
Imagining the Divine: Ghazali on Imagination, Dreams, and Dreaming

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This study presents a phenomenological analysis of Ghazali's discussion of dreams and dream discourse as it specifically relates to the faculty of the imagination. The imagination is an important, though ambiguous and understudied, category, as it is responsible for diverse visual activities such as dreaming, visions, and prophecy. The imagination, then, is responsible for translating the incorporeal divine world into corporeal material images. These images, in turn, represent an integral part of the mystic's experience. The imagination tries to overcome the fundamental aniconic tension in monotheism between God's immanence and His transcendence. As a result, the products of the imagination are very ambiguous: for the philosophers they are chimerical, yet for the mystics they provide an important access to truth. Although this study is devoted to Ghazali, a twelfth-century Muslim, the conclusions are meant to aid in the much needed construction of the imagination as a nuanced and important category in the academic study of religion.

I

At the heart of monotheism resides an overwhelming desire to visualize the Divine (cf. Wolfson: 4–11). Ideally such a visualization mediates the fundamental tension between God's incorporeality, on the one hand, and the need to apprehend Him and His intimate involvement in human

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affairs, on the other. Although Christianity mediated this tension somewhat with the theory of incarnation, in Judaism and Islam the tension between imaging the Divine and the strong prohibition against iconic representation has remained consistent. A central question that emerges, then, is, If one is prohibited from seeing God, can one imagine Him? If so, how does one undertake this? Or, put somewhat differently, into what faculty does this visualization occur?

In what follows I want to explore the relationship between the imagination, on the one hand, and dreams (including the state of dreaming) and revelation, on the other. Linking the latter to the former is the creation of mental images that occupy an ambiguous position somewhere between the corporeal and the spiritual, between subjective hallucination and objective perception. Although there exists an intimate connection between religious experience and the imagination, we rarely nuance the use, place, and function of the latter.¹ How, for example, does the imagination relate to (1) the other mental faculties (e.g., senses, reason), (2) the body, and (3) the acquisition of knowledge? The subjective nature of the imagination makes an objective analysis of this faculty extremely difficult. It is, therefore, necessary to begin to rethink what the imagination is, how it relates to the nature of religious experience, and the utility of the imagination as a category in the academic study of western religions. To this end, I here present a particular case study that will, I hope, offer a framework in which to suggest how the imagination serves as the instrument for creative hermeneutics.

The main theoretical concern of this article is to examine the nature of the relationship between the imaginative faculty and access to truth. In particular, how does an embodied, finite individual apprehend that which is infinite and exists without bodily extension? The medieval philosophers attempted to protect God's uniqueness by stressing the aniconic dimensions of their traditions. In so doing, they argued vociferously against the naïveté of those, often referred to as mystics, who claimed that one could

¹ The positive role of the imagination rarely figures in treatments of the nature of religious experience. One of the few recent exceptions is the work of Wolfson (e.g., 61–67, 169–178). Wayne Proudfoot, for example, ignores the phenomenological implications of this faculty in his criticism of those who seek to define the nature of religious or visionary experience (136–148). Within the context of Islamic philosophy, the role and function of the imagination are often treated in either a reductionist (Gutas: 299–307) or a Jungian (e.g., Corbin 1981) manner. There has, however, been considerably more attention paid to dreams, although their relationship to the imagination is often ignored. Cox Miller's work, which provides an excellent account of dreams in the world of late antiquity, spends little time on the philosophical sources of the imagination. As far as Islamic studies is concerned there exist several studies devoted to dreams (Hermansen; Hoffman; Katz 1996, 1997). None of these, however, devote treatment to the role and function of the imagination and its role in dreams or the act of dreaming.

apprehend God experientially by means of images that function as specific manifestations of His transcendence. The philosophical critique, however, often overlooks the sophisticated theoretical assumptions of the mystics.

Although the philosophers and mystics in medieval Islam (not to mention Judaism and Christianity) would both agree that truth is tantamount to knowledge of God, they differed with respect to what this knowledge consists of and how one discovers it. At issue, then, is the instrument by which the individual receives knowledge: Does it occur through the intellect or the imagination? For the philosophers, knowledge of God is equivalent to understanding the world (namely, the various sciences) and is something that arises naturally and syllogistically in the intellect. For the mystics, however, knowledge of God is intuited semiotically and arises in the imagination both supernaturally and directly from God.

To illustrate this, the focus of this article will be on the thought of Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī (d. 1111; hereafter Ghazali).² As one of the central and most influential figures in Islamic thought, Ghazali made a lasting contribution with his ability to harmonize the inner, mystical impulse of religion with the legal framework of what was considered to be orthodox Islam. The end result was the legitimization of the mystical dimension of Islam, and it is through this prism that Ghazali read the traditional sources. Ghazali, however, was also very familiar with the rich philosophical discourse of his age, and he often adopted and adapted certain of its principles.³ Despite this, it is often considered more appropriate to consider Ghazali an opponent of the philosophical enterprise. His goal was to show how philosophy, based on the absurdity of its own principles, leads to uncertain knowledge at best and unbelief (*kufṛ*) at worst.⁴ In general terms, his critique focuses on the unreliability and uncertainty of philosophical proofs—the problem was that the philosophers treated such proofs as if they were infallible. Ghazali's subsequent decentering of the rational faculty coincided with his desire to carve out a niche for the creative and hermeneutic functions of the imagination. Although he speaks from a Muslim perspective, Ghazali's voice is

² There exist several good, and highly readable, biographies of Ghazali (MacDonald; Smith; Watt 1963).

