CRISIS AND CERTAINTY OF KNOWLEDGE IN AL-GHAZĀLĪ (1058–1111) AND DESCARTES (1596–1650)

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In the *Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (Deliverance from error) al-Ghazālī presents us with an autobiographical account in which he takes his conversion from skepticism to faith as an occasion for philosophical reflection. The story of the philosopher's implacable search for intellectual and spiritual certainty is likely to be deeply moving to any reader. Moreover, the *Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* reveals how that search eventually turned into an agonizing quest. Al-Ghazālī, the most celebrated scholar and teacher of his time, the pride of the Niẓāmiyya Academy of Baghdad, a man of great intelligence whose advice was sought by fellow theologians, scientists, and princes, ultimately felt that the only thing he could be certain of was his upcoming physical and mental collapse. Apparently, he realized that the more he accumulated objective knowledge the less he found himself convinced of the knowability of anything. As Richard Joseph McCarthy comments, in *Freedom and Fulfillment*: "in Ghazali subjective certitude was inversely proportional to the mass of objective knowledge (cognitions)."[1] But let us hear al-Ghazālī in his own words:

> So I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire, unless I set about mending my ways. I therefore reflected unceasingly on this for some time, while I still had freedom of choice. (*Freedom*, p. 91)

In the introduction to his translation of the *Munqidh* McCarthy uses this self-description to give an insightful psychological profile of the Persian philosopher:

> And the choice for men like Ghazali, strongly emotional and introspective, but much less inclined to action, becomes precisely a tormenting fury with its steps ahead and its sudden withdrawals, doubts and uncertainties and above all the affective coloration, with more and more painful soul states and a physiological repercussion on the whole humoral condition. . . . (*Freedom*, p. xxxi)

This could, indeed, explain how al-Ghazālī, as he discloses himself in his autobiographical writing, ultimately lost the ability to speak and had to give up his prestigious Chair of Theology to become a pilgrim. This piece of self-revelation, the like of which is rarely found in the philosophical literature, still impresses the modern reader—unless, of course, one believes, as did 'Abd al-Dāi'im al-Baqarī, that the doubts exposed in the *Munqidh* are nothing but "the ruse of a rhetorician who wants to make himself pass for a free inquirer among a crowd of the slaves of 'conformism' *[taqlīd]*" (*Freedom*, p. xxvii), or, at best, that al-Ghazālī, wishing to be remembered as a religious reformer,

constructs the *Munqidh* by directing it toward that end and invents wholly, or nearly so, the account of a spiritual evolution which led him, through theoretical study and practical experimentation, from the doubt of the sophists to the certitude of the mystics. (*Freedom*, p. xxviii)

If the thesis of a didactically motivated skepticism holds true, one would have to put al-Ghazālī's efforts to overcome uncertainty in even closer vicinity to Cartesian methodical doubt than some scholars have already suggested.[2] Descartes' famous description of a Self doubting itself in the *Meditations* has, after all, often been interpreted as a device introduced for the sole purpose of demonstrating that a skeptical position is intellectually unbearable—since it is impossible to be certain of one's uncertainty without thereby already overcoming skepticism.[3]

However, the purpose of this essay is not to find out whether al-Ghazālī and Descartes have both faked their respective intellectual crises. The actual philosophical interest of comparing these two great minds lies not in exploring their skeptical periods but, on the contrary, in discovering how they thought that doubt could be defeated, namely by creating what one could call an "epistemological platform" that is grounded in subjectivity. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct that "platform." To that effect, this essay will first examine al-Ghazālī's criticism of various schools of thought (those that he makes partly responsible for his intellectual crisis), then proceed to compare and contrast him with Descartes as the Western champion of certitude, and in the end turn to the opening book of al-Ghazālī's famous *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the religious sciences) to clarify his notion of 'certain knowledge.'

Al-Ghazālī's Criticism of Various Schools of Thought

Al-Ghazālī identifies in the *Munqidh* four different groups of seekers after truth in Islam: the scholastic theologians *(mutakallimūn)*, the Bāṭinites (that is, an Ismā'īlī sect of the time), the philosophers, and the Sufis—basically every school that claimed to have any knowledge. He tells us that he had scrutinized most thoroughly their respective doctrines without, however, finding anything in them that could convince him of the reliability of their teachings.[4]

Much has been written about al-Ghazālī's critique of these four groups. It appears to me, however, that not too many interpreters of his philosophy realized (1) that his issue was less with the actual results achieved by these various seekers of truth than with how the truth was arrived at, and (2) that he had already convinced himself of the necessarily incomplete nature of the knowledge they were able to obtain, which reinforces the view that the story of his breakdown may, indeed, have been feigned.

