

ABŪ ḤAMID AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON THE FORMATION
AND DEVELOPMENT OF ECONOMIC,
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE*

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Introduction

A keen interest in economic phenomena is part and parcel of the intellectual legacy of Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111). This interest is a logical extension of his main concern which can be expressed as moral guidance for eternal happiness formulated in the form of an all-encompassing life-program. As a consequence, treatment of economic matters in al-Ghazālī's agenda is part of a larger program.

Al-Ghazālī is of the opinion that the main purpose of man in this life is to know and love Allah (God) and to show obedience to Him ('*ilm*, *ḥāl* and '*amal*'). But, in order to attain this goal one must first survive, and this can only be achieved by providing for ones basic needs. This leads to what is called economic activity. But, economic activity does involve moral risks, and such risks can be avoided only by a sound knowledge of the true nature of economic activity. For, to him, one cannot behave properly without proper knowledge. (Theory comes first: '*ilm*, *ḥāl* and '*amal*'). With a view to help his reader in this regard, al-Ghazālī undertakes a thorough examination of economic life *as it is*, followed by formulation of some legal and ethical frameworks intended to guard the moral safety of economic subjects.

I think it would not be wrong to characterize al-Ghazālī's first approach to economic life as analytical, and the latter one as

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normative. However, al-Ghazālī employs both of them as complementary rather than alternative methods. The present paper will focus on the outcome of al-Ghazālī's analytical approach to economic phenomena, especially on the formation and development of economic, social and political life as treated in his *magnum opus Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*.

I. Starting Points—Man and the Objective World

In trying to explain the emergence of economic life al-Ghazālī starts from two points: the nature of man and his natural environment that we prefer to call "the objective World" or "the World as it is."¹

Man and his nature play a central role in al-Ghazālī's various analyses.² The same applies to his treatment of the problem of the formation of economic, social and political life, and it constitutes one of his starting points in this regard. "Man is in need of three things", says al-Ghazālī, "food, clothing and shelter." Adding that food is needed for nutrition, sustenance, and survival; that clothing is needed in order to protect against hot and cold weather; and that shelter (or dwelling) is needed, in addition to the protection it provides against heat and cold, to protect ones family and material belongings (*amwāl*) against other harmful external effects.³

Al-Ghazālī's second point of departure is the natural or material environment in the sense of "the objective World" mentioned earlier. He defines what we prefer to call "the

¹ For an analysis of al-Ghazālī's two-dimensional conception of the World as *subjective* and *objective*, see, Sabri Orman, *Gazālī'nin İktisat Felsefesi* (Economic Philosophy of al-Ghazālī), (Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 1984), 81–85.

² A concise treatment of al-Ghazālī's anthropology and its implications for moral and economic life can be found in *Ibid*, 69–81.

³ Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Vol. III, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 225.