

AL-GHAZALI:
A CORRIDOR OF HOPE FOR
A LIVING THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

Imam Ghazali is commonly known to be as speculative theologian of the Ash'arite school of theology. However, he was not a strict follower of this theological school. A more accurate description of Ghazali would be of an originator of philosophical theology. He approached several doctrines of Ash'arite theology with suspicion and devised a new philosophical position which is compatible with reason, rationality and diversity. For him reason is not merely instrumental; he redefined reason and rationality with reference to their Divine noetic roots. Imam Ghazali has an enlightened fresh outlook that can provide moulds of thought for new receptivity and sensibility. His narrative is unprecedented and multi-faceted. The intellect of Imam Ghazali has served us in both the classical and modern age. In our present predicament, he is a corridor of hope for a living theological paradigm. Imam Ghazali was not against philosophy and natural science. His engagement with philosophy and science is extensive and longstanding which can be recognized and measured in many ways. This article argues against the prevailing misconception about Ghazali relating with philosophy and science and try to bring out the alternative view that he was not against philosophy and science. His approach to consult dissimilar scholars, theologians, jurists, mystics and philosophers and gain knowledge from every field of expertise is dynamic and inspirational. The diversity of sources of knowledge and variety of experience enabled him to be multidimensional. This approach and behavior is beneficial for academia and intellectuals who intend to construct a new theological bridge between religion and modern sciences.

Abu Hamid Muammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111) is an enigmatic as well as a charismatic figure in the Muslim intellectual history. He had an outstanding rank in the Islamic intellectual heritage. Imam Ghazali is commonly known to be as speculative theologian (*mutakallim*) of the Ash'arite school of *Kalam* theology, however it is worth noting that he was not a strict follower of this theological school. A more accurate description of Ghazali would be of an originator of philosophical theology. He approached several doctrines of Ash'arite theology with suspicion and devised a new philosophical position which is compatible with reason, rationality and diversity. For him reason is not merely instrumental; he redefined reason and rationality with reference to their Divine noetic roots. Imam Ghazali has an enlightened fresh outlook that can provide moulds of thought according for new receptivity and sensibility. His narrative is unprecedented and multi-faceted. The intellect of Imam Ghazali has served us in both the classical and modern age. In our present predicament, he is a corridor of hope for a living theological paradigm.

Blame is often put at the doorsteps of Ghazali for ushering in decline for the Muslim civilization. Arguments are advanced on the basis of his disparaging analyses of reason and rationality in his renowned book "*Incoherence of the Philosophers*"¹. His *Tahafah* is considered to be the reason for the decay of the Muslim intellectual tradition. Deterioration of Islamic intellectual legacy launched after misapprehension of immense use of reason and formal logic.

This thesis is enlarged by Oriental scholars and modern scholars, philosophers and historians in many intellectual circles, both east and west. They argue that Ghazali's attack on philosophy had demolished the credibility of reason and logic in Islamic intellectual tradition. After that, critical thinking stopped and orthodoxy came to the mainstream in the Islamic world. That assault brought to an end the development of philosophy and natural sciences in the Muslim world. As a consequence, the decadence of Islamic intellectual tradition started and still continues.

There is a long list of both Eastern and Western scholars who have argued that Imam Ghazali was responsible for the decadence of

the Muslim Ummah. I will cite here some of them. For example, the modern Muslim jurist and historian Syed Ameer Ali (1849–1928) from the Indian sub-continent pointed out in his book *The Spirit of Islam* that “Rationalism was thus fighting a losing battle of its old enemy, the writings of Imam al-Ghazali, which were directed chiefly against the study of philosophy.”²

The contemporary Arab philosopher and thinker Mohammed Abed Al Jabri (27 December 1935 – 3 May 2010 Rabat) also holds the view that Imam Ghazali was the imperative cause of the death of rationalism in Islamic history comparing to Averroes who was the great custodian and preserver of reason and philosophy. He figured it out in these words: “...post-Averroes Arabs have lived on the margin of history (in inertia and decline), because we kept clinging to the Avicennian moment after Ghazali granted it currency within “Islam”.”³

Neil deGrasse Tyson (born October 5, 1958) is an existing renowned American astrophysicist, author, and science communicator. He also proclaimed in his public lecture on how religious fundamentalism is the root of the collapse of the Islamic Golden age of Science and Mathematics in Baghdad that “al-Ghazali.....out of his work you get the philosophy that mathematic is the work of devil and nothing good can come out of this philosophy.”⁴

This hypothesis became popular and acquired attention of scholars after the advent of modernity. When they started to study the golden age of Islamic history with the lenses of modernity in the perspective of renaissance, they invented a theory of anti-rationalism by means of blaming Imam al-Ghazali. In fact, Imam Ghazali was not against philosophy and natural science. His engagement with philosophy and science is extensive and longstanding which can be recognized and measured in many ways. This article will argue against the prevailing misconception about Ghazali relating with philosophy and science and try to bring out the alternative view that he was not against philosophy and science. I will also try to construct the thesis that Imam Ghazali could be a suitable persona for constructing a living theological paradigm.

