

ETHICS OF AL-GHAZALI

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INTRODUCTION

Ghazali's ethical views are inspired by his mysticism. His ethical teachings are expounded in his three celebrated books:

1. *Kimīya-e-Sa'adat*; (The Alchemy of Happiness).
2. *Ihya-al-'Ulum-al-Din* (Revivification of Religious Sciences).
3. *Mizān-al-'Aural* (Scale of Actions).

There is a difference in the treatment of moral problems in the *Ihya* and the *Kimīya*. The, third book of *Ihya* contains discussion on popular moral philosophy. While the intellectuals and the philosophers may be benefited by these discussions, Ghazali's intention in this book is to make his moral views accessible to the common people.

Kimīya contains mystical side of Ghazali's ethical teachings. But since mysticism is a part and parcel of Ghazali's ethics, study of *Kimīya* is a necessary prelude to the study of *Ihya*. Discussions on the moral problems in the *Mizān-al-'Amal* are not very different from those in the *Ihya*. *Ihya*, however, is more comprehensive than *Mizān*.

The Alchemy of Happiness

In the preface of the *Kimīya Ghazali* defines man's purpose in the world in terms of Ma'rifat (Gnosis) or communion with God. Man is capable of acquiring Ma'rifat and ultimately the Beatific vision through perfection of his self. By nature he is imperfect. But through constant efforts he can attain perfection of his self. The Science which may enable him to attain perfection is called by Ghazali *Kimīya-e-Sa'adat*.

Ghazali writes: "Just as Alchemy, that changes copper and brass into gold by cleaning them is difficult and is not known to every body, in the same way, this Alchemy (of happiness) which cleans man of his bestiality,

and leads him to the purity of angels, through which he ultimately attains eternal felicity (Sa'ada) is also difficult and is not known to everyone".¹⁷

This Alchemy (of Happiness is Ma'rifat which is both the way (*Tariqa*) and purpose (*Ghaya*) of man's life. Man attains Ma'rifat)through four stages:

1. By knowing himself,
2. Knowing God,
3. Knowing the world, and
4. Knowing the life Hereafter.

The first step towards Ma'rifat is knowing oneself. It is in this context that Ghazali makes his ethical discussions.

It is evident from his treatment of the subject that Ghazali draws all his moral concepts from a psychological study of man. He no-where attempts a purely philosophical analysis of the ethical concepts such as 'good', 'right', 'virtue', 'ought', 'duty', etc. His analysis is through and through psychological.

However, a true appreciation of Ghazali is possible only if he is seen in the background of medieval Muslim thought. Ghazali was an heir of Ash'arite theology on the one hand, and Hellenic wisdom on the other. But the Ash'arite's glorification of the absolute power of God could not justify moral responsibility. Ghazali attempted a reconciliation of God's absolute power with man's moral responsibility by seeking the source of good and evil in man himself. This he did with the help of Greek Philosophy which also sought to explain all moral concepts through a psychological study of man.

The Human Soul as a Divine Principle

In conformity with his mysticism Ghazali lays down both in the *Kimiya* and the *Ihya* that the reality of man is his Heart. Heart is the source of all good and evil in man. Immorality is a disease of the *heart or souls*¹⁸ which deprives the soul of its immortality in the same way as diseases of the body ultimately lead to its death. And just as it is necessary for those among us who are endowed with superior intellect to learn the science of medicine in order to be capable of keeping the body healthy and to avoid death as long as possible, in the same way, it is necessary for every person to learn the science

¹⁷ Al-Ghazali, A .H ,— *Kimiya-e-S'aadat*.

¹⁸ The expressions 'soul"Heart' and 'self' are used as synonyms in the *Ihya*

of morality in order to be able to deal successfully with the diseases of the heart, so that the soul remains healthy and tranquil and enjoys abiding and eternal life.

According to Ghazali there may be three conditions prevailing upon the soul to which allusion has been made in the Quran.

1. When the soul is overpowered by passions and desires and is not able to resist them it is called the instigating soul (*Nafs-al-ammarah*)¹⁹ or the indulgent soul.
2. When the soul checks itself from indulgence and tries to resist the desires and passions but cannot successfully do it, and remains unsatisfied with itself, it is called the upbraiding soul (*al-Nafs-al-Lanwamah*)²⁰.
3. When the soul is capable of resisting successfully the desires and passions and is contented and satisfied with itself, it is called the tranquil soul (*Al-Nafs-al-Mutma'innah*)²¹.

Out of these three conditions the soul is diseased in the first state; it is under treatment in the second and acquires perfect health in the third.

