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The Quest for the Unknown: On al-Ghazālī's Critical Thinking and Epistemology in Islamic Tradition

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Abstract

This study elaborates on al-Ghazālī's critical inquiry into major intellectual traditions that hold some bearing on religion, with special reference to his sustained critique of pure reason as introduced to Islamic metaphysics by philosophers. Al Ghazālī's critique scheme places high premium on the standards of rationality, yet exhibits the deficiency of reason in metaphysical realms in order to establish a legitimate space for revelation. The study elaborates the Qur'ānic perspective of critical thinking which has provided the inspiration for al-Ghazālī and then identifies several intellectual standards of assessment and sound reasoning, which al-Ghazālī employed in his critique and coherently integrated with Islamic epistemology. This includes the demand for evidence to support a claim, the relationship between reason and revelation, and the quest for objectivity. The study aims to chart a trajectory of critical and intellectual thinking that is grounded in reason and guided by revelation.

Keywords: *Critical thinking; al- Ghazālī; revelation, critique of pure reason; Islamic epistemology.*

Introduction

As living beings, we are exposed to various types of pollution released into the environment largely due to many of our activities. Organic and inorganic pollutants have devastating effects on our physical health and on the environment at large. Due to our technological achievements however, we have developed different monitoring mechanisms to keep our air, water and food supplies clean, even though at times, our means of protection only exacerbate the situation.

As rational beings from different cultures and orientations we are equally exposed to various types of ideas and thoughts – true and false concepts, valid and invalid arguments, etc. – that are no less detrimental to our mental and spiritual health than air, water and soil pollutants are to our physical health. We are, however, not as stringent in taking care of

mental health as we are to our physical health. 'Critical thinking' is a *mental filter*¹ that ensures that only the right ideas make their way into our perceptions. Given the overwhelming amount of information we have at our disposal, and particularly in the age of information and communication technology, critical thinking helps us separate fact from opinion and distinguish between rational claims and emotional ones. It identifies logical flaws in arguments, evaluates evidence and draws conclusions on the basis of good evidence. Critical thinking requires a fair recognition of the strength and the weakness of an argument, just as it helps to present a point of view in a structured, clear, and well-reasoned way. In short, critical thinking refers to "a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends."²

Critical thinking thrived in Islamic history not as an independent discipline but as a technique of analysis and intellectual discourse employed in the formation and development of many religious disciplines. For example, *'ilm al-jadal* (science of dialectics or argumentation) is based on advancing evidence to show which of the juristic rulings or theological perspective is more sound. According to Imam al-haramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), one of the early scholars to write on this discipline, any error committed on fundamental or secondary matter of religion by a learned man must be identified and corrected by another learned man. Such critique, which must be supported by *burhān* (demonstrative proof) and *husn al-jidāl* (good arguments), is a religious duty and part of *al-amr bi-al-maruf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (enjoining the virtue and forbidding the vice).³ Like *'ilm al-jadal*, *ijtihād* is a critical-cum-creative intellectual discipline used for extrapolating legal rulings from the Qur'an and Sunnah. A *mujtahid* (a person who practices *ijtihād*) would be critical of the existing *madhāhib* (legal schools) and creative in generating new ones or updating old juridical pronouncements on pressing problems in accordance with the strength of the evidence of the Qur'an and Prophetic Sunnah.⁴ To

"Mental filter" is used here as a cognitive skill of thinking critically about thinking. It is not used to describe a cognitive distortion that happens when a person is focusing only on the negative aspects of a situation and filtering out all of the positive ones. See "Mental Filter," Retrieved from <http://panicdisorder.about.com/od/livingwithpd/tp/Mental-Filter.htm>.

² Edward Glaser, *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1941), p. 5.

³ D. A. al-Juwaynī, *Al-Kāfiyah fī al-Jadal* (Cairo: 'Isā al-Bābī al-habbī, 1979), p. 24.

⁴ For more on the relationship between *ijtihād* and creative or critical thinking, see J. Badi and M. Tajdin, *Creative Thinking: An Islamic Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2005), pp. 69-109; and S. Sikandar Shah and M. Wok Mahmud, "Critical Thinking and Its Implications for

ascertain the authenticity and credibility of hadith, scholars of hadith developed various stern measures, unprecedented in the history of textual critique.

Muslims scholars of various schools made use of critical thinking in their intra and inter-scholarly engagements. There were theological critiques among the Ash'arites, Mu'tazilites, Shiites, Khawarijites etc., and many critical encounters between Muslim theologians and philosophers and between them and the Jewish and Christian theologians. There were also critiques among the jurists of Islamic schools of jurisprudence: Hanafites, Malikites, Shāfi'ites, Hambalites, Zaydites, Imamites etc. and their critical engagements with the Sufis.⁵

Imam al-Ghazālī is one of the greatest minds brought up within the Islamic intellectual tradition of critical discourse.⁶ As Hallaq rightly observed, al-Ghazālī drew attention from many of his contemporaries and has received greater attention from modern researchers than any other thinker in medieval Islam.⁷ What earns al-Ghazālī this unique recognition is in fact, as this study advances, a form of critique grounded in Islamic epistemology that he exhibited throughout his inquiries. Such critique is widely recognized but not independently studied. In his address on the occasion of the celebration of the 900th anniversary, Amadou-Mahtar

Contemporary *Ijtihād*," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2010), pp. 45-67.

