

The Importance of Seeking Truth: Lessons from al-Ghazālī

Senata Adi Prasetya

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya
smart08senata@gmail.com

Abstract

This article critically examines how Al-Ghazālī carries out the process of seeking truth and its contextualization in contemporary Indonesian Islam. Al-Ghazālī entered a deep crisis because of his doubts about the senses and reason and described this state as “psychological instability”. This state is considered to be the culmination of a process of doubt (i.e. existential doubt), which is compared to a disease that has a profound effect on one's being. The article argues that Al-Ghazālī's quest for truth began with doubt and skepticism of questions he could not answer. Moreover, Al-Ghazālī's “doubt” is an intellectual method and approach of critical thinking that aims at purifying knowledge from faults and impurities and at revealing the truth of things. I believe that doubt as Al-Ghazālī sees it is a reviewing of the sources of knowledge and criticizing them again. It is also a critical rethinking of data that are considered implicitly correct in the social and epistemological consciousness, or taken for granted. The views expressed in this article are meant to reflect the religious beliefs of the author. Rather, this article is intended to illustrate the life lessons that can be learned from Al-Ghazālī's life through the lens of the Hero's Journey in seeking truth.

Keywords: seeking truth; al-Ghazālī; doubt

Introduction

In today's society, we seem less inclined to seek truth than ever before. We are less open to different opinions and we are wired on the stimulation of being right. With always having our phones in our pockets and information at our fingertips, we are in a data overload. With the correlation between information and truth getting lost in

the wind. Trying to find why we are in this mess, I looked back at some smart people in history. Here is what I found Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), is one of the most important theologians, philosophers, and Sufis of Islam.¹ Born around 1056 in northeastern Iran, he became the holder of the most prestigious academic post in Islamic theology in Baghdad, only to renounce that position and teach at small schools in the provinces for no money.

If we look back at the course of human history, we will find countless struggles, contradictions, and struggles (in the name of) “truth”. The truth seems not enough just to be embraced and believed but must be staked, confirmed, contested, and then made an instrument of power so that often “in the name” of truth everything must be paid for with blood, life, even often ending in open war. Al-Hallaj, a Persian Sufi, had to be hanged just to defend the doctrine of *hulul* (reside in *nasut*).²

It is a historical fact that “truth” can display in many forms, depending on who and for what purpose it is present. In reality, truth is not free from interest and power. It will forever be at stake and fought over by mankind. Those stakes and struggles don't always happen in an open arena, sometimes it appears and roils in the inner space or psychology of a person. Imam Al-Ghazālī suffered from a kind of “psychological instability” when he tried to trace the “true truth” (*haqiqah al-umur*) and “true truth” (*al-ilm al-yaqin*).³ In his search Al-Ghazālī studied, identified and verified all the sciences that existed

¹ W Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).

² Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazali's Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennian Foundation*, vol. 27 (Routledge, 2011).

³ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*, terj. Bahrudin Achmad (Bekasi: Al-Muqsih Pustaka, 2020), iv.

at that time, such as kalam (theology), fiqh, philosophy, and Sufism, along with their derivatives.

In its close study of Al-Ghazālī's cosmology—meaning, how God creates things and events in the world, how human acts relate to God's power, and how the universe is structured—the book reveals the significant philosophical influence on Al-Ghazālī. His cosmology has always been one of the most challenging aspects of his work. This book shows how Al-Ghazālī created a new discourse on cosmology that moved away from concerns held earlier among Muslim theologians and Arab philosophers. This new cosmology was structured to provide a framework for the pursuit of the natural sciences and a basis for science and philosophy in Islam to continue to flourish beyond the 12th century.⁴

In addition, Al-Ghazālī introduces the issue of doubt in his book *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* [*Deliverance from Error*]. The book can be considered an intellectual autobiography of this philosopher. Here Al-Ghazālī describes his intellectual development and the method of his search for truth. He also discusses the ideas of various doctrines that were present in Islamic society in his period, including the philosophers, *al-Mutakallimun* (scholastics), *al-Batiniyya* (interiority), and Sufism. The book is a concise exposition of Al-Ghazālī's experience in the field of research and epistemological criticism.⁵

In this context, I will explain why Al-Ghazālī is indeed the first Muslim theologian who actively promotes the naturalization of the philosophical tradition into Islamic theology. His works document an attempt to integrate Aristotelian logics into the tradition of kalam, of

⁴ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh University Press, 1963).

rationalist Islamic theology. Al-Ghazālī tirelessly stresses the merits of syllogistic logics and urges his peers in Islamic theology to adopt this rational technique in seeking truth. He was quite outspoken about this project and propagates it, for instance, in his autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Dalal)* as well as in the *Incoherence* and this aspect of Al-Ghazālī's relationship to falsafa is well known.⁶ Some critics and interpreters of Al-Ghazālī have questioned how he could make use of Aristotelian logics without also adopting Aristotelian ontology. In the Aristotelian tradition, logic is so closely connected to the specific explanation of the world's most elementary constituents and their relations to one another that Aristotelian logic can hardly be adopted without Aristotelian ontology. Al-Ghazālī understood this connection very well.

