

The Self as Enemy, the Self as Divine: A Crossroads in the Development of Islamic Anthropology

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Towards the end of his life the Muslim theologian, jurist, and mystic Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 CE) composed a streamlined version of his principal work, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*). The original title of the work, written in Ghazālī’s native Persian, is *The Chemistry of Happiness*: yet the common European custom of translating the first word as “alchemy” is not entirely out of place. Ghazālī’s stated intention, after all, is to isolate the human being’s most valuable component from amidst the many things out of which the individual is composed. He likens this procedure to the process whereby base metals are transmuted into gold.¹

Why this interest in the human constitution? Ghazālī draws on a Qur’ānic citation and a saying of the Prophet. The Qur’ānic verse goes as follows: “We will show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves (*fī anfusi-him*), so that the truth will become known to them.” (Q. 41:53.) This comes across as so much creation theology and many Muslim thinkers, Ghazālī included, would interpret it as an argument from design of sorts.² From the way in which the body’s members and organs are put together to the way in which they finely co-operate to, finally, the way in which they aid us in coming to terms with outward reality (the “horizons” mentioned in the verse), there is no end to signs of intelligent design in creation.³ Further implications may be teased out once it is recognised that the grammatical

¹ *Kīmīyā-yi sa’ādat*, 2 vols., ed. Ḥusayn Ḳhadīv-jam, Teheran 1983 (hereafter *Kīmīyā-yi*), 1:6. An Arabic version of the introductory chapter on self-knowledge has been edited by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Alīm (Cairo, 1986): I have checked my findings against this text but will refrain from citing it, since it is uncertain if the translation is in al-Ghazālī’s own hand (or even authorised by him).

² See, e.g., *Al-maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ ma’ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā* (“The Highest Purpose in Explaining the Meanings of the Beautiful Names of God”), ed. F.A. Shehadi, Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq 1982, 107 (–hereafter *Maqṣad*).

³ See *Maqṣad*, 106–107; *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 5 vols. (henceforth *Iḥyā’*), Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyyah, 2002, bk. 21, ch. 2, 3:6.13–21; and the *Book of Gratitude* (= *Iḥyā’*, bk. 32), *passim*.

placeholder for ‘self’ in this context, i.e. *nafs*, is the same expression that is customarily used to designate ‘soul’.⁴ On this interpretation of the verse it is the human soul that is filled with signs of God’s own truth.

It is the Prophetic saying, which has the unmistakable ring of the Delphic maxim to it, that really attracts our attention. In Ghazālī’s phrasing this goes as follows: “One who knows himself (or again “his soul”, *nafs*) will come to know his Lord”.⁵ And what will such self-examination encompass? According to Ghazālī the following questions are in order:

What art thou in thyself, and from whence hast thou come? Whither art thou going, and for what purpose hast thou come to tarry here awhile, and in what does thy real happiness and misery consist? Some of thy attributes are those of cattle, some of predators, some of devils, and some of angels: thou hast to find out which of these represent the reality of thy substance and which are extraneous and handed to thee on lease. Till thou knowest this, thou canst not find out where thy real happiness lies.

(*Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:13–14)⁶

My purpose in this essay is to unpack this concise mission statement and to outline the path Ghazālī takes in answering the questions he poses. An examination of Ghazālī’s *Revivification* and related works reveals the extent to which he came under the spell of the ancient ideal of self-knowledge. At the same time, idiosyncratic features in Ghazālī’s account indicate a departure from that self-same tradition. If it is largely Ghazālī whom we have to thank for the popularity of the self-examination theme in later Islamic literature as well as for the way it became couched in Platonic and Peripatetic terminology, as I believe we do, then it also remains true that a peculiarly Islamic perspective informs Ghazālī’s reading of the philosophers. Ghazālī’s thought, I will argue, is representative of a particular moment in the development of Islamic anthropology, one at which the Greek intellectualist ideal as developed by Avicenna (980–1037) begins to meld with the relentless self-questioning that characterises the moralist strand of Muslim piety. Later Islamic thinkers will more confidently speak of the self, of the “I”, and of our unhindered immediate access to both: but Ghazālī occupies a unique position in holding at once that self-knowledge is absolutely crucial for our now and future well-being, and that it is an exceedingly difficult task.

⁴This is the way the verse is rendered, e.g., in N.J. Dawood’s popular Penguin interpretation.

⁵For variations on this *ḥadīth* see *Mīzān al-‘amal* (“The Criterion of Action” – hereafter *Mīzān*), ed. S. Dunyā, Cairo Dār al-ma’ārif bi al-miṣr 1964b, 200; *Ma’ārij al-quds* (“The Jerusalem Ascent” – hereafter *Ma’ārij*), Cairo: al-Maktaba al-tijāriyya al-kubrī 1963, 2–3; on the authorship of the latter work, n. 13 below.

⁶The antiquated but charming English translation derives from *The Alchemy of Happiness*, translated by C. Field (London: MES 1991), having been emended for precision.

Cognitive Powers

Ghazālī's unquestionable theocentrism allows him to draw some preliminary conclusions based on the *ḥadīth* just cited. Human life properly conceived is directed towards the divine, with no other path leading to true happiness.⁷ At the same time, a certain ethical naturalism is assumed. Even if aligning one's life with God's revealed will constitutes the believer's mission, the fact that this course of action is conducive to felicity is grounded in the correlation of God's prescriptions to what one requires in one's true being (*ḥaqīqa*) or essence (*dhāt*).⁸ And, while *dhāt* itself is a notoriously slippery term, with a semantic field covering everything from 'essence' to 'innermost being' to 'self' in the literature of the period,⁹ this naturalistic tendency does help to explain why both chemical/analytic and introspective overtones should frame Ghazālī's quest for self-knowledge. If it is the human essence that is properly designated by the term *nafs*, then it is this that should command our attention more than any accidental features that may or may not accrue to the soul or to embodied life more generally.¹⁰

But this terminological elision also suggests an immediate problem, for thought no less than for translation. Is Ghazālī merely making the point that we are not our bodies? Such a claim would scarcely raise an eyebrow among the Neoplatonically inclined Arabic Aristotelians (even if from the point of view of mainstream Ash'arite theology it would be radical: although the details were disputed, the theologians generally treated soul as a corporeal principle, if one of a particularly subtle nature). Ghazālī's preliminary remarks on the substance of soul indicate that he does indeed take this view: whatever the reality of *nafs* may otherwise turn out to be, minimally we are dealing with an incorporeal principle.¹¹ By way of negation it can be established that this essence, like the Truth from whence it stems, is indivisible and immaterial in its essence, without a bodily or perceptible quality that would attach to it. It is at once everywhere that its influence extends, and yet without a specific location that one could pinpoint (*Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:16–18, 1:50–52).

⁷ See, further *Ihyā'*, bk. 21, 3:6.8–10 and bk. 22, 3:57.24–28, both of which cite verse 51:5 from the Qur'ān: "I created Jinn and man only to serve Me."

⁸ See, e.g., the introduction to the *Criterion of Action: Mīzān*, 180–181.

