

THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF DOUBT IN AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S PHILOSOPHY

Osman Bakar

Authentic works attributed to Abu Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazzālī (450/1058-505/1111) are numerous and they deal with a vast range of subjects. But the specific work of his which has given rise to many commentaries by scholars upon the problem of doubt in his philosophical system, is the *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*⁹ (Deliverance From Error). This autobiographical work, written some five years before al-Ghazzālī's death and most probably after his return to teaching at the Maimūnah Nizāmīyah College at Naishapur in Dhū al-Qa'dah 499 July 1106 following a long period of retirement to a life of self-discipline and ascetic practices, has been compared by different present-day scholars with the Confessions of St. Augustine, with Newman's Grammar of Assent in its intellectual subtlety and as an *apologia pro vita sua*, and also with Bunyan's Grace Abounding in its puritanical sense¹⁰. More important, from the point of view of our present discussion, is the fact that this work has often been cited to support the contention that the method of doubt is something central to al-Ghazzālī's epistemology and system of thought, and that in this question al-Ghazzālī,

⁹ The title of the book occurs in two readings. One is *Al—Munqidh min al—Oalāl wa'l—mufsih 'an al—Ahwāl* (What saves from error and manifests the states of the soul). The other is *Al—Munqidh min al—Dalāi wa'l—muwassil* (or: *al—mūsil*) *ilā Dhi' l—'lzza wa'l—Jalāl* (What saves from error and unites with the Possessor of Power and Glory).

For an annotated English translation of this work based upon the earliest available manuscript, as well as translations of a number of al—Ghazzālī's other works that are specifically mentioned in the *munqidh*, see R.)oseph McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al—Ghazzālī's al—munqidh min .al—Oalāl* and other relevant works of at-Ghazzālī Boston (1980). For references to translations of the *munqidh* into various languages, see this book of McCarthy, p.xxv

¹⁰ See M. 'Umaruddin, *The Ethical Philosophy of al-Ghazzālī*, Lahore (1977), p.286, note 2 to chap, IV; also, Wensinck, *La Pensee de Ghazzālī*, p.111.

therefore, anticipates Descartes (1596-1650)¹¹. In fact, a number of comparative studies have been made of the place and function of doubt in the philosophies of the two thinkers.

Our aim in this paper is to discuss the meaning and significance of doubt in the life and thought of al-Ghazzālī, not as an anticipation of the method of doubt or the sceptical attitude of modern western philosophy, but as an integral element of the epistemology of Islamic intellectual tradition to which al-Ghazzālī properly belongs. We will seek to analyze the nature, function and spirit of the Ghazzālīandoubt. In discussing the above question, we re mindful of two important factors.’ One is the specific intellectual, religious and spiritual climate prevailing in the Islamic world during the time of al-Ghazzali, which no doubt constitutes the main external contributory factor to the generation of doubt in the early phase of al-Ghazzālī’s intellectual life. The other concerns the whole set of opportunities which Islam ever places at the disposal of man in his quest for certainty, and what we know of al-Ghazzālī s life shows us that he was very much exposed to these opportunities. Further, the spirit of the! Ghazzālīan doubt can best be understood when viewed in the context of the true purpose for which the *al-Munqidh* has been written and when also viewed in the light of his later works.

In the *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, al-Ghazālī informs us of how in the prime of his life he was inflicted with a mysterious malady of the soul, which lasted for nearly two months during which time he “was a sceptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine”¹². He was a student in his early twenties at the Nizāmīyah Academy of Naishapur when he suffered from this disease of scepticism. Now what is the nature of this Ghazzālīan doubt? al-Ghazzālī tells us that his doubt has been generated in the course

¹¹ See M.Saeed Sheikh, “Al—Ghazzali: Metaphysics” in M.M. Sharif, A History of muslim Philosophy, Wiesbaden (1963), vol.1,pp.587—588; Sami M. Najm, “The Place and Function of Doubt in the Philosophies of Descartes and al—Ghazzālī”; and also, W.Montgomery Watt, The Faith and Practice of al—Ghazali Chicago (1982), p.12.

¹² McCarthy, R. J., op. cit.,p.66.

of his quest for certainty, that is for the reality of things “as they really are” (*ḥaḳīq al-umūr*)¹³ This knowledge of the reality of things “as they really are” is what al-Ghazzālī calls *al-ilm al-yaqīn*, a sure and certain knowledge which he defines as “that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor is it accompanied by the possibility of error and deception, nor can the mind even suppose such a possibility”¹⁴. Here, we need to say something of this inner quest of al-Ghazzālī itself because it is very much relevant to the whole of our present discussion. In fact, the meaning of this quest should never be lost sight of if we are to understand truly the nature and significance of the Ghazzālīan doubt.