³ Ghazali contended that one could refute the philosophers only if one first had thoroughly understood their principles. As a result, he wrote a work entitled *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa* (*The Intentions of the Philosophers*), wherein he provides a summary, but not a rejection, of Avicennian philosophy. Indeed, it was such an effective summary that later scholastics, upon reading the Latin translation, concluded that Ghazali (Latin: Algazel) was a committed Avicennian.

⁴ Ghazali accuses the philosophers of unbelief (*kufṛ*) in three areas: (1) their claim that the world is eternal, (2) their idea that God can only know universals, and (3) their denial of bodily resurrection (1997: 7–8).

by no means unique to Islam; rather, he is one individual in a relatively long line of thinkers who argues that the analytical scrutiny of religious experience is not so much threatening as it is ultimately unsatisfying.

Against the philosophers,⁵ Ghazali claims that the imaginative faculty is both primary and superior to the rational faculty because it is responsible for the creation of images (*muthul*, sing. *mithâl*) that enable the embodied individual to perceive the imperceptible and to express the inexpressible. Crucial to understanding Ghazali's formulation is his claim that although God is beyond form or shape the nature of our embodiedness is such that we can only have access to the Divine through these phenomena. In other words, the symbolic vision of the mystic, like that of the prophet, bridges the gap between what is invisible and what is visible, thereby giving appropriate expression to the incorporeal, transcendent world (Wolfson: 66).

Theophanic images are not meant to confine or restrict God's essence or His transcendence: there exists no one-to-one correspondence between God and images. Yet there is a certain cognitive status to images in that they, without fully comprehending their object, concretize a specific aspect of it. Without such images, Ghazali argues, we would be left with a distant and impersonal deity. It is crucial to stress that Ghazali is neither denying the transcendence of God nor opening himself to the charge of idolatry (*shirk*). On the contrary, he claims that there is an ontological connection between God and His manifestation in images. Such an ontology allows him to bridge the gap between the transcendent and the corporeal. This enables him to offer an alternative to the God of the philosophers, who, he argues, is nothing more than an impersonal, disembodied intellect with which one is unable to have a personal or emotive relationship. Ghazali, then, challenges the philosophers on their own turf and, in the process, subverts their attempts at demythologizing humanity's encounter with the Divine.

II

A world cannot exist without its display or without meaningful articulations. In the world of Neoplatonism⁶—the ontological system to which

⁵ Although I am certainly aware that the Islamic philosophers admit of great differences among them and that their separate systems admit of many important nuances, I follow Ghazali in using the generic term *philosophers* (1997: 4–5, 7–8).

⁶ *Neoplatonism* is a notoriously vague term that comprises diverse trajectories such as intellectual mysticism, logic, theurgy, poetry, and aesthetics. It is also a nineteenth-century construct, and none of the individuals we today call "Neoplatonists" would have answered to this term (cf. Gatti: 22–27).

Ghazali subscribed—these articulations occur within an emanative framework, wherein images issue ontically from a nonmaterial source.⁷ Within this framework sense phenomena are necessary conditions for our knowledge of both the transcendence of the world and what is transcendent to the world. From the embodied human perspective, Neoplatonic articulations are layered in such a manner that the higher are founded on the lower and in such a way that this foundation can always be brought to light. Images, then, are what allow a finite individual, composed of form and matter, to access that which exists without matter. Central to this ontology is the notion of imaging: the One gradually becomes manifest through successive and increasingly corporealized images.

The apprehension of truth, therefore, is ontically connected to images, for the latter make the former accessible. It is within this context that the imagination—the faculty that deals with images—becomes so important: It enables us to recognize and interpret the Divine as it reveals itself in particular images. This is not the same thing as saying either that one can see God's essence as an image or that the former can even be reduced to the latter. On the contrary, one is able to apprehend that a world exists above our own and that our only access to it is through the images that are the content of prophecy and dreams. Such images provide insight and illumination that capture certain aspects, but certainly not the totality, of the Divine.

It is against this background that we need to situate Ghazali. For this is what enables him to challenge the standard philosophical position that metaphysical knowledge is possible and that access to the Divine occurs only through the intellection of universals. However, what enables Ghazali to make such a case is his acknowledgment that speculation cannot ignore the particular embodied standpoint of the human condition. Although Ghazali subscribes to the basic Neoplatonic ontology of the philosophers, he questions a number of their traditional axioms: (1) that the universe possesses a structure that exists independently of God or the human that apprehends it; (2) that there exists a universal Intellect that is independent of humans and that somehow gives meaning and structure to the phenomena of this world; and (3) that there exists such a concept as disembodied human reason that, when active, participates in this universal Intellect. Such criticisms allowed Ghazali to formulate a position that

⁷ Here I am influenced by Heideggerian phenomenology (e.g., Heidegger: 60ff.). I am well aware of the possible tension that arises from reading together Heidegger and Neoplatonism. The latter contends that there is philosophical disclosure of ultimate reality that is independent of images, whereas the former would deny this. Despite this, the basic Neoplatonic concept of emanation, it seems to me, is not antithetical to the basic phenomenological claim that the world is not available apart from its articulations and that these articulations have an elemental embodied level of meaning.

acknowledges that God's transcendence and the structure of the universe are unknowable to the embodied human and that one can only have knowledge of these concepts by means of inspirational moments that occur as images and take place during dreams in the imaginative faculty (e.g., 1967a: 25, 1967b: 627, 1986: 125).