⁹ See Fazlur Rahman, "Dhāt", in Th. Bianquis, E.J. Donzel and W. Heinrichs (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition, vol. 2*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1965, 220.

¹⁰ Despite the many gifts God has given us in the form of our bodily constitution, we are not to identify primarily with the body, as even the beasts are aware of their limbs and organs and know that they belong to them: *Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:13. For this overall picture see also Ghazālī's polemical treatise against the Ismā'īlīs, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya wa faḍā'il al-mustazhiriyya* (hereafter *Faḍā'ih*), ed. 'A. Badawī, Cairo: Al-maktaba al-'arabiyya 1964a, 198–200.

¹¹ *Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:16; see further Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazālī's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 2001, 68–87; on Ghazālī's relation to the Ash'arites, see Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1994.

Further than this it is difficult to venture. According to Ghazālī no fewer than four expressions are commonly used in association with the sought spiritual subtlety (*latīfa*), and this variegation easily leads to exasperation:

The variation in these expressions, along with what pertains to them, has left most scholars bewildered. Consequently, you will see them discussing [these] notions and say: “This is the notion of the intellect (*‘aql*); this is the notion of the spirit (*rūh*); this is the notion of the heart (*qalb*); this is the notion of the soul (*nafs*).” Yet [these] thinkers do not perceive the actual differences between these names.

(*Ihyā’*, bk. 21, 3:5.21–23; cf. 3:4.2–3.)

In Ghazālī’s analysis, the problem lies in confusing the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the essence (*dhāt*) under consideration with the bodily functions and organs with which it is regularly associated. The heart is correctly thought to enjoy a connection with the entity Ghazālī means to pinpoint; so is the animating spirit which according to the physicians courses through our veins; so are the twin phenomena of intellectual apprehension and the deliberate pursuit of worldly happiness. Yet none of these functions is strictly identical with the principle with which they are associated. Instead, the meanings of the terms add up to five in all: inasmuch as these different expressions point to diverse functions, they refer to distinct features of our existence, but inasmuch as their underlying principle and coordinator is one, all four names refer to a single entity.¹²

For this concealed reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-bāṭina*) Ghazālī’s preferred expression is ‘heart’, and in both the *Chemistry* and in the *Revivification* we see a corresponding move from a consideration of the soul/self (*nafs*) to one concerning the “wonders of the heart” (*‘ajā’ib al-qalb*). The move represents a strategy common to Ghazālī’s later career, in that he attempts to distance himself from Greek-derived philosophical terminology by putting forward an Arabic-Islamic alternative whenever he can.¹³ This should not be allowed to distract from the main issue; Ghazālī’s “pectoral psychology”, to use Ebrahim Moosa’s term, is no less a psychology for being pectoral.¹⁴

¹² *Ihyā’*, bk. 21, 3:5.23–30; cf. *Ma’ārij*, 10–13. This calculus makes understandable al-Ghazālī’s otherwise strange arithmetic, according to which four expressions, each of which has two meanings, add up to five meanings in all. This can only mean that there are in reality five intentional objects, i.e. five objects of thought in the minds of the learned, even if the people involved do not recognise this but instead keep on using fewer or more numerous expressions. On outward, mental, and verbal existence see *Maqṣad*, 18–19.

¹³ In the *Jerusalem Ascent* the term *nafs* is retained, which has led some scholars to doubt its authenticity. A survey of the different opinions on the matter, along with a defence of the attribution of *Ma’ārij* to al-Ghazālī, is now offered by Frank Griffel, review article of Gianotti (2001), *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124/1(2004), 108–111. Drawing on Afifi al-Akiti, “The Three Properties of Prophethood in Certain Works of Avicenna and al-Ḡazālī” (in Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman (eds.), *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 2004), Griffel points out that al-Ghazālī’s attempts to dress up Greek philosophical psychology in Islamic garb are less than systematic.

¹⁴ See Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 2005, 224 ff.

Just how cosmetic the terminological shift is that Ghazālī initiates can be gleaned from the way his treatise *On the Marvels of the Heart* compares with later works of Islamic psychology. We have already mentioned how *nafs* serves a dual function as both self (in the reflexive sense) and soul: a later *kalām* thinker such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE) can exploit this very linguistic ambivalence in his own work *On the Soul and the Spirit, with an Explication of their Powers*, where he argues for the functional identity of self-examination and the counting off of the various psychic faculties (Gr. *dynamis*/Ar. *quwwa*) that we possess. For what could self-examination be, except for knowledge of those capacities and movements of the soul that remain hidden to the outward eye but are manifest to inward reflection?¹⁵ This in fact is the line adopted by Ghazālī as well, in the *Ihyā'* and elsewhere. The capacities in question are branded by him “the hosts of the heart” (*junūd al-qalb*), and an understanding of their role is presented as a necessary first step in the quest for self-knowledge.¹⁶ Such an investigation will incorporate the sensory faculties that make possible our apprehension of the world around us, as well as an understanding of the bodily instruments that facilitate this process; it will also encompass the inner senses that serve to fashion a unified experience out of the disjointed jumble of sense-impressions, and the motive faculties that enable us to orientate ourselves appropriately in the world thus disclosed.

We may term this the epistemological reading of the Delphic maxim and of the microcosm-macrocosm motif that often accompanies it.¹⁷ Within the framework of a naturalised epistemology, an account of our perceptual apparatus can provide us with a working map of how the world at large is laid out: Ghazālī’s habit of talking about the outer and inner senses and the intellect as revealing distinct “worlds” (*‘ālam*) is especially telling in this regard.¹⁸ It is in accordance with this understanding of the Delphic tradition, which ultimately can be traced all the way back to Plato’s *Phaedrus* (229e–230a), that Avicenna can declare that knowledge of one’s own *nafs* is a prerequisite to acquiring all the sciences.¹⁹ Ghazālī’s *Jerusalem Ascent* makes the same

¹⁵ See his *Kitāb al-nafs wa al-rūḥ wa sharḥ qawā-humā*, ed. M. Saḥīr Ḥasan al-Ma’sūmī, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute 1968, 27.

¹⁶ See *Ihyā'*, bk. 21, chs. 2–3; *Kīmiyā-yi*, 1:18–19; *Ma’ārij*, 80–81; *Mīzān*, 202–203 ff.

¹⁷ On the different interpretations of the Delphic maxim see Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, London: Kegan Paul, 1969, 1–40.

¹⁸ See, e.g., the famous chapter on prophecy in Ghazālī’s autobiography, the *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (“Deliverance from Error”), eds. K. Ayyād and J. Saliba, Beirut: Librairie Orientale 1969.