The scholarly work of Imam Ghazali unveils itself his place in the field of philosophy and science. The following works could be considered a most relevant and illuminating one to determine his accurate position:

Maqasid al-falasifah (مقاصد الفلاسفة) (Aims of the Philosophers) Full title: *Maqasid al-falasifah: fi al-mantiq wa-al-hikmah al-ilahiyah wa-al-hikmah al-tabʿiyah*

Tahafah al-Falasifa (تحافة الفلاسفة) (Incoherence of Philosophers)

Mīyār al-'Ilm fī fan al-Mantiq (معيار العلم في فن المنطق) (Criterion of Knowledge in the Art of Logic)

al-Madnun bihī'ala ghayr ahli (المضنون به على غير اهله) (the hidden [knowledge] from the masses)

al-Qistas al-Mustaqim (القسطاس المستقيم) (The Correct Balance)

Mihāk al-Nazar fīl al-Mantiq (محك النظر في المنطق) (Touchstone of Reasoning in logic)

Firstly, it is to be noted that he did not denounce philosophy in essence in *Tabafahal-falasifa* which can be known evidently from the proclamation of *Maqasid al-falasifab*. He was refuting some theological positions by using the same logic and principles which were not wrong in themselves. These introductory notes are so lucid and clear to clarify his position about philosophy and branches of philosophy and simplify the objective of his critique.

اعرفك اولاً ان علومهم اربعة اقسام، الرياضيات والمنطقيات والطبيعات والاهليات (واما الرياضيات) فيها نظر في الحساب والهندسة وليس في مقتضيات الهندسة والحساب ما يخالف العقل ولا هي مما يمكن ان يقابل بانكار وحده اذا كان كذلك فلا غرض لنا في اشتغال بايراده (واما الاهليات) فاكتر عقائدهم فيها على خلاف الحق والصواب نادر فيها (واما المنطقيات) فاكتر على منهج الصواب والخطأ نادر فيها وانما يخالفون اهل الحق فيها بالاصطلاحات والايادات دون المعاني والمقاصد اذ غرضها تهذيب طرق الاستدلالات واما الطبيعات فالحق فيها مشوب بالباطل^o

Imam Ghazali particularly stated that there are four branches of knowledge of the philosophers and then described the merit of each of them. He clearly mentioned that Mathematics had no such thing which was problematic and in conflict with religion and Logic is mostly correct and arguments in its vocabulary and terminology not with teleological use of it and Empirical sciences are mixed up with right and wrong. He had issue essentially with some Theological consequences and he said that many of theological positions of philosophers are mixed with error and rare in the right. He criticized those theological issues by pointing out their mistakes. He did not discredit philosophy but the theological views of philosophers which came in conflict with the doctrines or Islamic creed. For instance, if he had condemned some philosophical views, it does not mean that he was against philosophy per se. It's very simple to comprehend that the critique of some conclusions does not lead to the critique of principles.

Ghazali and Philosophy

Let us take a look at the issue of Ghazali and philosophy. After the translation of *Maqasid* into Hebrew, it played a significant role in the Jewish literature of the middle ages. “The *Maqasid* served for the Jews as the textbook of the peripatetic philosophy according to the version of Ibn Sina.”⁶ This translation is consulted and used by the desire to defend philosophy, believing that philosophy was an ally of religion.⁷

His early traditionalist adversary also complained his use of logic as propaedeutic to the science of *usul al-fiqh*. Ibn as Salah⁸ and later Ibn Taimiya denounced that he endorsed and applied logic in *Mustasfa* and they censured his statement that it is an introduction to all the sciences and that he who does not have a thorough knowledge of it cannot inspire confidence in his knowledge.⁹ Another scholar of Ghazali, George Makdasi shed light on his logic and philosophy by describing that his audacious stand was bound to arouse suspicions that he was not entirely unaffected by the heresy of the *falasifa*.¹⁰