Hence, in this article, I try to analyze the epistemology of doubt as introduced by al Ghazali and show that Al-Ghazālī's "doubt" is an intellectual method and approach of critical thinking that aims at purifying knowledge from faults and impurities and at revealing the truth of things. I believe that doubt as Al-Ghazālī sees it is a reviewing of the sources of knowledge and criticizing them again. It is also a critical rethinking of data that are considered implicitly correct in the social and epistemological consciousness, or taken for granted

Al-Ghazālī and His Work

Al-Ghazālī, also spelled al-Ghazzālī, in full Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī, (born 1058, Ṭūs, Iran—died December 18, 1111, Ṭūs), Muslim theologian and mystic whose great work, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*) ("The Revival of the Religious

⁶ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*, 22-23; Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Tahafut Al-Falasifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1958), 15.12-16.4.

Sciences”), made Sufism (Islamic mysticism) an acceptable part of orthodox Islam.⁷

Al-Ghazālī was born at Ṭūs (near Mashhad in eastern Iran) and was educated there, then in Jorjān, and finally at Nishapur (Neyshābūr), where his teacher was al-Juwaynī, who earned the title of *imām al-ḥaramayn* (the imam of the two sacred cities of Mecca and Medina). After the latter’s death in 1085, al-Ghazālī was invited to go to the court of Niẓām al-Mulk, the powerful vizier of the Seljuq sultans. The vizier was so impressed by al-Ghazālī’s scholarship that in 1091 he appointed him chief professor in the Niẓāmiyyah college in Baghdad. While lecturing to more than 300 students, al-Ghazālī was also mastering and criticizing the Neoplatonist philosophies of al-Fārābī and Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā). He passed through a spiritual crisis that rendered him physically incapable of lecturing for a time.⁸

In November 1095 he abandoned his career and left Baghdad on the pretext of going on pilgrimage to Mecca. Making arrangements for his family, he disposed of his wealth and adopted the life of a poor Sufi, or mystic. After some time in Damascus and Jerusalem, with a visit to Mecca in November 1096, al-Ghazālī settled in Ṭūs, where Sufi disciples joined him in a virtually monastic communal life. In 1106 he was persuaded to return to teaching at the Niẓāmiyyah college at Nishapur.⁹ A consideration in this decision was that a “renewer” (*mujaddid*) of the life of Islam was expected at the beginning of each century, and his friends argued that he was the “renewer” for

⁷ William Montgomery Watt, “Al-Ghazali | Biography, History, Philosophy, & Books | Britannica,” accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Ghazali>.

⁸ Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*.

⁹ Abdul Kadir Riyadi, *Arkeologi Tasawuf: Melacak Jejak Pemikiran Tasawuf al Muhasibi Hingga Tasawuf Nusantara* (Bandung: Mizan Pustaka, 2016).

the century beginning in September 1106. He continued lecturing in Nishapur at least until 1110, when he returned to Tūs, where he died the following year.¹⁰

More than 400 works are ascribed to al-Ghazālī, but he probably did not write nearly so many. Frequently the same work is found with different titles in different manuscripts, but many of the numerous manuscripts have not yet been carefully examined. Several works have also been falsely ascribed to him, and others are of doubtful authenticity. At least 50 genuine works are extant.

The works of Al-Ghazālī are spread in various fields of science, including: 1) Jurisprudence (*al-fiqhi wa usulih*) like *Kitab tahzib al-uṣul* (Pruning on legal theory), *Ghayat al-ghawr fi diryat al-dawar* (On the question of divorce) [M:15, 58], *al-Mustaṣfa min ‘ilm al-uṣul* (The clarified from legal theory). [M:59 ; A:63; GAL,S. I. 754, no 51; K:11936]. Then, 2) Sufism & Ethics (*al-taṣawuf wal akhlaq*) [for a more detailed listing see SE], *Mizan al-‘amal*, (Criterion of Action) [M:21; A:21], *Iḥya’ ‘ulum al-din* (Revival of Islamic Knowledge), *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalal* (Deliverance from Error).¹¹

In addition, 3) Theology (*‘ilm al-Kalam wa uṣul al-din*): *al-Iqtisad fil-‘itiqad* (Median in Belief), *Fayaṣl al-tafriqa bayn al-Islam wal-zandaqa* (The Criterion of Distinction between Islam and Clandestine Unbelief), *Mishkat al-anwar* (The Niche of Light), *Qanun al-ta’wil* (Methodology of Interpretation). Also, philosophy and logic (*falsafa wal mantiq*): *Maqaṣid al-falasifah* (Aims of Philosophers) [M:17; A:16; GAL, I, 425, S., I, 755], *Tahafut al-falasifa* (Incoherence of philosophers). [M:16; A:17; GAL, I, 425, S., I, 754], *Mi‘yar al-‘ilm fi*

¹⁰ Riyadi, *Arkeologi Tasawuf: Melacak Jejak Pemikiran Tasawuf al Muhasibi Hingga Tasawuf Nusantara*, 149-168.

¹¹ William Montgomery Watt, “Al-Ghazali | Biography, History, Philosophy, & Books | Britannica.”

fan al-manṭiq (Criterion of Knowledge in the Art of Logic) [M:18; A:18], etc.