¹⁹ See *Maqāla fī al-nafs ‘alā sunna l-ikhtisār* (“Treatise on the Soul”), ed. Samuel Landauer under the title, “Die Psychologie des Ibn Sīnā”, *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 29(1875), 335–418, pp. 340 and 374. Remi Brague, who locates an equivalent movement in al-Kindī’s *Book of Definitions*, regards this as a shift in the way the Delphic maxim was understood: from the ancient practically oriented reading we have moved on to a theoretical concern (see his article “Cosmological Mysticism: The Imitation of the Heavenly Bodies in Ibn Ṭufayl’s Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān”, *Graduate Faculty Philosophical Journal* 19.2–20.1(1997), 91–102). If this is right, then Ghazālī’s project in fact represents a return to the more ancient ideal, as we shall see.

point, as does the *Criterion of Action* and indeed the *Revivification*. Knowledge of the psychic faculties not only provides us with a start on the path to God, but also to all the sciences.²⁰

Motive Parts

The line of enquiry I have pursued thus far must appear disappointing to anyone who has come to the Islamic tradition in hopes of finding materials related to the themes of introspection and self-awareness, to say nothing of more socially constructed aspects of selfhood. Does self-knowledge for the Muslims thinkers consist merely in a catalogue of the various perceptual and cognitive powers? Assuredly not: for on the terms laid out in the *Revivification* we have thus far been at most dealing with the hosts of the heart, not at all with its true nature. Ghazālī makes clear that all of this barely qualifies as a start in our quest of self-examination: it is not enough to know what is *ours*, we must also know what in us actually *is* us.

Ghazālī's most explicit attempt at defining *nafs*, situated right at the onset of the book *On the Marvels of the Heart*, sheds fresh light on the matter. According to Ghazālī *nafs* has several meanings, two of which are of consequence:

One of them indicates the irascible and appetitive human powers together [...] it is according to this usage that the Sufis mean by *nafs* the root of all of a human being's reprehensible qualities. Accordingly, they say that it is necessary to wage war (*mujāhada*) against one's *nafs* and break it. This is what is referred to by the blessed saying, "Your worst enemy is your own *nafs* – what can be found between your two flanks." [...] The second meaning [indicates] that subtle thing which we have mentioned, the true human, i.e. one's *nafs* and essence. (*Ihyā'*, 3:4.31–5.1)

The passage brings back into focus the normative aspect of Ghazālī's search for self-knowledge. On the one side we have the lower self or soul, which immediately gets labelled as something working contrary to the divine purpose; on the other, we have the true reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the human being, which is an essence defined in terms of soul (cf. similarly *Ma'ārij*, 10). One aspect forms an object of identification, while the other is fit primarily for reprimand; the one is to be promoted, while the other must on every occasion be kept in check. This time, however, we have more to go on.

The division drawn here is ultimately of Neoplatonic provenance: appetite and anger together constitute the brute soul, the *nafs bāhimiyya*, a term that derives from the Arabic adaptation of Plotinus (the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*).²¹ It is

²⁰ See *Ma'ārij*, 2–5; *Mīzān*, 221; *Ihyā'*, bk. 21, 3:17.18 ("the one who knows his soul/self knows his Lord; [conversely], when a human is ignorant of this [i.e. the heart] one is ignorant of oneself, and one who is ignorant of one's self is ignorant of one's Lord; and one who is ignorant of one's heart is all the more ignorant of other things").

²¹ See Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, London: Duckworth 2002, 61–62; the appellation has Plotinian (I.1 [53] 10.6–7) as well as Platonic (*Republic* IX, 588c) roots.

contrasted with the specifically human soul (*al-nafs al-insāniyya*), which is the seat of reason. The latter is what we should identify with, as it is all that sets us apart from brute animals. Just enough Peripatetic materials exist to justify attributing such a dichotomy to Aristotle: but the moralising tone adopted both by the *Theology* and by Ghazālī is almost entirely Platonic.²² According to Ghazālī, the human being lies situated midway between the bestial and the angelic: we have, so to speak, a leg in both camps, living at once in both the sensible and the intelligible worlds.²³ Insofar as we focus on our animal functions, we form part of the animal kingdom, while insofar as we partake of the angelic life we may be said to be or to become “angels in human form” (*Mīzān*, 210). This schizophrenic condition is painted in the starkest of terms in Ghazālī’s writings; it motivates the better part of his reflections on human psychology.

What might constitute an angelic mode of existence? According to Ghazālī, this is a life of contemplation. What separates us from mere bestial impulses and allows for a share in the angelic nature is knowledge of the immutable realities (*ḥaqā’iq*) of things.²⁴ The heart’s specific task is to teach the human being about eternal truths, most prominently about the reality of God²⁵: ultimate happiness lies in what is specifically human, namely, knowledge and intellection (*Mīzān*, 305–310). This line of thinking allows Ghazālī to argue again for the incorporeality of the soul in a manner reminiscent of Avicenna. Authentic knowledge of God relies on the affirmation of a special power of apprehension in the human heart. But because God is not a body nor associated with anything bodily, we cannot come to an authentic knowledge concerning divine reality through any of the earthly powers of apprehension, not even on the view that all perception hangs on a certain degree of abstraction (*tajrīd*: see *Ma’ārij*, 48–49). Instead, acquaintance (*ma’rifa*) with the divine has to occur through a faculty whose object lies altogether beyond the material; and, due to Ghazālī’s adherence to the Empedoclean principle of “like knowing like”, this means that the apprehending subject must be immaterial too. It is due to the heart having something of the lordly (*rubbānī*) in it that it loves lordliness (*rubūbiyya*) by its very nature (*Iḥyā’*, 3:249.18–19). The reality of the self is of the genus of the angelic substance (*Kīmiyā-yi*, 1:15), and this allows for calling the wise among us angelic and lordly (*Iḥyā’*, 3:9.19–21).

²² According to the self-professedly crude precepts of the ethical psychology sketched in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I 13, 1102a26–32) a basic division can be drawn between rationally and irrationally motivated actions, with the latter covering actions resulting both from the appetitive and from the irascible impulses. Elsewhere, it is recommended that we identify with reason (*EN* IX 4, 1166a16–17; 1168b34–1169a3) and with the intellect (X 7, 1178a2–3).

²³ See, e.g., *Mīzān*, 209; *Maqṣad*, 44–46.

²⁴ *Iḥyā’*, 3:9.12–18; also *Ma’ārij*, 40–45; for the Muslim philosophers, cp, e.g., al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992 CE), *Kitāb al-amad ʿalā al-abad*, 92.3–4; for the equation of the angels with the separate intelligences, Avicenna, *al-Shifāʾ: al-Ilāhiyyāt*, bk. 10, ch. 1.

²⁵ See, e.g., *Iḥyā’*, bk. 21, 3:8.11–15; bk. 22, 3:57.28–31; for God as the ultimate reality (*al-Ḥaqq*), *Maqṣad*, 137–138.

Thus intellectual knowledge is what reveals God and His attributes; it is what allows for approximation of God and perfects faith (*Mīzān*, 331). The lower parts of the soul, meanwhile, have a place in the natural order of things in preserving our earthly existence. Ghazālī explains in his book *On Disciplining the Soul*:

Desire has been created for a purpose, and is an indispensable part of human nature. Should the desire for food cease, man would die; should the desire for sexual intercourse cease, man would die out; and should man feel no anger, he would not be able to defend himself from those things which threaten his life. While the basis (*aṣl*) of desire remains, the love of property must necessarily remain also, which encourages one to guard it. What is required is not the total extirpation of these things, but rather the restoration of their balance and moderation, which is the mean between excess and defect.

