

# AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S UNSPEAKABLE DOCTRINE OF THE SOUL

*Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology  
of the Iḥyā'*

BY

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## CHAPTER TWO

### AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S DOGMATIC/THEOLOGICAL (*KALĀMĪ*) FORMULATION OF THE SOUL

In spite of what we have seen in the previous chapter, it is often argued that, if we wish to know al-Ghazālī's true personal position on any number of religious topics, we must turn to works written with the intention of affirming and explaining proper doctrine, the "doctrine of Truth" as al-Ghazālī himself calls it. Indeed, such a work is even promised in the *Tahāfut*, which names the anticipated treatise *Qawā'id al-'aqā'id*.

As for the affirmation of the doctrine of the Truth, we will compose a book about it after a period of rest from this [current work], if God wills that success [be granted] to assist [us]. We will name it *Qawā'id al-'aqā'id*, and in it we will concern ourselves with the establishment [of right doctrine], just as we have concerned ourselves in this book with the demolition [of heretical doctrine]. And God knows best.<sup>1</sup>

While this investigation will take us into the realm of dogmatic theology or the *kalām*, it still may raise some questions or reveal some positions that will serve our search for some self-disclosure concerning the true nature of the human soul. In addition, a thorough exposure to his dogmatic theological discussions of the soul and the Afterlife will assist us in piecing together at least one part of the puzzle facing us. For these reasons, then, we turn to the *Qawā'id al-'aqā'id*, being the second book of the *Ihyā'*, and also to *al-Iqtisād fī 'l-ʿitiqād*, which is an earlier but more detailed and more advanced version of the *Qawā'id*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in his *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī uṣūl al-dīn* al-Ghazālī extolls the *Iqtisād* as being "more eloquent in analysis and

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<sup>1</sup> *Tahāfut*, 80.

<sup>2</sup> Although book two of the *Ihyā'* bears the exact title promised in the *Tahāfut*, some see this promise better fulfilled by *al-Iqtisād fī 'l-ʿitiqād*, which is regarded by some as a companion to the *Tahāfut*, composed while Abū Ḥāmid was still teaching at the Niẓāmīya in Baghdad. To corroborate this theory, Marmura points out that al-Ghazālī states in the *Iqtisād* that the aim of the work is precisely "*qawā'id al-'aqā'id*"—thus fulfilling the spirit of the promise rather than the letter. See Marmura, "Bodily Resurrection," 50–1.

closer to knocking on the doors of gnosis (*al-ma'rifa*) than the official *kalām* one finds in the books of the *mutakallimūn*.<sup>3</sup> Due to the importance and complementarity of both works, then, we will consider them together here.

Turning briefly again to the *Tahāfut*, specifically to the beginning of his second preface, al-Ghazālī writes that one of the ways in which “the philosophers” differ from their counterparts (i.e., the dogmatic theologians) is in “sheer terminology” (*lafz mujarrad*).

Such as their calling the Fashioner of the universe (be He exalted)—according to their discourse—a *jawhar*. [This is] in light of their understanding that the *jawhar* is the existent not inhering in a substrate (*lā fī māwḍūʿ*), that is, the self-sufficient [existent] having no need of a formative agent (*muqawwim*) to establish it (*yuqawwimuhu*). They do not intend by “*jawhar*” that which occupies space (*mutahayyiz*), as is intended by their opponents.<sup>4</sup>

While our substantive treatment of the *Tahāfut* awaits us in the next chapter, this statement is instructive here for two reasons: first, it shows that there is a general problem of equivocity surrounding the term *jawhar* (“substance” or “atom”) in the fields of medieval Islamic philosophy and theology;<sup>5</sup> second, it reveals that al-Ghazālī’s own understanding of the term, insofar as he can be counted among the opponents of the philosophers, explicitly ties spatiality (and thus materiality) to the term. This proves to be an essential yet problematic point as we proceed to examine his dogmatic theological treatments of the nature of the human soul.

His theological psychology begins with a speculative explication of the entire created universe, which, by definition, must include the human soul and everything else that is other than God. Simply put, in the idiom of the Ashʿarī *mutakallimūn* (among others), the created world reduces to atoms, bodies, and accidents. In the first of the four main points (*aqṭāb*) of the *Iqtisād*, he writes,

<sup>3</sup> (Cairo: Maktabat al-jundī, 1964), 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Tahāfut*, 41.

<sup>5</sup> “Substance” reflects the usage of the Islamic philosophical tradition, about which al-Ghazālī is speaking in the passage cited above, while “atom” reflects the signification common within the *kalām* circles. See A. Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalām* (Leiden/NY: E.J. Brill, 1994), 55ff. Equivocity can be found even among the *mutakallimūn*, however, one example being the Muʿtazilī theologian Muʿammar (d.c. 835), an atomist who apparently held that the soul was a *jawhar*, but of a purely spiritual, non-material nature. See al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul: 1930), 331–2; see also Marmura, “Bodily Resurrection,” 51–2.