Al-Ghazālī's greatest work is *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*. In 40 "books" he explained the doctrines and practices of Islam and showed how these can be made the basis of a profound devotional life, leading to the higher stages of Sufism, or mysticism. The relation of mystical experience to other forms of cognition is discussed in *Mishkāt al-anwār* (*The Niche for Lights*). Al-Ghazālī's abandonment of his career and adoption of a mystical, monastic life is defended in the autobiographical work *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*The Deliverer from Error*).¹²

In addition, one of the first works of Al-Ghazālī after his arrival in Baghdad was *Fadā'ih al-Bāṭiniyya* (*Scandal of The Esoterics*). It was also in Baghdad that he writes some of his most famous works such as *Al-Iqtisad fi al-i'tiqad* (*Moderation in Belief*).¹³ By utilizing his high rhetorical skills and intelligence, Al-Ghazālī quickly became a renowned scholar in Baghdad. Not only did he produce scholarly works, but he also engaged in intellectual debates and conversations with other scholars.

His philosophical studies began with treatises on logic and culminated in the *Tahāfut al-falāsifah* (*The Inconsistency—or Incoherence—of the Philosophers*), in which he defended Islam against such philosophers as Avicenna who sought to demonstrate certain speculative views contrary to accepted Islamic teaching. (See Islamic philosophy for more on these philosophers.) In preparation for this

¹² Luis Xavier López-Farjeat, "11 Al-Ghazālī on Knowledge ('ilm) and Certainty (Yaqīn) in al-Munqidh Min Aḍ-Ḍalāl and in al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm," in *Islam and Rationality* (Brill, 2015), 229–52.

¹³ Muhammad Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, "Al-Iqtisad Fi al-I'tiqad, Ed," *Insaf Ramadan*. (Damascus: Dar Qutaiba, 2003).

major treatise, he published an objective account of *Maqāṣid al-falāsifah* (*The Aims of the Philosophers*; i.e., their teachings). This book was influential in Europe and was one of the first to be translated from Arabic to Latin (12th century).¹⁴

Al-Ghazālī's abandonment of a brilliant career as a professor in order to lead a kind of monastic life won him many followers and critics among his contemporaries. Western scholars have been so attracted by his account of his spiritual development that they have paid him far more attention than they have other equally important Muslim thinkers

Al-Ghazālī's Endless Doubt: What Can We Know for Certain?

Al-Ghazālī enters a deep crisis because of his doubt in the senses and the intellect and describes this state in the following way: "This disease became so hard and lasted for two months while I was following the doctrine of sophistry due to my state, and not due to utterance and writing."¹⁵ This state is considered the peak of the process of doubt, which is compared to a disease that has a great influence on his entity. It is possible to consider this state as existential doubt.

Al-Ghazālī introduces the issue of doubt in his book *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* [*Deliverance from Error*]. The book can be considered an intellectual autobiography of this philosopher. Here Al-Ghazālī describes his intellectual development and the method of his search for truth.¹⁶ He also discusses the ideas of various doctrines that were present in Islamic society in his period, including the philosophers, *al-Mutakallimun* (scholastics), *al-Batiniyya* (interiority), and Sufism. The

¹⁴ Nurman Said, "The Significance of Al-Ghazālī and His Works for Indonesian Muslims: A Preliminary Study," *Studia Islamika* 3, no. 3 (2014).

¹⁵ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*, 22.

¹⁶ Sobhi Rayan, "Al-Ghazali's Method of Doubt," *Review of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (2004): 162–73.

book is a concise exposition of Al-Ghazālī's experience in the field of research and epistemological criticism.

Al-Ghazālī describes his doubt in the senses by saying: how can I trust the senses, the strongest of which is sight, when it sees the shadow and thinks it stands still, and judges that there is no movement?¹⁷ But then, by experience and observation, you know that it is moving, though it does not move all at once, but gradually, an atom after another, and it had not even a second of standing still. You look at the star and see it the size of a dinar, but the geometric evidence shows that it is larger than the earth in size. This and other examples are judged by the sense of sight, but are refuted by the judgment of the intellect in a way that cannot be denied. I said: probably trust in the senses is invalid, and probably there is no trust except in the intellectual powers, which are the primary things.¹⁸

It is clear that Al-Ghazālī has lost his trust in the concrete things after he has recognized the misleading of the senses in some cases. He tries to prove this supposition by giving examples from the world of the senses where the intellect judges that the senses make errors.¹⁹ After examining and testing the data of the senses and expressing his doubt in them, Al-Ghazālī moves to the examination of the data of intellect, which is considered a more advanced epistemological stage than the senses and their ruler. It can distinguish between the right and the wrong with regard to the things that are related to the senses.

Nevertheless, the difficulty that faces Al-Ghazālī in his research lies in this statement: probably, behind the realization of the intellect, there is another ruler, and if he is revealed, he might refute the

¹⁷ Osman Bakar, "The Meaning and Significance of Doubt in Al-Ghazzali's Philosophy," *Islamic Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1986): 31.

¹⁸ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*, 22.