Al-Ghazālī, for instance, deplores the fact that theologians, in their—legitimate—effort to defend the orthodox faith,

> *relied on* premises which they *took over* from their adversaries, *being compelled* to admit them either by *uncritical acceptance,* or because of the *Community's consensus* or by

simple acceptance deriving from the Qur'ān and the Traditions. (*Freedom,* p. 68; my emphasis)

Al-Ghazālī is not suggesting that what theologians have relied on is false; rather he is exposing the fact that they simply rely on basic doctrinal statements. Surprisingly enough, al-Ghazālī is not even exempting premises that his fellow theologians derive from the undisputed sources of Islamic law, that is, scholarly consensus *(ijmāʿ),* the Koran, and "Traditions" *(Ḥadīth),* not because these might be erroneous but because theologians do not attempt to verify or in some way validate them by a methodical inquiry. What al-Ghazālī is actually denouncing is the excessive reliance on authority and tradition, which, to put it in more modern terms, may lend itself to a fundamentalist mind-set. As to the other three schools, al-Ghazālī exposes the Bāṭinites for depending entirely on the teaching of an (allegedly) infallible Imam,[5] the philosophers and scientists for assuming that rational propositions are conducive to ultimate truth, and finally the Sufis for trusting the power of ecstasy alone.[6] One cannot help but appreciate the fresh breath that passes through al-Ghazālī's work, a fresh and daring breath that invites its readers to become seekers of truth themselves. His criticism would be entirely misunderstood if interpreted as a call to break away from tradition; Holy Scripture remains, of course, the repository of revelation. *Al-Ghazālī's epistemological tenet, however, is that nobody becomes knowledgeable just by quoting from authoritative texts—knowledge takes shape in an individual mind seeking truth.*

Al-Ghazālī is, in addition, deeply critical of the (objective) knowledge actually reached by these various schools of thought. One finds this expressed best in *The Alchemy of Happiness,* one of his few treatises written in Persian, where, for instance, he points out the limited scope of the sciences (without, however, dismissing the usefulness of scientific investigation as such).[7] To illustrate his dissatisfaction with the scientists in various disciplines, al-Ghazālī compares them to ants observing the writing of letters:

> The mere *physicist* is like an ant who, crawling on a sheet of paper and observing black letters spreading over it, should refer the cause to the pen alone. The *astronomer* is like an ant of somewhat wider vision who should catch sight of the fingers moving the pen. (*Alchemy,* p. 38)[8]

The true knower, however, as envisaged by al-Ghazālī, is to be likened to an ant grasping that these letters ought to be traced back farther, not just to a writer but to the writer's brain, in which the written word took shape, and finally to the wish to write conceived in the writer's *"qalb,"* that is, his heart, which is considered the seat of knowledge.[9] A comprehensive understanding of these letters is only ensured if one oversees all the steps from the letters' appearance on the paper to the writer's intention to inscribe a certain word (in al-Ghazālī's text "Allah," the name of God).

The epistemological implications in al-Ghazālī's humorous imagery of ants trying to make sense of ink marks can easily be overlooked. How significant some

of these implications actually are emerges more clearly by comparing the passage quoted above to a similarly construed text in Plato's *Republic,* where Socrates invites his interlocutor to represent all that can be known along a mathematically divided line. The juxtaposition of the two texts reveals an adroit use of the figure of analogy. In the passage in question, true and complete knowledge is explained by Socrates to be the ability to relate correctly—that is, through the means of a proportion—the visible and invisible realms of all reality, and again, within these two realms, the proportionately corresponding sections.[10] A reflection in the water will thus be traced back to the object in which there is more "reality" than in its mirrored image (which explains why the sections on the line representing them cannot be of equal length but only proportionally related to each other). Truer than the visible object, in turn, is the notion one conceives of the object, and truer than the notion is the idea that renders the concept possible. By the same token, the "truest" notion sought in al-Ghazālī's analogy of the ant is the genuine, or, one might say, innermost *"qalbian"* knowledge that is at the epistemic origin of the reflection (preceding the act of writing). To take up al-Ghazālī's example, there could, indeed, be no true desire to trace the name of God without an already existing knowledge of God that triggers that desire.

