

Receptive to Reality: Al-Ghazālī on the Structure of the Soul

Taneli Kukkonen

University of Otago and University of Jyväskylä

A part from his views on causality, few things in the study of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1056–1111) have incited as much controversy as his understanding of the human soul. The spectrum of available interpretations runs the gamut from a materialist and *kalāmī* take on Ghazālī's psychology, through an understanding that allows for a philosophical influence but seeks to limit its impact, all the way to a fully Avicennian reading. Any proposed solution is instantaneously rendered contentious by the way Ghazālī's vocabulary, focus, and style of presentation vary from treatise to treatise: in some instances Ghazālī's formulations inch very close to *falsafī* territory, while in others he gives the impression of wishing to remain within the ambit of Sufi or *kalāmī* analyses and the attendant terminology. This has led to charges of incoherence from some quarters, while others have suspected Ghazālī of disingenuity and dissimulation—it is hard to say which camp is more unkind. A third school of thought, meanwhile, posits that any perceived discrepancies in either thought or expression must lead to the rejection of at least some of the offending texts as spurious.¹

The most comprehensive review of the materials so far has been made by Timothy Gianotti, who in his doctoral dissertation and subsequent monograph collates many of those pertinent texts that without a question come from Ghazālī's own hand.² Steering clear of the many psychological works whose authorship is contested has the indisputable advantage of allowing one to sidestep the often circular arguments that accompany

¹ Thus most famously Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975); W. M. Watt advocated a similar approach when it comes to the *Mizān al-'amal* (*Criterion of Action*) in, e.g., "The Authenticity of the Works Attributed to al-Ghazālī," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1952): 24–45.

² Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazālī's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul: Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology of the Iḥyā'* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001). This article was completed before the publication of Alexander Treiger's important new study, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought. Al-Ghazālī's Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennian Foundation* (London: Routledge, 2011); I note here only that Treiger's principal findings appear to concur with mine, leaving full dialogue with the work for a later occasion.

the reception of a complex and problematic body of texts. As Gianotti's study makes plain, however, even sticking to the safe core of Ghazālī's texts—Gianotti barely steps outside the ambit of the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* and the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*—does not wholly shield one from serious puzzles and problems. Somewhat short on analysis, Gianotti's preferred approach is to invoke the trope of esoteric/exoteric learning. In Gianotti's view, Ghazālī purposely leaves things unsaid for fear of their unorthodox implications, or because not everybody is adequately equipped to handle such unconventional and potentially unsettling knowledge.

Any reader of Ghazālī will have to make peace with Ghazālī's shifting terminology and his occasional habit of speaking in hints and allusions. But I tend to think that the esoteric/exoteric distinction raises more problems than it solves, and accordingly shall pursue a different line of investigation in this article. By pointing out some features in Ghazālī's mature ontology that guide his psychological views, I hope to cut through some of the thicket and to pinpoint some facets of his doctrine that are to him indispensable. The most pertinent of these is his theory of worlds within worlds: the domains of *mulk* and *malakūt*, the visible kingdom and the invisible dominion, hold a central place in explaining the way the world takes shape, just as they determine the placement of humankind's origin and destination (*mabda' wa-ma'ād*) within this grand design. Whatever Ghazālī's psychological convictions, these have to find their place within this larger cosmological framework and, as it turns out, this makes of his psychology a relatively straightforward business after all. What this approach additionally does is point to some of the real problems Ghazālī has with the Avicennian psychology he so obviously appropriates. These problems, I submit, have less to do with the ontology of the rational soul than they have with questions of ontology as such. It is Ghazālī's view of the reality of things, of their true natures (*ḥaqā'iq al-ashyā'*), that renders the Avicennian picture ultimately unsatisfactory to him.

Worlds within Worlds

As regards Ghazālī's attitude towards the philosophical tradition, I am inclined to agree with Gianotti, Griffel, and others that the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* only has limited utility when it comes to establishing Ghazālī's own views. The primary purpose of the *Incoherence* is to undermine the reader's confidence in the rigour of the Muslim Peripatetics' reasoning and to show their inability to demonstrate the elevated claims made in their metaphysics and natural philosophy. In the case of Aristotelian psychology as developed by Ibn Sīnā, which forms the topic of the 18th through the 20th discussions of the *Incoherence*, what is denied is the philosophers' ability to demonstrate a few choice doctrines relating to the ontology of the soul: that the human soul is a spiritual and self-subsistent substance (*jawbar rūḥānī qā'im bi-nafsi-hi*), that it is neither a body nor impressed upon one, that it is necessarily eternal (*sarmadī*) and its passing away inconceivable, and that its pleasures and torments in the afterlife are only of the spiritual and not of the bodily kind. That none of these doctrines is demonstrable solely through

the use of reason leaves entirely untouched the issue of whether they might be true nonetheless or established through some other means.³

In the *Deliverer from Error* Ghazālī says that the human heart, which is the true nature of his spirit (*ḥaqīqat rūḥi-bi*) and the locus of any understanding of God (*maḥall maʿrifat Allāb*) a human being may have, is something other than the flesh and blood which we share with the beasts and the dead.⁴ Frank Griffel sees in this a clear indication that Ghazālī subscribes to the philosophical view of the rational soul as an immaterial, self-subsistent substance.⁵ Though I am ultimately sympathetic to Griffel’s point of view, as will become clear from the following essay, I really do not see Ghazālī committing to that much on the basis of this passage alone. Nor does the formulation given in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* according to which “the body is a vessel for the soul, while the soul is the locus for knowledge” manage to say anything that would not be broadly acceptable either to a *kalām* theologian, a Muslim Peripatetic, or a Sufi reader.⁶ Ghazālī’s further contention that knowledge is the aim of every human being (*maqṣūd al-insān*) and the distinguishing mark (*khāṣṣiyya*) of his creation is more substantive, but hard to parse in the immediate context; we shall have reason to return to it later.

Still, when it comes to establishing on the negative side that Ghazālī in fact holds no truck with any materialist reading of the soul, the *Deliverer* passage does square with what is said elsewhere in the *Revival*. This is helpful, insofar as it obviates the need to turn to any of the contested psychological works and their battery of familiar Avicennian arguments. Ghazālī does not engage directly with *kalām* authors; instead he heaps scorn upon the medical profession’s (*aṭibbāʾ*) habit of equating the spirit with the subtle body that is responsible for coordinating our bodily movements (*Iḥyāʾ*, 4:100.9, 4:100.25). According to Ghazālī, the spirit in this sense of the word is a paltry thing, barely worthy of attention. If the spirit is one of the Lord’s charges, as the Qurʾān indicates (Q. 17:85), then the person who approaches God through acquaintance with what the physicians call spirit is akin to one who claims to have knowledge of some king through acquaintance with the ball that the king’s polo-players shunt around a playing field (*Iḥyāʾ*, 4:101.7–15). It is not that this kind of principle could or would not also be operative in the physical workings of the human being and indeed also the animal (cf. *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:4.20–26); Ghazālī’s protest is only that investigating such a corporeal instrument brings us nowhere when it comes to establishing the reality of the centre from which issue its motions and its many tasks.

How, then, to go about such an investigation? Here is a starting point, as good as any: Ghazālī’s occasional allusions to a psychological framework in his account of his own

³ As Ghazālī himself plainly says: see *Tabāfut al-falāsifa* XX, in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. taken from M. Bouyges, tr. M. E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2nd ed. 2000), 213.19–214.2. Cf. also *Tabāfut*, 8.1–2.

⁴ *Al-munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, ed. K. Ayyād & J. Salība (Beirut, 2nd ed. 1969), 45.5–6.

⁵ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 285.