¹⁹ Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Descartes and Al-Ghazālī: Doubt, Certitude and Light," *Islamic Studies*, 2010, 219–51.

intellect in its judgment, as did the intellect to the senses. Non-appearance of that ruler does not deny its existence. The soul hesitated in replying to this question, and supported its forms in its sleep, and said: don't you see things in your sleep and imagine conditions and believe they are stable and settled? You don't doubt that condition and then you wake up and realize that your imagination and beliefs had no origin or result. You may feel safe to believe that all that you believe in your waking time through your senses or your intellect is truth, in addition to your present state, but a certain state may occur to you, whose relation to your awakening is similar to the relation of your awakening to your sleeping state, and your awakening is a sleeping state in addition to it, and if that state occurred, you can be certain that all that you believed in with your intellect was merely imagination that does not take place in reality.²⁰

Here, Al-Ghazālī supposes the existence of a stage beyond the intellect, which can judge the data of the mind as an epistemological stage, which is more developed than the intellect. It is possible to try to reach this stage when man gets rid of the senses and the material world surrounding him. Man can reach this stage automatically after death. However, it is possible to reach this stage during the state of the Sufi revelation and inspiration that requires a large intellectual effort or abstract thinking which is likely to decrease the function of the senses to their lowest level.²¹

Also, the establishment of knowledge appears in its three stages—senses, intellect and beyond the intellect. It appears that the difference between the senses and the intellect is similar to the difference between the intellect and beyond the intellect stages.

²⁰ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*, 22.

²¹ Rayan, "Al-Ghazali's Method of Doubt."

However, these stages are not separated; in fact there are reciprocal and complementary relations among them.²²

Eventually, in his *Deliverance From Error*, al-Ghazali reflects on his journey from skepticism to faith. Previous scholarship has actually interpreted this text as an anticipation of Cartesian positions regarding epistemic certainty. In this autobiographical account al-Ghazali first reached absolute skepticism and doubted sensory evidence, since they were often deceiving.²³ At first he began with temporarily suspending authority in the matters of faith, and rejected tradition (*taqlid*). al-Ghazali scrutinized all his cognitions and was completely empty of any knowledge. He also compared the conscious state of wakefulness with the dreaming state, al-Ghazali further explains:

“Don’t you see that when you are asleep you believe certain things and imagine certain circumstances and believe they are fixed and lasting and entertain no doubts about that being their status? Then you wake up and know that all your imaginings and beliefs were groundless and insubstantial”.²⁴

Then al-Ghazali references the viewing of a star to the deceitfulness of the senses. When we look at a certain star it appears to us to be no bigger than a coin, but in actuality it is bigger than the earth itself. We figure this out, by the power of the intellect, through geometric calculations. But al-Ghazali then doubts even mathematical and logical truths, since they could also be deceiving. Al-Ghazālī tries to get out of this crisis, but in vain. It is not possible to find answers to these doubts except by proofs that are based on primary science.

²² Rayan.

²³ Mustapha Itani, “Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali’s Influence on René Descartes,” Medium, May 9, 2021, <https://medium.com/@mustaphahitani/abu-hamid-al-ghazalis-influence-on-ren%C3%A9-descartes-d9e6bb4fb29>.

²⁴ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*.

He needs one axiom at least from which he can step to greater certainties.²⁵ However, these sciences are also doubted. Therefore, they cannot constitute a basis to get rid of doubt. This situation requires the interference of an external element on which human knowledge can be established, because the natural intellect is insufficient to guarantee certainty of human knowledge. Here, Al-Ghazālī discovers the "Godly light" that saves him from the crisis of doubt.²⁶

Al-Ghazālī's Search For Truth

The most important thing about al-Ghazālī's system of thought is its method which may be described as that of the courage to know and the courage to doubt. The best expression of it is given in his famous autobiographical work, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, which he wrote some five years before his death.²⁷ In *al-Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī makes {587} a critical examination of the methods of the various schools of thought current in his time in a manner closely similar to that of Descartes' (d. 1060/1650) in his *Discours de la methode* (1047/1637). All kinds of knowledge, al-Ghazālī held, should be investigated and nothing should be considered dangerous or hostile. For himself he said that

²⁵ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, 22.

²⁶ Rayan, "Al-Ghazali's Method of Doubt."

²⁷ *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* as an autobiographical work is unique in the whole of Arabic literature for "the keenness and the fullness of its self-revelation." It is the most often referred to book and has been translated and edited a number of times; C. Brockelmann in his *Arabische Litteratur*, Weimar, 1899, Vol. I, pp. 419-26, has given 69 items. For some of the important translations of *Munqidh*, cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, 1913-34, Vol. 11, p. 149. For Urdu translations see Hāfiz M. Anwar 'Ali, *Lecture Imam Ghazālī*, Lahore, 1311/1893, ill pp. (with Arabic text) and M. Hanif Nadawi, *Sargudhasht-i Ghazali*, Lahore, 1959, 188 pp. (with an Introduction, pp. 3-108); see also Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte Der Arabischen Litteratur*, vol. 1 (Рипол Классик, 1897).

he had embarked on the open sea of knowledge right from his adolescence setting aside all craven caution:

“I poked into every dark recess and made an assault on every problem, I plunged into every abyss. I scrutinized the creed of every sect and I fathomed the mysteries of each doctrine. All this I did that I might distinguish between the true and the false. There was not a philosopher whose system I did not acquaint myself with, nor a theologian whose doctrines I did not examine. If ever I met a Sufi, I coveted to probe into his secrets; if an ascetic, I investigated into the basis of his austerities; if one of the atheistic zindiqs, I groped into the causes of his bold atheism.”²⁸

It can be said that Al-Ghazālī’s life is a constant search for knowledge, while all his intellectual endeavours were aimed at reaching knowledge.