⁵ H. Hanafi, "Hal al-Naqd waqafa 'alā al-Hadārah al-Gharbiyyah?" in *Falsafat al-Naqd wa-Naqd al-Falsafah fī al-Fikr al-'Arabī wa-al-Gharbī*, ed. Hasan Hanafi (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wihdah al-'Arabiyyah), pp. 7-24.

⁶ He is acclaimed by a number of historians of religion as the most influential Muslim thinker after the Prophet. (See S. M. Zwemer *A Moslem Seeker after God: Showing Islam at Its Best in Life and Teaching of Al-Ghazali Mystic and Theologian of the 11th Century* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1920), p. 21; William Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1953; *Yūṣuf al-Qaradāwī, Al-Imām al-Ghazālī bayna Mādilūh wa-Nāqidh* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1994), p. 11.). On the occasion of the celebration of the 900th anniversary of his death in 1985, based on the Hijri calculation (505-1405), the Executive Board of UNESCO testified that al-Ghazālī "made a major contribution to the evolution and enrichment of Islamic Thought and ethics" and that his mighty work had "left an indelible imprint on other cultures" (Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. "On the occasion of the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the death of Al-Ghazali" (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), p. 2. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000671/067115eb.pdf>). Twenty-six years later, in 2011, the world's scholarly community repeated the commemoration based on the Gregorian calculation (1111-2011). For example, *The Muslim World* journal published two special issues – vol. 101, no. 4, 2011 & vol. 102, no. 1, 2012 – consisting of 11 articles to commemorate year 1111, the year al-Ghazālī died. Similarly, *Islam & Science* journal published a special issue in its vol. 9, no. 2, 2011. As documented in al-Ghazālī's website <http://www.ghazali.org>, scores of academic dissertations, colloquia, chairs in academic institutions of higher learning and scholarly books and journal articles have studied from various angles the enduring legacy of al-Ghazālī.

⁷ Wael Bahjat Hallaq, Forward to *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis: A Debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam*, by Farouk Mitha (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2001), p. xiii

M'Bow, the then Director General of UNESCO, acknowledged that al-Ghazālī's approach in systematically subjecting the intellectual traditions previously established to critical analysis was exemplary in its scrupulousness.⁸ Al-Ghazālī's critique, according to Parvez Manzoor, is "the most cogent intellectual argument of the monotheistic faith in medieval times." It was well appreciated within and outside the Islamic circles, being a source of inspiration for many Jewish and Christian intellectuals, particularly in medieval time.⁹ Al-Akiti notes that "al-Ghazālī's balancing of the forces transcends the bounded concerns of his own religion and engages the perennial concerns of all and sundry, atheists and theists alike."¹⁰ Parvez Manzoor again observes that al-Ghazālī's critique of philosophical postulates "stretches far beyond the confines of medieval polemics in which it was historically situated and reaches right down to the heart of the contemporary debate over the truth and ideology of scientism, to the thorny question of the relationship between scientific knowledge ... and man's search for meaning..."¹¹

'Critical thinking,' as used in this study, refers to several intellectual standards of assessment and skills of sound reasoning, which al-Ghazālī employed in his critique and coherently integrated with Islamic epistemology. This includes objectivity, rationality, consistency, relevance of evidence and whether the premises provided lead to a logical conclusion. This study sets out to examine al-Ghazālī's approach to critical thinking. The study first elaborates the Qur'ānic perspective of critical thinking which has provided the inspiration for al-Ghazālī and then proceeds to identify features of al-Ghazālī's critique, including demand for evidence to support a claim, integration of reason and revelation, and the quest for objectivity. Based on textual analysis of al-Ghazālī's works, primarily *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* [The Incoherence of the Philosophers], *al-Munqidh min al-haḳāl* [The Deliverer from Error], and *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* [The Revival of the Religious Sciences], the study aims to exhibit an alternative trajectory of critical and intellectual thinking founded on Islamic epistemology.

⁸ Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "On the occasion of the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the death of Al-Ghazali," pp. 3-4.

⁹ S Parvez Manzoor, "Two Poles of a Critical and Creative Faith," *The Muslim News*, London, April 28, 2000. Retrieved from <http://www.algonet.se/~pmanzoor/MNews-Ghazali.htm>.

¹⁰ M. Afifi al-Akiti, "On Celebrating the 900th Anniversary of al-Ghazālī," *The Muslim World*, vol. 101, no. 4 (2011), p. 574

¹¹ S Parvez Manzoor, "Two Poles of a Critical and Creative Faith."

The Qur'an on Critical Thinking

The Qur'an places high premium on rational thinking. As such, it raises many thought-provoking questions concerning the existence of God and His unity; the essence of man; the origin of the universe and its ultimate destiny; the creation of the seen and unseen worlds; and the nature of reality and ultimate purpose of existence. Furthermore, the Qur'an makes it abundantly clear that none will make sense of its parables and narratives, appreciate its legislations and teachings or grasp the meaning of its *āyāt* in the created cosmos and those in the revealed Qur'an itself except *ulū al-albāb*,¹² a term which may broadly refer to scholars endowed with wisdom, intellectual integrity, sound reasoning, fair judgement and open-mindedness (Qur'an, 2:269; 3:7, 190; 12:111; 38:29; 39:21). It also condemns factors that impede rational thinking, such as *taqīd* (blind imitation) (Qur'an, 2:170; 5:104; 31:21; 43:21-24), *hawā* (pursuit of caprice) (Qur'an, 5:48, 77; 6:56, 119; 28:50; 47:14; 23:71), and *zann* (pursuit of conjecture in the face of certitude) (Qur'an, 10:36; 53:23, 28). Phrases used in the Qur'an to encourage thinking includes *awalam yatafakkarū* (Do they not reflect) (Qur'an, 7:184), *awalam yandunū* (do they not consider) (Qur'an, 7:185), *afalam yaddabbanū* (do they not ponder) (Qur'an, 23:68), *afalā ta'qilūn* (Will you not use your reason?) (Qur'an, 2:44; 7:169), to mention a few.¹³