Aware of the inherent difficulty of scientific explanation and its rupture with lived experience, Ghazali argues that the communication that occurs in dreams provides an appropriate medium for imaging certain aspects of that which is transcendent into the three dimensional (1986: 124–129). Ghazali, thus, argues that dreaming—one of the primary activities of the imaginative faculty—permits a certain access to truth, an access that is otherwise closed to abstract or discursive thinking. In so doing, he wants to claim that religious experience, with its locus in the imagination, has its own integrity and cannot be assimilated to the philosophical pursuit of knowledge. This is in direct response to the standard philosophical claim that religious experience is somehow derivative or that it represents philosophy for the masses. Ghazali's debate with the philosophers revolves around the imagination: he praises it, whereas they are often highly critical of it. Because religion is deemed independent of reason, Ghazali argues that the imagination, with its creative capacity, becomes primary.

III

Before proceeding, it would be worthwhile to provide a brief overview of dream discourse in medieval Islam. With the channels of classical prophecy all but closed, the Muslim community still sought to maintain communication with the Divine. This was done through such normative and widespread institutions as Qur'ân and Sunna interpretation and appeal to those learned in these disciplines. Dreams were also a conduit that kept these channels open. Although dreams played an almost universal role in Muslim piety, it was left to the mystics to develop an elaborate discussion of their import and significance. Within this context dreams provided an important substitute for prophecy, with the dreamer sharing certain affinities with the prophet.

In the context of medieval Islam dreams played a prominent role in both the maintenance and the evolution of society (Katz 1996: 205–208; von Grunebaum: 6). Many momentous decisions were associated with dreams and their interpretation. It was a dream, for example, that was responsible for al-Ash'ari's rejection of the rationalist theology of the Mu'tazila (McCarthy 1953: 150–155); it was Aristotle's visit to the caliph al-Ma'mûn in a dream that led to the great period of translation from

Greek into Arabic at Baghdad (al-Nadîm: 583–584); and it was in a dream that Aristotle told Suhrawardî of the Illuminationist “knowledge by presence” (Suhrawardî: 70–74). In addition, the appearance of the Prophet in dreams was instrumental in solving important theological disputes and questions for the community (Goldziher: 503). In like manner, the appearance of saints or the mysterious Khidr in dreams enabled Sufis to claim special knowledge without formal initiation (Corbin 1966: 385–387; Schimmel: 105–106). Even in the modern Muslim world dreams and visions continue to play an integral part in religious life (Hoffman: 47–58).

Dreams and their relationship to the imagination also played an important role in Islamic philosophy. Based on Greek theories of the soul and its cognitive faculties, the philosophers argued that the imagination was a chimaera-producing faculty and was far inferior to the intellect.⁸ One of the most prominent Islamic philosophers in this discussion was Alfarabi (al-Fârâbî) (d. c. 950), and, in what follows, discussion will be confined to him.

Rather than celebrate the creative and productive aspects of the imagination, Alfarabi attempted to harness this faculty by subsuming it under the science of psychology. The imagination is now situated in a psychology hierarchy in which it occupies a position far below the intellect. In so doing, Alfarabi, following Aristotle, privileged the intellect (Arabic: *‘aql*; Greek: *nous*) as the faculty by virtue of which the individual transcends the particularities of his or her own situatedness and, in the process, becomes god-like. When the individual engages in theoretical contemplation, his or her intellect accesses universals that have no existence in this world, the world of generation and corruption. The philosophers, then, juxtaposed the purity of the intellect with the imperfections of the imagination.

According to Alfarabi, dreams are natural phenomena that are not sent by God.⁹ In particular, he defines the imaginative faculty (*al-qûwa al-mutakhayyila*), that is, the faculty responsible for dreams and prophecy, as intermediate between the faculties of sense (*al-qûwa al-ḥâssa*) and reason (*al-qûwa al-nâṭiqâ*) (211–228). Alfarabi considers the imaginative faculty as one of the lower faculties, which stores and reproduces the sensibles that are gathered by the senses. During sleep, when this faculty is disconnected from the senses, it takes these sensible imprints (*rusûm al-maḥsûsât*) that are stored in it and combines and recombines them, thus producing

⁸ For the Greek precedents, see Rahman 1958: 29–91. Of particular importance is the third book of Aristotle’s *De Anima* and the Arabic recension—itsself probably based on a Hellenistic or Stoic recension—of Aristotle’s *Parva Naturalia*. According to Pines, there is no evidence that the Muslims knew the version of Aristotle’s *De Divinatione* that we possess today (152).

⁹ The precedent for this position is in Aristotle: “It is absurd to combine the idea that the sender of such dreams should be God with the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely people at random” (1984a: 462b19–21).

dreams (211; cf. Aristotle 1984b: 426a29–30). Much like Plato before him, Alfarabi mistrusted the productive aspect of the imagination: in a system that gives priority to intellection, production must always be derivative.