The more striking parallel between Plato and al-Ghazālī, however, involves a basic epistemological premise becoming apparent through the comparison above, one that has knowledge rest on completeness, since true knowledge cannot possibly be fragmented or can cover only a few aspects of the reality of an object. Therefore, a true knower does not stop short of grasping the originating principle of that object or of the epistemic process that he (or she) wishes to understand. On the other hand, a true knower also does not restrict reality to that principle only but follows it through all of its manifestations down to its lowest expression, such as a reflection or a shadow in Plato, or ink marks traced on a sheet in al-Ghazālī.

The structural affinities between Plato's and al-Ghazālī's epistemological schemes should not mislead one about existing conceptional differences. Sometimes the most similar passages in philosophical texts of different derivation also bear strong contrasting moments. Plato, for instance, is also critical regarding the actual knowledge attainable through the sciences.[11] The difference lies in that he imputes this to the geometer not making use of reason *(nūs),* the highest faculty, but rather "only" the faculty of understanding. A more serious divergence appears at this point in that *nūs* is not the same as al-Ghazālī's *qalb.* As the Persian philosopher emphasizes, the heart is not "the piece of flesh situated in the left [side] of our bodies, but that which uses all the other faculties as its instruments" (*Alchemy,* "The knowledge of self," p. 21).[12] The heart employs all available cognitive means in order to attain self-knowledge, and through self-knowledge the knowledge of God. The question of self-knowledge is addressed in many Platonic dialogues. It is, however, not discussed in connection with the attainment of the knowledge of (a) God. Comparability between reason and the heart is, nevertheless, ensured, since both faculties act as supreme cognitive capabilities in their respective epistemological schemes.

A strong epistemic link between self-knowledge and the knowledge of God exists, however, in the philosophy of Descartes, which adds to the challenge of contrasting and comparing him with al-Ghazālī.

Unraveling 'Certainty' and the 'Self' in al-Ghazālī and Descartes

Al-Ghazālī does not content himself with merely exposing the lack of reliable and complete knowledge in theological, sectarian, philosophical, and mystical teaching. He formulates carefully the criteria of what he deems to be truly certain:

> So I began by saying to myself: "What I seek is knowledge of the true meaning of things. Of necessity, therefore, I must inquire into just what the true meaning of knowledge is." Then it became clear to me that *sure* and *certain* knowledge [al-'ilm al-yaqīnī] is that in which the thing known is made 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. (*Freedom*, p. 63)[13]

The first part of the statement is about understanding that there could be no true knowledge of things without the knowledge of what true knowledge is in the first place. The second part lists the criteria for true knowledge, namely that it be "sure" and "certain" knowledge. Not only ought there to be no doubts but the possibility of error and deception should be excluded to such an extent that one would be unable even to think of that possibility. This type of knowledge is of such an unshakeable nature that, if it were to be challenged, it would still not be dismissed. For instance, if somebody maintained that three is more than ten and hoped to prove this claim by turning a stick into a snake (like Moses), one would continue to know that ten is more than three. However great the marvel produced by the transformation of the stick, it would clearly not compel us to revise our knowledge of arithmetic (see *Freedom*, pp. 63–64).

How can such a high degree of certainty be achieved? For al-Ghazālī, an important step in that direction consists literally of purging one's mind of opinions and beliefs that have been adopted from youth without ever being questioned. Only through this "cleansing" of inherited beliefs can one's innate (religious) disposition, namely one's *fiṭra*, be recovered. Al-Ghazālī is referring here to a famous saying of the Prophet: "Every infant is born endowed with the *fiṭra*: then his parents make him Jew or Christian or Magian [Zoroastrian]."[14] The implication is that every human is predisposed to Islam by birth, but then perverted by its non-Muslim environment. It is quite significant that al-Ghazālī goes a step further by suggesting that any opinion that is not accepted out of inner conviction stains one's system of beliefs (and thus one's epistemological basis). With his usual intensity al-Ghazālī describes in his autobiographical account how he himself

> felt an inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original *fiṭra*, and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through slavish aping of parents and teachers

and that he

wanted to sift out these uncritical beliefs, the beginnings of which are suggestions imposed from without, since there are no differences of opinion in the discernment of those that are true from those that are false. (*Freedom,* pp. 63–64)

As previously stated, al-Ghazālī is not taking issue with the contents of these beliefs but with the fact that he had accepted them in his youth without inner conviction. Opinions, however, are not the only externally imposed beliefs one needs to rid oneself of. Any type of untested epistemic content is doomed to be subjected to the same treatment—for instance, as is information transmitted through sense perception, since it can represent a powerful hindrance to the attainment of (spiritual) truth:

> To use a figure, the heart *[qalb]* may be represented as a well, and the five senses as five streams which are continually conveying water to it. In order to find out the real contents of the heart these streams must be stopped for a time, at any rate, and the refuse they have brought with them must be cleared out of the well. In other words, we must put away, for the time knowledge which has been acquired by external processes and which too often hardens into prejudice. (*Alchemy,* p. 28)[15]

From here, much could be said about al-Ghazālī's critique of religious practices and how his teaching intended to address what he perceived to be deficiencies in traditional Muslim upbringing. This, however, would alter the course of this investigation. The following reflections will, therefore, abstract from the original religious context and focus entirely on interiority as the epistemic cornerstone in his philosophy—the heart as a source of knowledge in itself and not as a means to restore one's original religious disposition. Only in this way can a comparison with Descartes' search for certainty be attempted.

The similarities between the two philosophers are many—in thoughts, phrasing, and even in the examples they use. As a note found in the "Cartesian Collection" of the National Library in Paris by V. V. Naumkin suggests, these similarities may well have to do with the always secretive Descartes having known al-Ghazālī's work.[16] One thus finds the French philosopher deeply distrustful of what a majority of people may be thinking, reasoning that it is more likely for an individual to discover something of value than for an entire nation (see *Discourse on Method,* p. 14). As in al-Ghazālī's philosophy the Cartesian stand is that true knowledge cannot be transmitted through authorities, however great they may be, but that the acquisition of knowledge is a matter of critical self-appropriation. Moreover, Descartes, too, mentions in the very same work the devastating effects that unquestioned custom and opinions can have on one's acquisition of certain knowledge and also the need to establish criteria for true knowledge. We find him thus stating, in the *Discourse on Method*:[17]

> for all the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I could not do better than to undertake, once and for all, to get rid of them, in order to replace them afterwards either by other, better ones, or even by the same ones, when I would have adjusted them to the level of reason. (Part Two, 1, p. 29)

Like al-Ghazālī, the French philosopher is highly aware of the impact of social, cultural, and religious upbringing on one's judgment. And he, too, is not excluding the possibility that there might be truth in habits and beliefs.[18] These, however, ought to be validated, which is why Descartes proposes to adjust opinions "to the level of reason," that is, to fit them into a rational scheme. This is the context in which Descartes develops his famous four rules (only the first of which is relevant for the present inquiry):

> The first rule was never to accept anything as true that I did not evidently know to be such: that is to say, carefully to avoid all precipitation and prejudice, and to include in my judgments nothing more than that which would present itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I were to have no occasion to put it in doubt. (*Discourse on Method,* Part Two, 7, p. 15)

Without any question, Descartes is as fierce and rigorous in establishing certainty as al-Ghazālī: what is (still) dubitable or only probable cannot be said to be true. Nevertheless, the clearing of unvalidated opinions and sensational perceptions is not expected to unravel one's original—religious—basis. What it provides is the unhindered working of reason that for Descartes is invested best in mathematics—to the extent that the clarity and distinctness of thought achieved in arithmetic and geometry become the measure for reliable knowledge. (How the French philosopher still manages to bring God into his epistemological scheme shall be explained below.)

A more important difference has to do with al-Ghazālī never doubting his own self, in the sense of questioning his very existence in the way that Descartes did in his *Meditations.* Even though the French rationalist may never truly have wondered whether he really existed (as he would like his reader to believe), it remains remarkable that he thought of the possibility of that inner epistemic drama. Moreover, one needs to realize that the Cartesian *mise-en-scène* of a Self doubting itself is, ironically, the necessary preparatory stage leading to the eventual defeat of skepticism. Not even excluding himself as the object of doubt is what allows Descartes ultimately to set up our human rational ability as the basis of certainty.