Nevertheless, the type of reasoning the Qur'an encourages is the one that recognises its own limitation. Such reasoning would exercise its rights in areas within the rational dictate and believes in *al-ghayb* (the unseen), as established in revelation, which are not necessarily irrational but simply go beyond the ambit of human reason.¹⁴

¹² For a study on the Qur'anic use of *ulū al-albāb* and its implication for development, see Mohd. Kamal Hassan, "A Return to the Qur'anic Paradigm of Development and Integrated Knowledge: The *Ulū al-Albāb* Model," *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2010), pp. 183-210.

¹³ For more on Qur'an's thinking terminologies, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "Reading the Signs," pp. 141-164; Jamal Badi, "'Thinking' Terminologies from Qur'anic Perspective and Their Impact on Human Intellectual Development," *International Journal of Arab Culture, Management and Sustainable Development*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2011), pp. 41-54.

¹⁴ This may include questioning what is known as *āyāt mutashābihāt* (allegorical verses) of the Qur'an (Qur'an, 3:7). To ask many unnecessary, trivial questions, as posed by Banū Isrā'īl to Prophet Mūsā (Qur'an, 2:67-73), was also discouraged (Qur'an, 5:101-102). Other than that, the Qur'an nurtures inquisitive mind (Qur'an, 2:259-260; 7:143; 16:43; 25:59) and extensively employs questioning technique in the formation of the Islamic worldview (see Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu et al, "Al-As'ilah al-Qur'āniyyah wa-Dawruhū fī Taqrīr Ru'yat al-Islām lil-Wujūd", *Journal of Islam in Asia*, Special Issue 2 (2011), pp. 1-33. Retrieved from <http://www.iium.edu.my/jiasia/ojs-2.2/index.php/Islam/issue/view/16>.

The Qur'ān then calls humans to stop to think, 'and never to stop thinking (Qur'ān, 12:1-2; 38:29; 43:1-3) in areas within the reach of human reason. According to Hashim Kamali, the Qur'ānic references to thinking occur in conjunction with basically five major themes: primarily the belief in the Oneness and munificence of God (*tawhīd*); reflection on the Qur'ān; man and the universe; historical precedent; and the act of thinking itself.¹⁵ 'Abd al-Karīm Nawfān 'Ubaydāt classifies areas where the Qur'ān calls for rational thinking into four, namely: reflection on God's *āyāt* (signs) in the creation; reflection on God's laws in nature; reflection on the wisdom behind Sharī'ah; and reflection on God's law in history.¹⁶ In discussing over this wide array of fundamental questions, man is encouraged to think systematically; hence he is at liberty to think individually or in pairs (Qur'ān, 34:47) and draw conclusion on the basis of evidence presented before him in *āfāq* (cosmos, horizons) and *anfus* (human disposition, human community) (Qur'ān, 41:53). Anyone who does not use his reason properly is likened to a beast or even worse (Qur'ān, 7:179; 25:44).

While the word *naqd* (Arabic word for 'critique' or 'criticism') has no root in the Qur'ānic vocabulary, its synonyms can be found, such as *tabayyanū* (ascertain the truth) (Qur'ān, 49:6), *li-yanūza* (to separate the bad from the good). (Qur'ān, 8:37). Other than that, critical thinking is one of the discursive styles¹⁷ the Qur'ān employs extensively when making its case for the existence and unity of God, creation, resurrection, the necessity of revelation, etc. Therefore, man is invited to think deeply and critically and to rethink: could there be any flaw in this divinely designed system of being? (Qur'ān, 67:3-4). On human interactions, the Qur'ān calls for fair judgment (Qur'ān, 5:8; 6:152), willingness to consider new ideas and the courage to pursue the truth thereof (Qur'ān, 43:21-24; 39:18). It advises not to delve into any matter which one is unfit for (Qur'ān, 3:66; 17:36), not to accept any claim without evidence (Qur'ān, 49:6) and to ensure that the evidence truly supports the claim (Qur'ān, 3:168; 46:11; 34:34-37). Furthermore, it faults those who blindly follow their ancestors, saying that those ancestors themselves were not less irrational than their successors: "When it is said to them: "Follow what Allah has revealed:" They say: "Nay! We shall follow the ways of our

¹⁵ M. H. Kamali, "Reading the Signs: A Qur'ānic Perspective on Thinking," *Islam & Science*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2006), p.143.

¹⁶ 'A. Karīm Nawfān 'Ubaydāt, *Al-Di'ālāh al-'Aqliyyah fī al-Qur'ān* (Jordan: Dār al-Nafā'is, 2000), pp. 90-98.

¹⁷ For other thinking styles that can be identified in the Qur'ān see Jamal Badi and Mustapha Tajdin, *Creative Thinking*, pp. 33-68.

fathers. What! Even though their fathers were wholly unintelligent and had no guidance?" (Qur'ān, 2:170).

