

Snježana Veljačić-Akpinar

Dharma Realm Buddhist University, City of Ten Thousand Buddhas,
4951 Bodhi Way, Ukiah Campus, CA 95482, USA
snjezana.akpinar@drbu.org

Al-Ghazali, Skepticism and Islam

Abstract

The author of this short paper examines the issue of skepticism with special interest for Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's case, well-documented in his own autobiography, linking it with René Descartes. In his case, Sufism became a new more harmonious methodical approach to knowledge and the solution to the problem of attaining "a clear discernible perception", i.e. for excluding dogmatism from theological discourse by rational means.

Keywords

Al-Ghazali, René Descartes, doubt, search for a 'Criterion for Truth', dogmatic authoritarianism (*ta'lim*)

"Practical intelligence, the intelligence of actions, is at the head of that what rules man. If he serves and assists it, that becomes the closest thing to him and that is the intelligence of actions. [...] It is the best precaution for the body, and the body is the tool of the soul and its vehicle."

Al-Ghazali¹

Al-Ghazali, a famous Muslim philosopher and theologian whose life spanned the 11th and 12th century, suddenly lost his power to speak. This incident befell him in the middle of his successful academic career. According to his autobiography, it was due to doubt. Doubt attacked him "like an illness", provoked by a reaction to fanatic "authoritarian instructionists" (*ta'limiyyah*), and forced him to abandon an illustrious professorship. Only after spending time in solitude, did Al-Ghazali recover his capacity to express himself and accept doubt as a means for delving into the deeper meaning of knowledge. He described the experience in his autobiography entitled *Deliverance from Error*:

"Thereupon I investigated the various kind of knowledge that I had and found myself destitute of all knowledge with the characteristic of infallibility. [...] My reliance on sense perception was also destroyed. [...] Perhaps behind intellect perception there is another judge who, if he manifests himself, will show you the falsity of judging."²

1

Al-Ghazali, *Mizan al-'Amal [Criterion of Action]*, Dar al-Ma'arif Press, Cairo 1964, pp. 194–195.

2

Al-Ghazali, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1980, paragraphs 9 and 10, p. 3. (Al-Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error [al-Munqidh min al-Dala]* is quoted according to this 1980 Twayne's edition.

All the more baffling since:

“To thirst after a comprehension of things as they really are was my habit and custom from a very early age.”³

Al-Ghazali aptly represents the Illuminationist movement (*mushriqiyya*) that spread throughout the world of Islam from his native Persia during the 11th century. The basic characteristics of the Persian Illuminationists could also be found in the European Enlightenment movement of the 17th century, a movement that in our eyes seems to be in the process of both being transformed and being threatened by irrationalist anti-universalist attitudes that breed a distrust towards a philosophy of culture.

In his search for a ‘Criterion for Truth’ that could save him from the “darkness of mere opinions”,⁴ Al-Ghazali described his inner crisis in great detail. He began to doubt everything, “the disease was baffling, and lasted almost two months, during which I was a sceptic in fact though not in theory, nor outward expression”.⁵ Since the crisis was provoked by an inner resistance to “violent fanaticism” and dogmatic authoritarianism (*ta’lim*), upon recovery he set out to formulate his ensuing insights:

“To begin with, what I am looking for is knowledge of what things really are, so I must undoubtedly try to find what knowledge really is. It was plain to me that sure and certain knowledge is that knowledge in which the object is disclosed in such a fashion that no doubt remains along with it, that no possibility of error or illusion accompanies it. I saw that *the mind cannot even entertain such a supposition*. Certain knowledge must also be infallible; and this infallibility or security from error is such that no attempt to show its falsity of the knowledge can occasion doubt or denial, even though the attempt is made by someone who turns stones into gold and rods into a serpent. Thus I know that ten is more than three [...] of doubt about my knowledge there is no trace. [...] I investigated the various kinds of knowledge I had and found myself destitute of all knowledge of infallibility except in the case of sense perception and necessary truths.”⁶

He finally settled on accepting God’s grace and compassion with a stronger confidence than René Descartes had shown in his days. This was possible due to the sufi meditative dimension which allowed Al-Ghazali to become more constructive and amenable towards building a new and harmonious methodical approach to knowledge, a knowledge that cannot exist within our given mind, but can become the molder of our mind’s mold as it were, in order for a higher reality to be perceived. Al-Ghazali described this process that he had grasped during his solitude. As he approached the crossing from subjective to objective thinking he consciously chose to invert the process of gaining objective knowledge and link it to Islamic tradition stating:

“It is customary with weaker intellects to take men as the criterion of the truth and not the truth as the criterion of men. The intelligent man follows ‘Ali who said ‘Do not know the truth by the men, but know the truth and then you will know those who are truthful’.”⁷

From this point on, his path toward scientific objectivism led Al-Ghazali into a direct critical analysis of worldly sciences. He accepted the tension between subject and object as a necessary element. Explaining his method, Al-Ghazali reiterated what seems to have become a self-evident truth:

“When I had finished with these sciences, I next turned with set purpose to the method of Sufism. I knew that the complete mystic way includes both intellectual belief and practical activity; the latter consists in getting rid of the obstacles in the self and stripping off its base characteristics and vicious morals, so that the heart may attain to freedom.”⁸

Thus Sufism became the last hope for Al-Ghazali for attaining apodictic truth, something that for him was only possible through an immediate experience

(Arabic: *dhawq*, taste). Along with it, however, he stressed the *sine qua non*: a moral transformation without which “entry into an absolute poverty of perception”⁹ would have been unattainable. Al-Ghazali understood sufi meditative practices as a synthesis of logic and ethics. His definition of ethics becomes clear when reading his guarded critique of the *Muʿtazilites*, a theological school that arose in Basra in the eighth century. The basic meaning of the word *muʿtazila* is to find a position between two positions (*al-manzila bayna al-manzilatain*). This “position” remained an important tenet of Islamic theology (*kalam*), although the school itself faded mostly due to its political involvements. In discussing the movement Al-Ghazali concluded that the *muʿtazilite* approach on ethics consisted in defining the characteristics and the moral constitution of the soul, as well as the method of moderating and controlling it.