“The thirst for grasping the real meaning of things was indeed my habit and wont from my early years and in the prime of my life. It was an instinctive, natural disposition placed in my makeup by God Most High, not something due to my choosing and contriving.” – Al-Ghazālī (*Deliverance From Error/ Al-Munqidh min Al-Dalal*)²⁹

Although we tend to view Al-Ghazālī as a pious man who is unwavering in his faith, he had actually undergone a number of

²⁸ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*, 21-22.

²⁹ Riyadi, *Arkeologi Tasawuf: Melacak Jejak Pemikiran Tasawuf al Muhasibi Hingga Tasawuf Nusantara*, 149-168.

spiritual crises in his life despite remaining steadfast in his religious belief. Al-Ghazālī's crisis of skepticism began while he was in Baghdad, where he began to question the reliability of his senses and the veracity of his knowledge.³⁰ He felt that knowledge based on sense-perception alone could not be trusted as it was subject to the influence of emotions and preconceived notions. He began to doubt what he knew and wondered, if we cannot trust our strongest sense which is sight, how can we be sure to trust our reason?

“...while everything you believe through sensation or intellection in your waking state may be true in relation to that state, what assurance have you that you may not suddenly experience a state which would have the same relation to your waking state as the latter has to your dreaming, and your waking state would be dreaming in relation to that new and further state? If you found yourself in such a state, you would be sure that all your rational beliefs were unsubstantial facts.” – Al-Ghazālī (*Deliverance From Error*)³¹

This put Al-Ghazālī into a deep spiritual crisis where he began becoming skeptical of everything even though he is outwardly pious and actively practises his religion. Inwardly, however, he was unsure of everything.

³⁰ Adi Prasetia Senata et al., “Epistemic Rationality In Islamic Education: The Significance for Religious Moderation in Contemporary Indonesian Islam,” *Ulul Albab* 22, no. 2 (2021): 232; Senata Adi Prasetia, “Epistemologi Rasional Dalam Pendidikan Islam: Studi Komparasi Pemikiran Muhammad Abid al Jabiri Dan Mohammed Arkoun,” 2022.

³¹ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal*.

“This malady was mysterious and it lasted for nearly two months. During that time I was a skeptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine. At length God Most High cured me of that sickness. My soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by construction a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge.” – Al-Ghazālī (*Deliverance From Error*)³²

This was only the first of his multiple crises. In 1095 CE, Al-Ghazālī had another major spiritual and existential crisis, one that would eventually lead him on a path of pilgrimage. This crisis of doubt spurred his search for certainty and knowledge of the Divine.

He realised that all of his intellectual endeavours, including his own career, had been based on selfish motivations such as fame and reputation. He started questioning his faith, his understanding of God, and the traditional Islamic teachings he had studied and devoted his life to. The crisis affected him so much that he fell mentally and physically ill, causing him to be unable to teach anymore.

“Next I attentively considered my circumstances, and I saw that I was immersed in attachments which had encompassed me from all sides. I also considered my activities – the best of them being public and private instruction – and that in them I was applying myself to sciences unimportant and useless in this pilgrimage to the hereafter. Then I reflection on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was not directed purely

³² Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī.

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.” – Al-Ghazālī (*Deliverance From Error*)³³

At this point, Al-Ghazālī decided that he would take a new approach to reach true knowledge. Not through books, intellectual debates or conceptual knowledge, but through direct experience and the *dhawq* (tasting, or mystical intuition, that is, direct knowledge of invisible realities or of God) of the Sufi mystics.

He left some money for his family, donated the rest to charity, and informed those around him that he was going on a pilgrimage to Mecca. In his absence, his brother would take his place as a teacher. However, it wasn't just a pilgrimage, but a long journey, inwardly and outwardly, to discover true knowledge through mysticism

The Classes of Seekers

When God by His grace and abundant generosity cured me of this disease, I came to regard the various seekers (sc. after truth) as comprising four groups:³⁴ (1) the *Theologians* (*mutakallimun*), who claim that they are the exponents of thought and intellectual speculation; (2) the *Batiniah*, who consider that they, as the party of ‘authoritative instruction’ (*ta’lim*), alone derive truth from the infallible imam; (3) the *Philosophers*, who regard themselves as the exponents of logic and demonstration; (4) the *Sufi or Mystics*, who claim that they alone enter into the ‘presence’ (sc. of God), and possess vision and intuitive understanding.

Al-Ghazālī said, I said within myself:

³³ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī.

³⁴ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, 21-23.