In much the same way as it transfers the body's temperaments into sensible phenomena, the imaginative faculty also re-presents supralunar phenomena by changing them into pre-existing sensibles with which it is already familiar (al-Fârâbî: 215). In certain individuals the imaginative faculty has attained such a state of perfection that they receive from the Active Intellect,¹⁰ even while awake, particulars that will come true in the future, as well as philosophic truths in symbolic form. This state, according to Alfarabi, is prophecy (*al-nubuwwa*) (225). However, as Alfarabi claims that dreams are the outcome of purely biological processes, he also contends that prophecy is a natural phenomenon, not a case of divine intervention, that is based on the physical constitution of the individual. Furthermore, although the prophet possesses a perfected imaginative faculty, he or she does not necessarily possess a perfected rational one. For this reason, the prophet occupies a lower position than the philosopher, who acquires knowledge through demonstration by dint of the rational faculty.¹¹

In his desire to construct a morphology of prophecy, Alfarabi filtered this experience through a rationalist prism. In much the same manner that Aristotle attempted to neutralize the otherness of poetry by redefining it and making it a part of philosophy (i.e., rhetoric), Alfarabi does the same with prophecy and dreams. In so doing, he attempts to demystify humanity's encounter with the Divine. He seeks to make prophecy and dreams—two modes whereby we encounter the intangible and the abstract—into a branch of psychology. By attempting to lay bare the deep structures of prophecy and dreams, he connects both to the causal necessity that he ascertained to be at work in the world of nature. As a consequence, Alfarabi, like the other philosophers, makes prophetic and dream discourse into something rational, something teachable.

Against the philosophers, Ghazali claims that the imaginative faculty is both primary and superior to the rational faculty. Essentially, he reverses their hierarchy: it is now the intellect that has the potential to subvert the truth because of its undue reliance on proofs that fail to fit adequately the

¹⁰ In medieval cosmology the Active Intellect is the last of the divine intellects that emanate from the One, and it is usually associated with the sphere of the moon. The human intellect, when it unites with this Intellect, moves from potentiality to actuality.

¹¹ For Alfarabi, the rational faculty is superior to all of the other four faculties (in descending order: the appetitive, representative, sensual, and nutritive). According to Walzer's commentary, Alfarabi "is only concerned with [the faculty of representation] in so far as it can provide a rational explanation of visionary prophecy and the apparently supernatural experience of outstanding individuals" (al-Fârâbî: 390).

world that the embodied human interacts with. For Ghazali, the philosophers based their theory of the intellect on the notion that this world is corrupt and that reality is to be found in a higher, immaterial world. Ghazali, on the contrary, acknowledges that there exists an immaterial world; where he differs from the philosophers, however, is his claim that we are unable to access it as embodied creatures. It is the imagination that provides the vehicle by which we mediate between materiality and immateriality. For Ghazali, then, true dreams are images that represent the righteous person's experience with the Divine. Because they are not filtered through the rational faculty, they possess a veridicality that is independent of reason and ratiocination.

IV

At the heart of monotheism resides an unmediated tension between the claim that God cannot be portrayed in images and a basic human desire to represent and interact with the Divine. If God is so far removed from human concerns, completely invisible, how can one develop a personal relationship with Him? The paradox of God's incorporeality and His intimate involvement in human affairs is, as I stated at the outset, one of the perennial concerns of monotheism. Indeed, one of the central features of the debate between Ghazali and the philosophers revolves around imagining the Divine and the subsequent role of images, dreams, and the imagination in religious experience. The philosophers wanted to claim that images are a product of the body's interaction with the world and that, although useful to a certain limited degree, they are unhelpful when it comes to the theoretical, abstract, and disembodied contemplation that is the goal of the philosophical life. Ghazali, on the other hand, argues that images represent particular moments in which the transcendent, immaterial world is unveiled to the mystic by means of the particulars of embodied experience.

Ghazali treats this subject in his little-studied *Treatise on the Realization of the Vision of God in Dreams and the Vision of the Prophet*.¹² The

¹² This is *Risāla fī taḥqīq ru'yat allāh fī al-manām wa ru'yat al-nabī*. The actual relationship between this treatise and another one, in which it is usually found, *al-Maḍnūn bihi 'alā ghair ahlihi* (hereafter *al-Maḍnūn*), is rather complicated. On the authenticity of *al-Maḍnūn*, see MacDonald: 129–132 and Watt 1952: 43. However, there exists more than one *al-Maḍnūn* within the Ghazalian corpus. In particular, an *al-Maḍnūn al-ṣaḡhīr* and an *al-Maḍnūn bihi 'alā ahlihi*, as well as the aforementioned *al-Maḍnūn*. For the present purpose, I have used and translated the Arabic version of *al-Maḍnūn bihi 'alā ghair ahlihi* found in *Majmū'a rasā'il*. An English translation of this text may be found in Hazārvi. Significantly, however, he does not mention the critical editions of the Arabic texts with which he works. Based on his translation and the comments in Brockelmann: 747, Hazārvi's translation seems to be that of *al-Maḍnūn al-ṣaḡhīr*, which includes a version—but not the version that I am working with—of the *Risāla fī taḥqīq ru'yat allāh fī al-manām wa ru'yat al-nabī*.

