

## The Development in al-Ghazālī's Epistemology

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**Abstract:** *The paper is concerned with the development in al-Ghazālī's theory of knowledge, which evolved through various stages. Both al-Ghazālī's life and writings reflect this development. As a student, he began his academic life with an interest in traditional Islamic studies such as jurisprudence. After he assumed his first teaching position at the Nizāmīyah school of Baghdad he became a methodological skeptic, a situation which prompted him to study all schools of thought available at the time in search for peremptory knowledge ('ilm al-yaqīn). From skepticism he moved to Sufism, and finally there are indications that he ended up studying the traditions (Hadith) of Prophet Muhammad (SAS), which led many to claim that he shifted to the methodology of the traditionalists [ahl al-hadīth] and that he abandoned Sufism.*

This paper offers a comprehensive outline of al-Ghazālī's epistemology in all his confirmed and available works which are analyzed in chronological order<sup>1</sup>. It is argued that al-Ghazālī's epistemology evolved through the various stages of his life. He began as a conformist, accepting knowledge on the authority of parents and teachers, but soon broke away from conformism while still a child. He stressed the importance of this step for anyone seeking true knowledge. After releasing himself from adherence to conformism, he began a long intellectual journey in quest of truth which led him to question everything and eventually to experience the most original and dramatic case of skepticism in the history of thought. The only way out of his skepticism was divine illumination.<sup>2</sup> After he regained his trust in logical necessities, he studied all the existing schools of thought including philosophy,

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dialectical theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) and the Bāṭinites;<sup>3</sup> his search was culminated in his acceptance of Sufism as the only path that leads to what he described as pre-emptory knowledge (*ʿilm yaqīn*).<sup>4</sup>

As a student, al-Ghazālī wrote *al-Mankhūl* on the fundamentals of jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*). His basic epistemological interest in this book was mainly juristic. He concentrated on technical issues that were part of or related to *usūl al-fiqh*, such as the conditions of the narrators of Hadith.<sup>5</sup> It should not come as a surprise that, as a student, al-Ghazālī imitated his teacher al-Juwaynī, a position that he acknowledged at the end of this book.<sup>6</sup> Although he differed in very few cases from his teacher in *al-Mankhūl*, his originality in *usūl al-fiqh* was manifested in his later work *al-Mustasfā* where logic played a major role in his *usūl*.

Although *al-Mankhūl* shows al-Ghazālī as an imitating student, his autobiographic work *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, which was written towards the end of his life, projects a personality of al-Ghazālī that is preoccupied with truth in itself. It was differences in belief that prompted him to search for truth.<sup>7</sup> His awareness during the early stages of his life of the different creeds of people started him on the first stage of a long journey of systematic skepticism which lasted until the climax of his quest for knowledge during his last days as a teacher at the Nizāmīyah of Baghdad.

Al-Ghazālī's critical thinking and regarding general questions of truth and knowledge, while apparent in *al-Munqidh*, is absent from *al-Mankhūl*. The fact that these two books reflected different areas of interest in al-Ghazālī's early life might appear contradictory. One question that might surface as a result of these two areas is: how could someone like al-Ghazālī who was investigating the general notions of knowledge and their sources as stated in *al-Munqidh*, have proceeded to verify the particular as the case in *al-Mankhūl*?

There could be one answer, I argue, that explains the above mentioned positions. Al-Ghazālī maintained two lines of thought from the days of youth until the last years of his life. The first line of thought, which represents al-Ghazālī's quest for knowledge, is best illustrated in the following lines from the introduction of *al-Munqidh*:

In the bloom of my life, from the time I reached puberty before I was twenty until now, when I am over fifty, I have constantly been diving daringly into the depths of this profound sea and wading into its deep water like a bold man, not like a cautious coward. I would penetrate far into every murky mystery, pounce upon every problem, and dash into every mazy difficulty. I would scrutinize the creed of every sect and seek to lay bare the secrets of each faction's teaching with the aim of

discriminating between the proponent of truth and the advocate of error, and between the faithful follower of tradition and the heterodox innovator.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Ghazālī reaffirmed the early beginning of this search for truth and the source of this quest for knowledge in the same introduction. He said:

The thirst for grasping the real meaning of things was indeed my habit and went from my early years and in the prime of my life. It was an instinctive, natural disposition placed in my makeup by God [Allah] Most High, not something due to my own choosing and contriving. As a result, the fetters of servile conformism (*taqlid*)<sup>9</sup> fell away from me, and inherited beliefs lost their hold on me, when I was still quite young.<sup>10</sup>

Although the above quotations showed the time frame of the first line of thought, which covered al-Ghazālī's life as a student, it remains that there were no books written by the student al-Ghazālī that reflected this independent approach to knowledge and truth. There were many works such as *al-Munqidh min al-dalal* by the later al-Ghazālī that embodied this investigative course that he undertook in pursuit of knowledge and truth in what could be called the area of universals.

The second line of thought is represented in al-Ghazālī's works in fields like jurisprudence. Although the first line of thought must have influenced the way al-Ghazālī approached areas like *fiqh* by having that independent spirit which led him away from conformism to previous writings in such fields, one cannot claim that these works were reflecting the first line of thought because they were concerned with particulars. Unlike a reductionist, he addressed these areas of particulars as if there were no relationship between the general notions of knowledge, which he put under investigation, and these particular fields.

The fact that al-Ghazālī kept working in the particular fields of the *Sharī'ah* indicates that he was never in doubt about the true validity of the premises which were derived from the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. In fact, he continued lecturing on these subjects even at the Nizāmīyah of Baghdad, when he was going through what I like to call the climax of his mental discourse regarding the first line of thought.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's continuous inquiry into both universals and particulars is interesting because on the surface they seem incompatible. One could see that al-Ghazālī had an obvious, spontaneous interest in the first. It

prompted a good deal of reflection throughout his life. The difficulty is in the question: why did he pursue the second? Part of the answer could be found in al-Ghazālī's formal education which started with training in the particulars (namely *fiqh*). Another partial answer comes from the fact that there was common interest in these particular sciences, especially in jurisprudence. In addition, al-Ghazālī pursued his interest in the particulars as a teacher who was expected (and thus there was a sense of duty) to lecture on such topics. All of these aspects and probably more provided the motivation for such pursuit of knowledge in the particulars. Moreover, one could think that once al-Ghazālī achieved universal knowledge, he found that his interest in the particulars was in line with his interest in the universals. In addition, there is a sociological element in this equation, where a scholar in the Islamic world is unlikely to be accepted without being deeply rooted and having strong interests in the particulars.

The next stage in al-Ghazālī's epistemological development took place when he became the teacher of the Nizāmīyah of Baghdad. His writings during this period, which lasted for a decade, reflect one of the most important stages in his intellectual development. He broke with the conformism that dominated his work as a student, and began a systematic inquiry of the schools of thought that were available at the time in his search for true knowledge.

Al-Ghazālī encountered many schools of thought in his quest for true knowledge. Eventually, he restricted the possibility of finding such knowledge to four "classes of seekers": the dialectical theologians (*al-Mutakallimūn*), the Bāṭinites, the philosophers, and the Sufis whose methodology he finally accepted. A careful study of the language that al-Ghazālī used to describe these four groups reveals that he narrowed them to two only; the Bāṭinites and the philosophers in one group, and the *Mutakallimūn* and the Sufis in the other. The choice of words reflects a subtle approval of the latter group.<sup>12</sup>

When al-Ghazālī became the teacher of the Nizāmīyah at Baghdad, he started studying philosophy in his search for true knowledge as part of a systematic approach in which he was attempting to study all sects, religions and schools of thought. He completed his philosophical studies, on his own in less than two years; he spent another year contemplating the issues he studied.<sup>13</sup> According to him, he could not find true knowledge in all the traditional subjects of philosophy; the only two exceptions were logic and mathematics, yet not without qualifications.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most important contributions of al-Ghazālī during this

period is his position on logic. He wrote several books which he intended as a criterion for science. He held in *Mi<sup>c</sup>yār al-<sup>c</sup>ilm*<sup>15</sup> that every person has three faculties: a faculty of sensibles, a faculty of imagination (*hakim wahmī*), and a faculty of reason.<sup>16</sup> It is the addition of a "faculty of imagination" here that contributes to the development of his genetic epistemology, even though he would drop it later on in *al-Munqidh*.