We say: belonging to the creation of every created thing is a cause, and the [entire] universe (*al-ʿālam*) is a created thing. Hence, it necessarily follows from [this] that it must have a cause. Now by “universe” we mean each and every existent other than God, and by “each and every existent other than God”—be he exalted—we mean all of the bodies and their accidents. A detailed explanation of this is that we do not doubt the principle of existence; then we know that every existent either does or does not occupy space, and we call each space-occupying thing a “singular *jawhar*” when it contains no combination [to other *jawāhir*].<sup>6</sup> When it combines with another [atom], we call it a “body”. If [the existent] does not occupy space, either its existence requires a body in which to subsist, and we call [such existents] “accidents”, or [its existence] does not require [a body], and [this] is God—be He praised and exalted.<sup>7</sup>

In order to ensure clarity, he carefully defines his terms in the ensuing pages, and here he makes it plain that, when saying that the universe is created, “all we intend through [our use of the term] ‘the universe’ now is the bodies and the *jawāhir* (atoms) only”.<sup>8</sup> Also, to avoid any misunderstanding about the spatiality of the *jawāhir*, he explains a few pages later that the *jawhar*, by necessity, is subject to motion and rest,<sup>9</sup> which are observable, spatial events. Thus, while a particular spatial specificity is not part of the essence of the *jawhar*,<sup>10</sup> spatiality is.

If one were to try to posit an immaterial soul in this theoretical context, it would have to fall under the category of accident;<sup>11</sup> alternatively, were one to argue that the soul is a single *jawhar*, it would have to be spatial and therefore material in some respect, for all *jawāhir* are space-occupying. Indeed, from this passage and the ensuing pages, he leaves no room for a third alternative, namely an immaterial soul that is separate from God and yet is, at the same time, neither a *jawhar* (occupying space) nor an accident.

This preliminary consideration of the soul in the context of what we may call his “Ashʿarī atomism”<sup>12</sup> begets many theological ques-

<sup>6</sup> “*Jawāhir*” is the Arabic “broken” plural of *jawhar*.

<sup>7</sup> *Al-Iqtisād*, 57 (Ankara edition, 24).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the theological positions mentioned in the Twentieth Discussion of the *Tahāfut*. See p. 242 and following. It is also the primary position advanced in the *Iqtisād*, as we will see shortly.

<sup>12</sup> This will be explained below.

tions: what about the angels? Are they material and hence spatial? Also, what about the human spirit that survives the body's demise and remains conscious in order to suffer the torment of the grave and to be questioned by Munkar and Nakīr? Also, what about the souls of the martyrs, which are said to be "living"—"and do not say of those who are slain in the way of God [that they are] dead; nay, they are alive, but ye perceive not."<sup>13</sup> One also is left with the puzzle of the enigmatic *āya* (42) from *sūrat al-Ẓumar* (39),

God takes the souls (*yatawaffā al-anfus*) at the time of their death, and those that have not died [He takes] during their sleep; He holds on to those upon whom death has been decreed, and He sends the others [back] until an appointed time. Surely in that are signs for people who reflect.

If the soul is an accident, subsisting in and contingent upon the living body, how can it be taken separately each night and how can it "live" to experience the post-mortem events prior to the resurrection? Likewise, if the soul is material, how can these events be possible once the matter of the person is dead and decomposing?

If this is the position truly espoused by al-Ghazālī in the *Iqtīṣād*, it is not a position free of problems, both philosophical and exegetical. There is also the inarguable fact that a change in the variable of time between the respective moments of death and resurrection poses a problem concerning the perfect and total identification of the living person (now deceased) with the resurrected person (yet to be). How can a belief in the "material soul" (theoretically subject to annihilation) or the identification of the soul with an accident inhering in the body accommodate these logical and exegetical difficulties?<sup>14</sup>

He does, toward the end of the *Iqtīṣād*, specifically in the discussion "Showing the Necessity of Believing in the Articles Conveyed by the Revealed Law" (*al-bāb al-thānī*), make an effort to clear up these concerns. Here, the respective definitions of *jawhar*, body, and accident are applied in concrete and telling ways. For example, al-Ghazālī dialectically poses to himself a question concerning the true nature of death and God's resurrecting (*al-īʿāda*) of that which has died.

<sup>13</sup> *al-Baqara* (2): 154.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the belief in an immaterial soul makes all of these difficulties any more workable. For example, how can an immaterial soul "return" to the body in the grave and experience the torture promised there? Certainly this tradition assumes some kind of spatiality and materiality in connection with the human spirit or soul. See Marmura, "Bodily Resurrection," 52.

If it were said, “so what do you say, do [both] the *jawāhir* and the accidents become annihilated and are then both restored together? Or are the accidents annihilated without the *jawāhir* [being destroyed] in which case only the accidents are then restored?” [To this] we say, “anything<sup>15</sup> is possible. In the Revealed Law there is no conclusive indication (*dalīl qāṭiʿ*) specifying one of these two possibilities. The first of the two modes (*wāḥid al-wajhayn*) is that the accidents are annihilated while the body of the person remains preserved, in the form of earth (*bi-ṣūra(t) al-turāb*), for example. It would be [the case], then, that life, color, moisture, composition, shape (*al-hayʾa*), and the collectivity of [its] accidents would cease to exist, and the meaning of their “restoration” would thus be that all these very same accidents<sup>16</sup> are returned to them [i.e., the bodies]. Or<sup>17</sup> [it could be that] replicas of them are returned to [the bodies], for, according to us, the accident does not remain.<sup>18</sup> And “life” is an accident; likewise, the existent (*al-mawjūd*) is, according to us, a different accident in every moment (*fī kullī sāʿa*). And the human being is that particular human being by virtue of his body, and he is one thing not by virtue of his accidents (for each accident that is renewed is other than the one before—*ghayr al-ākhar*). Hence, positing [God’s] restoration of the accidents is not one of the conditions for the restoration [of the individual body]. We have only mentioned this because some of the friends have been led to believe that it is impossible [for God] to restore [the exact] accidents, which is false; however, the discourse [required] for the demonstration of its futility is long, and there is no need for it in light of our purpose [in writing] this.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Ghazālī goes on to say that the second perspective on this issue of God’s restoration of the person is that “the bodies also become annihilated and are then restored through undergoing a second creation [*ex nihilo*].” When raising the related question as to how one would explain then how this “resurrected” being could be identified as the very same existent that had once been and not merely a semblance of the former existent, al-Ghazālī explains that the essence of the annihilated existent remains in God’s knowledge and there is

<sup>15</sup> The translation is literal, but the clear implication here is that “either alternative” is possible.