goal of this treatise is twofold: first, to analyze the language employed to describe the experience of dreams and visions and, second, to develop a typology of dreams in which the prophet or God appears to the dreamer. Ghazali is highly critical of the vulgar (*al-‘amma*), who think that when one sees the Prophet in a dream, one actually sees him (1986: 125). As is often the case with Ghazali, when arguing against the philosophers he assumes a strong scripturalist position; here, when reacting against the nonphilosophers, he adopts a stronger philosophical voice. He criticizes those who misunderstand the proper nature of dreams as ignorant of the way in which the imagination (*khayâl*) gives every image (*naqsh*) that exists within the soul (*nafs*) a visual form (*şûra*) (1986: 125). According to Ghazali,

They are not informed of how the imagination forms the vision [*ru’ya*] of the Prophet in a dream [*manâm*] while his [actual] person is buried in the garden in Medina. Yet he has not broken the tomb, nor has he departed to the place where the sleeper [*nâ’im*] sees him. Even if we were to accept this, how is it that 1,000 sleepers will see him on one night in 1,000 [different] places in different representations? (1986: 125)

Much of this discussion revolves around the saying (*hadîth*) of the Prophet: “He who sees me in a dream truly sees me since Satan cannot take my form.” Because Ghazali has just made the case that one does not actually see the Prophet’s person in a dream, he has to reinterpret this *hadîth* through the prism of iconic representation. He claims that what the dreamer actually sees is an “image [*mithâl*, pl. *muthul*] that is an intermediary [*wâsiṭa*] between the Prophet and himself for the sake of communicating truth to him” (1986: 125). Ultimate Truth, to which prophecy provides the clearest access, is, according to Ghazali, by its very nature “free from form, color, and shape [*munazzaha ‘an al-laun wa al-shakl wa al-şûra*]” (1986: 126). The paradox of this claim, however, is that embodied individuals can only access this Truth by means of such attributes. When one sees the Prophet in a dream or in a prophetic vision, one does not see his actual essence; rather, one sees an appropriate, embodied image that functions as an intermediary between Truth and the perceiver. According to Ghazali, “The dreamer says: ‘I saw God in a dream, not in the sense that I saw His essence [*dhât*].’ Therefore, when he says, ‘I saw the Prophet,’ this is not in the sense that he saw the essence [*dhât*] of the Prophet, or his spirit [*rûḥ*], or the essence of his personality [*dhât shakhsihî*] but in the sense that he saw his image [*mithâl*]” (1986: 125).

Ghazali next turns to a rather ambiguous discussion of the difference between image (*mithâl*) and resemblance (*mithl*).¹³ In response to a hypo-

¹³ Hazârvi translates the first term, *mithâl*, rather vaguely, as “example” (73–81). For purposes of clarification I give the English definitions of image and resemblance from the *Oxford English*

thetical objection that even if the Prophet were to possess a resemblance, Ghazali claims that God surely cannot: “This is ignorance of the difference between resemblance and image. The image does not mean resemblance, because resemblance connotes equality [*musâwî*] in all of the attributes [*şifât*]. The image does not require [such] equivalence” (1986: 126).

Although one cannot see something that resembles God, one can apprehend images of certain attributes of the Divine. Ghazali is certainly not making the claim that one can literally see God or something that either resembles or is equivalent to Him. However, he does argue that one can apprehend images of certain particular manifestations of His transcendence—and that these manifestations, derived from the sensual world, do not limit God but, rather, provide humans with something to interact with. If, for example, an individual has a theophanic vision of God as light, this does not mean that God is or is reducible to light. Rather, light, as we know from our own embodied experience, reveals itself and illumines things but is in itself difficult to apprehend. One cannot, for instance, stare into light and comprehend its source (Dorff: 136).

Within this context, Ghazali gives two examples of such images. The image of the sun is commonly employed for the human intellect (*‘aql*) because just as sensible phenomena are “uncovered” (*inkashafa*) by the light of the sun so too intelligible phenomena are uncovered by dint of the light of the intellect (cf. Lazarus-Yafeh: 291–292). In a similar manner, one can speak of a vizier as analogous to the moon. Although the vizier is not equivalent to the moon, he is similar to it in that he is an intermediary between the sultan and the people and symbolizes the overflow of the sultan’s power in dealing with the citizenry. In like manner, the moon is the intermediary between the sun and the earth: because of its position it reflects the light of the sun (cf. al-Ghazâlî 1952: 129–131). Ghazali cites one further example:

In many dreams [*manâmât*] the Prophet was given a vision of milk and rope. He said, “The milk is Islam and the rope is the Qur’ân.” . . . The similarity [*mumâtala*] between the milk and Islam and the rope and the Qur’ân is nothing but an analogy [*munâsaba*]. One clutches a rope for safety, just as one does the Qur’ân; milk nourishes the outer life, just as Islam nourishes the inner life. These are images and not resemblances because these things do not have resemblances. (1986: 127)

Dictionary (2d ed): *image* is (1) “an artificial imitation or representation of the external form of any object” and (2) “an optical appearance or counterpart of an object, such as is produced by rays of light either reflected as from a mirror, refracted as through a lense, or falling on a surface after passing through a small aperture.” *Resemblance*, on the other hand, is the “quality of being like or similar; likeness or similarity in appearance or any other respect; the fact of some likeness existing or being present.”

Ghazali stresses that the dreamer must understand this relationship between symbol and symbolized. In other words, one must know what the dream contains; to misunderstand the dream is to confuse the ideas of resemblance and image. This reinforces his position that dreams serve to connect the pure individual—albeit it in deeper and more authoritative ways—with a truth that everyone already knows. If the philosophers occupy one extreme of the hermeneutic continuum concerning dreams, those who see the Prophet in a dream and think that they literally see him occupy the other extreme. This is so dangerous for Ghazali because it confuses the means with the end. To mistake an image of the Prophet for the Prophet himself is as dangerous as reducing dreams to the body's functions.