One passage in Sūrat al-Naml on establishing the unity of Allah is worth mentioning. The passage begins with the following question: "*ā-Allāh akbarun ammā yushrikūn* (Who) is better? – Allah or the false gods they associate (with Him)? The passage then proceeds to recount Allah's creations and provisions one after another: He Who has created the heaven and earth...; He Who has made the earth habitable...; He Who answers the distressed when he calls upon Him...; He Who guides in utter darkness. Giving all this grand creation and majestic design as evidence of the existence and unity of Allah, the Qur'ān then continues to repeat after each bounty enumerated: "could there be any divine power besides Allah?" If the *kuffār* are still not open to this supporting evidence, then the burden of proof is placed in their court to defend their claim and justify their belief in atheism, deism or polytheism: "*Qul hāṭū burhānakum in kuntum sādiqīn*" "Bring forth your proof, if you are telling the truth" (Qur'ān, 27:59-64). Subsequently, it is declared that they have no solid ground for their denial, particularly of the issues related to the Hereafter: "No, but their knowledge of the Hereafter has reached a dead-lock giving occasion to uncertainty. No, but their doubt stands as the beacon of the unwise, in fact, their notion of the Hereafter has fallen on the blind spot"¹⁸ (Qur'ān, 27:66).

Al-Ghazālī's Intellectual Inquiry

Imam Abū hāmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī (450–505/1058–1111) is a prominent Muslim jurist, theologian, philosopher and Sufi. Born in Tūs in Persia, al-Ghazālī received education in his hometown and then in Jurjān and finally in Nishapur in today's northern part of Iran. At the Nizamiyya Madrasa (al-Madrasah al-Nisāmiyyah) in Nishapur, he learned *fiqh* (jurisprudence), logic and *ilm al-kalām* (science of theology) from an influential Ash'arite theologian, Imam al-haramayn al-Juwaynī and later became a renowned teacher at another Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad and that of Nishapur where he himself had been a student. He wrote profusely on various branches of knowledge that have significant bearing on religion, including Islamic jurisprudence and legal theory, logic, philosophy, theology, comparative religion and Sufism. He is better known for his *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, which is considered to be his *magnum opus*.

¹⁸ This translation is based on al-Muntakhab due to its literary style in rendering this particular *āyah*. See <http://www.islamawakened.com/quran/27/66/default.htm>.

Al-Ghazālī lived within an environment where a number of individuals prided themselves as the custodians of intellectual inquiry and thus ridiculed some religious values while others held some religious beliefs devoid of rationality. The basic fundamental epistemological question al-Ghazālī addressed then concerns *al-‘ilm bi-haqā’iq al-umnūr* (the knowledge of realities), which will lead to *al-‘ilm al-yaqīnī* (the knowledge of certitude).¹⁹

From the outset, al-Ghazālī recognized knowledge as being the best of all things, and further being the root of *sa‘ādah* (happiness) in this world and in the Hereafter; its acquisition is to pursue the best and its dissemination is the best of all occupations.²⁰ Believing in the indivisibility of *al-haqq* (the Truth), that all true knowledge comes from Him and all leads to Him, al-Ghazālī was determined, right from the period of adolescence, to pursue truth wherever it takes him.²¹

The first guiding principle of enquiry al-Ghazālī set forth is to study these sciences thoroughly and objectively. He cautioned that “to refute a doctrine before having thoroughly comprehended is like a stab in the dark” and that it is not possible for one to know what is defective in any science until one masters that science, equals its most learned exponents and even surpass them; only then could one’s critique be justified.²² To that end, al-Ghazālī acquired major intellectual traditions previously established and classified the seekers after truth into four groups: theologians, philosophers Batinites and Sufis. With great boldness and courage, he treaded an intricate path to investigate the truth claim of each group and eventually found all wanting except Sufism which he considered to be the true science of the Hereafter.

Batinite esotericism is founded on two main doctrines; the infallibility of the Imam and the primacy of esoteric interpretation of the Sharī‘ah which can be known only by the instruction of the the infallible Imam. According to al-Ghazālī, posing the authority of infallible Imam as a source of knowledge at the expense of the authority of reason and exoteric interpretation of the Sharī‘ah is absurd. If it is possible that there is another infallible imam other than Prophet Muhammad, it would have been equally possible for other groups to proffer their respective infallible imams and this will lead to multiple infallible imams *ad infinitum*, this is absurd. Similarly, if the Batinite esoteric interpretation is valid, it is also

¹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, p.42.

²⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah), vol. 1, pp. 20-21.

²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, pp. 40-41.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

possible to have other multiple valid interior interpretations and even several valid interior interpretations of the Batinite esoteric interpretation itself. In such instances mutual understanding and communication will be demolished. Through *reductio ad absurdum*²³ (reduction to absurdity) mode of argumentation, he demonstrated how such Batinite teaching is false because it could deconstruct the entirety of the Sharī'ah.²⁴ Al-Ghazālī authored *Fadā'ih al-Bāṭiniyyah wa-Fadā'il al-Mustazhiriyyah* [The Infamies of the Batinites and the Virtues of the Mustazhirites] and *al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm* [The Correct Balance] in critique of Batinite epistemology.