<sup>16</sup> All of the aforementioned accidents are individually repeated in the Arabic text. To avoid redundancy and to foster readability, then, I have slightly abridged the Arabic.

<sup>17</sup> Following the Ankara edition, we read “or” (أو) instead of “and” (و).

<sup>18</sup> According to the Ashʿarite occasionalism, accidents must be recreated in every successive moment in order for there to be any semblance of continuity in their existence. See Majid Fakhri’s *Islamic Occasionalism and its Critique by Averroës and Aquinas* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), esp. 56-82.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Iqtisād*, 233-4 (Ankara edition, 213-4).



kept in two separate parts: that which had been proper to it in terms of its existence and that which had not properly belonged to it in terms of its existence.

In the same way, al-Ghazālī explains, nonexistence (*al-'adam*) is eternally divided into that which will have existence and into that which God knows will not exist. Thus, God's restoration here means putting existence in the place of the [state of] "nonexistence", which had itself been preceded by existence.

Although there are many salient points to be highlighted in the passage cited above, both exegetical and philosophical, the first is al-Ghazālī's reluctance to go into too much speculative detail, a clear indication that his *kalām* is determined to remain within its proper confines—the consolidation and clear articulation of basic belief. Next, we might note a somewhat curious change of terminology in the very middle of the passage. In the beginning, the discussion is about accidents and *jawāhir*, and, as we follow him through the paragraph, the discussion turns to one of accidents and bodies: with no further mentioning of the *jawāhir*. This could be taken in various ways: 1) that al-Ghazālī is using the terms *jism* (body) and *jawhar* synonymously, in which case the discussion never strays from the initial question of *jawāhir* (which we must take to be contiguous) and accidents; or 2) that he naturally and unconsciously slips into discussing the *jawāhir* as they are universally found in the natural world, i.e., in various states of bodily conjunction; or 3) that he has shifted the discussion to bodies so as to avoid dealing with the more complicated and admittedly more speculative question of the fate of the *jawāhir* during and after death.

Given his efforts to distinguish between bodies and atoms earlier in the *Iqtisād*, it seems unlikely that al-Ghazālī would use two such formally distinct concepts in an equivocal way. So let us rule out the first of these possible interpretations for the time being. The second alternative is more plausible, especially in light of the fact that the *Iqtisād* is clearly written to be a popular work. If we were to pursue the third possibility, we would be led to suspect that he is being evasive about the status of the individual *jawāhir* after death. Why? This question has led some scholars to conclude that al-Ghazālī is being intentionally evasive here due to the fact that he equates the essence of the human being with a single, non-corporeal *jawhar*, an immaterial entity that has no place in the standard Ash'arī doctrine of the created world. Such a doctrine would also be at odds



with his public condemnation of the *falāsifa* and their doctrine of the immaterial rational soul, they argue.<sup>20</sup>

These questions can be puzzling, but he seems to have anticipated many of them, and so, when one takes the ensuing discussion of the *Iqtisād* into account, there seems to be very little room for such speculation about an immaterial *jawhar*. Reminding us that the *Tahāfut* was about the demolition of certain doctrines rather than the construction or putting forth of his own doctrines, al-Ghazālī briefly recalls his lengthy refutation of the philosophical doctrines:

For the sake of showing the futility of their doctrine, we went along with the presumption [that] the soul remains [after death], a soul deemed by them to be utterly non-spatial, and the presumption that the returning of [the soul's] management of the body is the same regardless of whether it is the very same body or a different body. But that is [just] a [way of] forcing upon them [something] that does not concur with what we believe.<sup>21</sup>

Further, he mentions their belief that the human being is a particular human being by virtue of his soul (*bi-ʿtibārī nafsihi*), that his occupation of space [in a body] is to be considered as an accident belonging to him, and that the person's body is only an instrument (*āla*) of the soul. He writes,

after their belief in the remaining of the soul [after death], we forced upon them the necessity of believing in [God's] restoration, i.e., the return of the soul to the management of some body. But [such] theorizing now in the analysis of this chapter [would entail] researching the spirit, the soul, life and its verities, and [our treatment of] basic dogma (*al-muʿtaqidāt*) will not bear plunging into these extreme heights concerning the intelligibles...<sup>22</sup>

Thus, there is no need in this work, he says, to delve into such theoretical issues—the very issues that his shifting away from the *jawhar* seems to raise in the *Iqtisād* passage cited above. “What we have mentioned is sufficient for the showing of the middle road in belief, for the sake of [affirming] belief in what has been conveyed by the Revealed Law”.<sup>23</sup> The questions that his theological position raises, however, remain unanswered and wait for some fuller treatment.

<sup>20</sup> In contemporary studies on al-Ghazālī, this question has been largely raised by Richard Frank. More will be said about his interpretation of al-Ghazālī below.

