**Qur’ān and Ḥadīth**.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, edited by Tim Winter, 19-32 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 27.

²⁶² Ibid, 25-6. See also: Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 199. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 155.

²⁶³ See: Qur’ān [2:30], [32:11], [32:51], [40:7-9], [50:17-8], and [66:6], to mention a few.

behind a veil, or by the sending of a messenger.”²⁶⁴ Sometimes the mode of this form of revelation is physical and involves “hearing a distinct voice through the auditory sense of the ear, or witnessing an angel by means of actual eyesight.”²⁶⁵ This mode of revelation is an interesting example of the blurring of the line dividing the metaphysical and the physical in Islamic thought.

In a more abstract description of the same phenomenon, Imām al-Ghazālī writes that God “casts the light of knowledge into the heart by means of the angels,” who “make their abodes, with the treasures of God’s mercy that they possess, only in the hearts of the virtuous and pure.”²⁶⁶ We have mentioned that the seat of knowledge, the heart, though metaphysical, is subtly connected to the physical heart. Here, Imām al-Ghazālī describes the heart using spatial terms, further obscuring the distinction between the corporeal and spiritual realms.²⁶⁷ Each human heart is like a house - a space into which the angels might descend - if it is purified of the negative qualities that are “like barking dogs,” and which distance those subtle creatures from the heart they might otherwise occupy.²⁶⁸ The angels are beings pure of sin, and are liable to be repulsed by moral, spiritual ugliness. In this way, as we will see in the next chapter, the ethical project of purifying one’s heart of corruption and vice opens up the channels to revealed, experiential knowledge. The role of angels in Imām al-Ghazālī’s theory of knowledge is a good example of a mode of knowledge acquisition that would be utterly nonsensical from a materialist’s point of view, but angels have a place and their own proper roles within Imām al-Ghazālī’s larger cosmology, thus it is not irrational for him to point out the function they play in relation to knowledge and learning.

²⁶⁴ Qur’ān [42:51]

²⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 324. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 263.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 182. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 139.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 139.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 139.

CHAPTER FIVE:

HOW TO DERIVE KNOWLEDGE FROM ITS SOURCES

Even under the view of causality held by Imām al-Ghazālī and within the *'Ash'arī* school of theology, action is taken with the expectation that causes are associated with and usually lead to certain effects taking place.²⁶⁹ Thus, the fact that God is the primary cause of knowledge entering the heart does not free the student from the obligation of seeking knowledge out through the secondary causes God creates. We have spoken about the trunk of the tree representing the sources of knowledge, its two main branches, reason and revelation, and the smaller branches that these, in turn, break off into, representing tertiary sources of knowledge. At the risk of overextending our metaphor, we may call the actual content of knowledge the fruit of this tree. Then, the means by which we derive knowledge from its sources could be described as the flowering buds that grow from the branches of the tree. In this chapter, we will be exploring means of deriving knowledge from its sources in Imām al-Ghazālī's theory of knowledge, some of which would be decried as being prelogical or irrational by modern thinkers in the field of epistemology and beyond.

5.1. Knowledge is Gained by Maintaining the Proper Intentions

5.1.1. Flawed Intentionality Prevents One from Gaining Knowledge

The ultimate valuation of any act in the Islamic worldview is determined by the intentions that prompt and motivate it,²⁷⁰ and the act of seeking knowledge is no exception to this rule. In Imām al-Ghazālī's theory of knowledge, correct intention impacts knowledge acquisition on several fronts. The first of these is the question of whether one can gain true knowledge with corrupt intentions. On this point, Imām al-

²⁶⁹ Eiyad Al-Kutubi, "Al-Ghazālī's Cause and Effect," <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/al-ghaz%C4%81l%C4%ABs-cause-and-effect>

²⁷⁰ The first *ḥadīth* in Imām al-Nawawī's famous collection of forty *ḥadīth* puts forward this principle.

Ghazālī quotes Yaḥyā b. Mu‘ādh al-Rāzī, who is reported to have said: “Verily the brilliance of knowledge and wisdom depart when worldly gain is sought through them.”²⁷¹ Under Imām al-Ghazālī’s worldview, true knowledge is knowledge of God, for the sake of God; knowledge used as a means to anything other than God is a sign of a flawed understanding of reality. To make worldly gain the intention behind one’s quest on path of knowledge is to fail to recognize the most basic precept of that path: that this world and the next are diametrically opposed, that the latter is to be sought out over the former, and that when you seek one you lose the other.²⁷² Anyone who “has not come to realize the paltriness of this world, its squalid murkiness, and the way its pleasure is mixed with pain, wherein anything of goodness eventually passes away, [he] lacks even minimal insight.”²⁷³ This is something any human might come to know experientially, whatever the content of their beliefs. A believing Muslim bears a further piece of knowledge, one that alters his or her entire approach to life: that the life of the hereafter is everlasting and that bartering this life for it secures the eternal reward of paradise.²⁷⁴ In a metaphysic that takes this to be a basic fact, seeking out the former at the expense of the latter is folly - such an intention, though all too common, runs counter to knowledge, thus cannot lead to knowledge. There is a saying that is commonly quoted in relation to the topic of intentionality in seeking knowledge: “We pursued knowledge for other than God, but knowledge refused to be for other than God alone.” Imām al-Ghazālī explains that the meaning of this statement “is that knowledge refused and rejected us and did not reveal its true character to us; all we gained access to was its formal discourse and words.”²⁷⁵ True knowledge cannot be gained without the proper intentions. Thus, in order to gain knowledge, one must constantly adjust one’s intention, calibrating it to true north: that is, orienting it towards the life of the hereafter and the pursuit of the pleasure of God, rather than the material or social gains of this life, such as wealth, status, or power.²⁷⁶ It is one

²⁷¹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 224. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 176.

²⁷² Ibid, 223. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 175.

²⁷³ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 175.

²⁷⁴ Qur’ān, [4:74].

²⁷⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 185. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 142.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 196-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 152.

of the core responsibilities of the student to be doing this at all times; that student eventually becomes the scholar that is the backbone of society's spiritual life.²⁷⁷ Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the knowledgeable teacher to admonish his or her students if he or she suspects they are somehow lacking in this respect.²⁷⁸

5.1.2. *Flawed Intentionality Leads to the Removal of Knowledge from the World*

Another impact of flawed intentions is to contribute to the eventual removal of knowledge from the world:

“Ibn Mas‘ūd said, ‘A time will come to people in which...knowledge will benefit neither the scholar nor his pupil...This occurs when the hearts of the scholars bend toward the love of the world and prefer it over the hereafter; that is the time in which God divests them of the founts of wisdom [that had resided therein] and He extinguishes the lamps of guidance from their hearts. When you encounter a scholar [of those times] he will inform you on his tongue that he is in awe of God, yet impiety is clear in his comportment. How fertile are the tongues in those days and how barren are the hearts!’”²⁷⁹

There is much in Imām al-Ghazālī's works decrying the state of intellectual life in his time,²⁸⁰ as well as many narrations warning about the deterioration that was prophesied to come at the end of times.²⁸¹ We have said that knowledge is preserved by the scholars, whose corruption leads directly to the corruption of knowledge. The measure of corruption in the scholars - the criteria mentioned by Imām al-Ghazālī most often in conjunction with scholarly corruption - is intention.²⁸² When the scholars use knowledge for their own worldly benefit, they turn people away from the truth, ruin the health of the society, and contribute to the ultimate erosion of knowledge. It is, however, especially difficult for scholars to guard their intentions, because their position is one of spiritual authority in the community. Authority is power and power is a force of corruption for

²⁷⁷ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 152.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 209. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 163.

²⁷⁹ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 237. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 187. Found in al-Zabīdī, **Ithāf**, 1:374.

²⁸⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 8-10, 208, 262, 303. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, xli-xlii, 162, 208, 244-5. For further descriptions of contemporary intellectual corruption, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa'l-Muḥṣiḥ bi'l-Aḥwāl**, 46-7, 124. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 54, 91.

²⁸¹ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 218, 237. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 171, 187.