There is an extensive catalogue of Muslim and non-Muslim philosophers who are influenced by the thought of Ghazali and he was influenced by them. Imam Tusi, Imam Fakhrudin Razi and Sharif Jurjani were influenced by philosophical thought of Ghazali and carried forward the philosophical theology that was formulated by him. Ramon Lull, T.O.S.F. (Catalan: c. 1232– c. 1315; in Latin Raimundus or Raymundus Lullus or Lullius) was a philosopher, logician, and theologian. He was student of the renowned philosopher Leibniz. He was influenced strongly by Ghazali and his thought. He was interested in logic and ethics and sought it from *Maqasid al falasifa* that had been translated into Latin. He worked on philosophico-theological system by means of rational discourse and his first works, a compendium of the Muslim thinker Al-Ghazali's logic and the *Llibre de contemplació en Déu* (Book on the Contemplation of God), a lengthy guide to finding truth through contemplation.

Muhammad bin Murtaza Faiz al-Kashani who was a pupil of great philosopher Mulla Sadra, wrote a classic book *المحجة البيضاء في تهذيب الإحياء* on the patron of *Ihya*¹¹ of Imam Ghazali with amendment according to the Shi'ites. It is an authentic referential book in Shi'ite school of thought. Imam Ghazali himself was influenced by philosophers like al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina and *Ibn- Maskawayh*. His exegeses of some *Ayat in* (مشكوة الانوار) *Mishkat al- anwar* are similar to the explanations of Ibn-e Sina in (اشارات) *Isyarat*. His arguments for essence and reality of soul

are derived from (كتاب الشفاء) *Kitab al-Shifa* of Ibn-Sina. *Maqasid al-falasifa* is the reproduction of *Ibn-Sina's* Persian work (دانشنامه علائی) *Danishnama*. The philosophy of ethics including essence of morality, its division and principles which are described with reference to Islam in *Ihya* is identical to philosopher Ibn-Maskawayh's¹² book (تهدیب الاخلاق) *Tehzeeb al-akhlaq* that is known as summary of the Greek philosophy on ethics.

It was philosophy that groomed Ghazali in argumentation and provided clarity to his thought. He argued while presenting his thought syllogistically in peripatetic fashion. He explained that how syllogistic form of reasoning can help in the problems of jurisprudence. He applied also syllogistic method for providing foundations and interpretive framework to solve the problems of jurisprudence that is acknowledged as *Usul al-Fiqh* in his book *Al-Mustasfa min 'ilm al-usul*. "Ghazali at first found solace in logic and deployed it to advance his theological propositions. Mastering the repertoire of logic, as well as of metaphysics and physics, clearly furnished his narrative with additional clarity, subtlety, and sophistication. However, it also provided him with new possibilities to share and exchange ideas with audiences beyond his limited fraternity of jurists and theologians."¹³

Ghazali and Cosmology

The position of Ghazali vis-a-vis cosmology is also debatable. He presented his own ideas about cosmological issues in the seventeenth discussion of *Incoherence of Philosophers* and later he also expressed his views about causality in a different way in *Ihya*. He stressed different aspects in different works. The traditionalist scholars situate him in the reference of theological school of Ash'arism and his position is understood as occasionalism. His ideas related to cosmology bear a resemblance to modern science as well. Allamah Shibli¹⁴ stated the opinion of Imam Ghazali about creation of the Universe in his distinguished book "Al-Ghazali" that this universe was created by God according to order, coherence and harmony as much as possible.

The modern debate on chapter 17 of *Tahafut al-falasifa* has focused on defining Ghazali as either a natural philosopher or an occasionalism theologian. In his defense of the possibility of miracles Ghazali presented two theories of causation, one denying the logical basis of Aristotelian notions of natural causality, and the other more or less adopting these notions. The two theories seem mutually exclusive and incompatible, and for this reason scholars have

attempted to explain Ghazali for the apparent confusion.”¹⁵ It is a stand in debate that did Ghazali deny the causality or not. In fact, Ghazali did not deny causality in general but the argument which Ghazali directed against the causal doctrine of philosophers is aimed at disapproving the necessity of causal relations as claimed by the philosophers.¹⁶