⁶ *al-badan markab li-l-naḥs, wa-l-naḥs maḥall li-l-ilm: Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2002, 5 vols.), 3:9.13.

intellectual journey in *The Deliverer from Error*. Ghazālī's fullest remarks come from a chapter dedicated to establishing the possibility of prophecy. Here, in order to prove that the inability of some to countenance prophetic visions does not render the latter inconceivable in the logical sense of the word, Ghazālī develops an extended analogy between the prophetic or holy power (*al-quwwat al-qudsiyya*) and the other faculties of the soul. The possession of an appropriate passive capacity, or receptivity, is a prerequisite for every type of apprehension, and because of this we should not be surprised to see prophecy denied by those to whom this eye, metaphorically speaking, has not been opened, in the same way that the blind are unable to comprehend the nature of visual information and are liable to deny that it describes anything real. The same line of argument is repeated with variations across Ghazālī's works:⁷ what is eye-catching about the *Deliverer's* chapter on prophecy is the way it expands into a general point about the relation between ontology and psychology.

The human substance in its original, innate nature (*jawbar al-insān fī aṣl al-fiṭra*) is created bare and innocent, with no information of God's worlds. These worlds are many and nobody but God can number them, as He says: "No-one knows the Hosts of your Lord but He." (Q. 74:31) A person receives information of the worlds by means of perception: each type of perception is created in order that one of the worlds of existents may be disclosed to him. By worlds I mean [distinct] genera of existents.⁸

Much could be said about the innate nature or *fiṭra* to which Ghazālī alludes here, but for now let it simply be noted that it is in and of itself a blank slate in that no news or report (*khabar*) has come to it regarding any of God's creation. The point will become important later on. As for what follows in the extract concerning the origins of perception, Ghazālī's argument is in line with Aristotle's remarks in *De anima* and with the Peripatetic tradition more in general. Each sense-modality exists in order to access a specific aspect of reality, one that is irreducible to the others in at least some relevant respect. Ghazālī's chosen example is that "touch falls decisively short of colours and sounds: these are as it were nonexistent according to the reality of touch". He underlines the ontological import of the distinction by calling the different realms of sense-perception by the name of worlds: in the *Revival* these get fleshed out as the world of colours, world of sounds, world of smells, etc.⁹

⁷ For examples see *Ihyā'*, 1:98.6–10, 3:8.37–9.1, 4:221.19–25, 4:271.1–2; *Misbkāt al-amwār*, ed. after Affifi, tr. D. Buchman as *The Niche of Lights* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 37.11–38.9; *al-Maqṣad al-asnāf fī sharḥ ma'āni asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. F. Shehadi (Beirut: Dār al-mashriq, 1971), 50–52, 56–58; *al-Imlā' fī ishkālāt al-iḥyā'*, printed in *Ihyā'*, 5:30.26–37.

⁸ *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, ed. Kāmil 'Ayyād & Jamīl Salība (Beirut, 2nd ed. 1969), 41.

⁹ *Ihyā'*, 3:10.1–2; types of existents (*aṣnāf al-mawjūdāt*) are evoked in the *Niche of Lights*, *Misbkāt*, 38.14; cf. also *Ihyā'*, 4:97.3–5. For a reading of Aristotle that takes a less phenomenological and more causally grounded view of sense-objects see Stephen Everson, *Aristotle on Perception* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

There then follows a developmental account of the way we come by our cognitive faculties. The senses are created first; then the capacity for discernment (*tamyīz*), whose advent Ghazālī pegs at seven years; then again the power of reasoning, otherwise known as intellection, at some unspecified age. (We may suspect fourteen or puberty, but Ghazālī does not commit to a date.)¹⁰ Even within the senses there is a hierarchy: touch is created first, likely thanks to the Peripatetic commonplace according to which touch is the one sense that is both common to and indispensable for every kind of animal.¹¹ After this there follows sight, which is perhaps curious given sight's exalted status among the senses as the most refined and wide-ranging and the one closest to abstraction. The rest of the five senses are dispensed with a hand-wave, with it being said that hearing and taste follow upon sight: the sense of smell is not even mentioned. This is in contrast to the more detailed presentation found in the *Revival*, bk. 32, where smell comes second in Ghazālī's genetic account of the senses (*Iḥyā'*, 4:96.13–29). In the latter context Ghazālī also finds Qur'ānic grounds for a staggered picture of human development in God's statement, "We have created you in stages" (Q. 71:14; see *Iḥyā'*, 4:101.1).

Arriving at the stage (*ṭawr*) of discernment, noticeable once more is Ghazālī's insistence that this has an existence (*wujūd*) distinct from the senses because the discerning subject "perceives things in addition to the sense-objects, things that have no existence in the world of sensation". Despite the ambiguity of the formulation I believe we are safe in assuming that by discernment—a term that originally carried legal rather than cognitive connotations—Ghazālī in fact means Ibn Sīnā's five so-called inner senses. Though Ghazālī makes something of a hash out of representing the inner senses in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*—his initial list is missing estimation and Ghazālī therefore has to assign variable names to various functions in order to come up with the canonical number five—Ghazālī does eventually get around to mentioning all five.¹² The *Intentions of the Philosophers* traces Ibn Sīnā's many expositions of the subject in more precise terms (as does the *Jerusalem Ascent*, a work which, however, is of contested authenticity) and so I see no reason to assume that such a conception would be missing from the background of Ghazālī's account of human psychology in the *Deliverer* as

¹⁰ Legal maturity, *bulūgh*, is mentioned in a parallel context in *Iḥyā'*, 3:8.21–22.

¹¹ Cp. *Iḥyā'*, 4:96.14–17 with Aristotle, *De anima* 2.2.413b1–9, *De anima* 2.11, *De sensu et sensato* 1.

¹² See *Iḥyā'*, 3:6.28–30, 3:8.8, 3:9.28–30 and for a separate mention of the common sense, 4:96.30. Ghazālī's presentation of the internal senses varies quite a bit, but there is precedent in Ibn Sīnā: see Harry Wolfson, "The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Philosophic Texts", reprinted in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion Volume One* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 276–282. Perhaps Ghazālī was working from different Avicennian texts at different dates, or perhaps he simply was not very interested in the details of the theory. Skellie in his translator's introduction to book XXI of the *Revival* has a useful chart: see al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart*, tr. W. J. Skellie (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), xxiv–xxv; cf. also Gotthard Strohmaier, "Avicennas Lehre von den 'inneren Sinnen' und ihre Voraussetzungen bei Galen", in *Le Opere Psicologiche di Galeno*, eds. P. Manuli & M. Vegetti (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1988), 231–242.

well.¹³ Ghazālī calls both memory and the retentive imagination a power or faculty (*quwwa*: *Iḥyā'*, 3:9.28–30), which is a singularly Peripatetic turn of phrase. Even plants are created with nutritional powers (*quwā*) identical to those of human beings.¹⁴

The objects of the internal senses for Ibn Sīnā range from the common sensibles (motion, size, etc.) to those corporeal intentions (*ma'ānī*) which allow the animal to flee intuitively any creature hostile to it.¹⁵ Within the Avicennian psychological framework the internal senses are needed to explain the animal's awareness of aspects of corporeal reality not entirely reducible to the proper objects of the five external senses and its corresponding ability to respond to such stimuli. This is all replicated in Ghazālī: what is more, in bringing up estimation and Ibn Sīnā's standard example of the sheep that instinctively flees the wolf, Ghazālī is explicit in saying that the inner senses all attach to animal life and to animal psychology.¹⁶ This implies that even though the objects of the inner senses may not belong to the "world of sensation", they still remain part of corporeal reality in all its particularity. The same goes for animal—and by extension human—awareness of rudimentary psychic states such as hunger, thirst, fear, and joy. Though these cognitions do not count as sense-perceptions, they do not belong among the intelligibles, either, precisely because animals share in them.¹⁷

This leaves the intellect and what Ghazālī in the *Deliverer* calls perceptibles of a prophetic nature (*mudrakāt al-nubuwwa*, *Munqidh*, 42.3).¹⁸ Ghazālī explains that some time after the onset of the ability to discern "the human being advances to another stage, as his intellect is created. Thus he perceives the necessary, the possible, and the impossible, as well as [other] things that did not exist in the previous stages" (*Munqidh*, 41). As the modal designators are given in the plural form (*al-wājibāt*, *al-jā'izāt*,

¹³ See *Ma'ārij al-quds fī madārij ma'rifat al-nafs* (Egypt: Al-maktabat al-tijāriyyat al-kubrā, 1963), 36–40; *Maqāsid al-falāsifa*, ed. Muḥyī al-Dīn Ṣabrī al-Kurdī (Cairo: Al-maṭba'at al-maḥmūdiyyat al-tijāriyya, 1936, 3 vols.), 3:46–48. The *Niche of Lights* (7.20–8.1) has another confused list of five internal faculties; its presentation of the "imaginal spirit" (*rūḥ kbayālī*, 36.4–14) accords in outline with what the *Deliverer* has to say.