²⁸² Ibid, 8-9, 209-10, 231. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, xli, 163-4, 182.

mankind, but spiritual authority is more potent and tempting than any other kind of power.²⁸³ For this reason, Sufyān al-Thawrī said: “The temptation of narrating *ḥadīth* is more perilous than the temptation of kin, wealth, or sons; how can one not fear its perils when it was said to the most eminent of the messengers [of God] ﷺ, *And if we had not strengthened you, you would have almost inclined to them a little [17:74].*”²⁸⁴ If the Prophet ﷺ himself would have inclined under the weight of power if it were not for the protection of God, the fallible scholars are likely to be completely crushed by it. Their role is crucial, and if they succumb, they risk great punishment.²⁸⁵

5.1.3. *Flawed Intentionality Causes One’s Knowledge to Count Against One*

A third impact of flawed intentionality in seeking knowledge is that one’s actions, judged insincere, are unlikely to be accepted by God. Imām al-Ghazālī cautions his readers to avoid the delusion that “God accepts any knowledge or action that was not accomplished sincerely for His countenance alone.”²⁸⁶ This is crucial, because Imām al-Ghazālī takes much of knowledge to be a means to approach God (and the rest of it to be knowledge of God itself), but to seek worldly rank through knowledge is to try and approach Him by means of what He despises.²⁸⁷ Seeking knowledge is almost never a neutral act: it has an effect on the person seeking it, either working in his or her favor by securing paradise or working against him or her by engendering the wrath of God and punishment in the hereafter.²⁸⁸ The use of religious knowledge to gain worldly benefit in particular bars one from even catching the scent of paradise.²⁸⁹ Imām al-Ghazālī has a good deal of personal experience with the question of intention: it was largely what brought about his legendary personal crisis and subsequent departure from the Nizāmiyya. He writes in his autobiography:

²⁸³ Ibid, 226-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 178.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 178.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 228. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 179.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 180. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 137.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 280-1. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 225.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 177-8, 218. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 135, 171.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 228. Found in Ibn Māja, 252. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 179.

“I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was not directed purely to God, but rather was instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige. So I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire, unless I set about mending my ways.”²⁹⁰

His path in pursuit of knowledge taught him that “learning with the intention of this world only is devastation and devastating.”²⁹¹ Interestingly enough, when a believer adjusts his or her intention and leaves off chasing this world, God’s grants it to him or her with ease and protects him or her from falling into worldly need.²⁹² The pursuit of knowledge is then sanctified; any knowledge gained with correct intention, rather than acting as a proof against its bearer, acts as a witness for him or her.²⁹³

5.2. Knowledge is Gained through Study and Reflection

5.2.1. Asking Questions

The intellect, which is key in helping identify the truth, is a central source of knowledge and the means of deriving that knowledge from it include all the obvious mental processes related to learning, like asking questions, reflection, and study. Given that man is not born a scholar, knowledge must be attained through learning.²⁹⁴ The Prophet ﷺ said regarding that that “Knowledge is similar to sealed storerooms, the keys to which are inquiry, so ask [and seek to know]; four [types of people] will be rewarded: the one who asks, the scholar [who responds], the one listening, and the one who loves all of them.”²⁹⁵ This was his own practice with his Companions; Anas b. Malik described the gatherings that the Prophet loved so well, those in which God was remembered, saying “we used to sit discussing belief, pondering [the meanings of] the Qur’ān, learning discernment in the science of the religion, and counting the graces that God had bestowed

²⁹⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 100. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 79.

²⁹¹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 206. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 160.

²⁹² Ibid, 197. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 153.

²⁹³ Ibid, 218. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 171.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 31. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 12.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 35. Found in Abū Nu’aym, *Ḥilya*, 3:192. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 15.

upon us.”²⁹⁶ Discussion, questioning, active thought - where these are absent, knowledge is rare. Imām al-Ghazālī describes the path of seeking knowledge as one of reflection, through which one understands the nature of the world.²⁹⁷ If asking questions were forbidden, God would not have commanded the believers to do so in the verses we have cited previously, [16:43] and [21:7].²⁹⁸ If one is fortunate enough to have found a true scholar to learn from, that scholar will be cautious and wise in answering it, for such a person is one “who, when asked a question, dreads that he will be asked [about it] on the day of judgment, ‘From where did you answer?’”²⁹⁹ Under the wing of a good teacher, a respectful student may ask freely and by establishing “the intimate discourse that was an integral facet of the teacher/student relationship in the Islamic sciences,”³⁰⁰ he or she will be sure to learn.

5.2.2. *Debate and its Many Dangers*

The discourse between a student and his or her teacher, as well as discourse between students or between scholars will often escalate from questioning to back-and-forth debate. Indeed, public debates were a huge part of the intellectual culture of Imām al-Ghazālī’s time.³⁰¹ This is part of learning and is necessary to the extent that the goal “is inquiry into the truth of a matter in order to render it clear and evident, for truth is worth seeking.”³⁰² What’s more, “mutual support when regarding knowledge and sharing ideas is beneficial and effective,” and it was the wont of the Companions to debate issues in their consultations.³⁰³ However, Imām al-Ghazālī argues across various works that the

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 122. Found in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 1:150. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 88

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 183. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 140.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 189. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 145.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 259. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 206.

³⁰⁰ Honerkamp, "Translator's Preface," xxxi.

³⁰¹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 9, 124-5, 162-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, xli, 90-1, 122.

³⁰² Ibid, 159. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 119.

³⁰³ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 119.

dangers of debate outweigh its benefits and, in light of this, he sets eight conditions for anyone who wishes to avoid spiritual harm in participating in them.³⁰⁴

The significance that this bears for our discussion is that the conditions Imām al-Ghazālī lists are not purely intellectual: most of them deal with the sincerity and intention of the person considering debate. It is an example of spiritual ethics overriding a method that modern common sense would take to be an excellent way to learn. In Islamic thought, however, seeking out debate can be a sign of spiritual illness, as is indicated in the verse: “*As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except God.*”³⁰⁵ Argumentation for its own sake cannot be a trait of the true scholar, for the quality that often motivates those seeking out debate is attraction to ostentation, fame, and rank.³⁰⁶ It gives rise to serious moral flaws and weakness of character.³⁰⁷ Perhaps this is why the great legal scholar, Imām Mālik ibn Anas, is reported to have said that there is no room for dialectics in religion.³⁰⁸ This holds even when one is certain that one’s own view is the correct one, for the Prophet ﷺ himself encouraged his followers to avoid disputation, saying that “Whoever ceases disputing a matter in which he is in the wrong, God will build him a residence in the meadows of heaven; and whoever ceases disputing a matter in which he is in the right, God will build a residence in the highest heaven.”³⁰⁹ Restraining oneself from excess argumentation can thus be deemed a principle of Islamic intellectual ethics, a quality that God loves, and whose opposite He detests.³¹⁰

Though much of Imām al-Ghazālī’s various diatribes on this topic are justified on the basis of ethical ideas, he also does not recommend seeking the truth through

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 159-68. These are part of a larger sub-science in the Islamic tradition, the ethics of debate, which, though we do not have room here to do it justice, is a fascinating facet of Islamic educational theory and a good example of the overlap between ethics and epistemology. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 119-27.

³⁰⁵ Qur’ān [3:7].

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 152. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 114.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 169. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 128.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 102. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 71.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 175. Found in Ibn Māja, 51. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 133.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 154. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 115.

argumentation on practical grounds. He believes that debate is not an effective means of convincing the hearts. This is because “heated debate and zealotry...strengthens the motivations for going astray and excites the causes for extremism and obstinacy.”³¹¹ He believes that people are liable to hold on to their own views when those views are being wrested from their hands forcefully; even if they are defeated in the debate, they will rationalize this in a way that allows them to maintain their beliefs.³¹² The only way to avoid this is to counsel with gentleness³¹³ and debate with humility.³¹⁴ In this, the model to be followed is set by another of the great legal scholars, Imām Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī, who said: “I have never spoken to anyone without wishing that God would grant him success, guidance, support, care, and protection. And I have never spoken with anyone while caring whether God clarified the truth through my words or his.”³¹⁵ In this way, the practical and the ethical are joined; under Imām al-Ghazālī’s understanding of debate, human behavior is weighed holistically such that no part of human nature is ignored in deriving the educational principles employed here.

5.2.3. *Beginning Study with What is Easily Understood*

A practical consideration that Imām al-Ghazālī emphasizes is that students should make use of the proper classification of the sciences in order to direct their curricula, such that they begin their study with what is a prerequisite to further knowledge and work their way up systematically through the other disciplines. The student ought to treat his life’s work as a ladder, gaining a solid foothold at each level before moving up to next.³¹⁶ Imām al-Ghazālī names this amongst the responsibilities of the student, saying that they should limit their study to certain fields until they have achieved a solid foundation, then

³¹¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād fi’l-‘Iqād*, 20. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazālī’s “Moderation in Belief,”* 11-12.