Professor Frank Griffel proposed that Ghazali was not an occasionalist in the line of the Ash‘arites. But he has his own different stand points which also elucidate causality in a more adjustable way and said that “Overall, Ghazali tried to make philosophical cosmology more approachable to the religiously trained reader. Later, in his *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Ghazali writes that it is not contrary to the religious law for a Muslim to believe that the celestial objects are compelled by God’s command to act as causes (*asbab*) in accord with His wisdom.”¹⁷

A Corridor of Hope

Imam al-Ghazali has the promise of becoming a corridor of hope in constructing a living theological paradigm. He is a great source of inspiration in rationalistic inquiry, agonizing self-criticizing orientation, and interdisciplinary approach, diachronic and scientific approach. He guides us to deliverance from self-indulgence and proffers an enlightening approach to interact with others in modern and postmodern pluralistic society. Ghazali has a deep theistic foundation as well as flexible exterior in epistemology and cosmology which both are needed in a living theological paradigm. There are few motivating forces which make him a corridor to hope.

Rational Inquisition

He was not against rationality as mentioned above but it was unbridled rationalism which he opposed. He was not a foe of philosophy but there were some theological consequences of Muslim philosophers which he criticized. He mentioned a catalog of problems in *Incoherence of philosophers* which were conflicting with Islam. He criticized those problems by emphasizing three of them. He also condemned the oppressive attitude of Muslim philosophers which was based on arrogance, egotism and absolutism or they claimed that their interpretation of God and cosmos was absolutely correct and there is no other possibility to be right. There was a small number of people like philosophers who can clutch at it and other are inferiors and ignorant who have no capacity to grasp it. There were actually theological and moral triggers which prompted him to disparage their ideological position and cynical behavior. He used reason in a proper way and created the methodological space for

rationality in his philosophical theology. Rational inquisition in his paradigm of jurisprudence and cosmological structure is noticeable that can be accommodating for us to develop a living theological paradigm.

Empirical Attitude

Imam al-Ghazali has an empirical attitude which is normally underestimated. He was not against natural sciences as some of his critics propagated to establish this charge. He evidently remarked about empirical sciences in the beginning of *Maqasid ul Falasifa* that it was not all about misleading knowledge of reality but rather is a mixture of wrong and right. I think that it is a really fair epistemological position to assume any form of knowledge and reality. This kind of attitude is appreciated in modern and natural sciences which are central grounds for new theological paradigm. It has already been discussed at the length that he did not deny causality but he situated the doctrine of causation in a moderate way which is adjustable for religion and modern sciences. He recognized empirical method and valued empirical premises as Michael E. Marmura cited: “In the Standard for Knowledge, the logical treatise appended to the Incoherence, Ghazali accepts the Avicennian claim that certain empirical premises yield certainty.”¹⁸

Agonistic Orientation

There is also a distinguishing quality of Imam Ghazali; his agonistic behavior. This agonistic apparatus is related to conflicts. This behavior is not confined to aggressive and skeptical behavior but it is engaging and reconciliatory orientation. This behavior puts emphasis on the significance of conflict and divergence in the field of ideas and the history of thought. This attitude is pertinent to postmodern condition and a pluralistic society. Living theological paradigm is interwoven with a cluster of complexities and conflicting agencies. Imam Ghazali suffered a storm of complexities and struggled a lot to engage with it. We are also facing the same situations which are more complex and ambiguous. The diversity of existential condition and philosophical posture nurtured the dynamic and vigorous inferences in theology. In this situation, Imam Ghazali can lead us in a most encouraging and appropriate way.

Diversity and Interdisciplinary Approach

Imam Ghazali is not decisive and conclusive about ideas which are scattered in different texts. The materials given in the *Tabafut al-falasifa* leave the impression of being inconclusive and open-ended—perhaps deliberately so—and the ambiguities are mirrored in al-Ghazali's other texts. This intellectual haze and open-ended

arrangement endows with mixture of old and new and creates space for a living theological paradigm that can adjust past with present and present with future.

His approach to consult dissimilar scholars, theologians, jurists, mystics and philosophers and gain knowledge from every field of expertise is dynamic and inspirational. The diversity of sources of knowledge and variety of experience enabled him to be multidimensional. Professor Ebrahim Moosa pointed it out in these words: “*This is also what makes his scholarly labors so distinct—that he managed to innovate a very early interdisciplinary approach, mixing metaphors and paradigms in order to illuminate ideas and problems.*”¹⁹

This approach and behavior is beneficial for academia and intellectuals who intend to construct a new theological bridge between religion and modern sciences.