(*Iḥyā'*, bk. 22, 3:52.23–26)²⁶

So, *metriopatheia* rather than *apatheia*. The troubles begin only when these bodily desires get out of hand, as according to Ghazālī they inevitably will: for in so doing, they pervert the natural order of things. Letting one's passions rule oneself is to submit to becoming a slave – a state of inauthentic existence, because in this case one's accidents assume the place of one's essence.²⁷ The natural order of things is that the intellect ('*aql*) rule, while appetite (*shahwa*) and passion (*ghaḍab*) follow. Ghazālī likens the situation to a kingdom where both the tax-collector and the police officer (*sharīf*) are needed, but must submit to the authority of the king and his *vizier*, i.e. reason.²⁸

So what is it that drives a wedge between reason and the passions? Because the nutrition of the heart is wisdom, understanding, and the love of God, this is what its nature dictates that it seek out, and any deviation from this inclination can only bespeak a terrible affliction (bk. 22, 3:54.31–55.2 and 57.24–28). The details are obscure, perhaps deliberately so, but Ghazālī seems to want to postulate a genuinely demonic power at the opposite extreme from the rule of reason, a profoundly malicious agency that at every turn actively seeks to thwart and contravene the divine order of things. This satanic power manifests itself in those sinister whisperings (*wasāwis*) of which the Qur'ān speaks (Q. 114:4–6).

The agencies vying for influence within a single human being thus number four, all in all. The divine and satanic powers stand opposed at either end, with the appetites and passions alternately falling under the sway of one force or the other.²⁹

²⁶Translation by Tim Winter, *Al-Ghazālī: Disciplining the Soul, Refining the Character, and Curing the Sicknesses of the Heart & Breaking the Two Desires*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society 1995, 27–28, modified.

²⁷*Mīzān*, 240 (correcting the mistyped pagination); cf. *Maqṣad*, 74.7–10; *Iḥyā'*, 1:58.3–5 raises the same point in reference to a lust for instrumental goods such as riches.

²⁸*Iḥyā'*, 3:7.11–25; also *Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:19–20; *Ma'ārij*, 80–81; *Mīzān*, 235–238.

²⁹See *Iḥyā'*, 3:10.17–11.8, and cf. 3:249.16–18; a particularly colourful later description of the warring factions in the soul as the angelic and satanic is found in Mullā Ṣadrā, *Elixir of the Gnostics*, pt. 3, ch. 8.

And where are we in all of this? According to Ghazālī, it is in our activities that our true affiliation stands revealed. To cite Claud Field's translation of the *Chemistry of Happiness* one more time,

The occupation of animals is eating, sleeping and fighting; therefore, if thou art an animal, busy thyself in these things. Devils are busy in stirring up mischief, and in guile and deceit; if thou belongest to them, do their work. Angels contemplate the beauty of God, and are entirely free from animal qualities; if thou art of angelic nature, then strive towards thine origin, that thou mayest know and contemplate the Most High, and be delivered from the thralldom of lust and anger.

(*Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:15)

It is clear where our loyalties are supposed to lie; we are asked to identify with our contemplative self and to resist the temptation to identify with our animal urges (to say nothing of those devilish murmurings that tell us that our self-realisation lies in setting ourselves against the divine plan). This, and only this, can lead to any meaningful and lasting bliss.

Indentification and Annihilation

Attractive as the picture painted by Ghazālī may be, a few persistent problems remain. Firstly, there are puzzles about the intellect that are not easily resolved: learned people have disagreed as to what the definition and real nature of this intellectual principle is (*Ihyā'*, 1:83.9), for instance quarrelling over whether it is an accident or a self-standing substance (*Ihyā'*, 1:82.3–4). One would think that without some basic level of agreement on such a fundamental point, the whole theoretical edifice would threaten to topple under its own weight. Nonetheless, in the *Revivification* Ghazālī refuses to take an explicit stand on the issue, all the while insisting that the answer can only be decided on the basis of divine disclosure and therefore does not have a place in a work on practical religion. Different proposals have been advanced in order to explain Ghazālī's reticence to take a stand on this point, ranging from sincere indecision to wilful obscurity and blatant misdirection: the emerging scholarly consensus is that Ghazālī's philosophical psychology is more Avicennian and dualist than he is willing to let on.³⁰ The most serious accusation that this raises has to do with the question of likening the divine with some aspect of creation (*shirk, tashbīh*), a mortal sin according to Islamic law and yet something that Ghazālī's theory of cognisance of the divine seems to require. Does Ghazālī's theory of a higher, intellectual self that is able to associate with the lordly require a robust theory of divinisation? Ghazālī certainly does not shy away from using the term (see *Ihyā'*, 3:9.19–21 and *Maqṣad*, 65).

³⁰For a careful setting of the problem that comes down on the "esotericist" side of the debate see Gianotti 2001; for a differing viewpoint, e.g., Griffel 2004.

Secondly, and on a related note, if the ultimate goal of aligning oneself with the divine purpose should ever be reached, then this would seem to entail the annihilation of any individual perspective whatsoever. The problem has received a great deal of commentary from scholars working on late ancient Platonism: if true enjoyment of the intelligible world hinges upon the identity of the knower and the known – if the mirror of the soul is polished to the point of becoming entirely transparent – then who in the realisation of such a beatific vision is the “I” that does the enjoying? In the medieval period the problem famously crops up in the “Averroist” debates in Paris in the 1270s.

Admittedly, not all premodern philosophers would have greeted either one of these conclusions as altogether undesirable. Take the following concise statement by the Baghdadi Christian philosopher Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī (d. 974 CE) in his *Reformation of Morals*:

Men are a single tribe, related to one another; humanity (*al-insāniyya*) unites them. The adornment of the divine power is in all of them and in each of them, and it is the rational soul. By means of this soul, man becomes man. It is the nobler of the two parts of man, which are the soul and the body. So man in his true being is the rational soul, and it is a single substance in all men (*jawhar wāḥid fī jamī‘ al-nās*). All men in their true being are a single thing (*kullu-hum bi-l-ḥaqīqa shay‘ wāḥid*), but they are many in persons. Since their souls are one (*kānat nufusu-hum wāḥida*), and love is only in the soul, all of them must show affection for one another and love one another.³¹

Clearly in this example the notion of a hive-mind of sorts (perhaps on the lines of Averroës’ later unity of the intellect) is held out as a promise, not as a threat. When we recognise that reason unites us, then a healthy disdain for personal predilections will develop and a recognition that the interests of others are ours as well will take its place.³² The appeal to a common humanity on the basis of a shared capacity of reasoning somewhat resembles that of the Stoics.

The Sufi tradition would similarly view the loss of the self as a desirable outcome in our worldly struggles against our own bad impulses, albeit from very different motives (mainly, the desire to emphasise God’s absolute power). In this tradition the overtones of ‘surrender’ (to the will of God, that is) that are discernible in the very term *islām* were taken to indicate that faith entails giving up every notion of autonomous selfhood. Many contemporary translators and students of Islamic mysticism accordingly end up translating *nafs* as ego, and the annihilation of the self as an eradication of the same; the choice is understandable, but obscures from sight the true radicalism of the Sufi programme. Typical is the formulation of

³¹ *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, in *The Reformation of Morals. A Parallel Arabic-English Edition*, ed. S.K. Kussaim, trans. S.H. Griffith, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press 2002, 106.2–9. Ethicists in the modern era have, of course, argued for the value of an impersonal standpoint for long: for one recent example see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984.