‘The truth cannot lie outside these four classes. These are the people who tread the paths of the quest for truth. If the truth is not with them, no point remains in trying to apprehend the truth. There is certainly no point in trying to return to the level of naive and derivative belief (*taqlid*) once it has been left, since a condition of being at such a level is that one should not know one is there; when a man comes to know that, the glass of his naive beliefs is broken. This is a breakage which cannot be mended, a breakage not to be repaired by patching or by assembling of fragments. The glass must be melted once again in the furnace for a new start, and out of it another fresh vessel formed’.³⁵

I now hastened to follow out these four ways and investigate what these groups had achieved, commencing with the science of theology and then taking the way of philosophy, the ‘authoritative instruction’ of the Batiniyah, and the way of mysticism, in that order

Al-Ghazālī’s Fatwā against Three Teachings of the Falasifa

Al-Ghazālī describes *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-Falasifa*) as a “refutation” (*radd*) of the philosophical movement.³⁶ This professed stance has contributed to the scholarly misconception that he opposed Aristotelianism and rejected its teachings. In reality, his response to falsafa was far more complex, even allowing him to adopt many of its teachings. By “refutation,” he does not mean the plain

³⁵ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, 21-23.

³⁶ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, “Fada’ih al-Batiniyya Wa Fada’il al-Mustazhiriyya, Transl. R. J. McCarthy,” *The Infamies of the Batinites and the Virtues of the Mustazhirites*, n.d.; Farouk Mitha, *Re-Reading al-Ghazālī: Orthodoxy, Reason and Authority in the Kitāb al-Mustaẓhirī* (McGill University, 1993); see also Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-tafriqa*, 191.16–192.12 / 56.3–57.8; idem, *al-Munqidh* 23.17–24.7. See also idem, *Fada’ih al-Batiniyya*, 153.13–154.2; 155.9–11.

rejection of the philosophical teachings discussed in that book. It is clear that in his *Incoherence*, Al-Ghazālī does not set out to prove the falsehood of all of—or even of most of—the philosophical teachings discussed there. The great majority of its twenty chapters focus on the *falaṣifa*’s inability to demonstrate given elements of their teachings.³⁷

In a 1924 article, David Z. Baneth reminded his readers that Al-Ghazālī’s criticism of the *falasifa*’s teachings had often been overestimated. Al-Ghazālī’s goal is to show that the metaphysics of al-Farabi and Avicenna are “unscientific,” as Baneth put it, meaning they are not backed by demonstrative proofs. Even unproven positions can still be correct. Whether or not these teachings are wrong depends upon a second criterion: only if these unproven teachings are incompatible with the literal wording of revelation must their truth be rejected.³⁸

For instance, Al-Ghazālī attacks the *falasifa*’s proofs for their view that God is one and that He cannot have a body. Despite his critiques, Al-Ghazālī shares these positions; what he attacks are the *falasifa*’s arguments and not their results. He claims that these arguments are not demonstrative and do not establish certain knowledge about God’s unity or His incorporeity. Humans do have knowledge about these two facts, Al-Ghazālī says, yet not the kind of knowledge that the philosophers claim.

Al-Ghazālī also attacks the *falasifa*’s arguments for the existence of souls in the heavens and for the incorruptibility of the human soul in the afterlife. Other of his works show, however, that Al-Ghazālī taught these same things. According to Baneth, Al-Ghazālī’s explicit goal was “to remove these questions from the realm of pure rational

³⁷ Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 101-103.

³⁸ Griffel, 101-103.

knowledge and assign their answer to another source of truth, namely revelation”.³⁹

In doing so, the *Incoherence* follows the technique of *kalam* disputations. Any reader of the *Incoherence* is struck by its careful composition and the economy of its language. Al-Ghazālī’s reports of philosophical teachings are short and precise. His counterarguments make productive use of the *kalam* technique of “exhaustive investigation and disjunction” (*al-sabr wa-l-taqsim*), where the consequences or implications of an adversary’s position are fully investigated and individually discussed and, in this case, dismissed and refuted one by one. The book’s twenty discussions are interspersed with objections and with further rejections, with secondary discussions, and with parallel attempts to convince the reader that alternative explanations to those put forward by the *falasifa* are just as plausible and tenable.⁴⁰ In his *Incoherence*, Al-Ghazālī does more than simply make room for the epistemological claims of revelation.

One of the first things students of Islamic history or of the history of philosophy learn is that Al-Ghazālī condemned the tradition of Aristotelian philosophy in Islam. That condemnation is first expressed at the end of *the Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-falasifa*), published in 487/1095, and later repeated in his *Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Clandestine Apostasy* (*Faysal al-tafriqa baynal-Islām wa-l-zandaqa*) and in his widely read autobiography *The Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*), both works written around 500/1106. Earlier intellectual historians of Islam claimed that

³⁹ David Hartwig Baneth, “Jehuda Hallewi Und Gazali,” *Korrespondenzblatt Der Akademie Für Die Wissenschaft Des Judentums* 5 (1980): 27; Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*, 99.

⁴⁰ Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*, 101-103.

this condemnation destroyed the philosophical tradition in Islam, 20 while today we know that this is not true.