¹⁴ *Iḥyā'*, 4:101.21–22. Cf. also *Mizān al-'amal*, ed. S. Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif al-miṣriyya, 1964), 202–203, which has yet another not-quite-identical presentation.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Ibn Sīnā, *al-sbifā': al-nafs* 1.5, ed. F. Rahman in *Avicenna's De anima* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 43–45.

¹⁶ See also *Imlā'*, in *Iḥyā'*, 5:37.20–23, where the estimative power in human beings, coming under the control of the intellect and knowledge and thus subject to *jabarūt* (cf. below) is contrasted with the spontaneous reactions of sheep; and cf. *Imlā'*, 5:38.23–34.

¹⁷ See *al-Mustasfā fī 'ilm al-uṣūl*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Salām 'Abd al-Shāfī (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2000), 36.19–22; cf. *al-Iqtisād fī al-'itqād*, eds. Ibrahim Çubukçu & H. Atay (Ankara: Nur Matbaası, 1962), 20.5–12; also *Maqṣad*, 45.16–46.4.

¹⁸ I will forego here questions concerning Ghazālī's conception of prophecy: for portrayals that are broadly sympathetic with mine see Frank Griffel, "Al-Ġazālī's Concept of Prophecy: The Introduction of Avicennan Psychology into Aš'arite Theology", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004): 101–144; M. Afifi al-Akiti, "The Three Properties of Prophethood in Certain Works of Avicenna and al-Ġazālī", in *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, eds. Jon McGinnis & David C. Reisman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 189–212.

al-mustahīlāt) there is really no room for misunderstanding: the intellect's objects are not the modal notions as such but those things, states of affairs, and/or propositions which the intellect judges to be necessary, possible, or impossible. Ghazālī's appropriation of Avicennian modal syllogistic furthermore specifies the judgements in question as being about beings and their properties; in terms of logic, what we have are propositions in which predicates are said to hold (necessarily, contingently, or absolutely) of a subject. Ghazālī therefore assumes here a modally tempered insight into the underlying rational structure of the universe.

What catches the eye here is how both the fruits of the intellect and those of the holy, prophetic spirit (*rūḥ qudsī nabawī*, *Mishkāt*, 37.7) are characterized as perceptions. Would we not rather assume that the judgements of the intellect, at least, are arrived at through syllogistic, discursive reasoning, along the lines of what is said elsewhere about the workings of the cogitative spirit (*rūḥ fikrī*) and the method of ascertainment (*ṭarīq al-i'tibār*):¹⁹

Axioms and Acquisition

Ghazālī's compressed style of presentation in the *Deliverer* in fact masks a basic distinction which he makes consistently across his other works. The intellect since its inception is endowed with certain intelligible axioms (*'aqliyyāt*) which in the opening pages of the *Deliverer* are called first principles (*awwaliyyāt*: *Munqidh*, 12.18). But it also gains further insight into the true natures of things (*ḥaqā'iq al-ashyā'*) through reasoning as well as through a more intimate form of intellectual exposure which Ghazālī labels *ma'rifa*. The latter two processes result in the acquisition of intelligibles (*ma'qūlāt*), while all three brands of knowledge can be said to pertain to intellectual realities (*ḥaqā'iq 'aqliyya: Ihyā'*, 3:8.11–15) insofar as their objects are universal and not particular, this being the crucial dividing line that separates animal from human cognition.

The distinction between axiomatic and speculative intellection follows the contours of one made in Islamic theology between necessary and acquired knowledge (*'ilm ḍarūrī*, *'ilm muktasab*).²⁰ Ghazālī makes use of the definite plural form "the necessary" (*ḍarūriyyāt*) often enough in connection with his axiomatic knowledge to make it plain that the allusion is deliberate (*Munqidh*, 13.23; cf. *Ihyā'*, 1:83.31, 3:16.14–15). The principal difference, and it is an important one, is that whereas earlier Muslim theologians had been willing to include among their candidates for axiomatic and innate knowledge (and thus necessary in the sense of "indubitable") items ranging from God's reign in heaven to one's awareness of oneself, Ghazālī purposefully limits the range of these self-evident truths to either analytic truths or the denial of one or another obvious contradiction. His favourite examples are the knowledge that ten is greater than three

¹⁹ See *Mishkāt*, 37.3–6; *Ihyā'*, 3:13.33–14.6.

²⁰ See Binyamin Abrahamov, "Necessary Knowledge in Islamic Theology", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20/1 (1993): 20–32.

and that a single thing cannot be in two places at once.²¹ The fact that Ghazālī often evokes the standard Ash‘arite example of any one thing being necessarily either eternal or originated should not be allowed to distract from the central principle: necessary knowledge for Ghazālī has to do with how all putative scientific knowledge is structured, things said *de omni et nullo*—in this instance, the principle of the excluded middle—not with pronouncing judgement on any particular point of dogma. Ghazālī’s stock examples of necessary truths include the principle that whenever the more specific is predicated, the more general is thereby also included (example: if a human being exists, an animal also exists), from which we may conclude that for him such structures even include something resembling Porphyry’s tree.²²

To the extent that it serves our present purpose, a few further features of axiomatic knowledge can be presented in outline. For Ghazālī, innate knowledge is found in all people of sound mind since childhood or youth, though perhaps not from birth.²³ It is also equally possessed by everybody in that whosoever knows one axiomatic truth, necessarily knows them all (*Iḥyā’*, 1:85.22–24). Necessary knowledge is furthermore present, as it were (*ka-annahu ḥāqīq*), since it is immediate and self-evident and since it requires no validation from outside. This contrasts with the proper intelligibles, which do not go hand in hand with the intellect (*lā yuqārinu l-‘aql*) but instead must be kindled within it, making of the latter but not the former objects of speculation (*nazarīyyāt: Mishkāt*, 9.17–10.10). This last remark I take to mean that unlike speculative or theoretical knowledge, axiomatic knowledge is not representational: it is not yet knowledge *of* anything—it has not arisen out of the reception of some outside information, the *khabar* mentioned in the *Deliverer*—at the same time that it is a condition for the knowledge of everything else. All of this is to say that necessary knowledge provides the matrix of possible relations in which objects of knowledge are to be set, even as it does not yet constitute actual knowledge of any real thing.

A more radical realignment occurs with the way Ghazālī appropriates acquired knowledge. Such knowledge, Ghazālī says on multiple occasions, is the only means of attaining proximity to God (*qurb Allāb*: see, e.g., *Iḥyā’*, 3:16.14–15); but just because of this, the three types of knowledge acquisition recognized in *kalām* will not do. Neither

²¹ *Munqidh*, 12.18–20; *Iḥyā’*, 1:83.28; *Mustasfā*, 35.20–21, 36.9–18 (where one’s knowledge of one’s own existence, which comes from al-Juwaynī, is mentioned at 36.10); *Iqtisād*, 20.13–21.4.