³² See the comments on the importance of overcoming one’s irascible impulses, etc. in the continuation to the *Reformation*.

the 14th-century Indian mystic Sharāf al-Dīn Manīrī in the 37th of his *Hundred Letters (Maktubat-i Sadi)*. According to Manīrī, the only thing standing between us and God is our *nafs*, so that when the seeker “engages in austerities and struggle with self and turns away from following his selfish inclinations, he emerges from the veil of his ego. Then there occurs revelation upon revelation, vision upon vision[...].”³³ In Ghazālī’s analysis, too, dominion consists in exercising dominance over one’s enemies: one’s foremost enemy is one’s self, which is between one’s two flanks (*Maqṣad*, 86.11–12). Becoming angelic means divesting one’s human attributes (*al-ṣifāt al-bashariyya*) altogether.³⁴ One must be freed of oneself (*yuslam min nafsi-hi: Maqṣad*, 74.10–11) if one is to achieve authentic existence as part of the intelligible domain.

Indicative of the way that the two traditions – the intellectualist and the Sufi – meld in the later Islamic tradition is Mullā Ṣadrā’s (d. 1640 CE) appropriation of the thought of the Andalusian mystic Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240 CE). Mullā Ṣadrā in his *Elixir of the Gnostics* urges his reader to embark on a journey of self-discovery, and for the greater part prescribes an Aristotelian/Platonist programme in plotting its course; yet when it comes to describing the final stage on the wayfarer’s journey, Mullā Ṣadrā paradoxically reveals that this has to do with “removing from your road to Him the harm of your existence.”³⁵ The sting of this revelation is somewhat lessened once one acknowledges that one’s individual existence was illusory in the first place: all that the rational soul and human self is, is a mirror for reflecting aspects of the divine self-disclosure, not an independent reality of its own (a play on Aristotle’s contention that the material intellect is potentially all things, while actually none of them).³⁶ The point is essentially the same that Roderick Chisholm makes in a more secular setting, while commenting on the way the notion of the subject is present in the Aristotelian tradition. Our expectations of the results of introspection notwithstanding, the discovery that the perceiving subject is in essence transparent is a positive result, and genuinely informative.³⁷ This appears to be what Ghazālī is getting at when he discusses (in very allusive fashion, mind) the pregnant Islamic saying according to which God created Adam, i.e. the first archetypal human, “according to His form”.³⁸

³³ Maneri, *The Hundred Letters*, trans. P. Jackson, New York: Paulist Press 1980, 142–143.

³⁴ *Mīzān*, 210; this reproduces a theme in Miskawayh, on whom see Roxanne Marcotte, “The Role of Imagination (*mutakhayyilah*) in Ibn Miskawayh’s Theory of Prophecies”, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73(1999), 37–72, see p. 54.

³⁵ *Elixir of the Gnostics*, pt. 2, ch. 10 (§64 Chittick).

³⁶ For details see, e.g., Ibn al-‘Arabī, “Wisdom of the Heart”, in A. ‘Afīfī (ed.), *The Bezels of Wisdom: Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘arabī 2002, 119–126.

³⁷ See Roderick M. Chisholm, “On the Observability of the Self”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 30(1969), 7–21.

³⁸ See, e.g., *Mishkāt*, 21.12–22.4; the passage is a particular favourite of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s, with a large part of the *Fuṣūṣ* dedicated to its exegesis.

Struggling with the Self

We appear to have arrived at an impasse in our quest for self-knowledge. The divine self is elusive, inscrutable, and may well turn out to be entirely impersonal; the lower self, meanwhile, is indisputably *mine*, but at the same time it is mean and base and hardly worthy of attention. Where to go from here? Ghazālī's tactic, I will argue, is to make a virtue out of necessity, and this in quite the literal sense. The shift is instituted through a newfound focus on the practical intellect, a part of Aristotelian psychology to which Avicenna among Ghazālī's predecessors had paid relatively little attention, though the moralist literature coming out of Baghdad had shone some light on it.³⁹

A suitable starting point is Ghazālī's belief, central to his entire epistemological enterprise, that any disclosure of the divine reality can in the final analysis occur only through an extension of divine grace from the top down; it is not something that the human thinker can achieve merely by way of inference and willpower.⁴⁰ This effectively puts the attainment of ultimate bliss beyond human control and human achievement – a welcome result for Ghazālī, who strenuously defends the Islamic tenet that God “guides whom He wills and leads astray whom He wills.” The details of this departure from Avicennian epistemology are beyond the scope of this study, but its significance cannot be overlooked.

For all of this, there is still something we can do to help our case. The soul's ultimate happiness lies in the contemplation of the realities of things divine and unification with them, true; however, such a state cannot be attained except through subjugating the appetitive and the irascible powers, and this again requires spiritual warfare and good works (*Mīzān*, 221). While such preparation in itself is not enough, and while any preparatory work done in anticipation of the divine self-disclosure does not on its own guarantee its arrival, one may still ready oneself for God's gracious descent through a conscious effort to curb the animal impulses and to eradicate the demonic propensity for destruction and perversity (*Mīzān*, 400). Spiritual warfare – Ghazālī's celebrated larger *jihād* – is said to be the sole key to unlocking the hidden sciences, even if in the final analysis this occurs through God's grace, not through man's own efforts (*Ihyā'*, bk. 1, 1:43.20). Knowledge of God, after all, will not enter an impure heart (*Ihyā'*, 1:51.20).

Accordingly, the principal aim of Ghazālī's *Criterion of Action*, to take but one example, is to outline the practical knowledge necessary for spiritual warfare and the struggle against the passions.⁴¹ In fact, Ghazālī positions the main part of his

³⁹On Avicenna's scant remarks on ethics see Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 2nd expanded ed., Leiden: E. J. Brill 1994, 107–110.

⁴⁰This feature is noted already by Farid Jabre, *La notion de la ma'rifa chez Ghazali*, Beirut: Lettres Orientales 1958.

⁴¹See *Mīzān*, 231; such a struggle necessarily precedes any correct understanding of the spiritual realities, *Mīzān*, 399.

later authorial output squarely in the “spiritual medicine” genre of which Abū Bakr al-Rāzī’s (d. 925) *al-Ṭibb al-rūḥānī* is a prime early example.⁴² In many ways, Ghazālī’s exposition seems to be modelled directly on Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Miskawayh’s (d. 1030) earlier work *On the Refinement of Character*; another major source is Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s *Nourishment of the Hearts*.⁴³ What both these works have in common is a dynamic approach to the construction of the self. Despite occasional warnings against the unhealthy urges of the self/soul, this principle remains fundamentally malleable and subject to the control of the rational soul.