<sup>21</sup> *Al-Iqtisād*, 235 (Ankara edition, 215).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

A bit further into the *Iqtisād*, specifically in his explanation of the interrogation of the soul by Munkar and Nakīr, he revisits the sensitive topic of the soul after death:

As for the questioning [of the soul] by Munkar and Nakīr, it is a truth, and believing in it is obligatory according to what has been conveyed by the Revealed Law concerning it and [because of] its being possible. For that [interrogation] requires nothing from them [Munkar and Nakīr] except that they make [the dead person] understand, [either] via sound or via something other than sound, for the only thing that is required from him [i.e. the deceased] is comprehension. And understanding necessitates only [some kind of] life. But the human being does not understand with all of his body; rather, [he comprehends through] a part (*juz'*) of the inner aspect of his heart.<sup>24</sup> And the reviving of a part that can understand the interrogation and respond is [logically] possible, doable.<sup>25, 26</sup>

Acknowledging that we neither see nor hear Munkar and Nakīr, al-Ghazālī argues that no one was able to see or hear Gabriel when he appeared and spoke to the Prophet, and yet “one believing in the Revealed Law cannot deny that”.<sup>27</sup> This analogy may satisfy the dogmatic concern, but it does not answer the fundamental question of the psychology underlying this passage: what exactly is this “part of the interior aspect of the heart”? Is it material? The term he uses here—*juz'*—certainly suggests materiality,<sup>28</sup> but the context seems to deny it. And what exactly is the “interior aspect” (*bāṭin*) of the heart? Is it also material and (thus) spatial? Is this “heart” understood here to be the physical organ, or is it something else? These questions arise naturally and predictably from the passage, and so we might assume that al-Ghazālī knew they were there, waiting for resolution. However, he does not tell us any more in the *Iqtisād*.<sup>29</sup> Given what

<sup>24</sup> Much more will be said about this “part of the inner aspect” of the heart in the following chapter.

<sup>25</sup> “Able to be done” is a more formal rendering, but I think the colloquial Americanism suits the Arabic phrase perfectly, and thus I opt for this vernacular rendering.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Iqtisād*, 236–7 (Ankara edition, 217).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Among the Muʿtazilī and Ashʿarī *mutakallimūn*, the term “part” (*juz'*) is a technical term synonymous with “atom” (*jachar*). Hence, his usage of this particular term, when viewed in the light of standard *kalām* usage, gives weight to a material, atomic psychology underlying this passage. See A. Dhanani's *The Physical Theory of Kalām*, 55–62.

<sup>29</sup> He does, however, tell us more in other books, such as in his account of Munkar and Nakīr in the final book of the *Ihyā'*, the *Kitāb dhikr al-mawt wa mā ba'dahu*

he has explained of the created world prior to this, we must assume then that this “part” is material and space-occupying in some way, for he does not treat it as an accident inhering in the body.

His use of the term “heart” in this context is curious and somewhat problematic, for it does not belong to the technical lexicon of Ash‘arī *kalām*. Rather, this term predominates in his mystical writings, to which we will turn in the fourth chapter, and seems to be out of place here, where it does little but add to the questions arising from the passage.

In *al-Risāla al-qudsīya*, which was written several years after al-Ghazālī’s departure from Baghdad,<sup>30</sup> and yet was considered by al-Ghazālī himself to be simpler and more popular than the *Iqtisād*,<sup>31</sup> there is little indication that al-Ghazālī made any significant departures from what we have already seen. As this work is woven into fabric of the *Kitāb Qawā‘id al-‘aqā‘id*, the second book of the *Ihyā’*, there is no need to treat it separately.

The *Qawā‘id* was assembled well after both the *Iqtisād* and the *Risāla* were composed, and, although we can therefore factor in a temporal shift, we find al-Ghazālī’s treatment of the *jawhar* to remain unchanged. Indeed, there seems to be nothing left to fuel any lingering suspicions of an immaterial soul—at least as far as his *kalām* is concerned. Here, as in the *Tahāfut* and the *Iqtisād*, an explicit and necessary connection between the *jawhar* and spatiality is struck, and this point is made in several places.

For example, in the third chapter, specifically in his commentary on the ten principles entailed in the knowledge of God’s essence, he says that

The fourth principle is the knowledge that He—be He exalted—is in no way a *jawhar* [thus] occupying space; on the contrary, exalted and sanctified is He above any connection with spatiality. The demonstration/proof of this is that every *jawhar* occupies space and is characterized by its spatial limits (*biḥayyizihī*), in which it must be either

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(vol. VI, esp. p. 143). We do not count this, however, as part of his *kalām* discourse, and so we treat it in the next chapter.

<sup>30</sup> See George F. Hourani, “A Revised Chronology of Ghazālī’s Writings” in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 104, no. 2 (April-June, 1984), 289–304.

<sup>31</sup> See his ranking of the dogmatic works in *Jawāhir al-Qur‘ān* (Beirut: Dār al-āfāq al-jadīda, 1988), 21. The *Iqtisād* seems to be the most sophisticated of these works in his eyes; however, although the *Qawā‘id* contains the contents of the simpler *Risāla*, it stands as being second only to the *Iqtisād* in complexity and detail.

resting or from which it must be moving; thus it is never free of some movement or rest, both of which are created [states]. And that which is not free of created phenomena must itself be a created phenomenon. Were a *jawhar* [thus] occupying space to be conceived as an eternal thing, the eternity of the universe's *jawāhir* would be thinkable. If one called Him by the term "*jawhar*" without intending by it "something occupying space" he would be mistaken as far as his terminology goes but not in his meaning.<sup>32</sup>

He continues to explain the necessary conclusion of this principle: that God can in no way be a body, because bodies are composed (*mu'allaf*)<sup>33</sup> of atoms (*jawāhir*), which we have seen already to be bound by spatiality. In addition, he explains that

it is impossible for the *jawhar* to be free of separation [from one another], combination, motion, rest, shape, and measure; and [each] of these is called a created occurrence (*al-ḥudūth*). Were it permissible to believe that the Fashioner of the universe was a body, it would be permissible to believe [that] divinity belongs to the sun and the moon or something else from among the categories of bodies. So if some insolent fellow had the audacity to call Him—be He exalted—a body without intending by that the composition of *jawāhir*, that would be wrong [usage] of the name, in spite of his hitting upon [the mark in] negating the meaning of "body".<sup>34</sup>

There can be no doubt that materiality and the occupation of space are necessarily attributed to the *jawhar* in his *kalāmī* terminology. The first line of this selection seems to be in accord with one of the doctrines of al-Ash'arī: namely, that the *jawāhir* never exist in isolation from one another, for they are always in the process of adjoining themselves to one another and separating from one another. Such is the *jawhar* as we find it in nature. The import of this particular Ash'arī doctrine will make itself clear as the study unfolds.