²² *Mishkāt*, 10.2–3; see also *Tabāfut*, 175.5–7, 175.20–176.13, and for further comments T. Kukkonen, “Possible Worlds in the *Tabāfut al-falāsifa*: Al-Ghazālī on Creation and Contingency”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38/4 (2000): 479–502.

²³ It is found *fī dbāt al-ṭīfl*, *Iḥyā’*, 1:83.27, and *mundbu l-ṣibā*, *Iḥyā’*, 3:16.6; *Mishkāt*, 36.15–37.2, however, has it that neither boy nor beast possesses the intellectual spirit (*rūḥ ‘aqlī*) or its proper perceptibles, which are the necessary universal cognitions (*ma‘ārif ḍarūriyya kulliyya*). I cannot think of an easy way to resolve the discrepancy, except to assume that the universal cognitions mentioned in the *Niche of Lights* are the actual intelligibles (but then the qualifier “necessary” seems out of place). *Iḥyā’*, 3:13.13 has it that the soul of the youth is underdeveloped and so as yet unfit for knowledge, but this could be a reference to acquired rather than innate knowledge.

the collation and assessment of second-hand reports, nor formal reasoning from accepted premises, nor the immediate evidence derived from one's own senses can win us beatitude in this life (although they may yet contribute to salvation in the next: Ghazālī toys here with the two meanings of “the other world” or *al-āk̄bira*, an expression which can mean either the transcendent dimension that underlies our reality at any and every moment or else the hereafter). On occasion Ghazālī nods in the direction of each of the three *kalāmī* sources of acquired knowledge (e.g., *Munqidh*, 40.8–14), yet his distinctive epistemological project leads him consistently to downplay their importance, if never to disavow them entirely.

(The topic as such, besides lying beyond our purview, is somewhat beside the point, but briefly: the testimony of the senses, though on the rudimentary level not admitting of doubt, can still lead to misunderstandings, in particular when it is manipulated and interpreted by the less reliable inner senses, common sense, memory, and above all the imagination. Sense-perception also can never hand us first-hand acquaintance with the divine because God is not a sense-object. Argumentation, meanwhile, can go wrong in a number of ways, either because of reliance on questionable premises, a simple error in reasoning, or—most commonly and worst of all—intellectual pride and combativeness for its own sake. And hearsay is often too close for comfort to appeals to blind authority or *taqlīd*.²⁴)

Where Ghazālī steers his ship next is of immediate and pressing interest to us. Instead of relying on a theory of acquired knowledge that builds on a cumulative reasoning from premises, Ghazālī's preferred model for the acquisition of the intelligibles is their direct emanation with the aid of divine grace—what Ghazālī in the *Deliverer* and elsewhere calls the divine light, in reference to certain eye-catching Prophetic traditions (*Munqidh*, 13.24–14.9). This lends heft to the perceptual metaphor of knowledge as a kind of seeing; it is time now to consider what the implications of his view are.

The Mirror of Reality

The first thing to notice is that Ghazālī does indeed follow the Peripatetic practice of likening intellectual knowledge to seeing. Thinking is tantamount to speculation or reflection (*nazar*) and, following the logic of the metaphor, it involves both a recipient and one or more external agents. The fact that *nazar* is also a standard term for reflection in *kalām* only serves to heighten the contrast between the theologians' use of the concept and Ghazālī's: whereas the theological majority opinion was that knowledge is

²⁴ For these points see Bernard Weiss, “Knowledge of the Past: The Theory of ‘Tawātur’ According to Ghazālī”, *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985): 81–105; Taneli Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī's Skepticism Revisited”, in *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010), 29–59; Richard M. Frank, “Al-Ghazālī on *taqlīd*. Scholars, theologians, and philosophers”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (1991–1992): 207–252.

something God instils directly in humans, Ghazālī here wishes to develop a naturalized epistemology built on ontological correspondences.²⁵

This leads Ghazālī's first and most forceful assertion in the *Book of Knowledge*, where his initial treatment of the rational soul in the *Revival* is located. Axioms and acquired knowledge are not enough, instead, one must posit a general receptacle for knowledge that bears the appropriate kind of relation to the thing being received. Of the various meanings attached to the intellect, accordingly,

The first is the quality by which the human being is separated from other beasts and by which he becomes fit to receive the theoretical sciences (*'ulūm nazāriyya*) and govern the hidden, speculative arts (*sinā'āt kbāfiyya fikriyya*). . . it is, as it were, a light cast into the heart by which it becomes fit for the perception of things. The one who denies this and who restricts [the scope of] the intellect merely to necessary knowledge (*'ulūm ḍarūriyya*) does not judge correctly, since a person ignorant of the sciences is still called rational, as indeed is the sleeper. This is by virtue of affirming the existence of such an innate disposition (*gharīza*) to the person, together with an ignorance of the sciences. (*Iḥyā'*, 1:83.13–26)

What Ghazālī here calls a disposition translates into Aristotelian potentiality, or perhaps first actuality: an infant is called potentially knowing in the same sense as it is described as being potentially a writer (this is as yet a remote possibility for the infant but a real potentiality nonetheless, in a way that would not be true, say, of a marmot or a rock), while the person who has grasped the principles of intellectual knowledge is potentially knowing in a stronger sense, and someone who has acquired a piece of actual knowledge but does not happen to be thinking about it just at the moment is more actually still a knower.²⁶ The language of “fittedness” (*isti'dād*) is more revealing still, as it shows Ghazālī distancing himself from any occasionalist epistemology that would make instances of knowledge dependent solely on God's habit (*'āda*). If this were the sole explanation, Ghazālī says—if donkeys did not differ from humans except through arbitrary nuggets of knowledge created in the latter to which the former are not privy—then there could be no principled objection to putting inanimate nature on a par with ensouled beings. All would be alike in being a direct creation of God, with stones possibly created with instances of sensation and the attribute of choice (*Iḥyā'*, 1:83.16–22). But plainly this is nonsense: therefore,

The human being differs from the beasts through perceiving the theoretical sciences by means of an innate disposition which is called the intellect. This is like the mirror, which differs from other bodies in that it reflects shapes and colours by a specific attribute, namely polish. Similar to this, the eye differs from the forehead through attributes and characteristics which make it fit for vision. The relation, therefore, of this innate disposition to the sciences is like the relation of the eye to

²⁵ I thank Ayman Shihadeh for help in clarifying this point.

²⁶ For an account that reproduces Ibn Sinā's different levels of the actualization of the intellect see, e.g., *Mīzān al-'amal*, 205–206.

vision; the relation of the Qur'ān and the Law to this innate disposition, in their leading to their respective sciences, is like the relation of the light of the sun to the faculty of vision. It is in this way that this innate disposition should be understood. (*Iḥyā'*, 1:83.22–26; cf. *Iḥyā'*, 3:16.16–18)

Ghazālī concludes that even though the intellect *qua* receptive disposition is the only thing referred to by that term whose existence is under dispute (axiomatic knowledge, empirical knowledge, and practical deliberation all being recognized by everybody), it must in fact be regarded as foundational when compared to the rest (*Iḥyā'*, 1:84.22–23; cf. 1:83.29–31, 1:84.3–5). Besides necessary knowledge, it is the second type of intellect we possess by nature (*bi-l-ṭab'*), and it is only by its presence that acquired knowledge becomes possible.