It is here that the Aristotelian notion of the practical intellect gains in prominence. According to Ghazālī the term ‘intellect’ is used equivocally of the faculties of knowledge (‘*ālīm*) and action (‘*āmil*), both of which attach to this power equally (*Mīzān*, 203). The rational soul is thus rather like the god Janus, inasmuch as “it has as it were two faces: one is [turned] towards the body [...] the other towards the exalted principle.”⁴⁴ And, strangely enough, whereas all that the theoretical intellect can do is patiently wait for the chance to witness the divine, the practical intellect is constantly busy in managing worldly affairs. This in fact is something Ghazālī will have learned from Avicenna: with respect to the intelligible universe, the theoretical faculty is essentially passive, whereas the practical intellect at least gets to be the active partner in relation to the body and its various powers.⁴⁵ There is something paradoxical about this, seeing as the theoretical intellect with its connection to the intelligible world is supposed to enjoy a “separate” (*mufāriq*) subsistence,⁴⁶ while the practical intellect must needs remain inextricably intertwined with the Aristotelian definition of the soul as the form of the living body, with all of its worldly attachments.⁴⁷

Another way of contrasting the theoretical and the practical intellect in Ghazālī is to point out that there does not seem to be anything particularly personal about an investigation that has at its crosshairs a definition of “essential humanity”. To the contrary, a single scholar should in principle be able to prescribe a common ideal to an audience encompassing all humankind. In a marked contrast, the obligation

⁴² See, e.g., *Iḥyā’*, 1:9.32–39; the *Chemistry of Happiness* bears the same stamp.

⁴³ The two works in the original are called *Fī tadhhīb al-akhlāq* and *Qūt al-qulūb*; see here Timothy Winter’s informative comparison (1995, lvi–lvii).

⁴⁴ *Ma’ārij*, 41.14–16; see *Mīzān*, 205; cf. Ibn Sīnā, *Avicenna’s De Anima (Arabic Text). Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā’*, ed. F. Rahman, London: Oxford University Press 1959, bk. 1, ch. 5; similarly, e.g., Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, pt. 3, ch. 10 (§56 Chittick).

⁴⁵ See *al-Shifā’*: *al-Nafs*, bk. 5, ch. 1 (202–209 in Rahman); the same interplay between active and passive is described in Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (in *Incoherence of the Philosophers* 2nd ed., trans. Michael E. Marmura, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press 2000, 181.7–15).

⁴⁶ Ghazālī in the *Revivification* makes the important observation that the heart *qua* intellect differs from the knowledge that the human being possesses: as the locus (*maḥall*) of knowledge and the receptacle for divine revelation, the heart is perceiver rather than perception itself, see *Iḥyā’*, bk. 21, 3:5.13–18.

⁴⁷ On soul as substance and soul as form see, e.g., Avicenna, *al-Shifā’*: *al-Nafs*, bk. 1, ch. 1.

to engage in spiritual warfare emerges as an intensely personal one. One's faults and failures are one's own, and even if outside counsel is welcome in this struggle, what can safely be said is that no two diagnoses and prescriptions will ever be the same.⁴⁸ The search for the human essence is common and scientifically guided, while the questioning of one's lower instincts and motivations takes on a much more individual character. Here, the particular overtakes the universal.⁴⁹

Take for instance the way in which Ghazālī treats the divine attribute of awareness in his explication of the *Beautiful Names of God*. Ghazālī first defines awareness as a subset of knowledge – the type of knowledge that attaches to the inner dimension of things, to be precise, as opposed to their external features. God is thereby said to be supremely aware, since He possesses such knowledge to the utmost degree. After such an introduction, it would seem natural for Ghazālī to play up once more his love of knowing “the realities of things” whilst explaining what the human being's share in such an attribute can be. If God's awareness is said to consist in his knowledge concerning the world He has created, then is not our awareness, too, tied to a knowledge of that same world? No!

The servant's share in this [attribute] lies in being aware of what occurs in *his* world. A servant's world in turn [consists of] his heart, his body, and those hidden things that characterise his heart: treachery, deception, preoccupation with the present life, evil intent [wrapped up in] good appearances, and the pretence of sincerity where it is lacking. These cannot be known except through extensive experience. [The experienced person will be] aware and mindful of his own self and know its [ways of] deceiving and deluding and holding out illusions: he will hold guard against himself and toil in opposition to it, assuming watch over it. Among the servants [of God], such a man deserves to be called 'aware'.

(*Maqṣad*, 112, emphasis added.)

One's dominion over one's world, by which is meant primarily one's body, resembles the Creator's dominion over the universe at large (*Ma'ārij*, 148). Recall once more also the simile involving the vizier, the tax-man, and the police officer: the boldly drawn analogy between God's world and the world of humankind reinforces the impression that it is precisely our inner life – our self-governance – that has been allotted as our primary dominion.

⁴⁸ Thus Ghazālī in his book *On Disciplining the Soul*: “Were a physician to treat all of his patients with a single medicine he would kill most of them; and so it is with the Sufī master, who, were he to charge all his aspirants with one kind of exercise, would destroy them and kill their hearts. Rather, attention should be paid to the illness of each aspirant, his circumstances, his age, his constitution, and the capacity of his body to perform such exercises, which should be prescribed on this basis” (*Iḥyā'*, bk. 22, 3:56.23–26); the translation is Tim Winter's (1995).

⁴⁹ Cp. Aristotle, *Met.* I 1, 981a13–20, where it is laid down as a rule that the job of the physician is not to heal “man, but [...] Callias or Socrates or some other called by some such individual name.”

Mirrors and Masks

This brings us to a few observations regarding the relation between the solitary self and the societal one. The *Revivification* was written primarily with the individual in mind who had come to recognise a void in his or her own spiritual life, much like Ghazālī himself had done some ten years previous.⁵⁰ Would he then greet the eager wayfarer with the exhortation: “Healer, heal thyself?” Evidently not: in fact, Ghazālī’s recipes for finding out what state one’s soul is in invariably involve other people, the testimony of friends and countrymen. All too often we are blind to our own faults.⁵¹ The preferable thing to do, Ghazālī says as a good Sufi should, is to find a reliable master or Shaykh: however, these are few and far between. (*Ihyā’*, 3:59.1–3) The second option is to find a good friend, one who will not hesitate to point out one’s weaknesses; the potential pitfall is that friends are often soft-hearted and willing to think only the best of us (3:59.4–22). It is because of this that one’s enemies are a particularly valuable sort of friend in this sort of situation. People who routinely assume the worst of us more often hit the mark than not; therefore “keeping one’s friends close, but enemies closer” is a dictum that could find use in areas besides politics (3:59.23–26). Finally, Ghazālī reminds us that it is good for us to mingle among people in general and to learn from each other’s foibles, weaknesses, and subtle personality quirks. As the Prophet had reminded his people, “The believers are mirrors for one another” (3:59.27–30). The mirroring relation is an unmistakably Platonic theme, although here again the source is likely to be pseudo-Aristotelian – this time, the *Treatise of the Apple*.⁵²

Why, though, should outside evidence be given preponderance in determining our spiritual state? We may here glance back at where we first began. It is in our actions that our character stands revealed, Ghazālī has told us: there simply is no better witness to our state – certainly not any internal monologue, which according to Ghazālī is always prone to delusional and defensive editorialising anyway. In fact, Ghazālī holds that God and one’s self are alike in that both are best observed indirectly:⁵³ just as God can be seen everywhere and nowhere,

⁵⁰On these developments see the remarks made in the *Munqidh* under the “Sufism” chapter.