'Ilm al-kalām is primarily a protective science meant to safeguard the Islamic creed against heretical innovations. The emergence of heretics and innovators gave *kalām* science its legitimate place. Going beyond that by dwelling into the nature of the Reality and Divine attributes, is what subjected *kalām* to Ghazālī's critique.²⁵ According to him, the theologians' way of argumentation falls short of leading to certainty in faith, and even when it does it entails some elements of doubt and *taqīd*, as their proofs are not demonstrative but rather dialectical; the premises of which the theologians adapted from their opponents.²⁶ Al-Ghazālī's critique of theology was not born out of ignorance or contempt, but rather stemmed from his being an insider who had been at the forefront of the discourse for years, and only after knowing its limitations did he decide to desert it and turn it inside-out. He authored *Ijām al-'Awām 'an 'Ilm al-Kalām* (Warding off the Masses from Sciences of Theology) in critique of *'ilm al-kalām*. He did not deny the efficacy of *kalām* in safeguarding the Islamic creed and enlightening a lower level of intellectual curiosity;²⁷ but for the knowledge of certainty, he found *kalām* to be a dead end: "the road to the realities of knowledge is closed from this direction" (*al-tarīqa ilā haqā'iq al-ma'rifah min hādhā al-wajh masdūq*).²⁸

²³ *Reductio ad absurdum* is an argument in which if a statement leads to an absurd conclusion, the statement cannot be true. For example if assumption that 'motion is possible' leads to the absurd conclusion that the runner completes an infinite series of tasks, then motion is impossible no matter how things appear. See Maurice F. Stanley, *Logic and Controversy* (Australia: Wadsworth, 2002), pp. 333, 375.

²⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, pp. 67-77; Farouk Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis: A Debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2001), p. 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49; Al-Ghazālī, *Faysal al-Tafriqah bayna al-Islām wa-al-Zandaqah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1993), pp. 75-77.

²⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, p. 95; *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, p. 49; *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, pp. 75-78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 95.

Like *kalām*, *fiqh* is reduced to the science of the minimum requirement of religion concerning exterior bodily rituals and worldly matters. These rituals, according to al- Ghazālī, cannot ascertain sincerity (which is the attribute of heart), which are necessary for the salvation in the Hereafter. However, because in Islam this world is closely intertwined with the Hereafter, the former being the seed-ground of the latter, observing the religious rituals, as expounded by *fuqahā'*, is necessary for the spiritual formation of individuals and communities and indispensable to prepare one for the Hereafter. On that basis, he condemned some extremist Sufis who claimed to have reached a state of certainty where they were no longer required to perform *ṣalāh* (prayer) and were permitted to drink alcohol and commit other prohibited things with impunity. Such an attitude is by far worse than *kufr* because its aim is to destroy the religion from within.²⁹ Other than that, he believes that Sufism is the true science of certainty that can lead to salvation in the Hereafter.

His fiercest critique was primarily against the philosophers' conclusions in *ilāhiyyāt* (metaphysics/theology). In this encounter, he adopted rational arguments of the Mu'tazilite, Karrāmite and Waqifite theologians who were often at odds with his Ash'arite theology, weaving them all into a suitable epistemic and argumentative framework to combat what he perceived to be a greater harm of philosophers.³⁰

Claim with Supporting Evidence

Weighing a claim against its supporting evidence is central to al-Ghazālī's critical readings, and particularly of philosophical writings, where one is cautioned not to accept or reject anything simply on the basis of personality which is associated with it. His favorite quote in this respect is a statement attributed to 'Alī ibn Abī tālib that "*lā ta'rif al-haqq bi-al-rijāl; I'rif al-haqq ta'rif ahlahu*"³¹ (Do not know the truth by the men, but know the truth, and then you will know who are truthful). Al-Ghazālī often cited this quote to ridicule people who embraced the heretical teachings of the philosophers in metaphysics because of their impression in the philosophers and in their mathematical sciences. In logic, such an attitude could amount to the logical fallacy of *ad verecundiam* or the inappropriate appeal to authority,³² as it associates

²⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, p. 65; *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 40-41.

³⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), pp. 7-8.

³¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, p. 63; *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, p. 55.

³² J. Bachman, "Appeal to Authority," in *Fallacies: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Hans V. Hansen and Robert C. Pinto (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp.

truth with people. The fact remains, however, that if a person is adept in a given science that does not necessarily make adept in other unrelated sciences just as his ignorance in a given discipline does not necessarily make him wrong in other disciplines:

Rather, every art has people who have obtained excellence and preeminence in it, even though stupidity and ignorance may characterize them in other arts. The arguments of the ancient philosophers in mathematics are demonstrative whereas those in metaphysics are conjectural.³³

Neo-Platonist peripatetic philosophy was adapted to the Islamic thought by some prominent Muslim philosophers such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (428/1037). Some of the philosophical doctrines as taught in the writings of these philosophers are obviously at odds with the Islamic teachings. In his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, al-Ghazālī engaged philosophers in a fierce intellectual debate over twenty doctrines of their teachings, seventeen of which he adjudged as heretical while he declaimed three as bordering the outright disbelief. These are: the assertion that the world is eternal; the denial of God's knowledge of particulars; and the denial of the bodily resurrection.³⁴ He went on to demonstrate that none of the arguments to support these teachings fulfil the conditions and high epistemological standard of *burhān*,³⁵ (apodeixis, demonstrative proof) that the philosophers themselves have set forth. According to him, the said philosophers merely rely upon unproven, dialectical premises that are conventionally accepted only among themselves.³⁶ In the fourth introduction to his *Tahāfut*, he says:

We avoid the phraseology used by the mutakallimīn and the Jurists, adopting for the time being the terms used by the Logicians, so that the whole thing might be cast into a different mould, and the method of the logician may be followed in the

274-286; G. Bassham, W. Irwin, H. Nardone and J. M. Wallace, *Critical Thinking: A Student's Introduction* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), pp. 162-166.

³³ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-da'āl*, pp. 56-57. The translation is adopted from Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali*.

³⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p. 230; Al-Munqidh, pp. 60-61.

³⁵ The word "burhān" is a Qur'ānic term used in philosophy to refer to apodeixis, demonstrative proof.

³⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh*, p. 59.

minutest detail. In this book, we will speak to them in their language – I mean their logical terminology. We will make it plain that in their metaphysical sciences they have not been able to fulfill the claims laid out in the different parts of the logic and in the introduction to it, i.e. what they have set down in the *Kitab al-Burhān* on the conditions for the truth of the premises of a syllogism, and what they have set down in the *Kitab al-Qiyas* on the conditions of its figures, and the various things they posited in the “Isagoge” and the “Categories”³⁷

The issue at stake here is epistemological and logical. Al- Ghazālī agreed with philosophers that demonstrative proof would lead to certainty³⁸ while dialectical proof would fall short. He then contended that while the philosophers’ arguments in mathematics and, to a certain extent, some other natural sciences are demonstrative, their argument in metaphysics are dialectical and thus the philosophers differed among themselves more in the latter and less in the former.³⁹ Bringing dialectical proof to deny the truth firmly established in revelation is like prioritising *zann* (conjecture) and *takhmīn* (speculation) over *tahqīq* (positive inquiry) and *yaqīn* (certainty).⁴⁰ Relying on *zann* or *takhmīn* in places where *yaqīn* or *tahqīq* is required is a gross charade and miscarriage of intellectual integrity. On that ground, al- Ghazālī faulted ancient philosophers for compromising their own principles in logic, charging the Muslim philosophers for practising *taqlīd*, in the sense that they merely repeated these teachings from the founders of their movement without critically examining them.⁴¹

The logicity of the philosophers’ teachings in metaphysics is also questioned. According to al- Ghazālī, these teachings are based on invalid

³⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p.9. However, the translation of this passage is adopted from both Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazālī's Tahafut al-Falāsifah*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), p. 10 and Frank Griffel, “Taqlīd of the philosophers: Al-Ghazālī's initial accusation in the *Tahāfut*,” In *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 287.

³⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār al-'Ilm fī al-Mantiq*, pp. 235, 243.

³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, p. 59; Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p.

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⁴⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3; Frank Griffel, “Taqlīd of the philosophers,” p. 293.

arguments⁴² because their conclusions did not necessarily follow from their premises. Even on issues in which he concurred with philosophers, he still contended that philosophers were unable to justify it conclusively on a mere rational basis. For example, in the fourteenth discussion of *Tahāfut*, he argued that the philosophers were unable to set a demonstrative rational proof to show that heaven is an animal, a living being with soul: "their doctrine in this question is one of those views whose possibility is not to be denied, nor its impossibility claimed. While al- Ghazālī believed that it is more likely that heaven truly has a life, "for God is capable of creating life in every body," he still insisted that the philosophers' conclusion⁴³ does not follow necessarily from the premises provided and thus their argument is a purely arbitrary assertion "*tahakkum mahd* "that has no support.⁴⁴

Drawing on the rational conceptual framework, al- Ghazālī exhibited the deficiency, contradiction and incoherence in the epistemological foundations of the philosophical inquiry into the metaphysical realm,⁴⁵ in order to establish a legitimate space for revelation. It is then expected that the validity of religious assertions, as entrenched in revelation, should be recognized, especially in areas where demonstrative proofs are simply unattainable.⁴⁶

Reason and Revelation

The compatibility of reason and revelation forms the cornerstone of Ghazālī's scheme of Islamic critical thinking. Muslim intellectuals generally believe that there could be no 'real' contradiction between reason and revelation as both are ultimately traced to the same source, Allah the Almighty. It is not plausible that revelation will establish or negate a fact which reason demonstratively holds to be otherwise; just as reason will not validate or deny a fact against that which is unequivocally stated in revelation.

⁴² In logic, invalid argument refers to "a deductive argument in which the conclusion does not follow necessarily from the premises – that is, a deductive argument in which it is possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false." See Greg Bassham, et al., *Critical Thinking*, p. 83.

⁴³ It should be noted that the issue here is not whether the teachings of the philosophers are true or not, but that it is based on irrelevant and thus illogical premises. Other than that, the Qur'ān has testified that heavens and earth glorify Allah and obey His command (17:44; 41:11).

⁴⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, pp. 147-151.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ A. H. Solihu, "Revelation and Prophethood in the Islamic Worldview," *Journal of Islam in Asia*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2009), pp. 175-182. Retrieved from <http://www.iiium.edu.my/jiasia/ojs-2.2/index.php/Islam/article/view/5/24>.

While al- Ghazālī was at odds with philosophers over their metaphysical teachings, he strongly defended the credibility of rational demonstrative proof, they prided themselves with, According to him, reason forms the basis of understanding revelation. Reason is like an eye and revelation is like the Sun both of which are interdependent and equally needed for one to see.⁴⁷ He is convinced that Islamic teachings are established on both reason and revelation and that the result of demonstrative proof will be in conformity with revelation on the ground that truth cannot negate truth. On that account, he pronounced that “*al-shar‘ ‘aqlun min al-khārij wa-al-‘aql shar‘un min ad-dākhil*” (revelation is reason from without, and reason is revelation from within).⁴⁸

However, Muslim scholars are divided on which to resort to when there is ‘apparent’ contradiction. Some, like Ibn Taymiyyah⁴⁹ (d. 728/1328) and Ibn al-Qayyim⁵⁰ (d. 751/1350) emphasized the primacy of revelation in the sense that reason should be brought to the apparent meaning of revelation. Others like Ibn Rushd⁵¹ (Averroes) (d. 595/1198) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razī⁵² (d. 606/1209), say that revelation should be interpreted in conformity with rational dictate. Al- Ghazālī’s position is closer to the second group. Essentially, to uphold the integrity and validity of the demonstrative proof, passages of revelation whose literal meaning is not in conformity with rational demonstrative proof must be interpreted allegorically through different levels of *ta‘wīl* (allegory) that he outlined as ‘Canons of *Ta‘wīl*’.⁵³ Unless the demonstrative proof of reason is firmly recognised, the credibility of revelation will be at stake, “for it is by reason that we know scripture to be true.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, he believes that demonstrative proof cannot be established to validate or refute metaphysical realms, as that is the prerogative of revelation, the central argument between him and the philosophers.