In light of some of the questions we raised earlier in the chapter, we might ask again whether this atomic materiality applies to the whole of creation. What of the angels and the heavens? What of the soul? In his exposition of the true creed at the beginning of the *Qawā'id*, which is a part of the treatise not taken directly from the

<sup>32</sup> *Qawā'id*, 139. This accords with the *Tahāfut* passage with which we opened the chapter. See *supra*.

<sup>33</sup> This is the classic Ash'arī definition of "body". See A. Dhanani, *Physical Theory*, 136.

<sup>34</sup> *Qawā'id*, 139–40.

*Risāla*, al-Ghazālī leaves little room for doubt concerning the materiality of everything other than God:

Everything besides Him—human, jinn, angel, devil, heaven, earth, animal, plant, mineral, atom, accident, that which is perceived by the intellect and that which is sensed—is created, absolutely originated by His Power (*biqudratihi*) following a state of nonexistence. He established it in the way something that had not been anything at all is established. This is because He was, in eternity, an existent alone; none other than Him existed with Him. After that [state] He generated the creation as a manifestation of His power . . .<sup>35</sup>

In the structure of the first half of this paragraph, there is a movement from specific created beings to increasingly general categories, culminating in “atom (*jawhar*) and accident, that which is perceived [by the intellect] and that which is sensed . . .” In our interpretation of the passage, then, we understand these final categories to be all-embracing, thus summing up and magnifying the Divine *qudra*, which is the real focus of the passage. Certainly, were we to read this passage in the light of the *Iqtisād*, it would be taken for granted that “atoms and accidents” sum up the entirety of creation. The question there, i.e., in the *Iqtisād*, had pertained to the exact definition of the *jawhar*, a question that the *Qawā'id* seems not to tolerate.

Thus, in his somewhat poetic explication of the divine transcendence (*tanzīh*), al-Ghazālī writes

Surely He is in no way [associated] with a body thus having form, nor with an atom thus being delineated, measured. He does not resemble the bodies—not in measurability, nor in divisibility. And surely He is not [associated] with any atom—they do not inhere in Him—nor with any accident—they do not inhere in Him [either]. No, He does not resemble any existent, and no existent resembles Him. “There is nothing like unto Him.” Nor is He like unto anything, for He is not delineated by [any] scale, and He is not encompassed by the quarters of space . . .<sup>36</sup>

In his explication of the post-mortem interrogation by Munkar and Nakīr, he essentially repeats what he has already said in the *Iqtisād*, explaining that “one of the parts” of the individual is revived for the tasks of hearing and responding.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 152.

Some scholars, after having examined his psychological statements in the *Iqtīṣād* and other *kalām* works, have recently raised the question as to whether he was truly Ash'arī in his *kalāmī* views concerning the soul.<sup>38</sup> In order to clear up this question and to gain a sharper understanding of al-Ghazālī's dogmatic psychology, let us briefly review just what the basic Ash'arī view of the soul entails, and then, by comparing the Ash'arī doctrine to what we have seen of al-Ghazālī's statements in both the *Iqtīṣād* and the *Qawā'id*, we can perhaps shed some better light on our questions.

According to the traditional Ash'arī understanding, the term "*jawhar*" denotes "atom", which is a single, indivisible existent having volume and thus occupying space.<sup>39</sup> "Bodies," by contrast, are those things which are composite, meaning either individual atoms in a state of conjunction with/adjunction to other atoms or, alternatively, two (and only two) atoms "that are immediately adjacent or contiguous to one another".<sup>40</sup> This simple distinction, then, was somewhat complicated by a standing disagreement among the early Ash'arī masters, some (such as al-Juwaynī and his student al-Anṣārī) claiming that a single atom conjoined to another became a single body, the conjunction thus being between two atombodies, while others (such as Ibn Fūrak and al-Qushayrī) claimed that two such conjoined atoms formed together a single composite body.

In any case, in spite of this difference of opinion over the lines of demarcation between the technical terms "body" and "atom", the Ash'arī masters generally agreed that the two terms were formally distinct, that the term "body" properly denoted the presence of conjunction or combination, whereas "atom" implied the discrete, unctiguous existent. Further, they agreed that all atoms were "equal to one another in corporeity and in occupying space . . ." and thus belonged to a single class, each member being "essentially similar (*mumāthil*) to every other".<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Namely Richard Frank and Kojiro Nakamura, both of whom will be considered in the course of this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> For example, al-Juwaynī's *Irshād* qualifies the term atom as "that which occupies space". See Richard Frank's "Bodies and Atoms: the Ash'arite Analysis" in *Islamic Theology and Philosophy* (Studies in Honor of George F. Hourani), ed. Michael E. Marmura (Albany: SUNY, 1984), 40. Similarly, his *Shāmil* defines the *jawhar* as having volume (*ḥajm*). See Frank, *al-Ghazālī*, 53 (bottom)—54.