> Thinking . . . ; and here I discover what properly belongs to myself. This alone is inseparable from me. I am—I exist: this is certain; but how often? As often as I think. (*Meditations,* II, p. 136)

These lines could never have been written by al-Ghazālī. No matter how much he emphasized humanity's highest cognitive abilities as the basis of certainty, at no point did he think of reducing the Self, as Descartes did, to one's soul, let alone to a mere "thinking thing" *(res cogitans).* The Persian philosopher does view one's physical existence as transient. He thus writes: "This world is a stage or market-place passed by pilgrims on their way to the next" (*Alchemy,* p. 48). One's senses and, by extension, one's body are, nevertheless, viewed as "instruments" of knowledge. Al-Ghazālī writes in reference to the pilgrims mentioned above:

It is here [on earth] that they are to provide themselves with provisions for the way; or, to put it plainly, man acquires here, *by the use of his bodily senses,* some knowledge of the works of God, and through them, of God Himself. (*Alchemy,* p. 48; my emphasis)

Al-Ghazālī's lack of interest in a reductionist understanding of what makes a human a human, even though cognitive abilities other than the "heart" remain subjected to epistemic doubt, can be further inferred from a comparison between man and God introduced in the context of the ant analogy discussed above. The comparison starts off with the assertion "No one can understand a king but a king" (*Alchemy,* p. 37), implying that human beings are provided with all attributes needed to understand God on the grounds of a basic similitude between man and his creator. Some of these attributes have been mentioned in the explanations given to describe the various faculties involved in writing. According to al-Ghazālī a careful examination of these faculties can also help us understand the workings of God. The human heart, for instance, where the wish to write originates, corresponds specifically to God's "Throne" *(al-'Arsh),* in which the divine will expresses itself. The brain, in which the word to be written takes shape, is analogous to the divine "Chair" *(al-Kursī).*[19] The "thought-chambers" of the brain assume a similar function to that of the "Tablet of Destiny" *(al-Lauḥ al-Maḥfūẓ).*[20]

And, finally, the written letters are the equivalent of the earthly creatures God had willed (see *Alchemy,* p. 48). Since there is no king without a kingdom, the notion of man as a king would necessarily be incomplete without including the kingdom he rules over—that is, the body, which according to the Islamic religion will be recovered in the afterlife. Doubtless, the body is considered an integral part of what makes up the Self in al-Ghazālī's philosophy. Not only this, it is instrumental in "knowing" God. This understanding of the Self has also to do with al-Ghazālī's view on what being a human is really about. He thus writes in the *Kitāb al-'Ilm* (Book of knowledge): "he [man] was only created to know" (I, p. 15). *Consequently, what is truly essential about human beings is not the fact that they are endowed with the ability to think—as in Descartes' philosophy—but that they are able to know.* There lies a sensible difference, since, if knowing involves one's brain, one's senses, and generally one's body, then one's physical existence cannot be dissociated from the Self.

Certainty and the Knowledge of God

Despite the difference in conceptualizing what is truly human, there emerges, however, a significant common feature between the two philosophers when it comes to the grounding of certainty. Like al-Ghazālī, one finds Descartes linking self-knowledge to the knowledge of God. In the *Meditations* one learns, thus, that by scrutinizing one's thinking one discovers ideas of such clarity and distinctness that they can only be innate. For instance, the epistemologically reliable 'idea' of the sun is not the one perceived through one's senses, but the one rendered possible through the use of geometry and arithmetic that are epistemic tools produced by

the human mind.[21] In that sense, the mathematically established idea of the sun is innate. It is in this context that Descartes claims that there is no idea as clear and as distinct as the idea of God and that we, therefore, have an even more intimate knowledge of God than of ourselves. How is this claim to be substantiated? The Cartesian idea of God rests on two intrinsically related notions: infinity and perfection. Both notions are thought to be underived concepts that can be acquired neither through experience nor through a logical operation. Descartes' reasoning is that we do not acquire the notion of infinity by negating what is finite, and we do not grasp perfection by thinking of the opposite of imperfection. On the contrary, it is because we possess the notion of perfection that we understand that things lack perfection. Most evidently, the ideas of infinity and perfection that the Cartesian Self discovers in itself as underived and, therefore, innate ideas of God strengthen further the notion of a self-ascertaining Self that establishes itself by thinking only.

As explained earlier, knowing oneself is also a prerequisite for knowing God in al-Ghazālī's philosophy, and knowing God is the highest knowledge that exists. In the *Kitāb al-'Ilm* the Persian philosopher quotes at length from various traditions emphasizing the high status of knowledge in Islam. He arranges these many citations in such a way that they reflect his own thought. To give but a few examples:

> The Prophet said . . . : "the nearest people to prophethood are the people of knowledge and the warriors of Jihad." (Section 1, p. 12)

> He also said: "On the day of resurrection the ink of the learned men will be likened to the blood of the martyrs." (ibid.)