³¹² Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 150. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 112.

³¹³ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād fi’l-‘Iqād*, 20. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazālī’s “Moderation in Belief,”* 12.

³¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā’l-Walad*, 107. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 42. See also: Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 246-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 195.

³¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 99. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 69.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 194-5. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 150-1.

move on to the others, rather than trying to master them all at once.³¹⁷ A wise student will “not pass beyond an area of study until they are well grounded in it theoretically and practically.”³¹⁸

It is the teacher’s responsibility to guide the student in this, as in all matters of learning; he does so by limiting “the student [to the material that is] at the level of his comprehension. He therefore does not convey to [the student] that which his intellect has no means of accessing or that which would overcome it and create in him an aversion to its pursuit.”³¹⁹ This protects the student from confusion and distraction, essentially removing barriers from his or her path of study. The teachings of a scholar are catered to his or her audience; he or she does not bring paradoxes or obscurities to the attention of the neophyte.³²⁰ For the student, hearing divergent opinions or dealing with subtle nuances at early stages “bewilders his reason...and perplexes his mind; it diminishes his judgment and causes him to despair of ever attaining comprehension and awareness.”³²¹ It is a part of human nature that the mind be overwhelmed by what is beyond its grasp; for this reason, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said: “No one speaks to a people on a matter that their intellects cannot grasp without that causing trial and tribulation among some of them.”³²² The skilled teacher knows this, and prevents the student from getting too far out of his or her depth, holding them instead to certain prescribed curricula.³²³ This recommendation, my reader will note, reveals a very commonsense understanding of education; Imām al-Ghazālī’s theory of knowledge does not lack such practical considerations. However, this means is not more efficacious than the spiritual or physical means we will come to in this chapter. Furthermore, Imām al-Ghazālī does not draw any apparent distinction between them or group them into different chapters on the basis of

³¹⁷ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 150-1.

³¹⁸ Ibid, 195. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 150.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 212. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 165.

³²⁰ Ibid, 190-1. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 146-7.

³²¹ Ibid, 190. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 146.

³²² Ibid, 212. Found in the introduction to Muslim’s **Ṣaḥīḥ**, 1:11. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 166.

³²³ Ibid, 209. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 163.

their relative rationality, as Von Grunebaum seems to think Muslim scholars writing on education do.³²⁴

5.2.4. *Avoiding Distraction*

A point less belabored by Imām al-Ghazālī, but equally useful for students to bear in mind in organizing their daily life, is that they should be careful to avoid distractions. If one is distracted in seeking knowledge, one will not be able to grasp the subtle realities behind external knowledge.³²⁵ Moreover, distractions lead to a waste of one’s mental resources, which, like a river, when spread over too wide a space, loses depth - some of it being absorbed, some of it evaporating, until its flow is no longer strong enough to make proper use of.³²⁶ In order for a student to use his resources most efficiently, he must hone them to a fine point. Thus it is the responsibility of students to free themselves from excess responsibilities and occupations unrelated to knowledge seeking, for such work will distract them from their greater mission. Imām al-Ghazālī goes as far as to suggest that they move away from their families and homelands in seeking knowledge so that they might reduce distraction, since “ties and relationships are things that preoccupy one and distract him from his goal.”³²⁷ If this recommendation seems a bit heartless, the label is not so far off: Imām al-Ghazālī follows it immediately with verse [33:4] from the Qur’ān, “*God has not created for a man two hearts in his breast,*” implying that love of knowledge has to take precedence over love of one’s family - one cannot maintain an equal commitment to both. Given the great significance of knowledge in Islam and the reverence afforded to it, such sacrifices are deemed worthwhile - after all, the Prophet ﷺ was reported to have said to his community: “Seek knowledge even in China,” which, in his time, implied “even unto the ends of the

³²⁴ Von Grunebaum, **Introduction to Ta’līm al-Muta’allim: Tarīq al-Ta’allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning**, 13.

³²⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 186. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 143.

³²⁶ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 143.

³²⁷ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 143.

earth.”³²⁸ Thus Imām al-Ghazālī’s rhetoric, while it may seem extreme to the modern consciousness, is actually quite normal within Islamic educational thought.

5.3. Knowledge is Gained Through Righteousness and Good Character

5.3.1. Ethics as a Means of Knowledge Acquisition

We have seen throughout the thesis that the philosophical realms of epistemology and ethics are inextricably linked in the Islamic worldview; Imām al-Ghazālī uses this fact to motivate and structure his ideas about education, then leverages the resulting pedagogy into a massive project of revival. It was “perhaps one of his principal contributions to the synthesis of the mystic and orthodox approaches in Islam” that he “presents the two ways in which religious truths can be acquired - the scholarly and the ethical - as ways that combine.”³²⁹ The idea that ethical behavior guided by knowledge causes an increase in one’s knowledge was not Imām al-Ghazālī’s, however: its nature as a principle of Islamic thought is attested to by the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever implements his acquired knowledge, God will make [him] an heir to knowledge not known to him.”³³⁰ Thus, acting in accordance with religious knowledge (which constitutes, in Islam, the content of ethics) is a means of obtaining further knowledge through the grace of God.

This kind of knowledge cannot be gained through anything but God’s mercy and striving on the straight path: it is experiential or spiritual knowledge, the part of revelation called “inspiration” or “unveiling.”³³¹ Imām al-Ghazālī considers it to be the highest form of knowledge,³³² and writes that it cannot effectively be sought through

³²⁸ Ibid, 35. Found in Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi’ bayān al-‘ilm wa-faḍlih*, 20. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 15.

³²⁹ Giladi, "Islamic Educational Theories in the Middle Ages: Some Methodological Notes with Special Reference to al-Ghazali," 8.

³³⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 265. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 211.

³³¹ Ibid, 264-5. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 210.

³³² Mahmut Çamdibi, *Şahsiyet Terbiyesi ve Gazālī*, (N.p.: Çamlıca Yayınları, 2014) 8.

“texts and formal education, [for] these do not suffice in that [unveiling].”³³³ Only by striving to live ethically, working in God’s cause to gain His love, can a student understand the subtleties workings of his heart - the center of his moral and conscious being - and, in understanding, polish it to the point where it may reflect the underlying meanings of God’s creation. In relation to this, Imām al-Ghazālī cites the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* that forms the basis of much of the science of taṣawwuf, in which the Prophet ﷺ relates the words of God: “My servant continues to draw near to me with supererogatory acts [of worship] until I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, and his sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks.”³³⁴ Again, using every action, every moment, to earn the pleasure of God in accordance with the content of religious knowledge opens up the channels of His divine inspiration. *Taṣawwuf* is a discipline that sets out the processes of inner or spiritual purification (*tazkiyya*) by which this might be achieved. It is “an unfathomable ocean into which every seeker plunges to the capacity of what has been provided for him, and in accordance with the worthy acts he has been destined to achieve.”³³⁵

5.3.2. *Spiritual Purification as a Means of Knowledge Acquisition*

In Chapter Three we introduced the concept of experiential knowledge, as far as it is discussed openly in Imām al-Ghazālī’s works; now we will approach this form of knowledge from the perspective of its acquisition. The means of achieving spiritual knowledge naturally involve the soul or the heart itself: cleansing the mirror of the heart “from the impurities that make up the veil [between us] and God most High and [prevent our] realization of His attributes and acts.”³³⁶ In this way, one allows for the light of the knowledge of God and His guidance to be reflected in it. Purification is pursued throughout one’s worldly life by joining one’s intellectual work on the path of knowledge with spiritual work; when one does this, one can acquire the full spectrum of beneficial

³³³ Ibid, 264. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 210.

³³⁴ Ibid, 266. Found in al-Bukhārī, 6502. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 211.

³³⁵ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 212.