<sup>40</sup> Frank, "Bodies," p. 53.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.



Turning to the more general question of the created universe or "the world" (*al-ʿālam*) and its composition, the Ashʿarī masters agreed that by "the world" was meant all that was not God, namely atoms and accidents. Some (such as al-Juwaynī and al-Anṣārī) added "bodies" to this formal definition, though this is certainly implicit in the earlier definitions of al-Baghdādī, al-Qushayrī and others,<sup>12</sup> since "bodies" are nothing other than atoms in a particular state or modality, as we have seen above. Between the bi and tripartite definitions, then, no substantial difference is noted among them.

Thus, according to this Ashʿarī theory, the soul must needs be a *jawhar* or atom; and life is an accident that falls into a reified "state of nonexistence" upon the body's death, which is itself an annihilation or a "falling into a state of nonexistence" for the body. This total annihilation, however, does not denote a loss of individual identity, for this is preserved in the Divine knowledge, even while the individual—life and limb—is utterly annihilated. Hence, "resurrection" is God's recreation of the very same individual with the very same identity, i.e. the very same body with the very same or similar accidents, one of which is its very "life".<sup>13</sup>

From the passages we have examined, it can be seen quite clearly that al-Ghazālī's dogmatic works employ the technical terminology of the *kalām* very much in accordance with the traditional Ashʿarī usage. This is particularly true in the case of the *jawhar*.

An opposing view is that, although it is not disputed that al-Ghazālī was trained as an Ashʿarī *mutakallim*<sup>14</sup> (among other things) and was widely regarded as such, the extent to which his personal doctrine of created beings followed that of the Ashʿarī school is suspect.<sup>15</sup> While statements in the *Iqtisād* and the *Qawāʿid* affirm that, in using the term *al-ʿālam*, he upholds the Ashʿarī position that the created world is constituted of *jawāhir*, bodies, and accidents,<sup>16</sup> i.e.,

<sup>12</sup> For the attribution of these doctrines to the individuals named, see Frank, "Bodies," 39–41.

<sup>13</sup> See Ibid., 57–9. For a more detailed exposition of this Ashʿarī doctrine, see D. Gimaret's chapter on "life" in his *La doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> And proclaimed thus by later philosophers and theologians, such as Ibn Rushd. See his *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut, 1930), esp. "Ashʿariyya" in Index A.

<sup>15</sup> See Frank, *Al-Ghazālī*, 48 and following, as well as his "Bodies," 39–53.

<sup>16</sup> The language here itself is a synthesis of closely placed statements within the *Iqtisād*. In the *Qawāʿid*, he says that "the world is made up of atoms (*jawāhir*), accidents, and bodies . . ." and that God neither resembles nor is resembled by them. See Frank, *Al-Ghazālī*, 51–2.



all that is not God, the question is raised as to whether the intentions underlying these technical terms are shared equally by al-Ghazālī and the rest of his Ash'arī *confrères*.

Most critical of these questions concerns the meaning of the term, *jawhar*. Somewhat surprising after we have read the second preface to the *Tahāfut*,<sup>47</sup> this scholarly view raises the question of equivocity in al-Ghazālī's own use of this term. For example, it is argued that nowhere in the *Iqtisād* or any other of the dogmatic works does he attribute volume (*al-ḥajm*) to the *jawhar*, this deletion being a departure from the definition of his teacher, al-Juwaynī.<sup>48</sup> And, although he does affirm that the *jawāhir* "form a single class . . ."<sup>49</sup> and that "occupying space" may properly be attributed to *jawāhir*,<sup>50</sup> it is argued that he suggests the possibility of *jawāhir* inhering in noncorporeal substrates: that is, or must be, *jawāhir* subsisting in themselves. This would account for existents that do not occupy space<sup>51</sup>—presumably existents such as angels, whose nature he refrains from elaborating upon in the *Iqtisād*. According to Frank's reading,

al-Ghazālī conspicuously avoids asserting the traditional thesis that created beings must either occupy space or reside in subjects that occupy space (*imma mutahayyizun aw-ḥallun fihi*), as does al-Juwaynī, who argues against the notion of the rational soul and the separated intelligences as beings that are not located in space (*Ikhtisār*, fol. 206r). On the contrary . . . in *Iqtisād* . . . he makes a point of eliminating "occupies space" (*mutahayyiz*) from the definition of *jawhar*, though he avoids any discussion of immaterial beings.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, while acknowledging the presence of traditional Ash'arī terms and positions in the aforementioned works, Frank argues that al-Ghazālī makes subtle departures—typically not conspicuous departures of commission but rather the more subtle departures of omission. In these passages, Frank argues, while al-Ghazālī clearly affirms that a *jawhar* can occupy space, he does not explicitly deny that a *jawhar* may also belong to that class of existents that do not occupy space,

<sup>47</sup> See the citation at the very beginning of the chapter, where al-Ghazālī addresses the problem of equivocation in the theological and philosophical uses of the term.

<sup>48</sup> See Frank, *Al-Ghazālī*, 53. The possibility that al-Ghazālī might deem *ḥajm* redundant and thus unnecessary (given his use of *mutahayyiz*) is not considered in this analysis.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 55.

a class that would presumably include the angelic ranks. In short, Frank argues that al-Ghazālī seems here to leave the door open to at least two classes or modalities of *jawāhir*, the material and the immaterial.<sup>53</sup>

Reading other non-*kalām* texts into this ambiguity or intentional equivocation, Frank is tempted to associate this inferred “immaterial atom” with the rational soul or “heart” treated more extensively by al-Ghazālī in later, mystically-oriented texts that espouse the “heart” as their predominant psychological idiom. Having carefully examined in the first chapter the various genres employed by al-Ghazālī and the respective ends for which each is suited, we are reluctant to follow Frank’s argument across the boundaries of genre, clear boundaries that al-Ghazālī himself has set, lest we confuse genre-specific statements from one group of texts with genre-specific statements in another group. This does not wholly discount Frank’s hypothesis, but it does slow it down, cautioning against a reading that pays no heed to context or genre.