⁵¹*Ihyā’*, bk. 22, 3:58.33–36, following the Gospel of Matthew 7:3.

⁵²The *Treatise of the Apple* purports to describe a deathbed dialogue between the philosopher and Simmias. Wisdom is achieved through the spirit, which is to say the immaterial, so a first requisite of wisdom is knowledge of self or soul (*nafs*). This is attained first through fortification, i.e. improvement of character, which again is achieved through letting others describe one’s self for oneself. The same way that the ill must consult physicians and the blind must have their complexion described to them by their companions, we need to have our condition outlined for us by our fellow human beings – preferably, other seekers after wisdom. For an English translation of the Arabic *De pomo* see Chittick 2001, 106.

⁵³There is ample ancient precedent to the notion that the soul, like God, cannot be perceived directly: both manifest themselves in works and in the orderliness of the *kosmoi* that form their respective domains of influence. For rich documentation spanning the philosophical literature, Philo, and the Greek Fathers see Philip Lyndon Reynolds, “The Essence, Power and Presence of God: Fragments of the History of an Idea, from Neopythagoreanism to Peter Abelard”, in Haijo J. Westra (ed.), *From Athens to Chartres*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1992, 351–380, pp. 351–362.

The intention (*ma'nā*) by which a human being is a human being is both evident and obscure. It is evident when inferred from his orderly and wise actions; it is obscure when sought by what the senses perceive. [...] This quiddity is obscured from the senses, but evident to the intellect by way of inferring it from what [a human being] achieves and how he acts.

(*Maqṣad*, 149–150)

The plain reading here, of course, is that the true self (the untainted rational soul) cannot be perceived by the outer senses but only by something structurally similar, *viz.* another intellect. And this is quite right; this is indeed what we are meant to infer. But I would suggest that more is going on in the text. Take note of Ghazālī's chosen examples: it is by observing a person's *actions* over a sustained period of time that we affirm her or his humanity. If someone consistently acts in an orderly and wise manner, we may conclude that we are dealing with a human being – clearly here a normative notion: conversely, bestial or destructive behaviour also reveals to us something about the perpetrator's true character, something that in the resurrection shall become evident to all.⁵⁴ And again, an outside observer is more likely to be able to cut through the thicket of thin justifications and excuses to get at the real motivating factors than is the perpetrator him- or herself.

We are what we do: among other things, this conviction grounds Ghazālī's further faith that in the afterlife, we shall each receive the fate best befitting to us. Ghazālī thus explains those visions that people sometimes have of their acquaintances being magically transformed, e.g., into dogs and pigs. What such visions disclose are intentions or meanings (*ma'ānī*) that already exist in their subjects. It is merely that in death, the material conditions that cloak such intentions fall off, revealing for all to see what such people already in fact are.⁵⁵ The same interpretive framework explains al-Ghazālī's insistence, both in the *Chemistry* and elsewhere, on judging the tree by its fruit.⁵⁶ When it comes to explaining how good acts and mortification of the soul create and enforce positive character traits – for instance, it is in constant acts of giving that the attribute of munificence is acquired (*sifa al-sakhā'*: see *Ihyā'*, 3:210.25–27) – and how, conversely, wicked actions conspire to produce wicked people, Ghazālī freely avails himself of the Aristotelian doctrine of habituation (see *Ihyā'*, 3:55 ff.). The treatise *On Disciplining the Soul*, long considered a centrepiece in the *Revivification*, in fact reads like a monotheist's guide to the *Nicomachean Ethics* in many places. Special attention is paid to the doctrine of the mean and its attendant complications; another favourite theme is how character is nothing but a condition or state (*hay'a*) of the soul-self that is particularly well-established (3:49.19).

⁵⁴With a few exceptions, al-Ghazālī advocates suspending judgement in this world concerning another person's piety or impiety, see Sherman Jackson, *The Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's Faysal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002.

⁵⁵See *Ihyā'*, 1:52.8–12; *Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:23; *Faḍā'iḥ*, 201; the apprehension of the intentional aspects of reality is an Avicennian trope, on which see Deborah L. Black, "Estimation (*wahm*) in Avicenna: The Logical and Psychological Dimensions", *Dialogue* 32(1993), 219–258.

⁵⁶Ghazālī puts it that "the fruits signify the one that grants them", *Maqṣad*, 57.15–16.

One aspect that emerges from Ghazālī's treatment of moral persons is how tentative and fragile is the harmony that any of us can achieve within ourselves. Because our different impulses really do constitute distinct autonomous forces within us, brought under one banner only in the event that one faculty manages to bring the others under its sway, uniting our theoretical beliefs with our inner states and furthermore with our actions is a constant challenge, never to be taken lightly let alone for granted (*Maqṣad*, 155.9–14; cf. *Iḥyā'*, bk. 1, 1:74.26–27). Self-identity and unity for Ghazālī are the ideal, not a presumed starting-point: if it is true that "Aristotle views psychic unity as the result of a slow process of integration which is broadly co-extensive with the acquisition of moral virtue," and if likewise for Plato personal unity is not a given but an honorific title, then he continues in a venerable line of discussion.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Much has been made over the years of al-Ghazālī's emphasis on ethics, both as regards the practical orientation of his own chief work (the *Revivification*) and his insistence on the unity of theory and practice.⁵⁸ Yet the theoretical underpinnings to this tendency have generally not been well understood. It is not enough simply to state that for al-Ghazālī, correct belief always comes accompanied by right action: it is also important to note why this is. I propose to read these remarks in light of Ghazālī's ruminations on the self and the soul.

The true self for Ghazālī can only be the human quiddity, and a naturalist analysis is enough to establish that it is (1) our capacity for reason and (2) our power of will that set us apart within the animal kingdom. The respective proofs for the existence of these two realities can be found in (1) the presence in us of an access point to a world beyond the material, and (2) a more detached viewpoint existing in relation to our worldly dealings than is afforded by the impulses of the animal passions. At the same time, Ghazālī takes quite seriously the Sufī tradition and its penchant for insisting that one's worst enemy is one's self, "what lies between one's two flanks." What is us in this second sense is what *ours*, what in this world is attributable to us: and these are more often than not the reproachable character traits and actions.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See Suzanne Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1995, 26; Mary Margaret McCabe, *Plato's Individuals*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994, 300.

⁵⁸ On theoretical and practical knowledge as the two pillars of faith see *Iḥyā'*, 1:26.27–28.23. For Ghazālī, it is a mark of the truly learned individual that one's deeds do not contradict one's professed beliefs (*Iḥyā'*, 1:64.1 ff.).

⁵⁹ There are important questions here to be raised about the way in which actions are ascribed to us (*iktisāb*), given that according to Ghazālī God is the sole true Agent in everything: but these questions will have to await a later date.