The soul enjoys abiding life only when it is able to attain the third stage (the stage of tranquillity). It should, therefore, be the aim of every person in this world to keep the soul healthy and tranquil as far as possible, in order that it enjoys abiding life and eternal felicity (Sa'ada).

Khalq and Khulq

This is possible only through practising morality (*Khulq*). The term *Khulq* has varied shades of meaning. It means conduct, character or morality. In order to avoid confusion Ghazali distinguishes it from another term, *Khalq*. He uses the terms *Khulq* and *Khalq* more or less in the sense of conduct and character, respectively. He writes:--

¹⁹ Quran, XVI : 63.

²⁰ Ibid, IXXV : 2

²¹ Ibid, XXIX : 27,

"We may speak about the same person that he has both good *Khulq* and good *Khalq*. By *Khulq* is meant explicit nature whereas *Khalq* is implicit nature".

Ghazali proceeds to explain these terms further. "*Khulq*" is that permanent feature of the soul from which actions issue freely without reflection²². He insists that *Khalq* ought to be the permanent mode of behaviour.

If a person occasionally spends for a good cause he will not be described as generous. Actions must issue from *Khalq* without reflection. For if money is spent after long reflection and hesitance, it is not a mark of generosity.

In short *Khalq* according to Ghazali, has the following implications:

1. The actual acts,
2. The agent has command over his will and can do good or bad without hesitance,
3. He discriminates between good and bad,
4. He is disposed towards good or bad.

Khalq is not therefore to be identified with the act alone or with the power to act or with the knowledge about good and bad, or with the disposition. It is complete with reference to all these together. In judging a person's, therefore, one has to take account of all these factors.

Ghazali's interpretation of *Khalq* is not very different from what we generally understand by Character. Character is generally defined as a completely fashioned will or a permanent mode of behaviour. Its implications are almost the same as described by Ghazali. As for *Khulq*, Ghazali does not specifically define it anywhere. How-ever, by *Khulq* he throughout understands explicit behaviour or what we call conduct.

Donaldson has = confused the meaning of these terms when he interprets Ghazali. He thinks that *Khalq* in Ghazali is created nature whereas *Khulq* is disposition. This is to misunderstand Ghazali. By *Khalq* Ghazali

²² Al-Ghazali, A.H.— *Ihya al-'Ulum-al-Din*,

Donaldson, D.M —. *Studies in Muslim ethics*; London S — P.C.K. 1953, p. 138.

does not understand created nature. For created nature he has another term *Tab'a* or what we call temperament. *Khalq* for Ghazali is definitely acquired nature which has its foundation in *Ta'ba*, but which is capable of changing. It is what a man becomes by virtue of his disposition or nature and a rationally conceived moral goal. Nor is *Khulq* simple disposition. In fact disposition is implicit in *Khalq*. Ghazali uses the term *Khulq* more or less in the sense of conduct. It is the actual act, as determined by the rationally conceived moral ideal. Both *Khalq* and *Khulq*, he believes, are capable of changing.

Of Human Bondage

Here Ghazali is beset with two questions. Is it possible to change our nature and disposition? 2. Is man free to effect such a change? With regard to the first question Ghazali lays down that the objection that it is not possible for a person to change his character since it is deeply rooted in his passions, desires and, his nature is not tenable. We observe that even animals are capable of changing their disposition, then why not man?

Though Ghazali insists that it is not possible for us to bring about an absolute change in our nature 'for we are bound by our nature, but a relative change is definitely possible. Thus it is not possible for a person to absolutely change his bodily organs or his passions or desires. But through training and exercise he can definitely bring about relative change in them. Our character is formed by our habits. Habits are formed by constant repetition of an act. Habits are liable to become our second nature. But if we have an honest desire to change our habit and adopt a new one we can successfully do it by constant repetition of the desired act. Here Ghazali distinguishes between four types of bad characters that we meet in society and discusses the possibility of preaching them morality. He writes:

"In this particular we may group mankind in four stages. The first are those who are heedless, who do not distinguish truth *al-haqq* from folly (*al-batil*), or the beautiful (*al-jamil*) from the base (*al-qabih*). They lack conviction (*itiqad*), and in the pursuit of pleasures they are unable to control their desires. They are the easiest, however, of the several kinds of men, to cure for they need only the instruction of a teacher (*murshid*) and a sufficient motive to direct them. Thus the disposition of anyone of this kind of men may become good in but a short time.