Al-Ghazālī's search for indubitable knowledge led him to reject all knowledge that was based on authority (such as, parents and teachers), which he blamed for the differences among people. He defined this knowledge in terms of mathematical certitude (on the same level of certitude that is found in "ten is greater than three"). He scrutinized all his cognition in search for knowledge that would meet the previous description; he thought for a while that the sensibles and the self-evident truths conform to the level of certitude that he was looking for. Nevertheless, meditating upon such knowledge he found that he could doubt them, and thus found himself devoid of any indubitable knowledge. As a result, came to doubt all sources of knowledge, including reason, which was based upon the possibility of the existence of a higher faculty which he defined in terms of its relation to reason (namely the faculty above reason, *malakah fawqa al-<sup>c</sup>aql*). In fact, he underwent the most genuine and dramatic experience of skepticism in the history of thought. This state of doubt continued for the duration of two months and eventually ended by divine illumination.<sup>17</sup>

The first thing that al-Ghazālī regained after he emerged from his state of doubt was his trust in logical necessities. According to him, this would not have been possible without divine illumination which he considered a source of knowledge called *kashf* and which he described as acquiring knowledge directly (from Allah).<sup>18</sup> Evidently, this latter source of knowledge forms the backbone of Sufi epistemology; he would expand on this concept during his first period of withdrawal from public life which he believed to be a condition that he should fulfill in order to attain peremptory knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

During the years of seclusion al-Ghazālī emphasized in his writings the limited capability of reason and that "unveiling" (*kashf*) is the only source of knowledge that is absolutely capable of attaining indubitable transcendental knowledge. In the *Ihyā' <sup>c</sup>ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of Islamic Sciences), he stressed the superiority of Sufi knowledge over that which is attained by conventional sources of knowledge. This Sufi knowledge, which he referred to as *ilm al-mukāshafah*, is the aim of intellectual activity, yet he stated that such knowledge should not be

revealed to the public. Therefore, the subject of the *Ihyā'* is that knowledge which leads to "unveiling," namely the science of action (*ʿilm al-muʿāmalah*).<sup>20</sup> By action, he means self-mortification and discipline which form a prerequisite for attaining peremptory transcendental knowledge. In addition, he held that "unveiling" is possible through the faculty higher than reason which forms one of the most important developments in his epistemology. The aim of this position is to show the limitations of reason which cannot achieve peremptory knowledge. This position is reinforced by listing prophecy as the highest level in relation to the attainment of knowledge, which is followed by the scholars, in what might be considered al-Ghazālī's response to the Muslim philosophers who ranked reason as the highest faculty. Finally, he added in the *Ihyā'* another means for the attainment of peremptory knowledge, namely, vision.<sup>21</sup>

Similar to his position in the *Ihyā'*, al-Ghazālī continued in *al-Maqṣad al-asnā sharh asmā' Allāh al-husnā* (The Sublime Aim in the Interpretation of Allah's Beautiful Names) to stress the limitations of reason and its incapability to attain peremptory transcendental knowledge. The only way to achieve such knowledge is through "unveiling." It is obvious that these two notions are consistent with al-Ghazālī's epistemology in the *Ihyā'*.<sup>22</sup>

As to *Bidāyat al-hidāyah* (The Beginning of Guidance), there are whole sections which are identical with *Qawāʿid al-ʿaqāʾid* (which is considered a part of the *Ihyā'*) and therefore it adds to the consistency of al-Ghazālī's epistemology during this period. In these sections he asserted the notion of discipline and self-mortification as prerequisites to the attainment of peremptory knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

In *Jawāhir al-Qurʾān* (The Jewels of the Qurʾān) which corresponds to his position in the *Ihyā'* and *Bidāyat al-hidāyah*, al-Ghazālī maintained the notion of discipline and self-mortification as conditions for the attainment of transcendental knowledge. He held that transcendental knowledge can be revealed through true vision in metaphorical language.<sup>24</sup>