The real novelty in Ghazālī's account, at least as far as the philosophical mainstream is concerned, lies in the emphasis he places on patient, life-long observation and refinement of one's character.⁶⁰ In his book on *Vigilance and self-examination*, for example (*murāqaba wa muḥāsaba: Iḥyā'*, bk. 38), Ghazālī lays great emphasis on the need for self-rebuke (*tawbīkh al-naḥs wa mu'ātabati-hā*). Quoting from the Qur'ān, Ghazālī warns his readers that not a single soul will escape admonishment: because the straight path down the middle is thinner than a hair's breadth and sharper than a sword's edge, everyone will stumble at some point.⁶¹ No-one is exempt from the character-building exercise of repentance (*tawba*: e.g., *Iḥyā'*, bk. 31, 4:9.19–20). Furthermore, according to Ghazālī, the wayfarer's soul is ever a work in progress, with work always remaining to be done, hence the need for constant and never-ending vigilance.⁶² Such a life of constant vigilance may seem to some less than rewarding, as Ian William Miller writes of this spectacle of self-criticism:

I am never turned away at the ticket booth for a sold-out performance; I am condemned, unless alcohol or true fun intervenes to put self-consciousness to sleep, to play the small-town newspaper critic to my own performances in a high school play, while bitterly wishing I could make a living as an author rather than as a critic.⁶³

Certainly many people with a propensity for self-doubt will sympathise. But there is something revealing about Miller's remark as well, considering that Ghazālī took real joy (or "true fun") to mean precisely such an intoxicated state as would result from another power forcefully overtaking the soul.⁶⁴ The Sufis' "taste for the divine" is the one thing that can offer respite from the yoke of one's own unhappy consciousness. Where Miller has gone wrong, I imagine Ghazālī would say, is in thinking that release consists in becoming an author rather than a critic; rather, our true contentment lies in recognising how God is the sole author of all our actions.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ What Jonathan Jacobs says of Maimonides applies equally to Ghazālī: "Virtue and even repentance do not free us of the potentiality to sin, and the obligation to examine oneself is never once and for all discharged. Likewise, sin does not exhaust our capacity for repentance and virtue, because the potential for ethically significant change is at no time exhausted. [...] This idiom of virtue and perfection is very similar to Aristotle's, but it is used to elaborate a quite different philosophical anthropology, one which reconfigures the ethical perfections and their possibility" (Jacobs, "Aristotle and Maimonides: The Ethics of Perfection and the Perfection of Ethics", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76/1(2002), 145–163, p. 163).

⁶¹ See *Iḥyā'*, bk. 22, 3:58.20–26, citing Q. 19:71.

⁶² See *Iḥyā'*, bk. 21, 3:40–42; *Mīzān*, 400–401. The one exception to this may be the prophets and the saints (see *Mīzān*, 241); but this hardly registers as an objection, as Ghazālī is always quick to remind his reader of the exclusivity of this class.

⁶³ Miller, *Faking It*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, 129.

⁶⁴ For some remarks on Ghazālī's take on divine intoxication see Kukkonen, "Ibn Ṭufayl and the Wisdom of the East: On Apprehending the Divine", in Stephen R.L. Clark and Panayiota Vassilopoulou (eds.), *Late Antique Epistemology*, London: Macmillan, 2008 (forthcoming).

⁶⁵ The first half of Ghazālī's *Book of Unity and Trust* (bk. 35 of the *Iḥyā'*) is devoted to the subject.

Where this is not possible, we must resign ourselves to the fact that we are neither pure angels nor simple beasts, but something forever suspended in between.⁶⁶

Appendix

In this essay I have tried to show how Ghazālī employs a two-pronged approach in interpreting the Delphic maxim, filtered through the traditions related to the Prophet. On the one side we have the mystery of the heart when viewed as a link to the intelligible universe; on the other, the self as a source of all that can go wrong in one's relation to the universe (indeed, all that can go wrong in the universe as a whole: animals, lacking will, never consciously contravene the divine plan, after all). But Ghazālī is often equally as interesting for the paths he chooses not to take. Most crucially, I have not found in Ghazālī's major works any extensive use of the argument from self-awareness so characteristic of Suhrawardī and the later Illuminationist tradition. The treatise called the *Jerusalem Ascent* does put forward an early version of the argument, essentially similar to the one that is found in Avicenna; and though the treatise's authorship has traditionally been disputed, I have in this essay treated it as authentic and therefore would be remiss not to mention the argument as well.

Very briefly, this begins from the self-evident nature of our role and existence as cognising subjects: it is something whose truth cannot escape any rational observer.⁶⁷ "Even while asleep you will not be ignorant of your being or your reality",⁶⁸ al-Ghazālī contends: the reason is that even dreams, which assuredly are not in one's conscious control, will nonetheless be identified as one's own dreams after the fact. What this points to is a notion of the self as something akin to a logical subject, a principle to which all these various properties, beliefs, and functions are attributed but of which little else is otherwise known. The unity of the soul that undergoes all these different states is something that simply has to be assumed, even if it eternally escapes the spectator's gaze: otherwise it would be impossible to make sense of such sentence constructions as for instance "I saw this bread and became hungry, then when I saw it being snatched away I got angry instead." The brand of self-awareness that this entails is immediate, since it does not depend on sense-perception; in the case of intellection, "its quiddity is equal to its cognition,

⁶⁶ Compare this with Pascal, according to whom "man is neither angel nor beast; and the misfortune is that he who would act the angel acts the beast" (*Pensées*, §358).

⁶⁷ Cp. *Kīmīyā-yi*, 1:16: the existence of the reality of the heart is so self-evident (*zāhir*) that not a single human being is given over to doubts about her or his own existence.

⁶⁸ 'anniyatu-ka wa-ḥaqīqatu-ka: *Ma'ārij*, 18 (correcting an obvious typographical error). *Anniyya* could denote existence as well as being or essence (See Marie-Therese d'Alverny, "Anniyya-Annitas", in *Mélanges offerts à E. Gilson*, Paris: J. Vrin 1959, 59–91); here I have chosen the middle term as the most neutral interpretation.

and its cognition to its quiddity” (*Ma‘ārij*, 19). Clearly these comments find inspiration in Avicenna’s so-called “flying man” argument, especially its more developed versions;⁶⁹ equally as clearly, the purpose of al-Ghazālī’s ruminations is to provide the main fruits of Avicenna’s labours without going to the metaphysical intricacies of the philosopher’s mature work. Much further study would be needed in order to put this minimal sketch in context, either in relation to its sources in Avicenna or its possible afterlife among the Illuminationist philosophers.⁷⁰

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⁶⁹ For Avicenna’s flying man see, e.g., *al-Shifā’*: *al-Nafs*, ed. Rahman 15–16; *al-Ishārāt wa al-tanbīhāt*, ed. S. Dunyā, Cairo, 4 vols., 1960–1968, 2:343–344; for comments and analysis, most recently by Jari Kaukua, *Avicenna on Subjectivity*, Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä 2007.

⁷⁰ The research for this article was completed during my tenure as the Canada Research Chair in the Aristotelian Tradition. The CRC Programme’s role in enabling this work is hereby gratefully acknowledged.