"The men who are in the second stage are those who know well enough the baseness of what is base, but they do not become habituated to good conduct because they consider that their evil conduct is something enjoyable. As a consequence they engage in it submissively, in accord with their desires, but contrary to their own better judgment. As a result the situation of those in this stage is much more difficult than that of those in the first stage, for they are more at fault. They can, however, resort to one of two expedients. Either they may root out their established habit that makes for corruption, or they may direct their desire towards something else that is not corrupt, relying on the" expulsive power of a new affliction. On the whole they may be said to be capable of exercising this discipline, but it will require strenuous effort.

"Those in the third stage actually approve of base dispositions, maintaining that they are necessary, right, and beautiful. So they pursue them whole-heartedly. It is almost impossible for men in this third stage to be cured. In fact there is no hope for them, except, in the rarest instance, for their opportunities for error (*asbab al-dalal*) are being constantly increased.

"The fourth kind are those who, along with what accompanies corrupt belief and practice, see also a 'sort of virtue in their very excess of evil and in the destruction of lives. In this they vie with one another, and they think they gain fame by the amount of evil they accomplish. It will be seen that they are most difficult of the four stages, and it is of them that it has been said: It is a real torture for anyone to have to train a wolf to be well-bred, or to wash black hair cloth to make it white.

"In summarizing the men of these four stages, we observe that the first are those who may be called ignorant (*jabil*); the second are those who are also in error (*Zalum*); the third are ignorant, in error, and are dissolute (*fasiq*), and the fourth are ignorant, in error, dissolute and wicked (*Sharin*)²³".

Freedom of Will

Ghazali was a follower of Ash'arite theology. His solution to the problem of freedom of will is therefore in conformity with Ash'arite views on the issue. God's power and His will is absolute. There is no efficient cause save God. Man acquires his powers from God by virtue of which he has a consciousness of limited freedom. Man has on the one hand a consciousness

²³ *Ihya, Op. Cit.* p. 58-59.

of being determined by his nature which includes desires, passions, inclinations etc. On the other hand, he has a consciousness of being capable of exercising choice also. It is this consciousness of a free will that justifies his belief in moral responsibility. "While the occurrence of a strong desire or inclination may come without man's responsibility, yet his reason is free to make a decision, and his will is free to accept the decision of reason as good and to implement the corresponding action. In such a case man would be free to do what he desires, but complete control of his desires would be beyond his power.²⁴

Ghazali's reconciliation of determinism and free will is not free from difficulties. He justified moral responsibility on the basis of freedom. But the question is, is not this consciousness of freedom a false consciousness? For according to Ghazali each time a man acts, the power to act is produced in him by God. It is actually God who acts through man. In such a case, what is the significance of the consciousness of freedom and how can moral responsibility be justified? Are we going to justify moral life on the basis of a false belief, Pla to would call a doxa?

Besides, Ghazali on this issue cannot escape the attacks of M'utazilites who would say that such a view calls the justice of God in question.

The Human Soul as a Psychological Phenomenon

Both *Khulq* and *Rbalq*, he believes, are capable of changing. Man can develop good character (*Khalq*) and his conduct (*Khulq*) can be good only if he acquires command over different faculties of his soul. Following the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition and following his Muslim predecessor, Ibn-Muskavaih, Ghazali distinguishes between faculties of soul.

1. The Power of Passion (*Al-Qummat-al-Shahwiya*),
2. The Power of Anger (*Al-Qummat-al-Ghadhabia*),
3. The Power of Reason (*Al-Qummat-al-Natiqa*).

These three powers of the soul should not be confused with the three conditions of the soul described earlier; the former may be called states of conscience, whereas the latter are powers of the soul by virtue of which these

²⁴ *Studies in Muslim Ethics, Op. Cit.*

states prevail upon the soul.

To these three faculties or powers Ghazali adds a fourth, which he calls power of justice (*Al-Qummat-Al-'Adl*).

This last power, namely power of justice, is what keeps a balance between the first three powers and is itself the result of this balance.

Following the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition Ghazali maintained that the first three faculties of the soul are the source of all virtues and vices. As a result of moderate exercise of these faculties virtues generate. When these faculties are immoderately exercised they result in vices. Virtue is a mean between two extremes, that is, excess (*Ifrat*) and defect (*Tafreet*). The extremes lead to vices (*Razail*).

These three faculties, along with the power of justice, give rise to the four cardinal virtues: Temperance, Courage, Wisdom and Justice. Opposite to each of the three cardinal virtues are two cardinal vices, having their source in the extremes:

1. When the passionate faculty is moderately exercised it leads to the cardinal virtue temperance (*iffa*). As a result of its excessive and defective use we have the cardinal vices: intemperance and inertia respectively.
- 2- Moderate exercise of the faculty of anger results in the cardinal virtue courage. Its excess and defect lead to rashness and cowardice respectively.
3. When the rational faculty is moderate, it generates the cardinal virtue wisdom (*Hikma*). When towards excess or defect it results in deceit (*Makr*), and Ignorance (*Jahl*) respectively.