In a separate piece I have attempted to give some content to Ghazālī's peculiar claim that the Qur'ān and the revealed law would have a positive impact on our cognitive capacities.²⁷ For now, let me home in on the mirroring relation which according to Ghazālī underlies the structure of any actual knowledge of reality. Such a relation is implied by Peripatetic psychology and is brought to the fore in the Avicennian materials: the correspondence relation between what is the case, on the one hand, and our knowledge of it, on the other, is not just a matter of representational tokens but a stronger case of formal and hence ontological unity (see, e.g., *Maqṣad*, 83.8–9, and cf. 138.1–3). This starts with the senses taking on the form of a proper sense-object without the matter and proceeds to our intellectual grasp of a thing's essence, which in Ibn Sīnā is explained in terms of his influential theory of common natures or quiddities (*mābiyyāt*).²⁸

Ghazālī reproduces just enough of all this to make it clear that he subscribes to Ibn Sīnā's theory. This is plain even though—and admittedly this is rather annoying—we are missing a systematic presentation of all of the soul's cognitive faculties in any of the works whose provenance is wholly undisputed. As far as psychic imprints are concerned, Ghazālī's favoured example is the way that the heavens, which are first registered by the senses, have their overall form (*ṣūra*) imprinted on the imaginal faculty (*khayāl*) and then submitted to memory (*Iḥyā'*, 19.34–20.1; *Maqṣad*, 18.11–14). Ghazālī's further reference to a cleansing process whereby the reports handed by the senses are relieved of everything extraneous bears a close resemblance to the Aristotelian/Avicennian notion of abstraction, or “the reception of form without the

²⁷ See Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī's Skepticism Revisited”; and Taneli Kukkonen, “The Self as Enemy, the Self as Divine: A Crossroads in the Development of Islamic Anthropology”, in *Ancient Philosophy of the Self*, eds. P. Remes and J. Sihvola (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2008), 205–224; in the present context also *Iḥyā'*, 3:29.8–10.

²⁸ See, e.g., *al-Shifā': al-Ilābiyyāt* 5.1, and for comments Michael E. Marmura, “Quiddity and Universality in Avicenna”, in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed. P. Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 77–87; on the psychological implications of the doctrine, Meryem Sebtī, “Le statut ontologique de l'image dans la doctrine avicennienne de la perception”, *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005): 109–140.

matter”.²⁹ Finally, Ghazālī says that when a human being perceives a particular individual by means of the senses, the intellect comes to acquire from that same perception a common and absolute meaning (*ma‘nā ‘āmm muṭlaq*). This is in contrast to the animals, whose spirits are only capable of dealing with particulars and particular situations (*Misbkāt*, 38.18–19). All of this points unmistakably in the direction of the human rational soul working on the abstracted common items derived from nature in order to obtain true universals, as the following passage from the *Revival* makes clear:

Know that the locus (*maḥall*) of knowledge is the heart, by which I mean the subtle principle (*latīfa*) that governs all the limbs, that which is obeyed and served by all the [body] parts. It relates to the true natures of known things (*ḥaqā‘iq al-ma‘lūmāt*) as the mirror relates to coloured forms (*ṣuwar*). As the likeness of the coloured form is impressed on the mirror and appears in it, so for every known reality there is a form (*ṣūra*) that is impressed on the mirror of the heart and shines forth from it. Additionally, just as the mirror is one thing, the forms of particulars another, and the appearance of their likenesses in the mirror yet a third distinct thing, so also here there are three factors: the heart, the real natures of things (*ḥaqā‘iq al-ashyā’*), and the manifestation and presence of the self-same real natures in the heart. (*Ihyā’*, 3:12.21–25; cf. *Ihyā’* 4:439.26–28 and ff.)

The separation of knowledge both from the knower and the thing known does double, if not triple, duty. Against any Ash‘arite or occasionalist party, it establishes that knowledge is not an accident that could come to attach to just any body in any straightforward fashion. For the reader steeped in the tradition of Peripatetic debates, it signals something different: in that context, the implication is that Ghazālī has a particular position *vis-a-vis* the contested issue of whether the intellect is one with the intelligibles and with its own act of intellection (short answer: no).³⁰ A third and final point about the mirroring metaphor is that it naturally inclines in the direction of a further principle active in the process of cognition being postulated, *viz.* that light which allows things to be seen. This is precisely the place occupied by the Agent Intellect within the Peripatetic tradition. Ghazālī seizes upon the notion of an emanation of intelligibles, which he finds in Ibn Sīnā, in order to block any wholly naturalistic explanation of knowledge acquisition and to ensure that the divine is present and active in all veridical understanding of the world.³¹

²⁹ See *Mizān al-‘amal*, 213; for *tajrīd* in Ibn Sīnā see Dag Hasse, “Avicenna on Abstraction”, in *Aspects of Avicenna*, ed. R. Wisnovsky (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001), 39–72; Cristina D’Ancona, “Degrees of Abstraction in Avicenna. How to Combine Aristotle’s *De Anima* and the *Enneads*”, in *Theories of Perception in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*, eds. S. Knuuttila and P. Kärkkäinen (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 47–71.

³⁰ See *Ihyā’*, 3:5.14–17. For Ibn Sīnā’s take on this much contested issue see Peter Adamson, “Porphyrius Arabus on Nature and Art: 463F Smith in Context”, in *Studies on Porphyry*, eds. G. Karamanolis & A. Sheppard (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2007), 141–163.

³¹ When Ghazālī writes that “The Pen with which God inscribes knowledge on the sheets of the hearts functions in the manner of the disk of the sun” (*Ihyā’*, 3:16.19–20), the analogy with the Agent Intellect is plain. For further remarks see Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī’s Skepticism Revisited”.

For all that, it is plain that Ghazālī lays great emphasis on the natural affinity of the heart, intellect, or spirit (Ghazālī asserts repeatedly that getting stuck on names would be counterproductive) for becoming acquainted with the deeper and abiding structures of reality.³² “The truth of the matter is that the heart is fitted to reflect in it the true nature of the reality of things” (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqq fī l-ashyāʾ: Iḥyāʾ*, 3:18.8; also 1:87.5–6, 4:269.9–10), and this reflection involves more than their mere corporeal shapes and forms (*qawābil wa-ṣuwar*). One aspect of this is our ability to reason to the fact that the world is created and that its creation is due to an eternal, governing, and wise Creator who is characterized by the divine attributes (*Iḥyāʾ*, 4:269.6–7). But Ghazālī has in his sights a more intimate acquaintance with the natures of things, something for which the term *maʿrifā* is reserved in his vocabulary, and consequently he wishes that all connotations of dialectic and discourse (*mujādala wa-munāzara*) be set aside when the term intellect is used (*Iḥyāʾ*, 4:269.8). In other words, the more perfect kind of knowledge is not discursive at all, but instead reflects a direct cognizance of the things known.³³

What might such an intimate acquaintance entail? The *Mean in Belief*, which we may note is a relatively early work in *kalām* (completed in 1095), describes the much-debated question of our vision of God (*ruʾyat Allāb*) as being the perfection of knowledge (*istikmāl al-ilm*), in the same way that the actuality of eyesight (*ibṣār*) perfects the act of imagining (*takhyīl*) a person standing in front of us (*Iqtisād*, 68.2–69.13). The perceived form is one and the same in each case, with no addition or residue; it is just that the one is, as it were, a perfection and an unveiling of the other (*Iqtisād*, 67.9–11). Ghazālī’s debt to Ibn Sīnā even in this early stage is clear: also noteworthy is how he underlines that the terminology is not important here, in other words, that “vision” could just as well be replaced by another expression as long as the meaning is understood (*Iqtisād*, 69.6–8). Ghazālī’s half-hearted assurance that God could create a direct cognition of Himself in the physical eye as well as in the intellect only underscores that it is the “eye of the heart” that he actually has in mind (cf. *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:16.15–31). And the contrast he draws repeatedly between knowledge that is based either on second-hand reports or on discursive reasoning, on the one hand, and knowledge that arises out of personal acquaintance, on the other, gives credence to the idea that the direct witnessing he has in mind here is meant to reflect both philosophical and Sufi doctrine concerning the immediate contemplation of ultimate reality as the true calling of humanity.³⁴

³² Out of the central books of the *Revival*, the *Book of Knowledge* talks at length about the intellect (*Iḥyāʾ*, 1:81–86); the *Explication of the Marvels of the Heart* privileges the heart (*qalb*) as the term used for discussing the true human being and the human essence; while the thirty-sixth, the *Book of Love, Longing, Intimacy, and Contentment*, asserts that this principle “is variably called either intellect or inner insight or the light of faith or certitude” (*Iḥyāʾ*, 4:269.4–5; similarly *Iḥyāʾ*, 1:87.5–6; *Mishkāt*, 5.13–14).