³³⁶ Ibid, 78. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 51.

knowledge, both the knowledge of conduct and the knowledge of unveiling. The act of purification the heart involves removing the “reprehensible character traits and blameworthy qualities”³³⁷ that it bears, fighting the base desires of the appetitive soul the (*nafs*) and following the examples of the prophets to adorn the heart with virtuous and beautiful traits.³³⁸ Imām al-Ghazālī describes the spiritual path in his *Deliverance from Error*:

“the first of its requirements...is the total purification of the heart from everything other than God Most High. Its key...is the utter absorption of the heart in the remembrance of God. Its end is being completely lost in God”³³⁹

The highest form of knowledge is best achieved through these means, not through the external sciences alone.³⁴⁰ The true scholars, then, are those who pair their pursuit of knowledge of the external sciences with pursuit of spiritual excellence, watching over the states of their hearts as assiduously as they scrutinize any intellectual problem. If they are “steadfast in practice and contemplation of the heart,” God reveals to them “the subtleties of wisdom that would confound the intellects of [even] those bestowed with perception.”³⁴¹ Their work serves to slowly pry open the doors to inspiration found in the heart.

When one sets out on this path in earnest, “revelations and visions begin, so that, even when awake, the Sufis see the angels and the spirits of the prophets and hear voices coming from them and learn useful things from them. Then their ‘state’ ascends from the vision of forms and likenesses to stages beyond the narrow range of words.”³⁴² As we have mentioned before, very little of this learning process can be expressed verbally: its reality and the subtleties of its nature can only be learned as such knowledge itself is achieved - that is, experientially. Nevertheless, the theories found within the science of *taṣawwuf* can give the neophyte a basic enough understanding that he or she may pursue

³³⁷ Ibid, 181. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 138.

³³⁸ Ibid, 78. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 51.

³³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Muḥṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 106. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 81.

³⁴⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 264. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 210.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 265. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 210.

³⁴² Al-Ghazālī, **Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Muḥṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl**, 106-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 81-2.

such knowledge; Imām al-Ghazālī explains that “one to whom such experience is not granted can acquire certain knowledge of that state through...hearsay,”³⁴³ by keeping the company of the spiritual masters, which will lead to faith in the efficacy of their practices, not to mention the general moral benefit that may be gained by a person observing their lifestyle and imbibing their worldview. If one is not lucky enough to be in the company of such people, one “must learn the certain possibility of such mystical states through the evidence of apodeictic demonstration in the way we have mentioned in ‘The Book of the Marvels of the Heart.’”³⁴⁴ Another element that puts spiritual purification out of the reach of the intellect alone is that its specific teachings are sourced from revealed knowledge, whether inspired or prophetic, about metaphysical realities beyond the perception of the external senses. This does not affect the efficacy of the means involved in seeking knowledge from this branch, since, as Imām al-Ghazālī argues extensively, metaphysical realities have their own variegated properties just as physical phenomena do - “very stupid and ignorant would be the man who...would suppose that they had been mentioned by chance, and not because of a profound divine significance in them which requires them to be such because of the special property in them.”³⁴⁵ Like “the reason for the effectiveness of the remedies of the acts of worship, with their prescriptions and determined quantities ordained by the prophets,” these “cannot be perceived by means of the intellectual resources of men endowed with intellect” but “must be the object of blind obedience to the prophets who perceived those qualities by the light of prophecy.”³⁴⁶ The blind obedience Imām al-Ghazālī mentions here is granted to the prophets in particular, as we saw in Chapter Four when discussing rightful authority in Islam. He maintains the practice of the orthodoxy with relation to Sufism: that is, subjecting it always to the tenets of the law. Thus, study of the external sciences (including jurisprudence), though it has its limits in terms of what kind of knowledge it can bring one, is a necessary condition of being successful on the path to the hereafter.

³⁴³ Ibid, 107. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 82.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 108. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 82.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 118. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 88.

³⁴⁶ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 87.

Imām al-Ghazālī cautions that “one who acquires *ḥadīth* and knowledge, then takes the Sufi path will succeed; while one who takes the Sufi path before acquiring knowledge is gambling with his soul.”³⁴⁷ Thus, the assertion of some that his “Sufi side” was distinct from his praxis is misleading. As Mayer incisively points out, “it is simply false that the gnostic vortex of Ghazālī’s worldview bears no relation to its ethical base, as if bracketed off in a purely separate sphere of understanding.”³⁴⁸

Imām al-Ghazālī focuses heavily on spiritual purification in describing the path of knowledge acquisition; it is a central part of his project of reviving the spiritual life of his religious community - a mission was born of his own experiences. Imām al-Ghazālī is a guide on the path he describes in his works: though further along than those he seeks to teach, his ultimate goal, if we may take his word for it, is the same as the one he recommends others aim towards. This motivates his life’s work and lends a note of sincerity to his views - to what are so very clearly his own beliefs. At the end of *Deliverance from Error*, his text of intellectual self-reflection, he writes:

“I now earnestly desire to reform myself and others, but I do not know whether I shall attain my desire or be cut off by death short of my goal...I ask Him, then, to reform me first, then to use me as an instrument of reform; to guide me, then to use me as an instrument of guidance; to show me the true as true, and to grant me the grace to follow it; and to show me the false as false, and to grant me the grace to eschew it!”³⁴⁹

In this way, he actively avails himself (while writing) of means that would be prelogical in the minds of modern secular thinkers. Throughout this autobiographical text, the reader can see that the means he recommends for students seeking knowledge elsewhere in his works are the ones he himself used to reform his own soul when he saw it to be in danger. Spiritual purification is the foremost of these and its metaphysical implications cannot be written off as being mere folkways he simply accepts for the sake of religious consistency³⁵⁰ - nor should they be overlooked by arguing that “Al-Ghazālī excels [fellow scholar] az-Zarnūjī by eliminating all prelogical matter and by closer coordination of

³⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 83. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 56.

³⁴⁸ Mayer, *Introduction to Letter to a Disciple*, xxvii.

³⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 126-7. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 92-3.

³⁵⁰ Von Grunebaum, *Introduction to Ta’līm al-Muta’allim: Tariq al-Ta’allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning*, 13.

moral principle, scientific outlook, and instructional technique.”³⁵¹ Many of the means Von Grunebaum labels as prelogical in Imām Burhān al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī’s work, *Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning*, feature in Imām al-Ghazālī’s educational thought as well.

5.3.3. *Knowledge is Gained Through Reverence for Knowledge*

We have spoken of the nobility of knowledge in Islamic thought: how, as blessed as the generality of believing Muslims are, “the scholars are superior to the believers by seven hundred levels” such that “between each level is a journey of five hundred years,”³⁵² and how the scholars are the heirs of the greatest of mankind, the prophets.³⁵³ Since knowledge is nobility, and nobility commands reverence, it is a duty of the student to conduct himself with respect and reverence towards knowledge and towards anyone who possesses or is even associated with it. All the other beings in creation revere the knowledgeable guides amongst mankind: as the Prophet ﷺ related, “Indeed, God, His angels, those who dwell in the heavens and the earth, even the ant in its hill and the fish in the ocean, all bless the one who teaches the people the path to beneficence.”³⁵⁴ Should not the students of such people be the foremost to take the pains to do so?

The reverence of the seekers of knowledge arises from love of knowledge, which is in turn born of love of God, Who is the ultimate aim of the seekers. For this reason, Imām ‘Alī said “Love of knowledge is a religion by which one lives.”³⁵⁵ Sincere students will feel this love naturally and will act in accordance with it, for if the student loves knowledge, he will love and respect those that lead him to it. We have said previously that mankind is in need of a guide on the path of seeking knowledge, someone “to refine him and show him the way to God the Exalted,”³⁵⁶ but finding someone who is fit for this is very difficult, as such men are rare indeed. Thus, “whoever is favored by good fortune

³⁵¹ Ibid, 1.

³⁵² Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 20. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 3.

³⁵³ Ibid, 22. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 5.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 41. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 19.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 266. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 212.

³⁵⁶ Al-Ghazālī, **Ayyuhā’l-Walad**, 101. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 34.

in finding a master such as we have mentioned, and the master accepts him, should venerate him outwardly and inwardly.”³⁵⁷ The object of the student’s quest is knowledge, so, if he is not an ingrate, “he adorns with a necklace of gratitude whoever leads him to it.”³⁵⁸ One owes the teachers of the religious sciences in particular a debt equal or greater than the debt owed to one’s parents, for one’s parents protect one in this worldly life, but one’s teachers protect one in the next.³⁵⁹ Elaborating on this idea, Imām al-Ghazālī writes,

“For that reason the teacher’s responsibility is more grave than that of the parents; for though the father is the primary cause of the child’s present existence and his ephemeral life, the teacher is the primary cause behind his immortal life. Were it not for the teacher, the student would eventually divert that which his father had rendered unto him into everlasting annihilation; whereas from the teacher he derives the benefit of everlasting life in the abode of the hereafter.”³⁶⁰

If reverence toward knowledge and teachers seems an excessive and unfamiliar concept to the modern thinker, it is likely because this tie between education and the hereafter has been broken. In Islam, however, the connection remains, such that these concepts are active in governing Islamic circles of knowledge today just as they had centuries ago. Again, through educational themes, we find that the holistic understanding of reality found in Islam creates an overlap between cosmology, ethics, and epistemology.