Al-Madnûn's discussion of dreams, then, is essentially one of drawing a distinction between the divine essence and divine appearances in dreams and visions. In dialogue with the philosophers, Ghazali is quick to point out the supernatural character of dreams; here, although still acknowledging this supernatural character, his goal is to maintain the divide between symbol and symbolized.

Also implicit in *al-Madnûn* is the important position that the imagination plays in the thought of Ghazali. When the imagination is activated—whether while asleep in dreams or while awake in visions—an intermediate position is created for the individual between the corporeal and the incorporeal worlds, for the latter can only be conceived of in terms of the former (Wolfson: 280). In this intermediate position the individual partakes of the world of images (*'âlam al-mithâl*), the world of concrete and tangible symbols (e.g., Rahman 1966: 409–412). One can only gain access to this world, especially in what would become its classic formulation in the work of ibn 'Arabi (d. 1249), through the imagination and not through the rational faculty.

Unlike the philosophers who claimed that the main function of the imagination is to recall and subsequently recombine stored sensibles, for Ghazali the imaginative faculty produces images of incorporeal and transcendent entities. In his discussion of the role of the imagination in medieval Jewish mysticism—which in many ways parallels that of medieval Islam—Wolfson argues that the imagination is crucial: “In the absence of imagination there is no form, and without form there is no vision and hence no knowledge” (280). This leads to an intimate connection between language and ontology, vision and epistemology: without the imagination there can be neither conception nor understanding of the Divine. The imaginative faculty, for Ghazali, then, functions as a corrective complement to the rational faculty because it is the instrument by which the individual gains access to the divine world. Because we are at the mercy of

the corporeal world and the senses, however, the faculty of imagination can only portray the incorporeal in corporeal form. It is the task of the imaginative faculty to produce iconically the divine realm. Within this context dreams function as one of the primary mechanisms by which the imagination carries out this task.

For Ghazali, all humans have dreams. It is one of the primary ways that we know that there exists a world beyond our own. However, the dreams of the wicked must be treated with caution because of their impure motives. The dreams of the vulgar (i.e., nonelite) are valid, though they must be properly interpreted (by whom, Ghazali never mentions). The dreams that are the most valid and secure are those experienced by the Sufis, either while asleep or awake as visions, because their hearts are pure. For the Sufis are the closest to God, and inspiration (*ilhâm*) shines on them longer and brighter than on anyone else.

V

To understand further the central position that dreams play in Ghazali's thought it is necessary to start at the beginning, at the moment of his original epistemological crisis. In his *Deliverance from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalâl*), written after, and therefore filtered through the prism of, his conversion to Sufism, Ghazali sets out to show the superiority of the Sufi way to attain gnosis (*ma'rifa*). He juxtaposes the Sufis with three other groups that claim certain knowledge: the theologians (*al-mutakallimûn*), who pride themselves on their use of independent judgment (*ra'y*) and reasoning (*nazar*) to arrive at religious truth; the philosophers (*al-falâsifa*) (1965: 87; McCarthy 1980: 71),¹⁴ who deny the independent validity of religious truth; and the Isma'ilis (*al-bâtiniyya*), who stress the "authoritative teaching" of esoteric knowledge that they receive directly from their imam (al-Ghazâlî 1965: 77; McCarthy 1980: 67).

Significantly, Ghazali locates the onset of his spiritual crisis as coming to him through dreams (*manâmât*). These dreams, he claims, are what initially led him to question causal relationships that are founded on unverifiable premises but are often treated as if they were natural law. Dreams, therefore, were responsible for making Ghazali question supposed self-evident truths (1965: 74; McCarthy 1980: 65). In dreams, he informs us, all that we perceive appears real and, upon waking, we realize that such perceptions are often entirely groundless. Why should our experiences while awake be any different? Perhaps, Ghazali muses, this world

¹⁴ Ghazali further subdivides the philosophers into (1) Materialists (*al-dahriyyûn*), (2) Naturalists (*al-ṭab'iyyûn*), and (3) Theists (*al-ilâhiyyûn*), with whom he is most concerned.

and the phenomena that the senses perceive are nothing but illusions and our dreams, which appear lucid to us while asleep, represent true reality. This blurring of the distinction between waking and dreaming, and the need to clarify it, was one of the major impetuses behind Ghazali's quest for certain knowledge.

More important, however, is the fact that dreams were ultimately responsible for providing Ghazali with a path out of his crisis. Ghazali recognized in dreams a state that exists beyond reason. This led him to posit a way of life that was independent of the dry rationalism of the philosophers. This new way of life should, by contrast, be built on the joyful praxis of the mystical path. According to Ghazali, the Sufi enjoys a personal relationship with God, and it is precisely this relationship that Ghazali attempted to make normative for the entire Muslim community. For Sufis, "when they become immersed in their souls, and they withdraw from their senses," are able to grasp phenomena that are not in accord with reason (al-Ghazâlî 1965: 74; McCarthy 1980: 66). Indeed, in this context Ghazali uses as his proof text a saying (*ḥadīth*) of the Prophet Muhammad: "Men sleep, and when they die they awake." Through dreams and visions the Sufi is able to move beyond the sleepy haze of this life so as to experience the truth of the incorporeal realm that is veiled in particular images.