In Islam, the quest for *ḥaḳīq al-umūr* originates with the famous prayer of the Prophet in which he asked God to show him things as they really are. This prayer of the Prophet is essentially the prayer of the gnostic in as much as it refers to a supra-rational or inner reality of things. And for this reason, it has been the Sufis who have most faithfully echoed that prayer of the Prophet. The famous Sufi, Jāmi (d.1492), has this prayer beautifully expanded, capturing in an eloquent manner the spirit of the very quest of gnostic:

O God, deliver us from preoccupation with worldly vanities, and show us the nature of things “as they really are”. Remove from our eyes the veil of ignorance, and show us things as they really are. Show us not non-existence as existent, nor cast the veil of non-existence over the beauty of existence. Make this phenomenal world the mirror to reflect the manifestation of Thy beauty, not a veil to separate and repel us from Thee. Cause these unreal phenomena of the Universe to be for us the sources of knowledge and insight, not the causes of ignorance and blindness. Our alienation and severance from Thy beauty all proceed from ourselves. Deliver us from ourselves, and accord to us intimate knowledge of Thee¹⁵.

Al-Ghazzālī’s quest for certainty as he has defined it is none other than this quest of the gnostic. Initially, however, it was a purely intellectual quest. There were both internal and external forces at work in fueling that quest to the point of generating a period of intense doubt in the youthful life of al-

¹³ al-Ghazzālī, *munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p.11. The text cited here is the one published together with its French translation by Farid Jabre, *Erreur et Délivrance* Beirut (1969).

¹⁴ McCarthy, R.) op. cit., p.63.

¹⁵ Jami, *Lawā’ih*, A Treatise On Sufism, Trans. by E.H. Whinfield and M.M. Kazvini, Royal Asiatic Society, London (1914). p.2.

Ghazzali. Internally, by his own admission, his natural intellectual disposition has always been to grasp the real meaning of things. As for the external forces, we have already referred to the most important of these, namely the various intellectual, religious and spiritual currents of al-Ghazzali's times, all of which could not but have engaged his highly reflective and contemplative mind. That these various currents were of central concern to him is very clear from the *Munqidh*. He, in fact, traces the genesis of his famous doubt to those currents. He was struck by the diversity of religions and creeds and by the fact that the followers of each religion cling stubbornly to their inherited beliefs. One consequence of his critical reflection upon this question is the loss of the hold of *taqlidāt* (uncritical inherited beliefs) on him. But living as he was in an age when the idea of Transcendence is very much a living reality in the souls of men, the problem of diversity of religions wās not to lead al-Ghazzali to the kind of relativism that is rampant in modern times as a response to the same problem¹⁶. On the contrary, it was to lead him to the search for the inner reality of human nature, man's primordial nature (*fitrah*), which on the earthly plane becomes the receptacle for the multiplicity of religious forms and expressions.

It is wrong, however, to infer from the above that al-Ghazzālī is against *taqlid* as such. He never advocated at any time its abandonment altogether. In fact, he considered it to be necessary for the simple believers whose simple minds are free from the kind of intellectual curiosity that has been manifested by God in others, and are therefore content to accept things based on the authority of others. Al-Ghazzālī's criticism of *taqlid* must be seen in the context of his quest for the highest level of certainty, a quest which in practical terms is the concern, not of the majority; but of the few Like him. From the point of view of this quest, *taqlid* is certainly a great impediment to its realization and consequently he lets himself loose from the bonds of *taqlid* (*rābitat al-taqlid*). Here, one needs to make a clear distinction between *taqlid*, which is a particular manner of acquiring ideas, and *taqlidāt*, which are the ideas themselves. This distinction is somehow seldom noted by many students of Ghazzālīan thought. Al-Ghazzālī's rejection of the former

¹⁶ For a profound critique of the Modern interpretation of the meaning of diversity of religions, see F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine wisdom*, Perennial Book, Middlesex (1978), chap.!

for himself is his methodological criticism of its inherent limitations, while his acceptance of it for the simple-minded is simply an affirmation of an aspect of the reality of the human order. The unreliability of taqlid stems from the fact that it is susceptible to lending itself to both true and false taqlīdāt. The solution to the problem of false taqlīdāt is, however, not sought through the complete eradication of taqlīd, which is practically impossible, but through addressing oneself to the question of the truth or falsity of the taqlīdāt, themselves. Thus, in the Munqidh, al-Ghazzālī tells us how, after reflection upon the problem of taqlīd, he seeks to sift out these taqlīdāt, to discern those that are true from those that are false¹⁷. A lot of his intellectual efforts were indeed devoted to this task.