Even if we were to step out of our carefully drawn parameters for a moment and follow Frank to consider this possibility, it would raise questions rather than resolve them. For example, what would be the nature of the conjunction (*al-ijtimāʿ*) between such a single, immaterial, self-subsisting atom and the human body? And, in light of this conjunction, would we then be forced to call it a body (i.e., atombody) by virtue of this conjunction? And, if so, would it then go from being a body to being a self-subsisting immaterial substance upon its separation from the body at death and/or sleep?

We must remember that al-Ghazālī admittedly wrote the *kalām* works to consolidate, strengthen, and protect standard Sunni beliefs.<sup>54</sup> They were not written to explore in minute detail points of speculative interest or controversy, an abuse of the *kalām* that al-Ghazālī criticizes in the *Book of Knowledge* and other works; indeed, he often cuts potentially complicated discussions short, saying that his purpose is not to indulge in extensive speculation or research. Our read-

<sup>53</sup> This hypothesis would link al-Ghazālī with earlier figures, such as the Muʿtazilī Muʿammar, whom we mentioned above. As a corroboration to his theory, Frank sees al-Ghazālī’s comments in the *Miʿyār* on the use of the term “accident” by his *mutakallimūn* colleagues as possible indicators of his belief in more than one class of *jawhar*. See *al-Ghazālī*, 53 (top). More will be said of this below.

<sup>54</sup> For example, see *Qawāʿid*, 136.

ing strongly suggests that these texts leave little room for ambiguity and reveal that, at least as far as his *kalāmī* psychology is concerned, al-Ghazālī may well be regarded as an Ash'arī, using standard Ash'arī atomism to explicate the common Sunni creed. The question of the soul's true nature he will not entertain in these works, but he does make it plain that right belief dictates that one believe in a soul that is bound by material constraints, as indeed are all created things.

Frank's reading and resulting speculation thus seem to miss the mark, to make too much of too little—building doctrines based on what al-Ghazālī does *not* say. As a counterpoint, we suggest that the absence of any attribution of volume to the *jawhar* may be due to the fact that al-Ghazālī simply thought it redundant to posit both space-occupying (*mutaḥayyiz*) and volume (*ḥajm*) in the same text, for authors often refrain from explicitly stating what is taken for granted. Such an omission can hardly be considered a significant departure from his teacher, al-Juwaynī. In any case, we are cautious to draw conclusions based on what an author does not say.

Turning to the position of Professor Nakamura, we encounter a similar tendency to overlook context and genre when examining aspects of al-Ghazālī's thought, and here we will pay particular attention to his evaluation of al-Ghazālī's theory of the soul.<sup>55</sup> Conceding that the *Iqtisād* is a perfect representative of "the atomism of traditional Ash'arism",<sup>56</sup> he invokes passages from the *Tahāfut* to cast doubt on the extent to which al-Ghazālī actually believed in the Ash'arī atomic psychology. The texts he selects from the *Tahāfut*, however, simply show that a full consideration of the (Ash'arī) atomic psychology vis-à-vis the philosophical psychology would take long and intricate argumentation, too long and too intricate for al-Ghazālī's purpose in writing the book. Nakamura himself is forced to admit that the selected texts cannot be taken "as clear evidence that al-Ghazālī was critical of atomism itself and forsook that dogma, but" he continues, "he might have felt that the theory of traditional atomism was going bankrupt".<sup>57</sup> This disjunction is more an anticipation of other, non-*kalāmī* texts than it is a reflection upon the *Tahāfut*. And that is well, for—even if we found *Tahāfut* passages that were

<sup>55</sup> See Nakamura, "Was Ghazālī an Ash'arite?", esp. 12–21.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 14.

far more compelling than the rather unpointed ones he presents—we will show in the next chapter just how unreliable the *Tahāfut* is as an example of al-Ghazālī's true position on anything.

This final point holds for the one statement in the *Tahāfut* that expresses an openness to the philosophers' belief in "the soul's being a self-subsistent substance",<sup>58</sup> a statement that Nakamura rightly notes is ruled out by a subsequent statement in the *Iqtīṣād*. Nakamura goes on to raise one of the central questions of our own study: namely, whether or not the *Iqtīṣād* truly reflects al-Ghazālī's personal position on the nature of the soul. He is right to note the tension between the *kalāmī* and non-*kalāmī* texts within al-Ghazālī's corpus, but whether or not he resolves it correctly is a question that we cannot answer in this chapter, for it will depend upon a careful weighing of several texts from a different genre, texts that will be considered in the fourth and fifth chapters. Still, it is helpful and relevant to include his hypothesis here, so that we may bear it in mind as we journey forward.