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā‘ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 3, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Ma‘ārij al-Qudus fī Ma‘ārij Ma‘rifat al-Nafs*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-āfaq al-Jadīdah, 1975), pp. 57-58.

⁴⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dar‘ Ta‘ārud al-‘Aql wa-al-Naql* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 86-91, 170-192.

⁵⁰ M. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-sawā‘iq al-Mursalah ‘alā al-Jahmiyyah wa-al-Mu‘attilah* (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Āsimah, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 723-731; vol. 3, pp. 853-856.

⁵¹ Ibn Rushd, *Al-Kashf ‘An Manāhij al-Adillah fī ‘Aqā‘id al-Millah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāasātal-Wihdah al-‘Arabiyyah, 1998), p. 206; *Fasl al-Maqāl fī-nā Bayna al-Hikmah wa- al-Shar‘ah min al-Ittisāl*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1999), pp. 205-208.

⁵² F. al-Razī, *Asās al-Taqdis* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1993), pp. 193-194.

⁵³ Al-Ghazālī, *Faysal al-tafriqah*, p. 47; *Qānūn al-Ta‘wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1993).

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Qānūn al-Ta‘wīl*, p. 21.

The Quest for Objectivity

Another distinctive characteristic central to al- Ghazālī's critique is his passion for objectivity. In his *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah* (the Aims of the Philosophers) which is a prelude to his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, al- Ghazālī gave an objective account of the philosophical teachings and their arguments in order to subsequently be able to refute them in his *Tahāfut*.⁵⁵ Knowing that he has nothing to gain in refuting weak arguments, which he deliberately ignored,⁵⁶ he presented strong arguments of his adversaries as objectively as possible and even often, as Dunyā observes, clearer in al- Ghazālī's representations than in their original sources.⁵⁷

In addition, despite his sustained critique of philosophy, al- Ghazālī did not fail to recognise those *burhān*-based objective philosophical disciplines that do not hold anything opposed to Islam, such as mathematics and, most importantly, logic. According to al- Ghazālī, logic is a necessary prerequisite for any rational argument⁵⁸ and indeed for all theoretical sciences to the extent where he asserted that "the sciences of whoever did not incorporate it are unreliable."⁵⁹ He considers logical fallacy where logical premises are compromised deliberately or otherwise as "a track of reasoning whence Satan often sneaks in" (*madākhil al-shaytān fī al-nazar*) to mislead human minds. Once this track is heavily protected with good reasoning, Satan will have no way to penetrate.⁶⁰

Discrediting the veracity of such sciences established on demonstrative proof will lead those who appreciate demonstrative proof to the conclusion that Islam is founded on ignorance. Al- Ghazālī dubbed anyone who denies them as "*sadīqun lil-islām jāhil*" (an ignorant friend of Islam),⁶¹ whose behaviors do grave disservice to Islam:

The harm inflicted on religion by those who defend it not by its proper way is greater than the harm caused by those who attack it

⁵⁵ See his introduction to *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Mahmudiyah al-Tijāriyyah bi-al-Azhar, 1936), pp. 2-3.

⁵⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ S. Dunya, *Muqaddimat al-Taba'ah al-Thāniyyah*, in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, 6th ed. by Al-Ghazālī (Cairo: Dā'rat al-Ma'ārif, 1980), pp. 26-36.

⁵⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār al-'Ilm fī al-Mantiq* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1990), p. 26.

⁵⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mustasāfā fī al-Fiqh* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1997), vol. 1, p. 45.

⁶⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Mihakk al-Nazar fī al-Mantiq* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), pp. 25-26.

⁶¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 57.

in the way proper to it. As it has been said:
 “a rational foe is better than an ignorant
 friend.”⁶²

When charged with incorporating maxims of ancient philosophers, al-Ghazālī contended that much of their statements in political science and moral philosophy have been borrowed from the early prophets of God and from the Sufis respectively and that by adopting these words he was simply reclaiming and disentangling the lost truth. Even if these maxims are found exclusively from the writings of the philosophers, why should they be shunned when these words in themselves are rational, supported with convincing evidence and not in contradiction with the Qur’ān or Prophetic Sunnah? Al-Ghazālī is convinced that if Muslims follow such a line of reasoning, and of rejecting every truth which by chanced may have been proclaimed first by their adversaries among the heretics, they will be denied many truths; and the *mubtūn* (impostors) among the philosophers will then deny them the right to wisdom, stripping them of all good things by skilfully incorporating or mixing them in their works. To al-Ghazālī, the truth must be extracted even from the fool; and the proximity between truth and falsehood does not make truth false and falsehood true. Every word or science must be evaluated by virtue of its own merit irrespective of its protagonists or antagonists.⁶³

Al- Ghazālī’s Legacy

Al- Ghazālī drew many admirers and critics from all branches of knowledge he wrote on. Among his immediate followers are Asa’d al-Mayhanī (d. 523/1130 or 527/1132–33) and ‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadhānī (d. 525/1131). According to al-Mayhanī, nobody will arrive at al- Ghazālī’s level of insights and his virtue unless he reaches—or at least almost reaches—intellectual perfection. Al-Hamadhānī therefore believed that al- Ghazālī belongs to a select group of few scholars firmly rooted in the knowledge of the outer as well as the inner meaning of the Qur’ān.⁶⁴

Among his critics are Ibn Rushd and Ibn Taymiyyah. Ibn Rushd concurred with al- Ghazālī on the necessity of *ta’wil* of verses that do not

⁶² Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p. 6.