In *al-Risālah al-ladunnīyah*,<sup>25</sup> al-Ghazālī discussed the notion of metaphysical transcendental knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ghaybī al-ladunnī*) which is accessible to elite Sufis only. This kind of knowledge can be attained through inspiration (*ilhām*). Al-Ghazālī ranked *ladunnī* knowledge higher than that which is attained conventionally.<sup>26</sup>

The last book dealing with the epistemology of Al-Ghazālī during the first period of seclusion is *Mishkāṭ al-anwār* (The Niche for Lights). He

reiterated his position regarding the existence of a faculty higher than reason. According to him, elite Sufis are capable of attaining knowledge directly from the same source, similar to prophets. In addition, he related the position of some Sufis who held that disclosing the divine secret is blasphemous (*Ifshā' sirr al-rubūbiyah kufr*). Nevertheless, he was willing to reveal some of this knowledge metaphorically through hints, signs and symbols. Moreover, he held that it is in Allah's hands to allow hearts to understand the meaning of these metaphors. The latter idea indicates that he considered the spiritual heart (*al-qalb*), which he distinguishes from the physical one, as a source of knowledge. According to him, the heart has an "eye" for knowledge which is sometimes referred to as intellect, soul, or human spirit. He defined it as "that which differentiates the intelligent [human being] from the nursing infant, the animal and the insane."<sup>27</sup>

Although al-Ghazālī introduces different sources such as inspiration and insight for the attainment of knowledge, the last six books emphasize Sufism as the common theme; therefore this period of seclusion reflects a unified epistemology.

After ending his seclusion and returning to teach at the Nizāmīyah of Nīshāpūr, al-Ghazālī maintained his epistemology as a Sufi. His last book to be written during this period, *al-Imlā' fī ishkālāt al-Ihyā'*<sup>28</sup> (The Dictation on the Problems of *al-Ihyā'*), was written in response to the criticism that the *Ihyā'* had endured at the hands of traditionalists whom al-Ghazālī did not mention by name. According to al-Ghazālī, they held that his book contradicts the *Sharī'ah* in advocating "unveiling" (*mukashafah*) as a source of knowledge. His defence of the *Ihyā'* is a sign of his commitment to Sufism as the only path for true knowledge.

After spending about four years at the Nizāmīyah of Nīshāpūr, al-Ghazālī withdrew again from public life and settled in his hometown of Tūs. The most important task regarding the last period of his life in relation to epistemology is to question the claim that he abandoned Sufism and adopted the method of the traditionalists. It is apparent though, that *al-Durrah al-fākhirah*, *Iljām al-awāmm 'an 'ilm al-kalām*, and *Minhāj al-ābidīn*, which were written during the last stage of his life, contain direct references to his continued acceptance of Sufism as the path for true knowledge.

In *al-Durrah al-fākhirah*, he held that the Sufis, whom he described as *'Ārifīn* (gnostics), are the only people who upon their death could proceed through the seven heavens to reach Allah.<sup>29</sup> In *Iljām*

*al-ʿAwāmm*, he employed the concept of "common people" to distinguish every other kind of scholar from the Sufis. He ranked the Sufis higher and he described them as the scholars of the hereafter.<sup>30</sup> Finally, in *Minhāj al-ʿĀbidīn*, he defended Sufi schools and lodges. In addition, he described the knowledge of the Sufi in terms of a divine light which is typical of "unveiling" (*kashf*).<sup>31</sup> Towards the end of this book, he described the nature of the path that the Sufi needs to follow, saying:

This path in its length is unlike the existing distances that people cover by feet according to their strength and weakness: it is rather a spiritual path that is tread by hearts which cover it with thought according to the faith and insight [of the seeker]. Its origin is a heavenly light (*nūr samāwī*) and a divine look (*naẓar Ilāhī*) which descend on the heart of the servant who uses it to see the reality of both worlds.<sup>32</sup>

All of these Sufi themes, which were also written using Sufi terminology, leave no room for any doubt or hesitation that al-Ghazālī's epistemology was Sufi in its essence. It should be noted that this is not a defence of Sufism against the *Salaḥīyah* position which tries to present al-Ghazālī in his final days as someone who abandoned Sufism. What I am trying to say is that they need a better argument for their position.