A few pages later al-Ghazālī adds a similar quotation from a different tradition that draws the comparison in favor of knowledge:

> The ink of the learned men will be likened to the blood of the martyrs, and the former will prove superior. (ibid., p. 16)

Finally, he finds among the sayings of Muhammad a passage that emphasizes the insuperable position of knowledge:

> Concerning the superiority of knowledge to worship and martyrdom, the Prophet said: "The superior rank the learned man holds in relation to the worshipper is like the superior rank I hold in relation to the least of men." (ibid., p. 13)

Al-Ghazālī comments on these words as follows:

> See how he [the Prophet] placed knowledge on an equal footing with prophecy and belittled the value of practice without knowledge, despite the fact that the worshipper may not be ignorant of the worship which he observes. Moreover, without this knowledge there would have been no worship. (ibid.)

One cannot help but think that al-Ghazālī aims at diminishing the ritualistic emphasis of Islam by deriving rituals from superior knowledge. What knowledge is this that is to be placed above the acts of Islam—and without which there would be no

religion at all? This is the certain knowledge al-Ghazālī was seeking in his days of crisis as described in the *Munqidh*. It is attainable by understanding oneself in one's use of transmitted teaching, by grasping the work of demonstrative reason, and, finally, by exposing oneself to immediate experience. Basically, it is assessing one's epistemic means and the objective knowledge achieved by these means. Testimony and tradition, for instance, suffice for one to know that the city of Mecca exists. By the same token, it is safe to apply reasoning *(naẓar)* to understand that an originated being cannot be conceived of without an originating cause. Also, experimentation can be trusted to discover the medicinal use of plants and herbs (see *Kitāb al-'Ilm*, VI, pp. 194–195). These are the means available to the ordinary subject of knowledge—with no mystic or prophetic gifts—to establish *al-'ilm al-yaqīnī*, that is, the knowledge that is free from doubt. What makes knowledge truly certain, however, is that it is not only objectively but also subjectively true. According to al-Ghazālī, it is possible that one may not be certain of some matter of which there is no doubt. There is, for instance, no doubt of the fact of death, but one may still not be certain of it.[22] Subjective certainty becomes even more important if the knowledge to be attained touches upon divine revelation the objectivity of which does not need to be validated, since its truthfulness is already certified by the fact that it is revealed knowledge. Fadlou Shehadi is thus right in pointing out, in *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God,* that:

> the notion of accepting a belief by a subject is for Ghazali not just an epistemological act but above all a religious one. Epistemologically and objectively it is perfectly correct to accept a belief because it is revealed. Religiously and subjectively, unless such a belief is accepted by experiencing the illumination of its truth and being gripped by its certainty, and unless the belief is translated in terms of one's religious life, there is no *religious merit* in bare authoritative acceptance. (p. 74)

What methods can be applied to gain subjective certainty of revealed knowledge? Basically, the same ones as used in the case of objective knowledge. Reason in particular is a powerful tool in explicating, specifying, amplifying, and interpreting revelation, which helps the subjective appropriation of revealed content. There is a difference, however, in that there are two additional means available—to the morally well suited and/or spiritually well prepared subject. A true Sufi can thus also make use of intuition *(dhawq)*, an epistemic means that overpowers the "heart" and forces it to accept revealed content (*Book of Knowledge,* VI, p. 195). This intuition does not add to the body of revelation, it only allows for a subjective acquisition of religious beliefs. Unlike revelation proper *(waḥī),* not even the disclosure *(ilhām)* to a mystic can lay claim to epistemic novelty (ibid., VII, p. 234). However, what all other epistemic means do achieve is to add subjectively to one's knowledge of revealed content and thereby to one's knowledge of God. It is significant to realize that in al-Ghazālī's ethics only the actions that spring forth from subjectively certified knowledge, also called *al-'ilm al-yaqīnī,* are considered true moral acts.

This certain knowledge is likened to a tree. The qualities of the heart are, therefore,

like branches which shoot out from it; and the good works and acts which result from these qualities are like the fruits and blossoms which sprout out from the branches. The *yaqīn,* then, is the origin and the foundation. (*Book of Knowledge,* VI, p. 201)

This foundation, in which is grounded the superiority of knowledge over worship, is the "epistemological platform" that the present essay has proposed to uncover by, at times, abstracting from the original devotional context. This was performed so that al-Ghazālī's fine distinction between objective and subjective certainties could be studied independently of the religious purpose for which they have been designed. This was not to suggest that the subtle epistemic differences he explored are of no value to philosophy at large—unless they are read in a strictly philosophical context. If that was the case, one ought to dismiss entirely Descartes' notion of evidence on the sole grounds that it has been modeled within a mathematical framework. The context for which a concept has been designed is not necessarily an argument against the legitimacy of a proposed concept. It is rather its applicability and, then, its actual application that decide justificatory questions of this type. By the same token, only a more detailed analysis can establish whether some of al-Ghazālī's terms and concepts could serve the needs of modern epistemology as well.