How exactly does one act with reverence towards knowledge and those who possess it? There is much that falls into the category of reverence, but its cornerstones are humility, etiquette, restraint, and service.³⁶¹ One ought not to question the scholar excessively, nor insist on a response if he or she does not provide one, nor harangue him or her in any way.³⁶² One makes excuses for him or her if he or she seems to falter, and one does not enter into debate to prove him or her wrong on a matter even if one is aware

³⁵⁷ Ibid, 102-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 36.

³⁵⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 188. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 144.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 45. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 21-2.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 206. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 160.

³⁶¹ Ibid, 187, 189-90. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 143, 146. See also: Al-Ghazālī, **Ayyuhā’l-Walad**, 101-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 34-8.

³⁶² Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 189-90. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 146.

of a mistake he or she has made.³⁶³ Inwardly, one should think of teachers as one treats them, not allowing an inconsistency to arise between one's outward and inward reverence for them, lest one fall into hypocrisy.³⁶⁴ If one is having trouble doing this with a particular teacher, one should leave his or her presence until and unless one is able to achieve an internal and external uniformity of opinion.³⁶⁵ One should always be at the service of one's teachers; one should strive to be the first to rise if one's teacher is in need of anything and should work hard to achieve whatever tasks the teacher sets one.³⁶⁶ Under no circumstances should the student evince (nor allow for the existence) of any arrogance or impudence towards either the teacher or the knowledge he or she is setting forward.³⁶⁷ Part of this is accepting, with humility, true knowledge even from those teachers that are not notable or famous.³⁶⁸ All of this would be very difficult if the path of seeking knowledge was not the path of righteousness; if it did not require the cultivation of the highest moral character and decency. Education in our times, in most cases, does involve the same degree of cultivation, nor would it take reverence to be a requirement of learning. To limit the ability of a student to question his or her teacher, for example, would be seen as counterproductive. But in Islamic thought, etiquette or right conduct (*adab*) is one of the subtle means by which one attains knowledge; the ideas are so intertwined that the words for education and etiquette share the same linguistic roots.³⁶⁹

The burden of reverence does not fall squarely on the shoulders of the student: the teacher has reciprocal responsibilities toward the student that help the student achieve the moral heights he or she should aspire to. The teacher should not view students as being indebted to him or her (though students are indebted to their teachers), but should see them as noble people and respect their efforts, for "they have made the goal of their

³⁶³ Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā'l-Walad*, 103. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 36.

³⁶⁴ Ibid, 103. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 36-8.

³⁶⁵ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 36-8.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 36. See also: Al-Ghazālī, "**Kitāb al-'Ilm**," 187, 189-90. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 143, 146.

³⁶⁷ Al-Ghazālī, "**Kitāb al-'Ilm**," 187. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 143.

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 187. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 144.

³⁶⁹ Rosenthal, **Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam**, 252.

hearts the intimate proximity to God by sowing knowledge therein.”³⁷⁰ They should not take advantage of the position of authority they bear, using the reverence of the student against him or her for worldly gain. Corrupt scholars fail to pass this benchmark of sincere intentions in teaching: they “expect the student to sustain the teacher at every turn of fate, to come to the aid of [the teacher’s] supporters and treat his enemies with animosity, and be like the donkey for all his requirements, be subservient before him, and fulfill his requests.”³⁷¹ Imām al-Ghazālī warns students to watch out for and assiduously avoid these so-called scholars, providing extensive descriptions thereof so that they might “recognize the degrees of subtle deceptions.”³⁷² The danger the corrupt scholar poses to the society cannot be overstated: such a person “is a ghoul, a demon who sweeps men off the path and destroys them, and they must run from him, since...[he] will wreak havoc on their religion the like of which Satan himself cannot.”³⁷³ Thus the scholar should take care to guard his or her intentions and actions as much as, if not more than, the student. He or she should facilitate the reverence of the student by guiding the student with kindness and mercy, not explicit criticism, which “rips aside the veil of reverence...unleashes a response of arrogant self-defense and only provokes an increased desire to persevere [in error].”³⁷⁴ Moreover, the scholar should live out the content of his or her teachings, displaying the same respect towards knowledge that is demanded of the student; this includes respecting fields of knowledge outside of their own specialty.³⁷⁵ The true scholars of the past were able to maintain these standards. Imām Mālik, for example, famously

“held the Islamic disciplines (*‘ilm al-dīn*) in such high esteem that when he intended to narrate *ḥadīth* he would make his ablutions, then sit on the front edge of his low dais, comb out his beard and apply perfume, [then] settle into a sitting position, and with dignity and solemnity he would narrate *ḥadīth*. When asked about that, he responded, ‘Upholding the

³⁷⁰ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 207. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 161.

³⁷¹ Ibid, 208. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 162.

³⁷² Ibid, 209. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 162. For further descriptions of corruption amongst the scholars, see: 230-1 in the same text. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 181-2.

³⁷³ Al-Ghazālī, **Ayyuhā’l-Walad**, 112-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Letter to a Disciple**, 52.

³⁷⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 210-1. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 164.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 211. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 165.

exaltedness of the *ḥadīth* of the Messenger of God ﷺ is very dear to me’...this reverence and solemnity point to the strength of his realization of the sublime nature of God most high.”³⁷⁶

Imām Mālik’s reverence for knowledge is held up as a model for seekers of knowledge even today. His great contributions to the intellectual history of Islam would not have been achieved to the same extent without the dutiful respect and love that this narration describes.

5.3.4. *Knowledge is gained through Humility*

One of the most important qualities sought through spiritual purification - one which facilitates reverence for knowledge and many other aspects of ethical life in the Islamic worldview - is humility. I mention humility (just one of the many virtuous qualities Imām al-Ghazālī writes of) because it, like reverence, has a specific significance when it comes to the acquisition of knowledge. One of the reasons for this is that the arrogance is a barrier to learning. In order to learn one must always maintain a humble consciousness of one’s own relative ignorance; then, one is able to take “everything that is cast before him by listening attentively, with humility, gratitude, joy, and gracious acceptance.”³⁷⁷ Only then can one recognize, as Imām ‘Alī does when proven wrong by a man asking him a question, “You are right and I am wrong; above every possessor of knowledge is one [more] knowing.”³⁷⁸ Those who have established proper intentions in seeking knowledge, who put the truth above everything, including their own image, are able to admit their own ignorance and mistakes and, in doing so, learn.³⁷⁹ The greatest scholars of the Islamic intellectual tradition possessed this crucial quality; Imām al-Shāfi‘ī said of his teacher Imām Mālik, “I witnessed Mālik being questioned on forty-eight matters, he responded to thirty-two of them with, ‘I do not know.’”³⁸⁰ The Prophet ﷺ himself was humble enough to say the same:

³⁷⁶ Ibid, 102. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 71.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 188. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 144.

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 164. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 124.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 102. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 71.

³⁸⁰ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 71.

“When the Messenger of God ﷺ was questioned about the most worthy and most evil places on the earth he responded, ‘I do not know,’ and even when Gabriel questioned him about them he responded, ‘I do not know.’ Then God taught him that the most worthy place was the mosque and the most evil were the market places.”³⁸¹

As the ultimate model for Muslims to emulate, the Prophet here sets an important precedent, demonstrating the necessity of humility even amongst those who possess the greatest authority and power in a community. Humility serves to protect everyone who attains it, no matter their position in the society, but it is a crucial prerequisite for the scholar. It is for this reason that Ibn Mas‘ūd said: “The scholar’s shield is ‘I do not know,’ if he errs in its use, his vital organs will be struck.”³⁸²

Paradoxically, humility is the only means of truly raising oneself - when seeking knowledge and in every other realm of life. This is because, in the cross-section of Islamic ethics and theology, it is taught that God loves humility in His creation and hates for them to display even the smallest trace of arrogance.³⁸³ Exaltation is His right and His right alone; His creation is utterly in need of Him and must reflect this through humility before Him. Thus, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever acts with arrogance, God will bring low; and whoever is humble, God will raise up.”³⁸⁴ Humility is a quality of beauty in mankind; it is “the finest garment God confers on a servant,” and is the “raiment of the prophets, and the outward traits of the righteous, the veracious, and the true scholars.”³⁸⁵ While some might manipulate the Islamic teaching that humiliation does not befit the believer in order to justify their own arrogance, there is a difference between humiliation and humility.³⁸⁶ The wise will be able to make the distinction and display the right quality in any given situation; they will also know that they should err on the side of humility, especially if they want remain open to learning at all times.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 259-60. Found in al-Ṭabarānī, **al-Mu‘jam al-Awsaṭ**, 7136. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 206.

