

THE GHAZALIAN ORIGINS OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY*

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Introduction

We can trace the origins of modern philosophy back to Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) who preceded some of the work achieved by René Descartes (1596–1650) and David Hume (1711–1776). Although their frameworks are different, the parallel between al-Ghazālī and Descartes, particularly on the issues of absolute truth, scepticism, dreamlike reality, and the separation of soul from body, is obvious. As for Hume’s work on causality which prompted Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) to write his famous *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is fundamentally not more than what al-Ghazālī achieved on the same subject a long time ago.

Al-Ghazālī, insisting upon *tawhid*, the Muslim doctrine of Unity and the omnipotence of God, did not accept the real distinction between primary and secondary qualities, but Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), René Descartes and Robert Boyle (1627–1691), the representatives of modern science in the seventeenth century, vehemently defended this distinction and made it the backbone of modern philosophy. With this distinction they “effected a final dualism between matter and spirit in a way

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which left nature open to the scrutiny and service of secular science, and which set the stage for man being left only with the world on his hands."¹

To objectify and secularize science and also to clinch the dualism between body and soul, Galileo, Descartes, and Boyle, the seventeenth century philosopher-scientists, made the real distinction between primary and secondary qualities "central to a unified metaphysical and scientific view of the world that [has] dominated"² in the West from the seventeenth century onward. Even today scientists and the majority of analytical philosophers continue to support a real distinction between primary and secondary qualities, since primary qualities represent the original properties of matter or the external world, and "the belief in an external world [qua world]... is the basis of all natural science."³

The seventeenth century philosopher-scientists believed that primary qualities are the geometrical properties of objects such as shape, size, and motion and that they are inseparable from objects, but secondary qualities such as color, taste, warmth, etc. arise in our minds because of the effect of the primary qualities of the insensible parts of objects on our sensory organs. Primary qualities representing the objective reality are the proper subject of science whereas secondary qualities are subjective entities that exist only in the mind. More specifically, primary qualities are related to quantity, mathematics, body, passive objects, objectivity, facts, knowledge, and science, but secondary qualities are related to the soul, perceiving subjects, subjectivity, values, emotion, faith, and religion.

¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1978), 33. Hereafter I will refer to the *Second Impression* of the same book (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993).

² Smith, A. D., "Of Primary and Secondary Qualities", *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 99, no. 2, April 1990, 221.

³ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, trans. Sonja Bergmann (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1979), 260.