In other works Ghazali further explicates the basic theory of dreams as found in *al-Munqidh*. In particular is his treatment of them in *Renewal of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyâ' 'ulûm al-dîn*), Ghazali's magnum opus and his mystically inspired systematization of the religious law written after his spiritual conversion. In a section from *The Explanation of the Marvels of the Heart* entitled "On the Difference between Inspiration and Instruction and That between the Sufi Method of Uncovering Reality and the Method of the Rational Observers" (1967a: 24–25), Ghazali claims that there are two doors to the heart. One of these doors is open to the five senses (*al-ḥawâss al-khums*), and the other, to the world of angels and the "Guarded Tablet" (*al-lauh al-mahfûz*) (cf. Wensinck). The former is open to the scientists and philosophers who depend on the senses to acquire knowledge. This knowledge, however, will always be uncertain or wrong because it is based on a system of causality that assumes that there is a necessary relationship between perceived causes and their effects. This is juxtaposed with the latter door, which leads to true, infallible knowledge because it is opened by means of unveiling (*iktishâf*) Truth by means of embodied images. The prophets receive this knowledge through prophetic revelation (*wahy*), the Sufis and saints experience similar knowledge through waking visions (*ru'yâ*) and dreams (*manâmât*), and common people experience it solely through dreams. The difference among the knowledges of the prophets, the Sufis, and ordinary Muslims through this

type of unveiling, then, is one of degree and not of kind. Ghazali posits that the way to achieve such inspiration is to purify the heart, to make it “predisposed to the manifestation of the essence of truth.” He claims that this involves the

severing [*inqitâ*] of all relations of the world, emptying [*tafrigh*] the heart of them, cutting the concern for the family, property, children, country, knowledge [*ilm*], power, and fame. Instead, [the Sufi] brings his heart to the state in which it is indifferent to the existence and nonexistence of everything. Then he retires by himself to his room and restricts himself to the religious duties and the superogatory acts of devotion. (1967a: 25)

Ghazali claims that the heart is like a mirror (*mir'ah*),¹⁵ which when purified from the veils of ignorance, sin, and other impurities reflects the mirror of the “Guarded Tablet.”¹⁵ The veils between these two mirrors can be removed either “by the hand” (i.e., discursively) or “by the blowing of winds that drive it away” (i.e., by means of an immediate inspiration). Ghazali explains this as follows:

The winds of benevolence blow, and the veils from the eyes of the heart are lifted, and some of what is written on the Guarded Tablet appears in them. This will sometimes occur in dreams [*manâmât*], and [the dreamer] will know what will happen in the future. The complete lifting of the veils occurs in death when the cover is lifted. It is also lifted during the waking state when the veil ascends because of a hidden kindness from God. It shines in the heart from beyond the veil of that which is sometimes hidden from the marvels of cognitive acts [*ilm*] and sometimes as a sudden flash and other times continuously to a certain extent. (1967a: 25)

This passage shows the way in which Ghazali conceives of the attainment of gnosis (*ma'rifa*), as well as how dreams fit into this discussion. Pure knowledge for Ghazali results from the unveiling (*iktishâf*) of truths directly into the imaginative faculty and in a manner that is independent of the five senses. This, in turn, allows the mystic to apprehend and contemplate in a nondiscursive manner the disclosure of the Divine through the veils of images. However, these images, rather paradoxically, ultimately derive their potency from the data that the senses have collected and which have subsequently been stored in the imagination. Significantly, Ghazali

¹⁵ This metaphor is Plotinian. In a famous passage from the *Enneads* (I.4.10.6), Plotinus compares the imagination to a mirror: when this mirror is smooth, polished, and bright, it projects images “back beyond themselves.” On the identification of the mirror with the imagination, see Blumenthal: 92. We are, thus, able to know intelligibles as if we had perceived them through the senses. This activity occurs, according to Plotinus, when the mind operates nondiscursively (cf. I.4.10.16–17). The medieval thinkers knew neither the *Enneads* nor Plotinus by name. They did, however, read sections of the former under the name of the *Theology of Aristotle* (Zimmermann).

maintains that the knowledge gained by *ilhâm* (inspiration) concerning the sublunar world is not quantifiably different from rationally deduced knowledge: although the end is the same, the means are radically different. The crucial difference between the two forms of acquisition, however, resides in the supralunar world, what the philosophers would call metaphysics. For Ghazali only those modes of nonrational knowledge provide any degree of certainty in this sphere.

Ghazali certainly presents no naive epistemology here. Like the philosophers, he acknowledges a number of different faculties in the human soul (e.g., 1965: 131; McCarthy 1980: 96–97). These faculties—which include the senses and the rational intellect (*‘aql*)—occupy, however, an inferior position with respect to the imagination. Ghazali is particularly drawn to the ocular model of knowledge that the imagination provides because it enables the mystic to visualize the divine presence. This occurs once the mystic has apprehended the images by which the Divine shows himself. Thus, whereas the philosophers claimed that the imagination is essentially a passive faculty, Ghazali argues that it is fundamentally active. It is responsible for acting as a prism, wherein the mystic fully experiences the Divine by means of concrete particulars.