³⁸² Ibid, 258. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 205.

³⁸³ Ibid, 171. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 129.

³⁸⁴ Ibid, 170. Found in al-Zābīdī, *Iḥāf*, 1:295; a similar report is found in Ibn Māja, 4176. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 129.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 279. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 224.

³⁸⁶ Ibid, 171. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 129.

5.4. Knowledge is Gained by Regulating the Physical Body

5.4.1. *The Significance of the Body*

We have discussed, throughout the thesis, the means by which the soul is illuminated with knowledge. This focus was not unjustified: in Imām al-Ghazālī’s cosmology, the seat of human identity and consciousness is the soul, thus it is the soul that is aware, learns, and knows. But just as the metaphysical and the ethical, and the metaphysical and the epistemological, and the ethical and the epistemological are all connected in Islamic thought, so, too, are the material and the metaphysical, and the material and the ethical, and the material and the epistemological. As we saw in Chapter Two, the material reality of this world (*‘ālam al-mulk*) has a purpose; it reflects the meanings found in the spiritual realm (*‘ālam al-malakūt*) that is layered upon it and acts as a ladder to reach it. Both of these realms are a creation of God and thus in His control, bearing a relationship to Him as all parts of His creation do. While both the heart and the body are connected to their Creator, the heart’s “relationship is of a loftier nature than that of any of the physical members of the body,” and it is therefore superior to them.³⁸⁷ Yet we are in need of the body on our path to cultivate the heart: the seat of human identity might be the soul, but the body is the vessel of the soul in this life. A soul’s body “is its mount that it rides upon and its means by which it strives [toward its destination]” and, like “the mount for the physical body on its way to pilgrimage,” or “the water skin that is necessary for the body to make its journey,” it is a necessary part of the journey to the hereafter that, if cast aside, leads to failure.³⁸⁸ The body is a means whose use is decreed by God, thus it is forbidden for one to neglect the body or expose it to destruction.³⁸⁹ Since the body itself is a means on the path to the hereafter, those things that help us order our physical lives contribute to our overall spiritual journey. In classifying purely material sciences like medicine, Imām al-Ghazālī writes: “Each of the sciences whose aim is the well-being of the physical body is thus a facet of the general

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 202. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 157.

³⁸⁸ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 157.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 63. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 38.

well-being of the means of traveling the path; there is no doubt that the science of medicine is one aspect of this, for it is necessary for maintaining bodily health.”³⁹⁰

The true scholars take the means God has given them, including the physical, regulating them with respect and care - they do not make physical life the center of their existence, but “keep the company of this world with their physical bodies, while their souls are conjoined to the loftiest abode.”³⁹¹ Such a person’s interior and exterior life are in harmony: “his demeanor reflects [his] apprehension [of God], as does his clothing, his bearing, his action and repose, his manner of discourse and his silence” such that “no one regards him without being reminded of God. His very appearance is proof of his earnest comportment.”³⁹² The seeker of knowledge ought to make this his goal; there is much guidance in the example of the Prophet ﷺ, of his Companions, and of their heirs, the scholars, to help him or her along in this. In this section, we will review some of the recommendations for organizing one’s physical life found in Islamic ethics as they pertain specifically to acquiring knowledge. These means, as we will see, are equally liable to be labeled as prelogical, though they, too, bear their proper place in the Islamic worldview.

5.4.2. *Moderation in Everything*

One of the principles of Islamic ethics that can be applied across all aspects of material life is that the believer and, in particular, the seeker of knowledge, should temper every choice they make and action they take with moderation. The basis for an Islamic ethic of moderation can be found in verse [2:143] of the Qur’ān, which makes reference to the “middle way” that is such a pervasive theme in Islamic thought, stating: “*And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear*

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 202. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 157.

³⁹¹ Ibid, 267. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 214.

³⁹² Ibid, 278. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 223.

witness to it before you...”³⁹³ This gives Qur’ānic evidence for the connection between the middle way and the witnessing of truth - that is, knowing or knowledge. A further connection between the two ideas (moderation and knowledge) occurs in verse [68:28], where the root for the word “middle” (wa - sa - ṭa) is used to mean “right-minded” or wise (*awsaṭuhum*).³⁹⁴ Moderation is a position of wisdom, and it ought to be applied by the wise in every aspect of their existence, whether material, social, or spiritual. Evidence for this is found throughout the Prophetic tradition - extremism is thus utterly incompatible with that tradition.

The scholars uphold the ethic of moderation; amongst the characteristics of the true scholar is

“that he inclines not toward extravagance in his food and beverages, nor elegance in his clothing, nor opulence in his furnishings or residence. Rather he prefers moderation in all that; in this he is similar to the predecessors (r) and he inclines toward simple sufficiency with the minimum in everything. Whenever his inclination in the direction of penury increases, his proximity to God increases, and his rank among the scholars of the hereafter becomes elevated.”³⁹⁵

If the scholars did not live thus, they would lead the masses astray, giving the less educated the excuse that the wise live wasteful, extravagant lives, so why should those who possess less knowledge than them avoid such behavior?³⁹⁶ Censuring those scholars who shamelessly lead lavish lives, Ḥātim b. al-Aṣamm said: “O malicious scholars! When the uneducated multitudes who fight like dogs over the world and thirst for its goods see the likes of you, they proclaim, ‘The [venerable] scholar lives thus! I am certainly no worse than he.’”³⁹⁷ This holds for those who study the religious sciences as well, not just those who have mastered them: the people on the path of knowledge become models for the rest of society, therefore the normal injunction for Muslims to avoid excess and waste applies doubly for them. While “self-adornment is permissible,”

³⁹³ Muḥammad Asad, trans. **The Message of the Qur’ān: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration**, 5th ed. (N.p.: The Book Foundation, 2003), [2:143].

³⁹⁴ Ibid, [68:28].

³⁹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘Ilm**,” 244. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 193.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 245-6. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 194.

³⁹⁷ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 194.

there is a risk in it of becoming attached to worldly, which will drag one off the path of healthy intentionality and chain one to the life of this world when one should be seeking the next.³⁹⁸ Only those with extreme self-control can resist the pull of even the permissible blessings of earthly life.³⁹⁹ Food is one of these permissible blessings that, when not moderated, has a negative effect on the soul. Seekers of knowledge take care to avoid such setbacks in order to be more successful on the path of knowledge; they follow the example of the scholars of old, like Imām Al-Shāfi‘ī, who said: “I have not satiated myself for sixteen years, for satiety weighs heavily on the body, hardens the heart, diminishes intelligence, induces sleep, and weakens one’s capacity for devotions.”⁴⁰⁰ They eat only of that which is permissible, otherwise they face the possibility of having their work corrupted by their source of energy, for food is nothing more than a means to an end.⁴⁰¹ Moderation and ethical consciousness in eating, then, is a tool of knowledge acquisition in the Islamic matrix of material, ethical, and epistemological.

Moderation is not limited to consumption of material goods, however; it also involves things as quotidian as excess mirth. Imām al-Ghazālī cites a statement of one of the predecessors, who said that “when a scholar laughs out loud, he spits out a bit of knowledge.”⁴⁰² This metaphor directly implies a reduction in the knowledge of one who does not comport him or herself with moderation in happiness. This may seem like an extreme limitation, Imām ‘Alī explains the potential reasoning behind it well when he instructs those on the path of knowledge: “When you hear of knowledge, keep it close, and do not associate it with levity and empty discourse, lest hearts reject and discard it.”⁴⁰³ The work both students and scholars are involved in is own of great nobility, and nobility brings with it a degree of restraint and discretion. To abandon this is to lower the station of knowledge in the eyes of the public. It is also a sign of the limitations of one’s own wisdom - an indication of a lack of knowledge.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, 248. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 197.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 250. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 199.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, 93. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 64.