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## Notes

1. I have adopted Badawī's classification of al-Ghazālī's works. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Mu'allāfat al-Ghazālī* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbūʿāt, 1977).
2. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Jābir (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Thāqafīyah), 10-11.
3. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 12.
4. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 43-51.
5. al-Ghazālī, *al-Mankhūl min ta'īqāt al-uṣūl*, ed., Muḥammad Ḥasan Hītū (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1970) 257.
6. al-Ghazālī, *al-Mankhūl*, 504.
7. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 4-6.
8. al-Ghazālī, *Freedom and Fulfillment [al-Munqidh min al-dalāl]* tr., Richard Joseph McCarthy (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 62.
9. For al-Ghazālī, conformism or *taqlīd* meant uncritical acceptance of knowledge and belief at the hands of parents and teachers by virtue of their



authority.

10. al-Ghazālī, *Freedom*, 63.

11. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 136.

12. He used "yadda'ūn" to describe the claims of the *Mutakallimūn* and the Sufis, and "yaz'umūn" to describe the claims of the Bāṭinites and the philosophers. See *al-Munqidh*, 12.

13. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 17.

14. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 23-29.

15. Marmura argues that "much of the account of demonstration in the *Mi'yār* seems to be a faithful summary of Avicenna's *Demonstration* [*al-Ishārāt*] which in turn is an exposition and an enlargement of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*." See Michael Marmura, "Ghazālī and Demonstrative Science," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* III (1965): 189.

16. al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār al-'ilm*, ed., Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmīyah, 1990), 29.

17. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 6-11.

18. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 11.

19. al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 45.

20. al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 1: 3-4.

21. al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 4: 194

22. al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā sharḥ asma' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed., Muḥammad Muṣṭafa Abū al-'Alā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jindī, 1968), 5-6.

23. al-Ghazālī, *Bidāyat al-hidāyah*, ed., Muḥammad al-Ḥajjār (Damascus: Dār al-Ṣabūnī, 1986), 27-29.

24. al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, ed., Muḥammad Muṣṭafa Abū al-'Alā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jindī, 1964), 31-34.

25. Literally, *ladun* means "at" or "at the place or hands of". In the title of this and every Sufi treatise it is used in relation to a verse mentioned in the Qur'ān (18:65), the meaning of which is: "So they [prophet Moses and his attendant] found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own presence [*ladunnā*]." Thus, Sufis are striving to acquire this kind of knowledge which al-Ghazālī calls *al-'ilm al-ghaybī al-ladunnī*, directly from Allah. It is apparent that an accurate concise translation is not possible. For a translation of the meaning of this particular verse in the Qur'ān, see Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qur'ān: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Lahore: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1934).

26. al-Ghazālī, "al-Risālah al-ladunnīyah," In *Majmū'at rasā'il al-Imām al-Ghazālī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1986), 3: 87.

27. al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār*, ed. °Abd al-°Azīz °Izz al-Dīn al-Siyārawān (Beirut: °Ālam al-Kutub, 1986), 115-122.
28. This book, *al-Imlā' fi ishkālāt al-Ihyā'*, is published as an appendix to *Ihyā' °ulūm al-dīn*. See al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, Appendix [*al-Mulhaq*], 13-41.
29. al-Ghazālī, *al-Durrah al-fākhirah fī kashf °ulūm al-Ākhirah*, ed., Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Abū al-°Ālā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jindī, 1968), 126. This book was printed as an appendix to *Sirr al-°ālamīn*, a book that was ascribed to al-Ghazālī.
30. al-Ghazālī, *Ijām al-°awāmm °an °ilm al-kalām*, ed., Muḥammad al-Muṭasim bi-Allāh al-Baghdādī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-°Arabī, 1985), 51-52.
31. al-Ghazālī, *Minhāj al-°ābidīn*, ed., Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Abū al-°Ālā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jindī, 1972), 44-58.
32. al-Ghazālī, *Minhāj*, 245.