In short, Nakamura follows Ibn Ṭufayl's lead and accuses al-Ghazālī of upholding a double or two-faced confession in the case of the soul's true nature: one official (Ash'arī) atomic confession for the general public and a private (philosophical) confession that he saved exclusively for the elite. Comparing al-Ghazālī's psychological stance to his theory of "optimism" in this respect, Nakamura writes,

The teachings expressed in the *Iqtīṣād* seem to be his official viewpoint as an orthodox theologian on behalf of the common people and the theologians . . . we may conclude that Ghazālī had two standpoints from a fairly early period: one was the official view of Ash'arism and the other was the teachings for the elite (for example, physical and sensuous pleasures and pains in the Hereafter belong to the former, and intellectual and spiritual joys and griefs to the latter, in contrast to the philosophers who deny bodily resurrection). That is to say, Ghazālī officially supports the traditional Ash'arite view of the soul, while he is inclined privately or unofficially to the philosophical view of the soul (though not in philosophical terms) . . .<sup>59</sup>

He seals his argument with the suggestion that this second, elite, unofficial, philosophical psychology is none other than that of Ibn Sīnā,

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 15–16.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 16.

as articulated in his "*Risāla fī ma'rifa(t) al-nafs al-nāṭiqā wa-aḥwālī-ha*"<sup>60</sup> among other places. Nakamura thus suggests that the only real difference between the two thinkers, on a private level, is a difference of terms.<sup>61</sup> In other words, while al-Ghazālī's psychological positions continue to be articulated in Ash'arī technical terms, the meanings or intentions of these terms may have shifted from the standard Ash'arī materialist meanings to non-standard definitions that conform to the immaterial psychological and eschatological positions of Ibn Sīnā. While al-Ghazālī cannot be shown to have adopted the philosophical terminology, Nakamura suggests that his adoption of the Avicennian positions was complete.

Although a detailed consideration of Ibn Sīnā's psychological and eschatological theories fall outside the scope of this study, we will give serious attention to al-Ghazālī's understanding and refutation of Ibn Sīnā's positions on the soul and the afterlife in very next chapter. For the time being, we can neither affirm nor dispute Nakamura's reading of non-conventional meanings within conventional terms, but we are wise to bear it in mind as we proceed.

At least as far as the face-value of al-Ghazālī's *kalām* is concerned, we seem to have won some clarity: al-Ghazālī upholds the traditional Ash'arī atomic model—not just for the soul, but for the entire created universe, including the soul.<sup>62</sup> On this point, we are in agreement with Prof. Nakamura. One might think, then, that our riddle is on its way to being solved. Our investigation of these dogmatic texts, however, has done little more than return us to the beginning, for we must remember that al-Ghazālī himself cautions his reader against overstepping the limits of any science. And the science of *kalām*, he says, while being useful for disputing heretics and for confirming basic belief, has nothing to do with the investigation of the true natures of things. Again, in *the Book of Knowledge*, he writes

<sup>60</sup> Taken from his *Aḥwāl al-nafs* (Cairo: 'isā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1952), p. 183.

<sup>61</sup> Nakamura, 19–20.

<sup>62</sup> Indeed, there are many other areas in which his "Ash'arism" can be seen, if by Ash'arism we mean a theological (*kalām*-based) adherence to the doctrines of occasionalist causality, *kash*, the creation of the universe (in time) ex-nihilo, the reality of "seeing" God, and the belief that the Divine attributes are additional to the Divine essence. These, in addition to his unwavering advocacy for the other traditional articles of faith and the requirements of the Revealed Law, suggest a *general* yet strong affiliation with the "school" of the Ash'arīya, especially in relation to his *kalām* writings. Such an affiliation would never preclude the presence of unique

As for *al-kalām*, its purpose is the protection of the articles of faith, which have been passed down by the people of the *Sunna* from among the righteous forbears—and no others. Anything beyond that [in the *kalām*] is seeking to unveil the true natures of things (*kashf haqā'iq al-ashyā'*) in an improper way (*min ghayr tarīqihā*). The purpose of safeguarding the *Sunna* is to attain, through a concise belief, a limited degree of [*kashf*], which is the extent to which we have laid it out in the *Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id* from the entirety of this book [i.e., from the entire *Ihyā'*].<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, as we saw in the first chapter, he can be even more stern when it comes to putting the practitioners of the *kalām* in their place:

Of religion, the theologian (*al-mutakallim*) has nothing save the creed that he shares with the rest of the common people, [the] creed which belongs to the actions external to the heart and the tongue. He only is distinguished from the common person through the craft of argumentation and protection.

As for the [servant's] gnosis (*ma'rifa*) of God—be He exalted—and His attributes and acts and all to which we point in the knowledge of the Unveiling, it is not attainable through the science of *kalām*. On the contrary, *al-kalām* is almost a veil [draped] over it and a barrier [keeping one] away from it. Rather its attainment is by way of concerted striving [in the way of God] which God—be He magnified—has made a preliminary to guidance inasmuch as He—be He exalted—said, “and those who strive for Us, We will surely guide them in Our ways. Surely God is with those who work righteousness” [29:69].<sup>64</sup>

Thus, from his own admission it would follow that searching the dogmatic works for esoteric truth is a futile exercise, for *al-kalām* is a totally inappropriate forum for such investigations. Indeed, we must begin our investigation again on more fertile soil, where the true natures of things may be discussed, albeit sometimes in a way that withholds more than it reveals. After examining his critique of the

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insights, formulations, and other novel non-*kalāmī* features present within his corpus, particularly in works of a non-*kalāmī* nature. This holds for many of the Ash'arīya, both before and after him, who were theologians and thinkers in their own right and not merely uncritical vessels of al-Ash'arī's teachings. If, however, we were to define the term more narrowly as a *kalām* “school” committed to the speculative explication and development of the creed, a project that al-Ghazālī censures as an abuse and misuse of *al-kalām*, then we would have to count him out.

<sup>63</sup> *Al-'ilm*, 55.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

philosophical formulations of the soul and the Afterlife, we will turn to works that employ the “heart” as their primary psychological idiom, a shift of terms that signals a shift of genre, from common belief and the venture of philosophy to the experiential knowledge of the Unveiling.