⁴⁰¹ Cemil Oruç, “**İmam-i Gazālī’nin Eđitim Anlayışı**,” (PhD diss., Marmara Universitesi, 2009) 143.

⁴⁰² Al-Ghazālī, “**Kitāb al-‘İlm**,” 283. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 228.

⁴⁰³ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 228.

5.4.3. *Little Speech*

The idea of moderation in mirth ties into what one might call the ethic of the tongue: in Islamic thought, speech is considered action and people are held to account for the things they say. Take, for example, the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet ﷺ said: “Every word uttered by a son of Adam will be against him, not in his favor, except three [things he said], enjoining worthy conduct, forbidding that which is contemptible, and remembering God.”⁴⁰⁴ Thus there is an entire tradition in Islamic thought of maintaining great caution and control of what one’s speech. The reason for this is that “vain discourse and affected speech, losing oneself in laughter, and vehemence in demeanor and speech...are signs of wantonness, a [false] sense of security, and heedlessness of the horrific extent of God’s chastisement and the severity of His wrath.”⁴⁰⁵ The knowledgeable are more aware than others of the reasons for and content of this ethical practice. Perhaps it is for that reason that Imām al-Ghazālī, in multiple locations, equates silence with knowledge, opining that “whoever has been given silence and ascetic [detachment], has been given knowledge in its totality.”⁴⁰⁶

We have seen that the ability to say “I do not know” is a protection for the scholar; the true scholars further protect themselves and the knowledge they convey by exercising great discretion in speech. It was reported that:

“Imām al-Shāfi‘ī (r) was once questioned concerning a certain matter on which he remained silent. So it was said to him, ‘Are you not going to respond, may God bless you?’ To which he responded, ‘Not until I know whether the merit resides in my silence or in the response [to your question].’”⁴⁰⁷

It is right that the scholars in particular should be careful in controlling their tongues, for they are called upon to teach, to preach, and to guide through their speech; moreover, they are given the authority to step in and do so more freely than others. Thus, for them, the inclination to speak, even when silence may be preferable, is stronger and more

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 261-2. Found in al-Tirmidhī, 2412; Ibn Māja, 3974. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 208.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 279. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 224.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 108. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 76. See also: Ibid, 262-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 209.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 93. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 64.

difficult to resist than it is for others. Relating a narration from Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's *Qūt al-Qulūb*, Imām al-Ghazālī writes that:

“Among the temptations for the scholar is that speech becomes more beloved to him than attentively listening. Speech allows for eloquent expression and superfluous embellishment, and leaves the speaker susceptible to error; whereas in thoughtful silence there is integrity and knowledge.”⁴⁰⁸

It is a trope of Islamic ethics that the tongue is one of the most difficult limbs to control for mankind;⁴⁰⁹ this applies doubly for those on the path of knowledge, for whom arrogance and ostentation are both a strong impulse and a great risk.⁴¹⁰ Ideally, the further they travel on that path, the more skilled they become at controlling their speech, for “when knowledge increases, discourse decreases.”⁴¹¹ Imām al-Ghazālī sets the same example in his texts, even limiting his own exposition in places. He writes at one point: “let us elaborate no more on this; the aim in realizing the truth of a matter is brevity in speech and reaching the goal promptly, not drawn-out expositions.”⁴¹² When questioned, true scholars are so vigilant in their heedfulness that they venture into evasiveness at times. The true “scholar is the one who, when questioned on a matter [of religion], feels as though he were having a molar removed.”⁴¹³

Those who can maintain silence when necessary are rewarded just as much as one who speaks the truth in teaching,⁴¹⁴ but reward is not the only thing there is to be gained by proper conduct in speech acts: by controlling the tongue, one can also gain in wisdom and knowledge. As we mentioned, silence is directly equated with knowledge and realization;⁴¹⁵ one who practices the former is likely to gain in the latter. A commonsense reason for this is that those who are silent, just like those who are humble, are open to learning. A reason that is not as familiar to the modern mind is that the moral exercise of

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 230. Found in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 1:144. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 181.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid, 93. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 64.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, 258-9. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 205.

⁴¹¹ Ibid, 263. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 209.

⁴¹² Ibid, 163. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 123.

⁴¹³ Ibid, 258. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 205.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid, 257. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 204.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 262-3. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 209.

silence is very difficult on the ego, and experiential knowledge can only be achieved when the ego is suppressed.⁴¹⁶

5.4.4. *Little Sleep*

Another realm of daily life in which regulation of the physical body facilitates knowledge acquisition is that of sleep. The idea of moderation in sleep, like that of speech, is firmly established in prophetic traditions and in the Islamic ethical system in general. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said to one of his Companions: “O so and so, do not sleep much at night, for a large quantity of sleep at night will leave its owner a poor man on Resurrection Day.”⁴¹⁷ Time is the capital of humankind; they either use it effectively in this life to earn paradise in the hereafter or they spend it fruitlessly.⁴¹⁸ A person’s nights account for much of that time, and though the physical body and the appetitive soul both enjoy sleep, some portion of that time can be saved - set aside for better use. As humans, time is our “most precious possession,” and wasting it is both immoral and unwise.⁴¹⁹ Thus, sleeping through the entire night could be described as heedlessness.⁴²⁰ Imām al-Shāfi‘ī yet again provides the model for us in this aspect of moderation. He used to “divide the night into three parts: a third for the study of knowledge, a third for prayer, and a third for sleep.”⁴²¹ This division of the night between fulfilling physical needs, ritual worship, and knowledge acquisition is the epitome of balance; it also joins the various means by which the path of knowledge is traversed.

⁴¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā’l-Walad*, 95. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 24.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 92. Found in Ibn Māja, *Iqāma*, 174. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 20.

⁴¹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 144. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 106.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 106.

⁴²⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā’l-Walad*, 93. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple*, 20.

⁴²¹ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 92. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, 63.

CONCLUSION: “PRELOGICAL”?

A Poor Choice of Words

The mental processes discussed above are fairly straightforward means of learning; they are in line with modern educational theories and, in the minds of thinkers like Rosenthal and Von Grunebaum, are worthy of being called “rational” or “logical.” But in Chapters Four and Five, we found such means paired with others, equally integral to an Islamic theory of education but which may be labeled “prelogical” or “irrational.”⁴²² Imām al-Ghazālī pairs these seamlessly, as they all constitute part of his worldview:

“Know that the sciences...differ in their manner of attainment. Sometimes they come upon the heart as though something were flung into it from a source it knows not. At other times they are gained through deduction (*istidlāl*) and study. That which is not attained by way of acquisition nor through artful proof is called general inspiration (*ilhām*), and that which is attained through inference is called reflection (*i‘tibār*) and mental perception (*istabṣār*).”⁴²³

Each of these fall into our binary division of the sources of knowledge into reason and revelation: deduction, study, reflection, and perception are functions of the intellect, while inspiration is a kind of revelation. Note that Imām al-Ghazālī touches on each of these means by which knowledge is attained without drawing any rational distinction between them, or singling out one over others as being more efficacious. The only difference is that, in the case of inspiration, the knowledge enters the heart through some function of the unseen world, while in the case of mental thought processes, the learner is aware of the action of the intellect in pursuit of knowledge.

The Term is Pejorative

It is fair to say that gaining knowledge through revelation is not a rational process in that it does not involve reasoning, or that it is not logical in that it is not a function of

⁴²² Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, 97; and Von Grunebaum, *Introduction to Ta‘līm al-Muta‘allim: Tariq al-Ta‘allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning*, 12.

⁴²³ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Qalb*,” 67. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart*, 51.

human deduction at work. But to apply the terms “prelogical” and “irrational” to revelation, or to the other secondary means of learning that open the doors to revelation, such as spiritual purification or ethical behavior, is unfair. The reason for this is that such terms have become pejorative in our time, which, at least in Western educational environments, still carries the marks of positivism and is largely characterized by a combination of scientism and materialism.⁴²⁴ If my reader doubts that the term was meant pejoratively, let him or her consider the fact that Von Grunebaum uses the term “magical” synonymously with “prelogical.”⁴²⁵ In much the same way, Rosenthal uses the term “supernatural” synonymously with “irrational,” and places both of these in opposition to the descriptors “rational” and “material.”⁴²⁶ This term, like irrational and pre-logical, though philosophically straightforward, carries a negative connotation in our time. Since modern academic thought sits under the shadow of the information age, its conception of knowledge has little to do with metaphysical realities - indeed, the idea of a metaphysic is meaningless.⁴²⁷ Thus whatever is “material” is “rational” and “logical,” and anything other than that (i.e. immaterial) is “irrational,” “supernatural,” “magical,” and “prelogical.” From such a position, one cannot adhere to the view that the Preserved Tablet contains the knowledge of all created things, that this is then reflected in existent reality, which is perceived and understood by man. Much less can one accommodate the idea that God might fold the process, and directly reveal the content of the Tablet to man’s heart. Not only could one not accept these understandings of reality - a physicalist worldview would have to label them as nonsense. The cosmologies differ, thus their epistemologies will necessarily differ as well.