For al-Ghazzālī, the positive function of taqlīd, namely the acceptance of truths based on authority, is to be protected by those who have been entrusted with true knowledge, who constitute the legitimate authority to interpret and clarify knowledge about religious and spiritual matters. As it pertains to knowledge, the reality of the human order affirmed by al-Ghazzālī is that there are degrees or levels of knowledge and consequently, of knowers. This view has its basis in the Qur'anic verse which al-Ghazzālī quoted: "God raises in degrees those of you who believe and those to whom knowledge is given"¹⁸. In Islam, there is a hierarchy of authorities culminating in the Holy Prophet, and ultimately God Himself. Faith (īmān), which is a level of knowledge, says al-Ghazzālī, is the favourable acceptance (husn al-zann)¹⁹ of knowledge based on hearsay and experience of others, of which the highest is that of the Prophet.

There has been objection from certain modernist circles that the idea of admissibility of taqlīd for one group of people and its un-acceptability for another is a dangerous one for it will lead to the crystallization of a caste system which is against the very spirit of Islam. What has been said above is

¹⁷ Al-Ghazzālī, munqidh p.11.

¹⁸ Qur'ān (58:11). See McCarthy, op.cit., p.96.

¹⁹ Al-Ghazzālī, munqidh, p.40.

actually already sufficient to render this objection invalid. Nevertheless, we like to quote here the rebuttal of a scholar who has bemoaned the banishment of the Islamic idea of hierarchy of knowledge and of authorities at the hands of the modernists: “In respect of the human order in society, we do not in the least mean by ‘hierarchy’ that semblance of it wherein oppression and exploitation and domination are legitimized as if they were an established principle ordained by God. The fact that hierarchical disorders have prevailed in human society does not mean that hierarchy in the human order is not valid, for there is, in point of fact, legitimate hierarchy in the order of creation, and this is the Divine Order pervading all Creation and manifesting the occurrence of justice”²⁰. It is this idea of the hierarchy of knowledge and of being which is central to al-Ghazzali’s epistemology and system of thought, and he himself would be the last person to say that such an idea implies the legitimization of a social caste system in Islam.

To sum up our discussion of al-Ghazzālī’s methodological criticism of taqlīd, we can say that he was dissatisfied with it because it could not quench his intense intellectual thirst. It is obvious to him at that young age that taqlīd, is an avenue to both truth and error, but as to what is true and what is false there is an open sea of debate around him, which disturbs him profoundly. It leads him to contemplate upon the most central question in philosophy, namely the question of what true knowledge is, and this marks the beginning of an intensification of his intellectual doubt. Besides the problem of the diversity of religions and creeds of which the central issue is taqlīd, there is another and more important religious and spiritual current which contributed to the genesis of his doubt and which deeply affected his mind. This he mentions as the existence of the multiplicity of schools of thought (madhāhib) and groups (firaq) within the Community of Islam itself, each with its own methods of understanding and affirming the truth and each claiming that it alone is saved. Al-Ghazzālī maint., ins in the Munqidh that in this state of affairs of the Community, which he likens to “a deep sea

²⁰ Al-Attas, S.M.N., *Islam and Secularism*, Kuala Lumpur (1978), p.101.

in which most men founder and from which few only are saved”, one finds the fulfillment of the famous promise of the Prophet: “My Community will split into seventy-odd sects, of which one will be saved”. The above religious climate was not peculiar to the times of al-Ghazzālī alone. A few centuries earlier, al-Hārith b. Asad al-Muhāsibī (165/781-243/837)²¹, another famous Sufi, whose writings exercised a great influence on al-Ghazzālī, lamented the similar pitiful state of affairs into which the Islamic community has fallen. In fact, the autobiographical character of the *Munqidh* may have been modeled on the introduction to al-Muhāsibī’s work, *Kitāb al-wasāyā* (or *al-Nasā’ih*) which is also autobiographical in character²²

The following extract from the *wasāyā* reveals striking similarities with certain passages in the *Munqidh* and speaks much of the kind of religious climate prevailing during the time of al-Muhāsibī:

It has come to pass in our days, that this community is divided into seventy and more sects: of these, one only is in the way of salvation, and for the rest, God knows best concerning them. Now I have not ceased, not so much as one moment of my life, to consider well the differences into which the community has fallen, and to search after the clear way and the true path, whereunto I have searched both theory and practice, and looked, for guidance on the road to the world to come, to the directing of the theologians. Moreover, I have studied much of the doctrine of Almighty God, with the interpretation of the lawyers, and reflected upon the various conditions of the community, and considered its diverse doctrines and sayings. Of all this I understood as much as was appointed for me to understand and saw that their divergence was as it were a deep sea, wherein many had been drowned, and but a small band escaped therefrom; and I saw

²¹ On the life and teaching of this early Sufi figure, see Smith, Margaret, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad: A Study of the Life and Teaching of Hārith ibn Asad al—muhasibi*, London (1935).