Al-Ghazālī's strong philosophical appeal lies also in that one discovers him not only as the partner of Descartes but also as the friend of Western mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart (who have made a similar epistemic use of the imagery of the tree). This, however, is but another window to open in a continuing dialogue between Eastern and Western—and between Islamic and Christian—civilizations.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper at the World Congress of Mulla Sadra, Tehran, Iran, May 22–27, 1999.

1 – *Freedom and Fulfillment,* an annotated translation of al-Ghazālī's *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* and other relevant works of al-Ghazālī by Richard Joseph McCarthy (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), p. 388 (hereafter cited as *Freedom*). In the quote McCarthy is actually rendering an essential observation made by J. Obermann in *Der philosophische und religiöse Subjektivismus Ghazālīs: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Religion* (Wien/Leipzig, 1921).

2 – See Sami M. Najm, "The Place and Function of Doubt in the Philosophies of Descartes and al-Ghazali," *Philosophy East and West* 16 (1966): 133–141; M. Saeed Sheikh, "Al-Ghazālī," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy,* ed. M. M. Sharif, 2 vols. (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1983), vol. 1, p. 588 n. 19 and p. 589 n. 19a; V. V. Naumkin, "Some Problems Related to the Study of Works by al-Ghazzali," in *Ghazzali: La raison et le miracle* (Paris: UNESCO, 1987), p. 124 n. 1; Mahmoud Zakzouk, *Al-Ghazālīs Philosophie im Vergleich mit*

Descartes (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992); and Catherine Wilson, "On Modern Western Philosophy," in *History of Islamic Philosophy,* ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, part 2 (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1021–1023.

3 – Descartes himself writes: "and I will continue always in this track [meaning discard all what is dubitable] until I shall find something that is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing more, until I shall know with certainty that there is nothing certain" (*Meditations,* in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, 2 vols. [Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1985], vol. 2, II, p. 16).

4 – "I have constantly been diving daringly into the depths of this profound sea [metaphor for divergence of various doctrines] and wading into its deep water like a bold man, not like a cautious coward. I would penetrate far into every murky mystery, pounce upon every problem, and dash into every mazy difficulty. I would scrutinize the creed of every sect and seek to lay bare the secrets of each faction's teaching with the aim of discriminating between the proponent of truth and the advocate of error, and between the faithful follower of tradition and the heterodox innovator" (*Freedom,* p. 62).

5 – Al-Ghazālī denounces this sect also in the "Faḍā'iḥ al-Bāṭiniyya wa Faḍā'il al-Mustaẓhiriyya" (translated as "The Infamies of the Baṭinites and the Virtues of Mustaẓhirites," in *Freedom,* pp. 175–286).

6 – There is no actual criticism of Sufis in the *Munqidh.* The *Alchemy,* however, does show some concern with the Sufis' overemphasis on the technical aspects of trance: "Other features of these mystic dances are the bodily contortions and tearing of clothes with which they are sometimes accompanied. If these are the result of genuine ecstatic conditions there is nothing to be said against them, but if they are deliberate on the part of those who wish to appear 'adepts,' then they are merely acts of hypocrisy" ("Concerning Music and Dancing as Aids to the Religious Life," in *The Alchemy of Happiness,* trans. from the Hindustani by Claud Field [Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1991], p. 83; hereafter cited as *Alchemy*).

7 – The *Munqidh* is particularly explicit on this matter: "the ignorant friend of Islam ... supposes that our religion must be championed by the rejection of every science ascribed to the philosophers. So he rejects all the sciences, claiming that they display ignorance and folly in them all" (*Freedom,* p. 74).

8 – "Those whose eyes never see beyond the world of phenomena are like those who mistake servants of the lowest rank for the king. The laws of phenomena must be constant, or there could be no such thing as science; but it is a great error to mistake the slaves for the master" (*Alchemy,* pp. 38–39).