Alongwith these cardinal virtues and vices, Ghazali draws a long list of subsidiary virtues and vices. Thus e.g.. under the cardinal virtue Temperance (*iffa*) come virtues such as contentment, modesty, etc. The subsidiary vices are greed, discontentment. and shamelessness. Subordinate to Courage are valour, tolerance, forgiveness, etc. Their opposite subsidiary vices are foolishness, stupidily etc. Opposite to the cardinal virtue Justice is injustice. A number of subsidiary virtues and vices generate from them.

The Power of Justice and the Role of Reason

What is significant here is that Ghazali considers justice as the result of a special faculty which he calls power of justice. He clearly deviates from the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition according to which justice is the result of a balance between the first three powers (passion, anger, and reason).

As for the nature of the power of justice, there is a lot of confusion in Ghazali. In the beginning he defines it as "The power which maintains a balance between the first three powers (Passion, Anger and Reason)". Next he says:

"By power of justice we understand the power which brings passion and anger under the control of Law (*Sharia*) and Reason. Reason should be taken as Adviser, and Power of Justice as the power which obeys the command of Reason".

What we gather from the first definition is that the power of Justice for Ghazali is an independent power which controls the first three powers, namely, Passion, Anger and Reason. The power of justice here appears very much like will. But it is will oriented by Reason. or we may call it a rationally determined will. This is clear from the last part of the second definition where Ghazali calls reason the adviser and power of justice a power that obeys the command as reason. As such the power of justice is a power that is partly created and partly acquired. Created in so far as it is identical with will, acquired in so far as it is determined by reason.

Ghazali sometimes seem to identify the power of justice with Reason itself, as it appears from the second definition. But here it is Reason in its regulative aspect. When Reason performs regulative function it becomes will.

One is reminded here of the controversy between Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites, on the question of priority of Reason or will in God. Mu'tazilites stood for Reason and said that God's will is determined by his wisdom. The Ash'arites glorified the will of God and said that God's will is His wisdom.

Ghazali, who is taken by the Ash'arites as one of their strong exponents, seems on this issue to be leaning toward M'utazilites. He believes that God does whatever He wills but His will is always directed by His wisdom. This view is reflected in his ethical discussions where he seems to subordinate will to Reason.

However, the confusion still permits, for Ghazali's account of the operation of the faculty of reason involves ambiguity. On the one hand he

seems to follow Aristotle in that Reason is a power of the soul which generates its own specific virtues and vices. When moderately exercised it generates the cardinal virtue, wisdom. But when its operation is immoderate i.e. either toward excess or defect, from it follow cardinal vices. deceit and ignorance. On the other hand he implies that the four cardinal virtues issue from the soul only when Passion, Anger and Will are under the control of reason. Ghazali regards Reason as an absolute authority over Passion, Anger and Will. The four cardinal virtues follow as a result of healthy relation between the earlier three powers and Reason.

But, again, Ghazali insists that the operation of Reason would itself be checked by the power of justice otherwise its excess or defect would lead to deceit and ignorance. Now, if by power of justice we understand will, it would imply that Ghazali recognises will as an authority over reason. This would contradict and falsify his earlier position, i.e., the authority of reason over the other faculties. If power of justice is identified with reason in its regulative function it would imply that reason ought to be its own judge. This is absurd. It would further imply that reason in its conative function can act contrary to reason in its cognitive and regulative function. In other words a contradiction in practical reason. As such practical reason should be as untrustworthy as theoretical reason. But this Ghazali does not seem to realize.

There is another difficulty, Ghazali believes alongwith Aristotle that just as the excess and defect of passion and anger lead to the vices, in the same way excess and defect of reason result in vices such as deceit and ignorance respectively. This is very strange. As for the earlier two faculties, namely, passion and anger, we can very well understand that their excess or defect could lead to vices. But to say about Reason, which is the guiding and controlling authority over passion and anger, that its excess can ever lead to deceit and cunningness appears very doubtful. Reason is an ideal faculty in man. When Aristotle defined man as a rational animal what is implied in his definition is not that man is actually rational, but that he has the potentiality to become rational. Rationality is man's differentia; it is his nature, his ideal, his perfection. But when Aristotle calls deceit and ignorance vices of reason, and wisdom a mean between these two, he is involved in a contradiction. It would imply that man's desire to, be rational can lead him to immorality also. This is absurd. When reason is man's ideal, his perfection, how can excess of reason generate vices such as deceit and cunningness?