²² See Arberry, A.J., *Sufism: An Account of the mystics of Islam*, Unwin Paperback, London (1979), p.47.

every party of them asserting that salvation was to be found in following them, and that he would perish who opposed them²³.

It is interesting that, although al-Ghazzālī's autobiographical work is more dramatic and eloquent than that of al-Muhāsibī, both men were led to an almost similar kind of personal crisis by similar external circumstances. Both sought the light of certainty and that knowledge which guarantees salvation, and they found that light in Sufism. In their very quest, they accomplished a philosophical as well as a sociological analysis of knowledge, the details of which remain to be studied. But having said this much, there is no doubt that al-Ghazzālī's philosophical discussion of doubt (shakk) and certainty (Yaqīn) is his original contribution.

We have already discussed the main factors which contributed to the generation of the Ghazzālian doubt, and the formulation of the fundamental question: what is the true meaning of knowledge? We have also mentioned that this doubt becomes more intensified after he begins to reflect with great earnestness upon the above question. We now discuss the philosophical meaning of this Ghazzālian doubt. We have seen earlier how al-Ghazzālī defines the kind of certain and infallible knowledge (al-ilm al-yaqīn) which he seeks. It is that knowledge which is completely free from any error or doubt and with which the heart finds complete satisfaction. Is such kind of certainty or certitude possible? It is significant that al-Ghazzālī never posed that question but, armed with the above criteria of certainty, proceeded immediately to scrutinize the whole state of his knowledge. He found himself "devoid of any knowledge answering the previous description except in the case of sense-data (hissiyāt) and the self-evident truths (darūiyāt)²⁴ He then sets out to induce doubt (tashkīk) against his sense-data to determine whether they could withstand his test of infallibility and indubitability. The outcome of this effort, in which reason (aql) appears as judge over the claims

²³ Arberry, 'ibid,pp.47-48, italics mine, Compare the italics portion with McCarthy op.ci,pp.62-63.

²⁴ McCarthy, ibid'p.64.

of the senses to certitude, is that his reliance on sense-data no longer becomes tenable. The charge of falsity leveled by reason against sense-perceptions cannot be rebutted by the senses.

With his reliance on sense-data shattered, al-Ghazzālī seeks refuge in the certainty of rational data which “belong to the category of primary truths, such as our asserting that ‘Ten is more than three’, and ‘One and the same thing cannot be simultaneously affirmed and denied’, and ‘One and the same thing cannot be incipient and eternal, existent and non-existent, necessary and impossible’”²⁵. However, this refuge in the rational data (aqliyyāt) too is not safe from elements of doubt. This time, doubt creeps in through an objection made on behalf of sense-data against the claims of reason to certitude. These claims of reason are not refuted in the way that reason itself has previously refuted the claims of the senses. They are merely subjected to doubt by means of analogical argumentations, but it is nevertheless a doubt which reason could not dispel in an incontrovertible manner. Reason is reminded of the possibility of another judge superior to itself, which if it were to reveal itself would “give the lie to the judgments of reason, just as the reason-judge revealed itself and gave the lie to the judgments of sense”²⁶. The mere fact of the non-appearance of this other judge does not prove the impossibility of its existence.

This inner debate within the soul of al-Ghazzālī turns for the worse when suggestion of the possibility of another kind of perception beyond reason is reinforced by various kinds of evidences and argumentations. First of all, an appeal is made to reason to exercise the principle of analogy to the phenomena of dreaming: that the relation of this suggested supra-rational state to the waking state, when the senses and reason are fully functional, is like the relation of the latter to our dreaming state. If our waking state judges our imaginings and beliefs in the dreaming state to be groundless, the supra-

²⁵ McCarthy, *ibid*,p.65.

²⁶ McCarthy, *ibid*,p.65.

rational state judges likewise our rational beliefs. This argumentation is as if al-Ghazzālī, himself one of the most respected jurists, is addressing himself to the jurists and others who are proponents of reason and who are well-versed with the principle of analogy. We are not suggesting here that this idea enters into the mind of al-Ghazzālī at the time of his actual experience of this inner debate. It could well have surfaced at the time of his decision to write the *Munqidh* in as much as the *Munqidh* was written, we believe, with a view of impressing upon the rationalists that Islamic epistemology affirms the existence of supra-rational perceptions as the real key to knowledge. Thus, al-Ghazzālī reproaches the rationalists in the *Munqidh*: “Therefore, whoever thinks that the unveiling of truth depends on precisely formulated proofs has indeed straitened the broad mercy of God”²⁷.