9 – See *Alchemy,* p. 37, and also *The Book of Knowledge,* Being a translation with notes of the *Kitāb al-'Ilm* of al-Ghazzālī's *Ihyā' al-Dīn* by Nabih Amin Faris, 2nd rev. ed. (Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1966), I, p. 15.

10 – "You surely apprehend the two types, the visible and the intelligible.... Represent them then, as it were, by a line divided into two unequal sections and cut each section again in the same ratio—the section, that is, of the visible and that of the intelligible order—and then as an expression of the ratio of their comparative clearness and obscurity you will have, as one of the sections of the visible world, images. By images I mean, first, shadows, and then reflections in water and on surfaces of dense, smooth, and bright texture, and everything of that kind, if you apprehend.... As the second section assume that of which this is a likeness or an image, that is, the animals about us and all plants and the whole class of objects made by man" (*Republic* 6.509e–511e, trans. P. Shorey in *Collected Dialogues of Plato,* ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns [New York: Pantheon Books, 1961]).

11 – In the same context in which he develops the idea of the mathematically divided line, he, for instance, blames the mathematicians for not being able to substantiate their findings, which is rendered by one of Socrates' interlocutors resuming the discussion in the following words: "you mean to distinguish the aspect of reality and the intelligible, which is contemplated by the power of dialectic, as something truer and more exact than the object of the so-called arts and sciences.... And I think you call the mental habit of geometers and their like mind or understanding, and not reason because you regard understanding as something intermediate between opinion and reason" (*Republic* 6.511c– 511e).

12 – Cf. *Kitāb Sharḥ ʿAjāʾib al-Qalb* (Book of the marvels of the heart), in *Freedom,* pp. 363–364.

13 – In the *Iḥyāʾ* al-Ghazālī elaborates different types of doubt. The most radical form of doubt *(shakk)* entails indecision; then there is conjecture *(ẓann);* and, finally, a belief approaching certainty *(iʿtiqād muqārib li-l-yaqīn);* cf. *The Book of Knowledge,* VI, p. 193. The concept of certain knowledge is derived from the Koran; see 18 : 65; 69 : 51; 102 : 5, 7.

14 – For a detailed discussion of *fiṭra* see the excellent entry in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–). Al-Ghazālī deemed his own innate disposition as being of a very sound nature: "As a result, the fetters of servile conformism fell away from me, and inherited beliefs lost their hold on me, when I was still quite young" (*Freedom,* p. 63); cf. *The Book of Knowledge,* VII, pp. 231–232.

15 – It would be worth exploring whether the separation proposed by al-Ghazālī suggests a distinction between empirical and pure intuition of the Kantian type.

16 – Cf. note 3. This note would, in addition, substantiate that Islamic thought has been able to inspire European philosophy well beyond the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

17 – *Discourse on Method,* in *Discourse on Method and Meditations,* trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill Educational Publishing, 1960). It

has been suggested that Descartes' "purging" may well have its roots in devotional spiritual exercises (which would draw him closer to al-Ghazālī's world of thought); see Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 336.

18 – Descartes' position appears to be more radical in *The Search for Truth,* where he clearly suggests the demolishing of the old building of knowledge; see *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* vol. 1, pp. 508–509, and pp. 406–407.

19 – *'Arsh* is frequently used in the Koran to name all of the throne, whereas *kursī* appears to designate only the actual seat of God; see William Montgomery Watt, *Companion to the Qur'an* (Oxford and Rockport [MA]: Oneworld Publications), 1967. According to the Mu'tazilite Zamakhsharī there are four possible explanations for the seat mentioned in Koran 2 : 255: *kursī* is either nothing but an imagery stressing divine grandeur, the name for the place of divine knowledge or divine rule, or a much smaller chair placed in front of the throne under which lies the creation; see H. Gätje, *Koran und Koranexegese* (Zurich and Stuttgart: Artemis, 1971), pp. 197–198. A reference to divine knowledge is also offered by Tabarī (see "Arsh," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*).

20 – This tablet is the repository of divine will; see Gätje, *Koran und Koranexegese,* pp. 75–76.

21 – *Meditations,* III, p. 27. Al-Ghazālī has a similar statement in the *Munqidh*: "Sight also looks at a star and sees it as something small, the size of a dinar; the geometrical proofs demonstrate that it surpasses the earth in size" (*Freedom,* p. 64).

22 – See Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God,* a philosophical critical analysis of some of the problems raised by Ghazālī's view of God as utterly unique and unknowable (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), p. 73.