So, whereas the philosophers were highly critical of the creative powers of the imagination, Ghazali argues that it is precisely this creativity that makes the imagination the locus of certain knowledge. For the imagination is the faculty that experiences and expresses in sensible form that which is essentially inexpressible. So although Ghazali adopts (with caveats) the logical and physical sciences of the philosophers, he will only concur with them up to a certain point. Although he agrees with their basic division of the human soul, he refuses to constrain the imagination by subsuming it under the rational faculty. His goal, instead, is to purify this faculty and set it free to discover the incorporeal realm.

Here Ghazali’s position is radically different from that of the philosophers. Both would agree that during sleep the dreamer is unaware of the sensual world; similarly, both would agree that the sensible images derived from this world exist in the imaginative faculty, which recombines them to produce dreams. However, they part company as regards the ultimate source of these dreams: for the philosophers, they are purely an internal psychobiological phenomenon; for Ghazali, they represent the intelligibles that the imaginative faculty has experienced in its contact with the “Guarded Tablet” (1967b: 627). Dreams, according to Ghazali, are not natural phenomena that are confined to the body; rather, they provide an outlet whereby the individual experiences that which exists outside of him- or herself.

VI

Because we are embodied creatures it is impossible to conceptualize suprasensible entities such as God, causation, or the structure of the universe without recourse to images. Such images are necessary because they provide us with particulars that are based on our experiences and engagement with the world. These images, in turn, are part and parcel of an ontology that stresses that the articulations of this world are necessary for understanding that which is infinite and incorporeal. Dreams, which represent one of the primary products of the imagination, provide a context that helps us to define our relationship to the Divine.

In his valorization of the imagination, Ghazali reacts against the standard philosophical claim that marginalizes this faculty at the expense of the intellect. Whereas the philosophers regard images and dreams as potentially subversive, Ghazali makes these phenomena the locus of the personal encounter between humans and God. For such images are what allow the embodied individual to access and apprehend that which exists without bodily extension. To reiterate, Ghazali does *not* equate God with, or reduce Him to, images. Rather, he argues that through images one apprehends specific aspects of His transcendence and His involvement in the world. The imagination, thus, becomes the locus of theophany and the primary instrument of the religious life.

Dreams occupy a central position in the work of Ghazali because they provide him with an excellent context in which he can not only criticize the philosophers but also formulate his own program that is essentially suprarational in scope. Whereas the philosophers subordinated the imagination to the rational faculty and, by extension, dreams to discursive knowledge, Ghazali subverts this claim. For him, the imagination is the supreme faculty because it enables the individual to experience the incorporeal world. Whereas the philosophers had attempted to harness both prophecy and dreams by rationalizing them, the work of Ghazali represents an attempt to liberate them.

This article has tried to use Ghazali's discourse on dreams as a case study with which to begin to understand the role of the imagination and its relationship to religious experience. This, as noted at the beginning, is made difficult owing to the ambiguity that surrounds this faculty. I have here presented this ambiguity as a paradox that is fundamental to the human condition: as embodied creatures we need particular images to articulate the world. This, however, does not mean that such articulations are simply the projection of ourselves onto the world. On the contrary, we only apprehend the world by means of the particular contexts by which

it displays itself. And it is precisely within this context that the imagination encounters, signifies, and translates this display.

Despite such paradoxes and ambiguities, however, it is possible to draw several tentative conclusions. First, it is important to regard the imagination as the vehicle by which the individual, and even a community, can mediate monotheism's fundamental tension between God's incorporeality and the need to experience and apprehend Him in a concrete manner. It is important to locate dreams and the act of dreaming against this backdrop. The dream, according to Ghazali, represents a clearing wherein the individual experiences the infinite through the veils of what is three dimensional.

Second, we need not regard the imagination simply as a haphazard or subjective faculty. In this regard, the medieval Muslim thinkers—and, in many ways, we as well—inherited from the Greeks a distinct psychic hierarchy wherein the imagination occupies a distinctive place. Within this context the imagination is a faculty that is related to perception, which, in turn, is the building block of all knowledge. Both the philosophers and the mystics could agree on this much. Where they differ, of course, is on whether or not the information that the imagination supplies is valid.

Third, the imagination is primarily a creative faculty. This, however, raises the unavoidable question and one that is especially relevant to the discussion on dream discourse: At what point does this creativity simply blur into unconscious hallucinations? But this, in turn, raises an equally important question for the historian of religions: Is it our job to assign criteria to ascertain the validity of, say, a dream? Indeed, is such an evaluation even necessary? Here Ghazali has something to offer us. For he claims that to characterize the content of a dream as either "true" or "false" is misplaced (cf. above, section IV). On the contrary, the difference between the perceived and the imagined is minor when compared with the hermeneutical significance of the act. For it is this significance that bridges the gap between God's absence and God's presence.

Finally, the valorization of the imagination has, historically, provided certain thinkers with a forum in which to argue for the irreducibility of religious experience. The imagination, thus, is inseparable from certain truth claims concerning the nature of the religious life and its superiority to one that is concerned solely with ratiocination. The critics of this approach (both in Ghazali's day and in ours) argue against such a valorization. They claim that it is a strategy for carving out an unassailable space for the preservation of ideas or concepts that some feel should not be subject to analytical scrutiny. As Ghazali shows us, however, this analytical scrutiny is not so much threatening to the priority or ineffability of religious experience as it is ultimately unsatisfactory.

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