³³ Cp. *Munqidh*, 39.20, where the Sufis are said to transcend the state (*ḥāl*)—really, stage—of forms and likenesses (*ṣuwar wa-amthāl*) and to reach a stage where words no longer suffice.

³⁴ Thus most famously *Munqidh*, 35.12–19 (also 40.8–16, 43.5–16); cf. *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:15.12–29; *Maqṣad*, 50–51, 55–56.

In his late treatise on the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) Ghazālī unequivocally reproduces the mirror metaphor once more, and for good measure adds a dose of Avicennian essentialist language: “the intellect, in the likeness of a mirror, has reflected in it the forms of the things known (*ṣuwar al-ma‘qūlāt*) as they are. By the forms of the things known I mean their true natures and essences (*ḥaqā‘iq wa-mābiyyāt*).” The innate inborn disposition (*gharīza*, *hay‘a*) for thus receiving the intelligibles (for that is certainly what *ma‘qūlāt* means in this instance) is the distinguishing characteristic of humanity, and to the extent that the essences of all created things can thus come to be reflected in the human soul (*naḥs ādamī*), humanity can be said to aspire to the divine or lordly presence (*ḥaḍra ilābiyya*, *ḥaḍra rubūbiyya*).³⁵ All of this serves to confirm that Ghazālī stuck to what is in essence an Avicennian picture from at least 1095 all the way to the end of his life.³⁶

A less obvious corollary from the mirroring doctrine is that such a relation does not require either the knower or the thing known to move from their respective positions. One simply takes on the characteristics of the other so that the distance between the two is made less—but ontologically, not in any crude spatial sense (*Maqṣad*, 45–46, 72–73, 117–118). Talking in a spiritual register, Ghazālī puts it that “in this journey there is no motion neither from the point of view of the wayfarer nor from that of the destination” (*Jawābir*, 16). It is perhaps a stretch to read into this Aristotle’s remark that cognition does not involve change in the conventional sense. But an even stronger implication does appear to be in Ghazālī’s sights, insofar as he takes the part of the soul that mirrors true reality—the realm of Dominion—already to be an inhabitant of that realm. A number of times, Ghazālī reiterates that the heart belongs to the world of dominion, i.e. on the side of divine reality or “the other world” (*ākḥira*).³⁷ How literally are we to take this, and what are the implications?

Multiple Mirrors

The crucial text for assessing Ghazālī’s views, I believe, comes from the *Explication of the Marvels of the Heart*, the 21st and most central book (in more ways than one) of the entire *Revival*. In a chapter dedicated to explaining how the Sufis can attain direct knowledge of the very same things which the scholars encounter through reasoning and study, Ghazālī first points out that the heart falls outside the purview of the senses (*kbārij ‘an idrāk al-ḥiss: Iḥyā’*, 3:19.22). In what is by now a familiar pattern, he goes on

³⁵ After all, all that can be said to exist are God and His actions. See *Mustasfā*, 22–23; for a restatement of the final point *Maqṣad*, 58–59; for the divine presence enveloping *mulk* and *malakūt* alike, *Iḥyā’*, 3:14.25–15.3.

³⁶ For added comments on the apprehension of quiddities as the basis for a true knowledge of things see T. Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on the Signification of Names”, *Vivarium* 48/1–2 (2010): 55–74; on the theological implications T. Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on Accidental Identity and the Attributes”, *The Muslim World* 101/4 (2011): 658–679.

³⁷ E.g., *Iḥyā’*, 1:9.27, 1:116.22; similarly *Kitāb al-arba‘in fī uṣūl al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-maktaba al-‘ilmiyya, 1988), 32.13–14; examples could be multiplied at will.

to elucidate a psychological problem by means of a metaphysical excursus. Ghazālī discusses the blueprint (*nuskba*) of the architecture of the world which God the Creator is supposed to have impressed on the Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*) prior to the world's creation in concrete reality. Here as elsewhere, Ghazālī points to the Preserved Tablet as the basis for God's eternal knowledge of the world (see, e.g., *Maqṣad*, 79–82, 92–93). Distinctive about the *Revival* passage under discussion is the way Ghazālī insists that the contents of this knowledge are also impressed on the hearts of the angels who reside in constant proximity to God (*Iḥyā'*, 3:19.31–34).

Now, given that such proximity, precisely in the likeness of angels, is supposed to be our own aim as well, ascending to the contemplation of the divine archetype appears to constitute ultimate human happiness too (see, e.g., *Maqṣad*, 42–46). And in many well-known contexts Ghazālī insists on divine grace as the only means by which such proximity is attained. However, and this is somewhat curious, in the *Revival* passage under consideration Ghazālī takes another tack. Here, Ghazālī suggests that our journey up to the archetype typically takes its start from the manifestation of the divine wisdom in the sensible world. The evidence of our senses first results in the form of a thing becoming present to our imaginary faculty (*kbayāl*); then this form is further carried on to the level of the heart, where it has the more exalted sense still of acting as a representation of the real nature of things (*ḥaqā'iq al-ashyā'*: *Iḥyā'*, 3:19.34–20.4). The composite picture then looks something like this:

There are four levels of existence to the world. [First there is its] existence in the Preserved Tablet, which precedes corporeal existence; this is followed by the world's real existence (*wujūd ḥaqīqī*), just as its real existence is followed by its imaginary existence, by which I mean the existence of its form in the imaginary faculty. Its imaginary existence is then followed by its intelligible existence (*wujūd 'aqlī*), by which I mean the existence of its form in the heart.

Some of these existences are spiritual (*rūḥānī*) while others are corporeal, and of the spiritual some are more spiritual than others: this is one of the finer points issuing from the Divine Wisdom (*al-luṭf min al-ḥikmat al-ilāhīyya*). For when that [Wisdom] created the pupil of your eye, in all its smallness, in it came to be represented by way of impression the form of the world and the heavens and the earth, in all their broad extent. Then [that form's] existence in the senses proceeds to an existence in the imaginary faculty, and from there to an existence in the heart. You can never perceive anything except for that which has reached you, you see: and if He had not placed a likeness of the world in its entirety (*li-l-'ālam kullī-hi mithāl*) within your essence, you would not have any information of anything other than yourself. (*Iḥyā'*, 3:20.5–11)

What we have here is an echo of the theory of the threefold existence of universals found, e.g., in Yaḥyā Ibn 'Adī and Ibn Sīnā. Common items are found “before the many” in the divine mind, then “in the many” in concrete existence, then “after the many” as recollected universals in the human intellect. All Ghazālī does is embellish the picture slightly by dividing the *post res* stage into two distinct phases, the imaginary and the

intellectual.³⁸ Though a full explanation will have to wait another occasion, I believe this additional division to be posited in order to explain how our collation of sensory data can go astray and our natural ascension to an intellectual knowledge of reality be thwarted.³⁹

The idea that we must proceed from a contemplation of the world and a reading of its signs to an understanding of its Creator is of course a commonplace in Ghazālī's works. There are in addition solid textual reasons for seeing this process as based on an ontological connection between the mundane and divine realms. To begin with the *Niche of Lights*, Ghazālī states that a connection (*ittiṣāl*), correspondence (*munāsaba*), and similitude (*mithāl*) can be found between each and every thing in the sensible and intelligible worlds. Were this not the case, ascent from one to the other would not be possible, and yet that is precisely the path prescribed for us (*Mishkāt*, 26.10–27.11). In the *Jewels of the Qur'ān* Ghazālī puts it that just as one cannot get at a fruit's core without going through the rind, so also there is no access to the divine secret without first examining God's kingdom and that which is evident.⁴⁰ And in a chapter in the *Book of Love and Longing, etc.* in the *Revival* the notion of innate knowledge is linked to the necessity of passing through this world. Talking about how knowledge in this life blossoms into clear and unobstructed vision in the next, Ghazālī compares this to the way a date pit grows into a palm tree and the kernel into a blade of wheat. Ghazālī postulates two rhetorical questions: how could that which does not contain the pit or the kernel ever grow to such stature? And how could one who does not know God in this life come to see Him in the next? (*Iḥyā'*, 4:273.21ff.) The first question finds its answer in the *fiṭra* which is equivalent to the potential intellect, while the second relates to the necessity of reflecting on the signs of this world in order to access the other.