Next to confront reason in support of the possibility of a supra-rational state is the presence of a group of people, the Sufis, who claim that they have actually experienced that state. They allege that in the states they experience they see phenomena which are not in accord with the normal data of reason. Finally, the last piece of evidence brought to the attention of reason is the prophetic saying, “Men are asleep: then after they die they awake”, and the Qur’anic verse “Thou wast heedless of this; now have We removed thy veil, and sharp is thy sight this day”²⁸. Both the hadīth and the Qur’ānic verse refer to man’s state after death, and reason is told that, may be, this is the state in question.

All these objections to the claim of reason to have the final say to truth could not be refuted satisfactorily by reason. The mysterious malady of the soul of al-Ghazzālī, which lasted for nearly two months, is none other than this inner tussle or tension between his rational faculty and another faculty which mounts an appeal to the former, through the senses, to accept its existence and the possibility of those experiences that have been associated

²⁷ McCarthy, *ibid*, p.66.

²⁸ Qur’ān (50-22).

with its various powers, such as those claimed by the Sufis. This other faculty, which is supra-rational and supra-logical, is the intuitive faculty which, at this particular stage of al-Ghazzālī's intellectual development, has actualized itself only to the extent of acknowledging the possibility of those experiences. Later, during the period of his intense spiritual life, he claims to have been invested with higher powers of the faculty which disclose to him innumerable mysteries of the spiritual world²⁹. These powers al-Ghazzālī terms *kashf* (direct vision) and *dhawq* (translated as fruitional experience by McCarthy, and immediate experience by Watt)³⁰.

The gradational movement from sense-data to rational data presents no serious difficulty, but the first direct encounter between rational experience and the intuitive one proves to be a painful one for al-Ghazzālī. His two-month period of being "a skeptic" in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine" is the period of having to endure intense, doubts about the reliability of his rational faculty in the face of certain assertive manifestations of the intuitive faculty. His problem is one of finding the rightful place for each of the human faculties of knowing within the total scheme of knowledge, and in particular of establishing the right relationship between reason and intuition, as this latter term is understood traditionally. Thus, when he was cured of this sickness, not through rational arguments or logical proofs but as the effect of a light, (*nūr*) which God cast into his breast, his intellectual equilibrium was restored and he once again accepted the reliability of rational data of the category of *darūriyyāt*. However, in this new intellectual equilibrium, reason no longer occupies the dominant position it used to have,

²⁹ McCarthy, *op.cit.*,p.94.

³⁰ McCarthy, *ibid.*,p.95;Watt^{op.cit.},p.62. On the various terms used in Islamic thought for intuition, and on the question of the relationship between intellect and intuition in the Islamic perspective, see Nasr, S.H., "Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from the Islamic Perspective" in S.Azzam (ed.), *Islam and Contemporary Society*, Islamic Council of Europe (1982), pp.36-46.

for al-Ghazzālī says it is that light which God cast into his breast, which is the key to most knowledge³¹.

We do not agree with the view of certain scholars that the method of doubt is something central to al-Ghazzālī's epistemology and system of thought. The whole spirit of the *Munqidh* does not support the view that al-Ghazzālī is advocating in it systematic doubt as an instrument for the investigation of truth³². And there is nothing to be found in the *Munqidh* which is comparable to Descartes' assertion that "it is necessary once in one's life to doubt of all things, so far as this is possible"³³. This brings us to the question of the true nature of the first personal crisis of al-Ghazzālī. McCarthy describes this crisis of skepticism as an epistemological crisis, which is of the intellect alone, in contrast to his description

of al-Ghazzālī's second personal crisis as a crisis of conscience, which is of the spirit³⁴. Father Poggi, whose *Un Classico della Spiritualità Musulmana* is considered by McCarthy to be one of the finest studies on al-Ghazzālī and the *Munqidh*, does not consider the youthful scepticism of al-Ghazzālī as real but purely a methodical one³⁵. Another celebrated Italian Orientalist, Giuseppe Furlani, also agrees that the doubt of al-Ghazzālī is not that of the skeptic but that of the critic of knowledge³⁶. We agree with the view of these scholars that at the time of his crisis al-Ghazzālī was neither a philosophical nor a religious skeptic, and that the crisis is an epistemological or methodical one. The *Munqidh* alone provides ample evidence to support this view. Al-Ghazzālī was not a philosophical sceptic because he never contested the

³¹ Al-Ghazzālī, *munqid* p.13.

³² This view is discussed in Sami M.Najm, *op.cit.*,

³³ Descartes, *Principles*, pt.I, in *The Philosophical works of Descartes*, two vols., trans. by E.S.Haldane and G.R.T.Ross, New York (1955).

³⁴ McCarthy *op. cit.*, p.xxix.

³⁵ Poggi, Vincenzo NM., *Un Classico della Spiritualità musulmana*, Libreria dell' University Gregoriana, Rome (1967), p.171.