⁶³ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, pp. 64–65.

⁶⁴ F. Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 61–95.

conform to demonstrative rational dictate.⁶⁵ However, in his rebuttal work, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (Incoherence of the Incoherence),⁶⁶ a book he wrote specifically to charge al-Ghazālī with the very logical fallacies and contradictions al-Ghazālī had earlier charged philosophers with, he considered al-Ghazālī as an amateur philosopher-cum-theologian whose arguments are mostly equally dialectical and not demonstrative.⁶⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah confronted al-Ghazālī on multiple fronts on logic, Sufism and philosophy, charging him for unnecessarily blending the works of the prophets with those of the philosophers and explaining the former in the latter terms. For that he believes that al-Ghazālī was inflicted with the illness of Ibn Sīnā's *al-Shifā'*.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, his scholarship was never seriously disputed. He constructed the ugliness of the philosophers' aims, doctrines and their supporting arguments on metaphysics in his *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah*, deconstructed the bad of their arguments in *Tabāfut al-Falāsifah* and reconstructed the Islamic alternatives in Qawā'id al-'aqā'id of Ihyā' 'Uḥm al-Dīn.⁶⁹ With al-Ghazālī, Sufism is no longer an irrational fantasy into the metaphysical world; similarly, there is no way forward for Sufi without passing through and remaining observant of religious duties as expounded in fiqh. Also, as al-Qaradāwī puts it, "al-Ghazālī taught Sufism to *fiqh* and *fiqh* to Sufism,"⁷⁰ connecting *kalām* with *Sufism* and *fiqh*, relating philosophy with religion and bringing them all into closer contact for mutual recognition. The breadth and depth of his inquiry, the methodology he employed, the objectivity he exhibited and the arguments he advanced for or against the sciences he studied, coupled with his analytical mind to simplify the complexities in a grand scheme of Islamic intellectual and critical thinking, have left an enduring Ghazālīan mark in Islamic scholarship, earning him admiration from his supporters and respect from his critics.

⁶⁵ A. M. Ibn Rushd, al-Kashf 'An Marāḥij al-Adillah fi 'Aqā'id al-Millah, p. 206. See also Mesut Okumus, "The Influence of al-Ghazzālī on the Hermeneutics of Ibn Rushd," Der Islam, vol. 86, no. 2, pp. 290-293.

⁶⁶ Ibn Rushd, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1980), vol. 1, p. 59. See also M. Afifi al-Akiti, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Falsafa: Al-Ghazālī's Madnūn, Tahāfut, and Maqāsid, with Particular Attention to Their Falsafi Treatments of God's Knowledge of Temporal Events." In *Avicenna and His Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), p. 68.

⁶⁷ al-Akiti, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Falsafa," p. 68, n. 42.

⁶⁸ T. A. Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dār' Ta'arud al-'Aql wa-al-Naql*, vol. 1, p. 131; M. Afifi al-Akiti, "The Three Properties of Prophethood in Certain Works of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī." In *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, ed. J. McGinnis (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 210.

⁶⁹ M. Afifi al-Akiti, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Falsafa," pp. 86, 89-90.

⁷⁰ Y. Al-Qaradāwī, *Al-Imām al-Ghazālī bayna Mādihih wa-Nāqidih*, p. 15.

Conclusion

Al-Ghazālī's critical engagement with philosophers is not intended to undermine philosophy as an intellectual inquiry into the nature of things within its ambit, but was rather geared against that type of philosophical reasoning which claims to be autonomous, and sufficient enough to give a coherent answer to ultimate human concerns or to decipher all the mysteries and complexities of existence. Within the philosophical, rational conceptual framework, he demonstrated how such reasoning would eventually lead to self-annihilation, exhibiting the unbridgeable lacuna in the episteme of reason that could be filled only by revelation from God.

The standard of rationality is indispensable for any critical thinking, and for Islamic thought to be critical it has to be rational. Revelation as a source of knowledge is another standard that qualifies a critical thinking to be Islamic. Revelation establishes values many of which are 'rational' and some are not 'irrational', in the sense that they are not necessarily contradictory to reason, but simply beyond the ambit of human rationality. The process of recognition is not top-down—where revelation imposed itself or is imposed on reason—but rather bottom-up where reason realizes something 'real' that is transcendental. It is here where al-Ghazālī placed revelation. To coherently integrate both reason and revelation has been the landscape of al-Ghazālī's critique. While it is possible to chart another line of Islamic critical thinking as done by Ibn Taymiyyah, for example, there is no doubt that al-Ghazālī drew on epistemology and values which are characteristically Islamic.

Critical thinking need not tread on atheistic, heretical or secular trajectories and religiosity is not synonymous with dogmatism, fanaticism or close-mindedness. As shown in this study, critical thinking is a disciplined intellectual reasoning containing shared, universal values that cut across generations, cultures and religions. People of sound reasoning would have much to appreciate therein, though they may equally have few to disagree with.