Finally, in the *Revival's Book of Gratitude*, Ghazālī states that this world is a mirror image of the other world (*al-dunyā mir'at al-ākbara*) and follows (*tābi'*) upon it, just as the form in the mirror follows upon the form of the one shown in it. In the order of existence, the form in the mirror always comes second, even if according to the reality of one's sight it may assume precedence: we do not see ourselves directly, but only come to comprehend our forms through seeing it in a mirror first. Thus also the other world, though it is primary in its being and the one with which our heart is naturally affiliated, is only reached through contemplating the secondary. This is the relation of the manifest Kingdom to the unseen realm of Dominion, Ghazālī avers: the situation is admittedly topsy-turvy, but it is necessarily so (*Iḥyā'*, 4:89.32–90.1; cf. *Iḥyā'*, 3:6.10–13, 3:37.14–18).

³⁸ As Walter Skellie already points out in his 1938 translation (*Marvels of the Heart*, 58–59).

³⁹ Cf., e.g., *Jawābir al-Qur'ān wa-duraru-hū* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1988), 38–39 for brief remarks; for the Avicennian element in this, Dimitri Gutas, "Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge in Avicenna", in *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy. From the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank*, ed. J. E. Montgomery (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 337–354.

⁴⁰ *Jawābir*, 34.

Another peculiar feature in the text cited above, the notion that the human being is somehow a microcosm, also famously comes up in the *Niche of Lights*, where it is brought up in conjunction with the tradition according to which Adam was created in the form of the all-Merciful (*Misbkāt*, 31.9–32.4). Viewed in light of the preceding remarks, it seems to me that in both instances Ghazālī wishes to intimate that his heart or innate disposition in actuality is nothing other than Ibn Sīnā’s potential intellect. Ghazālī’s references in the *Book of Knowledge* to knowledge as remembrance or recollection (*tadhakkur*), accordingly, are best viewed in the context of an Aristotelian picture where the intellect, since it is capable of thinking all the intelligibles, in a sense possesses them all potentially. Far from evoking any notion of pre-existent Platonic souls or the like, Ghazālī’s point in choosing the terminology of recollection would then be to emphasize against the *kalām* theologians that a reasoning process that involves an externalized manipulation of propositions and their acceptance on formal grounds is wholly unnecessary and may in fact prove genuinely harmful, because distracting (*Iḥyā’*, 1:85.1–8; cf. *Iḥyā’*, 3:17.17–32). Our duty, rather, is to open ourselves up to a direct and simple vision of reality as it really is, since this is what the human essence is fit to do from the first.

To sum up: the divine plan is made manifest by the shape and form assumed by the physical world, and our senses form the first witness to these physical manifestations. From this testimony our inner senses distil something of the overall characteristics of things; the purpose of our intellectual faculty, meanwhile, is to discern their true essences, which correspond to the original blueprint. And the intellect (or “heart”, to follow Ghazālī in his terminological preference) is peculiarly equipped to do this because it already inhabits that realm, at least in some sense, and because it already possesses at least in some kind of embryonic form—or potentially—whatever it is attempting to understand. The multiple mirrors posited in nature ultimately lead one back to the source, which is the contemplation of divine reality in all its splendour, to the extent that such an honour is conceivable for the human being (cf. *Iḥyā’*, 3:14.7–16): but what is crucial to recognize is that it is essentially the same reality that is being projected throughout all the levels, only at varying degrees of purity and intensity. Though Ghazālī’s turns of phrase may on occasion sound more like something coming out of a Middle Platonist text, nothing so far in his presentation would preclude us from assigning a fully Avicennian theory of the soul to him—and there is much to recommend such a designation.

Worlds beyond Worlds

Through a somewhat circuitous route we have arrived at a reading of Ghazālī’s psychology that some may find unacceptable, while others will regard it as fairly obvious. Bottom to top, as it were, Ghazālī follows Ibn Sīnā’s exposition of the faculties of the soul, which leads one to assume that his underlying ontology is no different. The intellect as the distinguishing hallmark and essence of the human soul is a separate

substance, with its separateness grounded in the separability of the intelligibles from matter, though its maturation occurs only through a lifetime spent abstracting the formal aspects of sensible reality in preparation for the reception of these intelligibles. This is the interpretation that most easily fits the evidence and covers the most ground. Among other benefits, it allows one to bring to the fold a number of controversial treatises ranging from the *Maḍnūn saghīr* to the *Ma'ārij al-quds*. On the proposed reading, these treatises merely recount for a philosophically more educated audience—this could be Ghazālī's personal circle of students, or perhaps simply Ghazālī himself in note-taking mode—the facts as the Peripatetic philosophers teach them and in terminology they would recognize. Ghazālī's well-known hortatory works, correspondingly, assume those same facts as a backdrop, without, however, going into a full explication. That would breach the limits of what a work devoted to the “science of works” is supposed to do, and perhaps produce needless confusion.

There is no hint of a double truth here, nor even of any intentional obfuscation, since the pieces that Ghazālī does put on the board in the *Revival* and elsewhere point plainly enough to the theory which they implicitly assume. It is only that Ghazālī, acting on his own advice in the *Deliverer*, wants to separate sharply between (potentially correct) philosophical theories and the (inarguably dangerous) authoritarianism to which a blanket acceptance of the tradition of *falsafa* could lead. Because technical terminology is such an effective tool in leading people into accepting the latter point of view—that is, into accepting a certain tradition as being authoritative on the whole without proper attention being paid to the true merits of the individual parts—it is useful in Ghazālī's view to break the association between the correct doctrine (quite especially as concerns human behaviour and its psychological underpinnings) and the philosophical terminology in which it has become couched.⁴¹

All this points in the direction of a full-scale adoption on Ghazālī's part of Ibn Sīnā's philosophical psychology; and this, for concerns of space alone, is where the matter must rest as far as this article is concerned. Several questions and problems remain, however, which it would be foolish to overlook and irresponsible to ignore. Here, all I can do is mention them as launching points for future research.

(1) One thing I have bypassed is the ontological status of the intermediate world of *jabarūt* or compulsion (see *Ihyā'*, 4:219.21–28), a concept to which Gianotti and before him Kojiro Nakamura have attached considerable weight.⁴² It seems to me that the prevailing interpretation according to which *jabarūt* has to do with certain functions of the soul which have effects on the body is both correct and sufficient (*Ihyā'*, 4:221.21–22

⁴¹ See, e.g., *Munqidh*, 20.20–23.2, 25.6–27.23; *Tabāfut*, 1.11–2.21, 8.5–10.2; cf. Frank Griffel, “*Taqīd* of the Philosophers: Al-Ghazālī's Initial Accusation in his *Tabāfut*”, in *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal. Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. S. Günther (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005), 273–296.