⁴²⁴ Honerkamp, "Translator's Preface," xxx.

⁴²⁵ Von Grunebaum, *Introduction to Ta'lim al-Muta'allim: Tariq al-Ta'allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning*, 13.

⁴²⁶ Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, 97.

⁴²⁷ Honerkamp, "Translator's Preface," xxx.

Imām al-Ghazālī's Means of Knowledge Acquisition as Causally Appropriate within his Metaphysic

This brings us to another reason why such labels are inaccurate: if the means Imām al-Ghazālī includes in his epistemology are efficacious in the context of his metaphysic, his recommendation that those means be used to arrive at their proper ends is not “irrational.” To take a means to achieve something when the causation holds within one’s own metaphysic is not an irrational act, it is in fact rational. But Rosenthal and Von Grunebaum, in describing them the way they have, and those who take similar positions to them, do not admit the possibility of a different metaphysic. Thus they assume the ignorance or irrationality of the one who believes as Imām al-Ghazālī does - belief, to them, is an anathema. What they fail to see, however, is that their understanding of knowledge is no less founded on faith: their faith in the idea that materialism and scientism are true to reality. The suggestion that means like “the recitation of pious formulae” are “primitive” is nothing more than philosophical prejudice.⁴²⁸ The idea that one can have an epistemology devoid of metaphysical contentions works out well for physicalists, but for anyone who sees the world differently, it is exclusionary and unreasonable.

Imām al-Ghazālī's Response

One's Ignorance of a Phenomenon does not Entail its Non-existence

Imām al-Ghazālī does not overlook the possibility of objections from perspectives like this: he has responses for those who deny the existence of that which they have not experienced. He warns his reader that “some men endowed with intellect have rejected the things perceptible to the prophetic power and considered them to be wildly improbably. That is the very essence of ignorance! For such a man has no supporting reason except it is a stage he himself has not attained and for him it does not exist: so he

⁴²⁸ Von Grunebaum, *Introduction to Ta‘līm al-Muta‘allim: Tarīq al-Ta‘allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning*, 12-3.

supposes that it does not exist in itself.”⁴²⁹ There are several ways of coming to know the unseen elements of the Imām al-Ghazālī’s epistemology, either through the intellect, accepting the word of those who transmit revealed knowledge, or through personal spiritual experience. Those who deny the existence of higher modes of knowing simply because they have not experienced such a thing themselves are not believed to be knowledgeable; they are blind to the reality of whatever is beyond them.⁴³⁰ The example of dreams is a useful in countering their argument. Imām al-Ghazālī explains that if a person who had never had a dream before had the experience described to him, and was told that “there are some men who fall down unconscious as though they were dead, and their perception, hearing and sight leave them, and they then perceive what is ‘hidden,’ he would deny it and give apodeictic proof of its impossibility by saying: ‘The sensory powers are the causes of perception.’”⁴³¹ This man would, however, be wrong, since such a thing is possible and is widely known to occur. One might retort that while the existence of dreams is demonstrated to be true through the collective knowledge of society, which recognizes it due to its being commonly experienced by the members of society. I would respond to this that the kind of revealed knowledge that is inspiration has been similarly demonstrated, just not in Western society. Throughout the Islamic civilization, even up until today in Muslim countries, the reality of such inspiration is commonly acknowledged. Thus it is not pre-logical for scholars of the Islamic civilization to take these means as a part of their understanding of reality, and to not “attempt to rationalize these folkways.”⁴³² Imām al-Ghazālī takes up a similar line of reasoning, challenging those who claim to take their beliefs from empirical proofs alone:

“You do not limit yourself to believing what you have experienced. On the contrary, you have listened to the reports of experienced men and have unquestioningly accepted their statements. Listen, therefore, to the utterances of the prophets: for they have indeed experienced and seen what is true in all that revelation has brought us. Follow in their path,

⁴²⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 111. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 84.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, 107-9. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 82-3.

⁴³¹ Ibid, 112. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 84.

⁴³² Von Grunebaum, *Introduction to Ta’līm al-Muta’allim: Tariq al-Ta’allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning*, 13.

and you will perceive some of that by direct vision...even if you have had no such experience, your reason peremptorily judges it necessary to believe and follow the experienced.”⁴³³

If one considers the fact that one possesses the capacity of reason - which Imām al-Ghazālī describes as a higher form of sight - and that this capacity is beyond or above that of physical sight, one can extrapolate from this to a still higher mode of knowing and seeing reality. Imām al-Ghazālī describes the knowledge derived from prophecy this way, and points out that just as the intellect perceives intelligibles beyond the power of physical eyesight, the “prophetic power” grasps intelligibles beyond the reach of the intellect.⁴³⁴ The weakness of the position of a person who denies the existence of such metaphysical realities or their ability to be perceived through prophecy is exposed when we consider that, if they were described using a different “mode of expression” or cultural association, that person would be much more liable to accept them (as it is with the concept of dreaming versus that of prophecy).⁴³⁵ This is particularly ironic because true dreams themselves are described as being one forty-sixth of prophecy in the Islamic tradition.⁴³⁶

Spiritual Realities have Properties and Effects

As for those who deny the efficacy of so-called “archaic” means of knowledge acquisition,⁴³⁷ Imām al-Ghazālī has a response for them as well. Although Von Grunebaum writes them off as “folkways,” the ritualistic elements of faith have effects and properties just as other physical phenomena have effects and properties.⁴³⁸ Modern thinkers will often adopt this attitude toward religious phenomena, because they, like the “philosophers” Imām al-Ghazālī addresses, see their own understanding of the universe and experience as the only accurate portrayal of reality and dismiss everything outside of

⁴³³ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa'l-Muḥṣiḥ bi'l-Aḥwāl*, 133-4. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 96.

⁴³⁴ Ibid, 112. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 84.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 132. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 95.

⁴³⁶ Yahya Michot, "Revelation," In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, edited by Tim Winter, 180-96 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 193.

⁴³⁷ Honerkamp, "Translator's Preface," xx.

⁴³⁸ Von Grunebaum, *Introduction to Ta'lim al-Muta'allim: Tariq al-Ta'allum - Instruction of the Student: The Method of Learning*, 12.

their own perspective as being impossible.⁴³⁹ Yet there is no difference between the physical properties the natural philosopher accepts and the “properties [existing] in the number of *rak‘as*, the throwing of stones, the number of the principal ceremonies of the pilgrimage, and the other prescriptions of revelation.”⁴⁴⁰ Moreover, there are existent physical phenomena whose causes and effects are unclear and whose properties are unknown. Would the natural philosopher (the Physicalist) deny the existence of those physical realities simply because they are not yet understood?⁴⁴¹ If he or she would not, then it is mere narrow-mindedness to deny the existence of metaphysical phenomena or mock their pursuit as meaningless.⁴⁴² A sick man’s lack of understanding about the function of a medication does not prevent him from taking the treatment recommended by a health professional, yet when it comes to religious professionals (scholars) and their recommendations for his spiritual health, his experience and not theirs becomes the determining factor.⁴⁴³ For anyone who takes this position, Imām al-Ghazālī has a warning: “beware, lest your portion of knowledge be the denial of everything that exceeds the confines of your own limits. Therein have perished the pedantic scholars who believed they had encompassed [in their knowledge] the entirety of intellectual knowledge.”⁴⁴⁴

⁴³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl wa’l-Mufṣiḥ bi’l-Aḥwāl*, 129-30. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 94.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, 133. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 96.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 129-33. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 94-6.

⁴⁴² Ibid, 131-2. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 95.

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 134. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **Deliverance from Error**, 96.

⁴⁴⁴ Al-Ghazālī, “*Kitāb al-‘Ilm*,” 302. For translation, see: Al-Ghazālī, **The Book of Knowledge**, 243-4.

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