Diachronic Approach

Ghazali is also brilliant in linguistics. He has a diachronic approach which is lively. The diachronic approach in linguistics cooperates with history in an organic manner. It looks at the development of meaning and considers the evolution of words throughout history. He adopted this approach and provided a new meaning to the word to be alive. We all have different pictures and grammatical effects of religious beliefs according to Wittgenstein. These grammatical effects affect a lot the structure of understanding and participate in constructing a paradigm.

He employed a rich reservoir of vocabulary in Islamic tradition in a vibrant manner. He explained Divine unity (*Tawhid*) in his monumental work (*Ihya*) in different way which is not literal but he exemplified Divine Unity (*Tawhid*) in mystical perspective enchantingly by using as an analogy the walnut with enormous experience as Sufi. He profoundly expended the meaning of *Sunna* and described that it begun as social normativity and remained in the form of good. There is another example of the word *ajal* which was normally understood as a predestined term of life associated to *qadariya* school of thought. He explained this word *ajal* according to an idea of *Ash'arite* in the form of *Occasionalism* and said that it is the moment in which God creates death at the time of death. “It ought to be said that [the decapitated individual] died by his *ajal*, *ajal* meaning the time in which God creates in him his death”²⁰. There is a long list of words like *Bid'ah*²¹, *Ilm*, *Itiqad*, *Itibah*, *Taqlid* etc which he connected lively.

This approach is embodied in an active epistemic practice and can unlock for us a door of epistemological reconstruction. The emergence of this living ethos is desirable for constructing a new

livening theological paradigm. Therefore, Ghazali is a better alternative for inspiration in building a living theological paradigm which can accommodate rapture and melancholy of Islamic tradition.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ This is English translation of his book "تهافت الفلاسفة"
- ² Sayed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam or The life and Teaching of Muhammad*, S. K. Lahiri and Co, 54 collage street, 1902, p.411.
- ³ M. A. Al-Jabri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique*, University of Texan Press, Austin, Texan, 1999, p. 124.
- ⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fl1nJC3lvFs>
- ⁵ مقاصد الفلاسفة لشيخ الإسلام الغزالي، Muhyi al-Din Sabri al-Kurdi, al-Matba'ah al-Mahmudiyah al-Tijariyah bi-al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt, 1936, p 2.3.
- ⁶ Gerahon B. Chertoff, The Logical Part of Al GHazali' s Maqasid Al- Falasifa, a thesis for the degree of Doctor of philosophy, in the faculty of philosophy, Columbia University, 1958, p. 84.
- ⁷ Ibid, p 85.
- ⁸ al-Dhahabi described Ibn al-Salāh as the shaikh of the Shafi'i scholars and he was famous in the expertise of hadith.
- ⁹ See Ghazali, *al-Mustasfa min ilm al-usul*, Cairo, Bulaq, 1322, vol. 1, p 10.
- ¹⁰ George Makdasi, "The non-ash'arite shafi'ism of Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali", French journal, *Extrat De La Revue Des Etudes Islamiques, Libr. Orientaliste Paul Geuthner*, Tome Liv, 1986, p. 252.
- ¹¹ *Ihya' Ulum al-din*, Translated in English as 'The Revival of the Religious Sciences.
- ¹² His complete name is Abu Ali Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Yaqub ibn Miskawayh (932–1030). He wrote the book Refinement of Morals (تَهْذِيبُ الْأَخْلَاقِ) by focusing on refinement of character with reference to Islam and Greek philosophy of ethics.
- ¹³ Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2005, p. 171, 172.
- ¹⁴ Allammah Shibli Nomani (1857-1914) is an Islamic scholar of Indian subcontinent. He is famous for his magnum opus *Sirat-un-Nabi* that was completed by his disciple Syed Sulaiman Nadvi after his death.
- ¹⁵ Leor Halevi, "The Theologian's Doubts: Natural Philosophy and the Skeptical Games of Ghazali", by the journal of *History of Ideas*, 2002, p 21.
- ¹⁶ See Did al- Ghazali deny Causality? To the memory of Richard Walzer, P, 85.
- ¹⁷ Frank Griffel, *Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p. 146.
- ¹⁸ Michael E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazal's Second Causal Theory in the 17th Discussion of his Tahafut," in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Parviz Morewedge, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1981, P, 149
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 172
- ²⁰ Michael E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazali's Second Causal Theory in the 17th Discussion of his Tahafut," in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Parviz Morewedge, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1981, P, 148
- ²¹ Bidah is the norm that is invented and recognized as religious norm without the sanction of prophet.