⁴² Kojiro Nakamura, “Imām Ghazālī's cosmology reconsidered with special reference to the concept of *jabarūt*”, *Studia Islamica* 80 (1994): 29–46.

lists power, will, and knowledge), and that perhaps nothing more needs to be said. According to Ghazālī's summary of the *Revival*, the so-called *Book of the Forty*, for instance, the light of pure understanding may dread, fear, joy, reverence, and similar states, and this is an instance of compulsion (*Arba'īn*, 32.14–17). The notion of *jabarūt* would then correspond more or less to the Avicennian motive and executive powers of the soul. What merits further investigation is whether *jabarūt* also acts as a more general signifier for the ways in which separate or disembodied principles may have an effect on the sensible universe, and whether Ghazālī thinks that such an ontological postulate might help resolve the contested issue of the possibility of human volition *vis-à-vis* the divine will.

(2) Another important problem has to do with the development of our intellectual faculty. Ghazālī is frustratingly vague on the particulars: to say that it is God's custom (*sunnat Allāh*) to have every faculty and attribute develop gradually is all well and good (*Ihyā'*, 1:86.10–11), but fails to explain much of anything. Nevertheless, Ghazālī is at least committed to the twin principles that (a) some kind of development occurs in our cognitive faculties over time and that (b) people differ fundamentally in their innate intellectual capacities at least on the side of our inborn *fiṭra*. And this is enough to raise serious questions about the degree of otherworldly happiness that differently endowed people can reach by their very nature. Ghazālī introduces the idea of varying intellectual endowments for the same purpose Ibn Sīnā does, to provide ontological grounds for abnormally keen and wide-ranging intellectual abilities in the case of the prophet or the saint (*Ihyā'*, 1:86.6–30, 3:21.10–23). But the questions that he must face are in a sense more difficult on account of his popular spirituality of the middle path. Can Ghazālī promise true happiness to everyone in the life to come?

(3) The resolution to both the afore-mentioned problems may lie with Ghazālī's emphasis on ethical practice as the preferable route to a true cognition of the divine. In terms of *jabarūt*, the determination of our will, and the schooling of our desires through force of habit, Ghazālī's musings take on a somewhat paradoxical character, but not necessarily more so than those put forward by various writers within the broader philosophical tradition. The literature on habituation and moral deliberation provides the starting point from which to unravel the question of how far our actions are determined by us, as opposed to being determined for us.

As for access to the ultimate objects of contemplation, according to two central chapters in the *Marvels of the Heart* (R. J. McCarthy does not hesitate to call chapter 8 a highlight and a kind of peak in all of Ghazālī), the grounds for the heart's reception of the intelligibles are prepared through a twofold process of (a) polishing the mirror of the soul—Ghazālī's celebrated greater *jihād*, the struggle against one's own lower nature which inevitably distorts one's ability to accept reality on non-egoistic terms—and (b) contemplating nature from the point of view of its createdness and its reflection of the divine wisdom and power in all of its aspects. These are the methods of the Sufis and the scholars, respectively, and while each path has its own advantages and pitfalls, Ghazālī is keen to promote the Sufi way as the one that holds out the greater promise (*Ihyā'*,

3:20.19–21.7). This is for the reason that any scholarly reasoning has the potential to turn into a dead letter as well as a dead end thanks to our discursive modes of reasoning going wrong and becoming yoked to personal satisfaction and excessive cleverness for its own sake.⁴³ Consequently, we might think that the Ghazālī's emphasis on the need for divine mercy in disclosing anything of the divine reality might provide a more egalitarian route towards access to the divine.

But if this is the correct answer, and I have elsewhere argued that by and large it is,⁴⁴ then Ghazālī's conclusions take him farther than what our theoretical layout so far will easily accommodate. For one absolutely central feature in Ghazālī's thought that has as yet received insufficient attention is his steadfast insistence on the divine attributes—as canonized and revealed in the 99 beautiful names of God—as constituting the true pinnacle of ontological perfection. How these divine names and attributes are supposed to square with the true realities of things (*ḥaqā'iq al-ashyā'*) *qua* their essences (*mābiyyāt*) is not immediately obvious: but whatever the answer to this puzzle, Ghazālī makes it plain that nothing in the observation of the visible world can ever prepare us sufficiently for, or in itself give rise to, an understanding of the attributes. Yet Ghazālī insists that such visions, incomplete as they may be, are possible for the human heart, and that it is precisely this that allows for an infinite gradation when it comes to proximity to, or alternatively distance from, the divine presence. The unmistakable impression, I think, is that of something to be contemplated beyond and above run-of-the-mill universals, something more akin to Platonic terms of perfection such as Wisdom-itself or Mercy-itself. And it is the heart's hidden affinity with this aspect of reality that for Ghazālī forms the ultimate mystery lying at the heart of each of us.⁴⁵ In the second book of the *Revival* Ghazālī states that the truth regarding “the spirit that is one of God's charges” is as difficult to grasp as is that of God's attributes (*Iḥyā'*, 1:98.16). We can now begin to grasp why this should be, and why Ghazālī's comment is not as throwaway as may first appear.

Here, then, I think, lies the principal difference between Ibn Sīnā's and Ghazālī's epistemologies: the one is geared towards uncovering the underlying structure of the physical world, while the other aims at leading one up to its source. For Ibn Sīnā, it is the necessary world-order itself—its intelligible structure, ultimately expressible in demonstrative syllogisms regarding kind-terms, their essential predicates, and the causal relations that spell out the interrelatedness of the beings to which they refer—that forms the first and most important object of reasoned thought. For Ghazālī, by contrast, all aspects of physical reality are but pale reflections of their source in the *malakūt* and the

⁴³ Ghazālī's admonitions against the misuses of dialectical theology warrant a separate investigation: on the particular point made here see *Iḥyā'*, 3:33.13–22, and for the same point made against the philosophers (and indeed Jews and Christians) *Tabāfut*, 2.4–8.

⁴⁴ See Kukkonen, “The Self as Enemy, the Self as Divine”.

⁴⁵ See *Iḥyā'*, 4:267.26–268.17.

divine attributes. This is a much more Platonic picture of reality than what Ibn Sīnā allows for.⁴⁶

Ghazālī's epistemology accordingly is ill at ease when it tries to balance an abstractionist understanding of regular cognition with a top-down model of what happens when the soul comes into contact with the supernal realm. This is a natural outcome, in a way, of Ghazālī's desire to preserve the general programme of natural theology ("reflecting on creation") while at the same time attempting to carve out space for a divinely inspired vision of transcendence. To an extent Ghazālī is aided in his project by Ibn Sīnā's account—itsself a delicate balancing act—of the dual processes of abstraction and emanation needed in any intellectual cognition. But because Ghazālī posits a far wider gap ontologically between transcendent and sensible reality than does Ibn Sīnā, illumination and inspiration (*ilbām*) must ultimately assume a much wider role in his cognitive psychology than what we find in Ibn Sīnā. Consequently, I do not think that one can escape the conclusion that Ibn Sīnā's is (with due allowances made for nuance and the dangers of anachronism) a predominantly scientific epistemology, while the motivating force in Ghazālī's project is properly spiritual, aiming as it does in bringing the reader to a recognition of God and an appreciation of Him alone.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ What the *Book of the Forty* says about the whole sensible world being only a shadow (*ẓill*), virtually nonexistent (*Arba'in*, 34), may perhaps be chalked down to a reiteration of the doctrine of the world's fundamental existential contingency (cp. *Maqṣad*, 58–59). But the entirety of the *Beautiful Names* quite consistently develops the theme of God instantiating all perfections in the full sense, while the world partakes in these only in a limited fashion: the gap between the two is infinite, as any theology of the "good infinite" (to use Hegel's term) must perceive it to be.

⁴⁷ I thank the participants of the SOAS conference for their comments and feedback on a preliminary version of this study, and the European Research Council (project acronym SSALT) and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study for their support of my scholarship.