³⁶ Furlani, Giuseppe, "Dr.J.Obermann, *Der philos. and regligiose Subjektivis-ia* (1922). McCarthy in his above cited work provides an English translation of some excerpts from Furlani's above review, see pp.388-390.

value of metaphysical certitude. He was always certain of the de jure certitude of truth. Thus, as we have mentioned earlier, he never questions whether the knowledge of haqa'iq al-umur is possible or not. His natural intellectual disposition to always seek that knowledge is, in a way, an affirmation of his certainty of the de jure certitude of truth.

According to Schuon, it is the agnostics and other relativists who sought to demonstrate the illusory character of the de jure certitude of truth by opposing to it the de facto certitude of error, as if the psychological phenomenon of false certitudes could pre-vent true certitudes from being what they are and from having all their effectiveness and as if the very existence of false certitudes did not prove in its own way the existence of true once³⁷. As for al-Ghazzālī, he never falls into the above philosophical temptation of the agnostics and relativists. His doubt is not of truth itself, but of the mode of knowing and of accepting this truth. But since by truth here, he means the inner reality of things, his quest for that reality also implies a quest for its corresponding mode of knowledge. His criticisms of all the modes of knowing that were then within his practical realization were motivated by a real theoretical awareness of the possibility of another mode of knowing, which the Sufis claim is theirs. In the case of al-Ghazzālī, this possibility must have agitated his mind right from the time it was first impressed upon him through his direct personal encounter with the way of the Sufis. We may recall here the early educational background of al-Ghazzālī. It was an education which was permeated by a strong influence of Sufism. His father, says al-Subki, was a pious dervish who spent as much time as he could in the company of the Sufis.³⁸

The first teacher to whom his early education was entrusted was a pious Sufi friend of his. Studying together with him then was the younger brother, Ahmad al-Ghazzālī (d. 1126) who, though less famous later made his mark as

³⁷ Schuon, F. *Logic and Transcendence*, Harper and Row, New York (1975), pp. 43-44.

³⁸ Al-Subki, T., *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah al-Kubrā*, vol. IV, Cairo (1324/1906), p. 102, quoted in M. Saeed Sheikh, op.cit., pp. 582-583.

a great Sufi whose disciples include ‘Abd al-Qāhir Abū Najīb as-Suhrawardī (d.1168), the founder of the Suhrawardiyyah Order, and most probably, as believed by a number of scholars, al-Ghazzālī himself. During his stay of study at Naishapur, besides studying Sufism as one of the subjects, he also became a disciple to the Sufi Abū ‘Alī ‘al---Fadl ibn Muhammad ibn ‘Alī al-Fārmadhī al-Tūsī who was a pupil of al-Qushairī (d. 465/1074). Al-Ghazzālī learnt from al-Fārmadhī (d. 477/1084) about the theory and practice of Sufism and, under the latter’s guidance, even indulged in certain ascetic and spiritual practices.

He was increasingly attracted to the idea of a direct personal experience of God as insisted by the Sufis. He, however, felt a bit dis-heartened that he could not attain to that stage where the mystics begin to receive pure inspiration from “high above”³⁹. With all these in mind we strongly believe that Sufism plays a central role in leading al-Ghazzālī to his epistemological crisis. Al-Ghazzālī’s doubt of the trust-worthiness of reason was not generated from “below” or by the reflection of reason upon its own self, but was suggested from “above” as a result of his acquaintance with the Sufi’s mode of knowledge which claims to be supra-rational and which offers its own critiques of reason. Likewise, the doubt was removed not by the activity of reason, but from “above” as a result of the light of divine grace which restores to each faculty of know-ledge its rightful position a End its validity and trustworthiness as its own level. Al-Ghazzali was also never at any time a religious skeptic. He tells us in the Mungidh that, throughout his quest for certainty, he always has an unshakable belief in the three fundamentals of the Islamic faith: “From the sciences which I had practiced and the methods which I had followed in my inquiry into the two kinds of knowledge, revealed and rational, I had already acquired a sure and certain faith in God Most High, in the prophetic mediation of revelation, and in the Last Day. These three fundamentals of our Faith had become deeply rooted in my-soul,

³⁹ Ibn Khallikan, *wafayāt al-A’yān*, English translation by de Slane, Paris (1842—1871), vol.1 I, p.122, quoted by M.Saeed Sheikh, *op.cit.*,p.583.

not because of any specific, precisely formulated proofs, but because of reasons and circumstances and experiences too many to list in detail.”⁴⁰

The above quotation is yet another evidence provided by the Munqidh that al-Ghazzālī’s so-called skepticism is not to be equated with the ones we encounter in modern western philosophy. The doubting mind of al-Ghazzālī was, therefore, never cut off from revelation and faith. On the contrary, it was based upon a “sure and certain” faith in the fundamentals of religion. As for the doubting mind of the modern skeptic, it is cut off from both the intellect and revelation and in the pursuit of its directionless activity it has turned against faith itself. Now, what is the distinction between the “sure and certain” faith which al-Ghazzālī always has and the certainty which he seeks? We will deal briefly with this question because in its very answer lies the significance of the Ghazzālian doubt and also because charges have been levelled against al-Ghazzālī by scholars like J. Obermann⁴¹ that his haunting doubts of objective reality led him to find sanctuary in religious subjectivism.