“This they borrow from the mystics [...].”¹⁰

Al-Ghazali’s quest for reality led him back to academia in order to attain a clear and discernible perception and continue writing books on the methods for removing disagreement.

The intention behind establishing such a public balance, as described in his *Criterion of Action*¹¹ and *The Just Balance*,¹² was to exclude dogmatism from theological discourse by rational means and discredit the dogmatic authoritarian instructionalists (*taʿlimiyyah*) who had provoked his existential crisis. After his arduous soul searching and distancing from the world, Al-Ghazali understood that the established ideologies should not be rocked too much, lest the baby be thrown out with the bathwater.

In explaining the instructionalists he stated:

“A grievous crime indeed against religion has been committed by the man who imagines that Islam is defended by the denial of mathematical sciences, seeing that there is nothing in revealed truth opposed to these sciences by way of neither affirmation or negation, and nothing opposed to the truths of religion.”¹³

Islam accepted Al-Ghazali’s theological reforms and in doing so made it possible for sufi spiritual traditions to develop and accept immediate insight to serve as a corrective measure against dogmatism, as well as technical, or even magical, approaches to mysticism. Nonetheless, Al-Ghazali clearly reiterated that:

“Theology has become one of the disciplines that are needed [...] only to safeguard the hearts of the common people as it has become necessary to hire an escort along the pilgrimage route. Let, therefore, the theologian know the limits of his position [...].”¹⁴

3
Ibid., paragraph 6, p. 3.

4
Ibid., paragraph 77, p. 17.

5
Ibid., paragraph 133, p. 27.

6
Ibid., paragraph 7, p. 3.

7
Ibid., paragraph 53, p. 12.

8
Ibid., paragraph, 80, p. 18.

9
Ibid., paragraph 36, p. 8.

10
Ibid., paragraph 50, p. 11.

11
See Al-Ghazali, *Mizan al-ʿAmal*.

12
See Al-Ghazali, *The Just Balance [Al-Qistas al-Mustaqim]*, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore 1978.

13
Al-Ghazali, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, paragraph 41, p. 9.

14
Al-Ghazali, *The Book of Knowledge [Kitab al-ʿilm]*, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore 1979, pp. 53–57.

Many questions and similar doubts are still confronting scholars and philosophers today, a thousand years after Al-Ghazali's death. Have the two movements, Illuminationism in Iran and Enlightenment in Europe, found each other not so much through Iran's Greek neighbors whose philosophers Al-Ghazali knew well enough to challenge, but also through Iran's Buddhist neighbors who had inhabited Afghanistan?

Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar

Al-Ghazali, skepticizam i islam

Sažetak

Autorica ovog kratkog rada istražuje pitanje skepticizma s naročitim zanimanjem za Abu Hamid al-Ghazalijev slučaj, koji je dobro dokumentiran u njegovoj vlastitoj autobiografiji, povezujući ga s Renéom Descartesom. U njegovu slučaju, sufizam je postao novi harmoničniji metodološki pristup znanju i rješenje problema postizanja »jasno razaberive percepcije«, tj. način da se racionalnim sredstvima isključi dogmatizam iz teološkog diskursa.

Ključne riječi

Al-Ghazali, René Descartes, sumnja, potraga za 'kriterijem za Istinu', dogmatska autoritarnost (*ta'lim*)

Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar

Al-Ghazali, Skeptizismus und Islam

Zusammenfassung

Die Verfasserin dieser kurzen Abhandlung untersucht die Frage des Skeptizismus mit besonderem Interesse für den Fall von Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, der in seiner eigenen Autobiografie gut dokumentiert ist, und verknüpft ihn mit René Descartes. In seinem Fall wurde der Sufismus eine neue, harmonischere, methodische Herangehensweise an das Wissen und die Lösung des Problems der Erlangung einer „klar erkennbaren Wahrnehmung“, d. h. er wurde eine Art Ausschließung des Dogmatismus aus dem theologischen Diskurs vermöge rationaler Mittel.

Schlüsselwörter

al-Ghazali, René Descartes, Zweifel, Suche nach dem „Kriterium für Wahrheit“, dogmatischer Autoritarismus (*ta'lim*)

Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar

Al-Ghazâlî, scepticisme et islam

Résumé

L'auteure de ce court travail examine la question du scepticisme avec un intérêt particulier pour le cas d'Abu Hamid al-Ghazâlî, largement documenté dans sa propre autobiographie, et le met en lien avec René Descartes. Dans son cas, le soufisme est devenu une nouvelle approche méthodologique de la connaissance bien plus harmonieuse, mais aussi la solution au problème lié à l'acquisition d'« une perception claire et discernable », c'est-à-dire à la manière d'exclure le dogmatisme du discours théologique par des moyens rationnels.

Mots-clés

al-Ghazâlî, René Descartes, doute, recherche « du critère de vérité », autoritarisme dogmatique (*ta'lim*)