Ghazali, being a follower of Aristotle in this respect, cannot escape this criticism for he also considers reason as the perfection of man. He writes in the *Kimiya* "Man has also been endowed with perfection. His perfection is reason with the help of which he knows God and His attributes, and frees himself from passion and anger".

In the first book of *Ihya* there is a chapter on the superiority of reason. There he defines reason as the purpose (*Ghaya*) of man and distinguishes between superior and inferior men in accordance, as they have more or less of reason.

The difficulty with Ghazali is that he is not capable of defining properly the role of reason in human life. Being a mystic and follower of Ash'arite theology, he would not like reason to have a free play. But, in the capacity of a philosopher and a logician, he cannot possibly ignore the authority of reason with the result, that he vacillates sometimes between Rationism and Mysticism and sometimes between rationalism and voluntarism. Ultimately he seeks refuge in mysticism. In the opening page of the third book of *Ihya* he says "The reality of man is his heart. This is a divine principle in man whose reality is a mystery".²⁵

Metaphysical foundation of the moral concepts

So far, through his psychological study of man, Ghazali establishes that moral notions such as virtue and vice have their source in human nature.

But, as human beings differ widely in their nature, these moral notions become subjective. The criterion of 'mean' provides objectivity to these notions, but cannot provide absolute objectivity. Besides, the criterion of 'mean' is not recognised by Ghazali himself as final. As an author of popular moral philosophy Ghazali defines virtue as a mean between two extremes. But, as a mystic Ghazali recognises a completely different criterion of good actions. To the followers of mystic order he recommends complete suppression of passion and anger by Reason, and ultimate surrender of individual's will to the Divine will. This is possible only through renunciation of earthly pleasures and dedication to God through mystic way (*Tariqa*).

Ghazali's recognition of a parallel moral code (*Tariqa*) for the followers of the mystic order alongwith the popular moral code (*Shari'a*) for the masses implies that the notions of virtue and vice are relative and subjective.

²⁵ *Ihya* p.1.

In order to provide objectivity and absoluteness to these moral notions, Ghazali seeks to establish their metaphysical foundation.

In *Al-Maqṣad-al-asna fī Sharḥ Asma-al-Husna* (The Highest aim in explanation of the Excellent Names of Allah) Ghazali refers to the names of Allah as the absolute criterion of virtue. He writes "The perfection of the worshippers, as well as his happiness lies in imitating (*Takhalluq*) the qualities of Allah, the most High, and in according himself with the meaning of His attributes and of His names — in that measure of course that may be within his right".

Attributes of God thus becomes values for man — approximation to, or imitation of these attributes his virtues. From a psychological analysis of virtue Ghazali arrives, in the manner of Plato at an absolute notion of perfection:— the attributes of God, like the Ideas of Plato, are the eternal verities. Man participates in these verities by approximating to or imitating them.

However, Ghazali unlike Plato would not allow man to have a free participation in the perfections of God. He imposes a limit by adding, "in that measure of course that may be within his right".

In further explanation of his relationship between God and man, he suggests the limits of legitimate imitation. The worshipper is not required to imitate all the divine attributes. He has no share in the divine names such as the Creator (*Al-Khalīq*), the Artificer (*Al-Bārī*), the Fashioner (*Al-Musammir*), etc. The reason is that man has no way of approach to those Names. But how do we know that man has a way of approach towards certain Names (Attributes) and not towards other Names, Ghazali does not tell.

Here it is interesting to compare Ghazali with Iqbal on the one hand, and with some contemporary writers on Muslim Philosophy, such as Dar, on the other. Iqbal in his "Reconstruction" argues that man shares with God His nature. Individuality and creativity are what constitute God's (Infinite Ego) Essential nature. The same constitute Man's (finite ego) nature. The more a man is progressive in individuality and creativity, the closer he is to God and to his own nature. Man's moral purpose is defined in terms of attainment of these perfections (Creativity and Individuality)²⁶

Dar in his "Ethical Teaching of Islam"²⁷ maintains that the most

²⁶ Iqbal, M — *Reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam* (Lahore, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf) 1962,

²⁷ Sharif M M.ed., — *History of Muslim Philosophy*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1963.

important attributes of God such as Unity and power are the values of first order for man. Man is therefore obliged to imitate them.

Ghazali's position is notably different from all such views. Being a mystic and a follower of an ascetic code of life, he recommends to man development of his passive nature, and imitation of only such attributes of God as would help him in his surrender to the will of God. These in his view are mercy, kindness, forgiveness, piety, temperance, etc. He forgets that surrender of a free, creative, powerful ego to the Infinite ego is a more complete surrender.