Al-Ghazālī's legal verdict in the *Incoherence* extends to no more than a single page at the end of the book. It is, in effect, a fatwa, a legal response to a question posed by a real or fictitious inquirer. In its original version on the last page of the *Incoherence*, it reads,⁴¹

If someone asks: "Now that you have discussed in detail the teachings of these [philosophers], do you [also] say decisively that they hold unbelief (*kufur*) and that the killing of someone who upholds their convictions is obligatory?" We answer: Pronouncing them unbelievers must be done in three questions. One of them is the question of the world's pre-eternity and their saying that the substances are all pre-eternal. The second is their statement that God's knowledge does not encompass the temporally created particulars among individual [existents]. The third is their denial of the resurrection of bodies and assembly of bodies [on Judgment Day]. These three teachings do not agree with Islam in any way. Whoever holds them [also] holds that prophets utter falsehoods and that they said whatever they have said in order to promote the public benefit, [meaning that the prophets] use symbols for the multitude of people in order to make them understand. Such [a position] is manifest unbelief (*kufur sirah*) which none of the [various] groups of Muslims [ever] held.⁴²

In his verdict against the *falasifa*, Al-Ghazālī singles out a limited number of theological or philosophical positions as unbelief.

⁴¹ Griffel, 101-103.

⁴² Abu Hamid Muhammad, *Tahafut Al-Falasifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, 376.2-10.

Here in the Incoherence, he lists three teachings: (1) that the word has no beginning in the past and is not created in time; (2) that God's knowledge includes only classes of beings (universals) and does not extend to individual beings and their circumstances (particulars); and (3) that the rewards and punishments in the next life are only spiritual in character and not also bodily. In his Scandals of the Esoterics (*Fadaih al-Batiniyya*), he adds (4) instances of blatant violations to the monotheism of Islam as well as the position (5) that although the teachings of the prophets provide some benefit (*maslaha*) to both the individual and to society, they are not actually true.⁴³ In Al-Ghazālī's usual formulations of the verdict, however, this last position is listed as a mere result of the earlier three (or four) points in the list.

Al-Ghazālī's fatwa is appended to a work where the specific legal status of the twenty teachings discussed in that book never comes up.⁴⁴ Indeed, there is a certain argumentative gap between the philosophical discussions of the twenty teachings of the *falasifa* in the main part of the Incoherence and the brief fatwa at the end.⁴⁵ In the several introductory chapters of the Incoherence, Al-Ghazālī explains his motivation for writing the work. Providing the basis for a legal condemnation of some of the *falasifa*'s teachings is neither mentioned

⁴³ Al-Ghazali, *Fada'ih al-batiniyya*, 151.17-153.13; idem, *Faysal al-tafriqa*, 184.4-5 / 41.5-6; idem, *al-Qanun al-kulli fil ta'wil*, 7, 44.17-18, 45.1-2; idem, *al-Iqtisad*, 249.6-9, 250.5; idem, *Tahafut*, 376.7-9 / 226.8-9. See Frank Griffel, *Apostasie Und Toleranz Im Islam: Die Entwicklung Zu al-Ġazālīs Urteil Gegen Die Philosophie Und Die Reaktionen Der Philosophen* (Brill, 2021), 292-95.

⁴⁴ The issue that the *fala' sifa* assume the prophets' teachings are false (*takdhib*) is brought up only once, as far as I can see, in the seventeenth discussion about the *falasifa*'s denial of a number of miracles that revelation or credible historical reports attribute to the prophets; see al-Ghazali, *Tahafut*, 289.11-290.1 / 173.1-3; see also Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 101-103.

⁴⁵ Griffel, *Apostasie Und Toleranz Im Islam: Die Entwicklung Zu al-Ġazālīs Urteil Gegen Die Philosophie Und Die Reaktionen Der Philosophen*.

there nor anywhere else in the discussions of the twenty teachings. The long chapter on the world's pre-eternity, for instance—a discussion that amounts to almost a third of the whole work—focuses on the question of whether the philosophers' claim of a pre-eternal world is tenable and correct. Although Al-Ghazālī denies this, he never engages in a justification why this position cannot be tolerated.

The Importance of Seeking Truth: Lessons from al-Ghazālī's Life

To understand the importance of his spiritual journey, it is crucial for us to understand Al-Ghazālī's background and the period in which he lived. There are still a lot of scholars who hold the belief that Al-Ghazālī contributed to the downfall of the Islamic Golden Age, thanks to his critique of philosophers coupled with his popularity as a scholar, which dealt a major blow to *falsafa* and steered the general trend of the Islamic world away from Greek philosophy. I too had once held this erroneous belief.⁴⁶

However, when we look at his life after his spiritual pilgrimage, we will find a different person altogether. It is important to note that Al-Ghazālī remained a strong proponent of the Ash'ari school of thought in Sunni Islam, although at the end of his life he put equal emphasis on the esoteric knowledge of Islam, not just its exoteric aspects.