The answer to the above question is to be found in the idea of certainty (yaqīn) in Islamic gnosis. There are degrees of certainty: in the terminology of the Qur’ān, these are ‘ilm al-yaqīn (science of certainty), ‘ayn al-yaqīn (vision of certainty) and haqq alyagīn (truth of certainty). These have been respectively compared to hearing about the description of fire, seeing fire and being consumed by fire⁴². As applied to al-Ghazzālī’s quest for certainty, the “sure and certain” faith which he says he has acquired from his inquiry into the various sciences refers to ‘ilm al-Yagīn since the acceptance of the truth is inferential in nature, based as it is upon the data furnished by revelation and the authority of the Prophet. In other words, at the level of faith, the truth which is the object of that faith is not known directly or with immediacy.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, munqidh pp.90-91.

⁴¹ Obermann, J., *Der philosophische und religiöse Subjektivismus Ghazzālīs’ Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Religion*, Wien and Leipzig (1921), p.20.

⁴² see Nasr, S.H., *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Crossroad, New York (1981), p.325; also, Abu Bakr Sirj al-Dīn, *The Book of Certainty*, New York (1974).

Nevertheless, to the extent that in one's act of faith one participates in the truth through both his reason and heart, faith already implies a particular level of knowledge and of certainty. Thus, from the beginning of al-Ghazzali's quest for the true knowledge of the Real, a certain element of certitude was always present.

In the *Kitab al-ilm* (Book of knowledge) of his magnum opus, *Ihya' Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revivification of the Religious Sciences), al-Ghazzali discusses the usage of the term *yaqīn* by the major intellectual schools of Islam up to his time. He identifies two distinct meanings to which the term is being applied. In one group are the philosophers (*nuzzīr*) and the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) who employ the term to signify lack or negation of doubt, in the sense that the knowledge or the truth in question is established from evidence which leaves no place for doubt or any possibility of doubt⁴³. The second application of the term *yaqīn* is that of the jurists and the Sufis as well as most of the learned men. *Yaqīn*, in this case, refers to the intensity of religious faith or fervor which involves both the acceptance, by the soul, of that which prevails over the heart and takes hold of it" and the submission of the soul to that thing in question. For al-Ghazzālī, both types of *yaqīn* need to be strengthened but it is the second *yaqīn* which is the nobler of the two since it is the life and value of the first, and it fosters religious and spiritual obedience and praiseworthy habits. In other words, philosophical certainty is of no value if not accompanied by submission to the truth and the transformation of one's being in conformity with that truth. Although the jurists and the Sufis are both identified with the second *yaqīn*, they are centrally concerned with different levels of *yaqīn*. The Sufis are basically concerned with a direct or immediate experience of the Truth, and with submission not merely at the level of external meaning of the *Sharī'ah* (Divine Law) but with submission of all the powers of the soul to the Pure Spirit. For this reason, the degrees of certainty we have earlier spoken of belong to *ma'rifah* (Islamic gnosis) and not to *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Or, in al-

⁴³ Al-Ghazzālī, *Kitāb al-'ilm*, English trans. by Nabih Amin Faris, Lahore (1974), pp.193-194.

Ghazzālī's popular terminology in the *lhyā*, they belong to 'ilm al-mukāshafah (science of revelation) and not to 'ilm al-mu'āmalah (science of practical religion).

Reverting back to al-Ghazzālī's "sure and certain faith", there are, with respect to his ultimate goal, deficiencies in both his modes of knowing and the submission of his whole being. Deficiency in the former lies at the heart of his first personal crisis which, as we have seen, is epistemological while deficiency in the latter is at the heart of his second personal crisis which is spiritual, although the two crisis are not unrelated. We have identified this earlier faith of al-Ghazzālī with the level of 'ilm al-yaqīn which is a particular manner of participation in the Truth. Objectively, if doubts could be generated about the trustworthiness of 'ilm al-yaqīn as being the highest level of certainty, it is because a higher level of certitude is possible for as Schuon profoundly says, if man is able to doubt, this is because certitude exists⁴⁴. Al-Ghazzālī's acquaintance with the methodology of the Sufis made him aware of the *de jure* certitude of truth of a higher level. At the time of his epistemological crisis, he was certain of this certitude only in the sense of 'ilm al-yaqīn. After the crisis, as a result of the light of intellectual intuition which he receives from Heaven, that certainty was elevated to the level of 'ayn al-yaqīn. This new-found certainty is not the end of al-Ghazzālī's intellectual and spiritual quest. He is too aware of the Sufis' claim of mystical experience but which he himself has not been able to realize yet, and this must have been a lingering source of inner disturbance for him. We remember how he did attempt to indulge in certain spiritual practices of the Sufis but without success. He is to realize later where his central fault lies: he was too engrossed in worldly desires and ambitions such as fame and fortune⁴⁵, while the efficacy of spiritual practices presupposes certain conditions like the sincerity of one's intention.

⁴⁴ Schuon, F.; op.cit., p.13.

⁴⁵ McCarthy, op.cit., p.91.

Al-Ghazzālī mentions in the *Munqidh* that immediately after his first crisis is over, he proceeds to study with greater thoroughness the views and methods of the various seekers of the Truth, whom he limits to four. These are “the mutakallimūn (theologians) who allege that they are men of independent judgment and reasoning; the ha-finities who claim to be the unique possessors of al-ta’līm (authoritative instruction) and the privileged recipients of knowledge acquired from the Infallible Imam; the philosophers who maintain that they are the men of logic and apodeictic demonstration; and finally the Sufis who claim to be the familiars of the Divine Presence and the men of mystic vision and illumination”⁴⁶. There is no doubt that al-Ghazal has undertaken this comparative study of all the categories of seekers of the Truth with the view of exhausting all the possibilities and opportunities which lie open to him in his path of seeking the highest level of certainty seekable, although one may already detect in him then that his real inclination and sympathy lies in Sufism. At the end of this thorough study, he came to the conclusion that “the Sufis were masters of states (*arbāb al-ahwāl*) and not purveyors of words (*ashāb al-aqwal*)”⁴⁷. He also came to realize how great a difference there is between theoretical knowledge and realized knowledge. For example, there is a great difference between our knowing the definitions and causes and conditions of health and satiety and our being healthy and sated, between our knowing the definition of drunkenness and our being drunk, and between our knowing the true nature and conditions of asceticism and our actually practicing asceticism. Certitude derived from realized knowledge is what *haqq al-yaqīn* is. This knowledge is free from error and doubt because it is not based on conjecture or mental concepts but it resides in the heart and thus involves the whole of man’s being ⁴⁸.

Realized knowledge, however, demands the transformation of the knower’s being. The distinctive characteristic of the Sufi mode of knowledge,

⁴⁶ McCarthy, *ibid*, p.67.

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazzālī, *munqidh* p.35.

⁴⁸ Nasr *op.cit.*, p.325.

says al-Ghazzālī, is that it seeks the removal of deformations of the soul such as pride, passional attachment to the world and a host of other reprehensible habits and vicious qualities, all of which stand as obstacles to the realization of that knowledge, in order to attain a heart empty of all save. God and adorned with the constant remembrance of God⁴⁹. This led al-Ghazzālī to reflect upon his own state of being. He realized the pitiful state of his soul and became certain that he was “on the brink of a crumb-ling bank and already on the. verge of falling into the Fire”⁵⁰ unless he set about mending his ways. Before him now lies the most important decision he has to make in his life. For about six months he incessantly vacillated between the contending pull of worldly desires and the appeals of the afterlife. This is al-Ghazzālī’s second personal crisis which is spiritual and far more serious than the first because it involves a decision of having to abandon one kind of life for another which is essentially opposed to the former. He tells us how, at last, when he has completely lost his capacity to make a choice God delivers him from, the crisis by making it easy for his heart to turn away from the attractions of the world. In the spiritual path of the Sufis, al-Ghazzālī found the light of certainty that he has tirelessly sought from the beginning of his intellectual awareness of what that certainty is.

It is therefore, in the light of the whole of Islamic epistemology and the idea of degrees of certainty (yaqīn) in Islamic gnosis that the famous Ghazzālīan doubt should be studied and understood. When al-Ghazzālī turns to his own inner being to find the light of certainty, it is not an exercise in religious subjectivism or an act of disillusionment with objective reality as maintained by scholars like Obermann and Furlani. Al-Ghazzālī, on the contrary, is in the quest for the highest objective reality which is, but the intellectual and spiritual tradition in which he lives and thinks makes him fully aware of the fact that what veils man from that reality is ‘the darkness of his own heart. Moreover, the living spiritual tradition of Islam also provides a

⁴⁹ McCarthy, op.cit.,p.90.

⁵⁰ McCarthy, ibid, p.91.

whole operative process, which leads by divine grace to the removal of that veil, for all the real seekers of the Truth, of which al-Ghazzali is an outstanding example. wa'llahu a'lam.