First, to seek God, seek knowledge. Al-Ghazālī's spiritual journey began with an understanding that the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the divine was necessary for spiritual growth. He believed that in order to find true understanding and peace, one must be open to learning about both God and the world around

⁴⁶ Shafiqah Othman, "Al-Ghazali's Search For Truth," Medium, December 16, 2022, <https://medium.com/the-temple-keeper/al-ghazalis-search-for-truth-9ae932470e78>.

them, and then use this knowledge to make meaningful connections between the two.⁴⁷

For example, dismissing a higher level of being and advancing to a lower one is only justified if a demonstrative argument invalidates (lit. “excuses,” *adhara*) the higher level: “There is no foregoing one level for a level that does not include the earlier one without the necessity of a demonstration.”⁴⁸ The many disagreements about how passages in the Qur’an should be read, Al-Ghazālī maintains, are merely disagreements about what can be proven demonstratively. A Hanbalite, for instance, will not accept a demonstration proving that God cannot be “above” (*fawq*).

Thus he accepts that the word “above” (e.g. Q 12:76 or 6:18) refers to a “real being,” meaning a spatial relationship, and does not allow interpreting this word in a way that deviates from its literal meaning. Al-Ghazālī, however, assumes that such a demonstrative argument can be produced. He therefore concludes that “above,” when used as a description of God, cannot have a spatial meaning. Rather, it is meant metaphorically to indicate a superior rank.⁴⁹

Second, we don’t know everything. Eventually, Al-Ghazālī confines himself within a circle of thinking, and tries to arrange his thoughts in order to go out of them. He soon realizes that there are essential thoughts (essences) that possess independent, and necessary existence within the consciousness.⁵⁰ This means they impose themselves on the consciousness from within the consciousness and not from outside, and also they are not part of the thinking ego, “I.”

⁴⁷ Othman.

⁴⁸ Muhammad Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Faysal Al-Tafriqa Bayna l’islam Wa al-Zandaqa*. Edited by Sulaiman Dunya (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1961), 47.9-10.

⁴⁹ Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*, 112-113.

⁵⁰ Rayan, “Al-Ghazali’s Method of Doubt.”

For example, he finds the idea of God within the consciousness, but this thought does not occur as a result of thinking; rather its existence was essential and imposed on the consciousness from within. Al Ghazali expressed this idea in the concept "Godly light" thrown into the chest, which does not occur by arranged evidence or arranged speech. This means that these "essences" or thoughts did not result from intellectual thinking, and their existence is spontaneous. This is what explains Al-Ghazālī's attempt to return to the original intuitive spontaneity.

So, Al-Ghazālī's spiritual transformation is a process of self-reflection and questioning that leads to a deeper understanding of one's faith.⁵¹ It is a journey of self-discovery and exploration that requires one to reassess and challenge their own beliefs. Through this process, one learns to appreciate uncertainty and to be open to different perspectives. This served as a reminder to us that even though we may think we know something, we must still be humble and open-minded to other ideas and beliefs. We must never be complacent in our beliefs, but instead strive to learn more and grow in our understanding.

Third, piety is not blind faith; It is active seeking. Al-Ghazālī doubts every existing thing because of his belief in the existence of something, which is the beginning. He tries to nullify every existing thing in order to reach the point of the beginning because these existing things constitute the obstacle to their revelation.⁵² The reason for this relentless attempt to return to the beginning is that it constitutes the basis of certainty for all existing things. Reaching it

⁵¹ Mohd Rosmizi Bin Abd Rahman and Salih Yucel, "The Mujaddid of His Age: Al-Ghazali and His Inner Spiritual Journey," *UMRAN-International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016).

⁵² Rayan, "Al-Ghazali's Method of Doubt."

means reaching certainty, which is connected to personal consciousness.

Therefore, it is possible to end with it rather than begin with it. Al Ghazali performs a thorough critical operation and a new assessment of sciences that he has acquired by imitation or sense or intellect. By doing so, he removes all ideological, social, and epistemological accumulations that cover human spontaneity. He attempts to reach this beginning since it is the only truth of certainty upon which he can establish the certainty of other existing things.

Al-Ghazālī's life emphasises the importance of developing an inner spiritual understanding and connection with the divine. Through this path of self-discovery, one can gain insight into the truth and purpose of their life. We should feel encouraged to rely on our own inner truth and not just blindly follow the beliefs and opinions of others. By taking the time to reflect and explore our own spiritual reality, we can gain a more profound understanding of our place in the world and our purpose in life.

Concluding Remarks

From what has been said above, I conclude that doubt for Al-Ghazālī is a method of thinking through which one can reach the truth. This is what characterizes the development of the various intellectual stages in his work. He applied this method in his review of acquired knowledge by imitation, sense, and intellect. Through it, he also reaches the truth of certainty (intuition or spontaneity) that formed the certain basis to rebuild the various types of knowledge. I notice that his thoughts about doubt were a description of a method that aims at criticizing the epistemological content and reaching the truth of content.

To be sure, Al-Ghazālī experienced “psychological instability” when he tried to trace the “essence of truth” (*haqiqah al-'umur*) and “true truth” (*al-'ilm al-yaqin*). In his search, al-Ghazali critically studied, studied and verified all the sciences that were in effect at that time, such as kalam (theology), jurisprudence, philosophy, and Sufism and its derivatives. Al-Ghazālī's existential experience of searching for and exploring "truth" is recorded in his book, *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal*. That's where we can smell Al-Ghazālī's anxiety. What is certain, said Al-Ghazālī, is that the truth must be sought without limits.

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