It is appropriate to begin a study on the problem of Monism versus Monotheism in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) thought by juxtaposing two passages from his famous treatise Mishkāt al-anwār (‘The Niche of Lights’) which is devoted to an interpretation of the Light Verse (Q. 24:35) and of the Veils Ḥadīth (to be discussed below). As I will try to show, the two passages represent monistic and monotheistic perspectives respectively.

For the purposes of the present study, the term ‘monism’ refers to the theory, put forward by al-Ghazālī in a number of contexts, that God is the only existent in existence and the world, considered in itself, is ‘sheer non-existence’ (‘adam maḥḍ); while ‘monotheism’ refers to the view that God is the one of the totality of existents which is the source of existence for the rest of existents. The fundamental difference between the two views lies in their respective assessments of God’s granting existence to what is other than He: the monistic paradigm views the granting of existence as essentially virtual so that in the last analysis God alone exists, whereas the monotheistic paradigm sees the granting of existence as real.

Let us now turn to the passages in question.

**Passage A: Mishkāt, Part 1, §§52–4**

[§52] The entire world is permeated by external visual and internal intellectual lights … Lower [lights] emanate from one another the way light emanates from a lamp [ṣīrāj, cf. Q. 24:35] … [Similarly,] higher [lights] are kindled from one another and arranged in a hierarchy of stages (ṭartīb maqāmāt). The entire [hierarchy] ascends to the ‘Light of lights’ – the [other lights’] first source and origin. This [origin] is God the Exalted, alone, without a partner. Other lights, by contrast, are borrowed (musta‘āra), the only real light being His light. [Indeed,] everything is His light. Moreover, He is everything. Moreover, nothing save He has a ‘he-ness’, except metaphorically (lā huuwiyya li-ghayrihi illā bi‘l-majāz).

[§53] Therefore, there is no light but His light, whereas other lights are lights not in themselves but only with respect to {the face}
adjacent to Him. Indeed, the face of everything that has a face is directed at Him and turns in His direction: Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God (fa-aynamā tuwallū fa-thamma wajhu’l-lāh) [Q. 2:115]. Hence, there is no god but He, for the term ‘god’ denotes that toward which face{s} turn with worship and godliness (ta’alā). Moreover, just as there is no god but He, there is no he but He (lā huwa illā huwa), for the term ‘he’ denotes that to which any kind of a reference is made, and there can be no reference but to Him (lā ishāra illā ilayhi).

[§54] There can be no reference to the light of the sun but only to the sun. Now, everything in existence relates to [God] as light relates to the sun, in the plain terms of this image (fī ḥir al-mithl). This is why ‘There is no god but God’ is the tawḥīd of the commoners, whereas ‘There is no god but He’ is the tawḥīd of the elect, since this is more perfect, special, comprehensive, correct and precise. It is more conducive to the holder [of this doctrine] entering into pure singularity and sheer unity.

Passage B: Mishkāt, Part 2, §§11–15

[§11] Since the world of [divine] kingdom (‘ālam al-malakūt) contains lofty, noble, luminous substances, called angels, from which lights emanate upon human spirits – which is why they are [also] called lords, God being the Lord of lords – and since [these substances] have diverse degrees (marātib) in luminosity, it is appropriate that their image[s] (mithāluhā) in the world of manifestation (‘ālam al-shahāda) be the sun, the moon and the stars.

[§12] The traveller (sālik) on the path first encounters the [angel] whose rank is the rank of the stars (mā darajatuhu darajat al-kawākib). He perceives the effluence of [this angel’s] light and realises that the entire lower world is under its control and the effluence of its light … Hence he says, ‘This is my Lord’ [Q. 6:76].

[§13] Then when he clearly perceives what is above it, i.e. the [angel] whose rank is the rank of the moon, he realises that the first [angel], in comparison to what is above it, enters the setting place of disappearance [lit. ‘falling’, huwīy]. Hence he says, ‘I do not like those that set (al-āfilīn)’ [Q. 6:76].

[§14] He ascends in the same manner till he reaches the [angel] whose image (mithāl) is the sun. He sees that it is greater and higher than the previous angel, yet he sees that it [too] admits of having an image through possessing a kind of analogous correspondence with it (qābil li’l-mithāl bi-nawṣ munāsaba lahu ma’ahu). However,
analogous correspondence with something imperfect is also an imperfection and a ‘setting’ [ufūl, cf. Q. 6:76]. This is why he says: \textit{I turn my face as a true believer} to Him who created the heavens and the earth (innī wa`jahu wajhiya li`lladhī faṭara`l-samāwātī wa’l-ardā ḥanīfan) [Q. 6:79].

Now, the meaning of ‘He who’ (alladhī) is an unspecific reference (ishāra mubhama) [whose referent] has no analogous correspondence (lā munāsaba lahā). Indeed, if someone were to ask, ‘what is the image (mithāl) of the referent (mafhūm) of ‘He who’’, this question would have no conceivable answer. This is why that which transcends any analogous correspondence is the First, the Real (fa`l-mutanazzih `an kull munāsaba huwa al-awwal al-ḥaq) …

[§15] This is why when Pharaoh asked Moses, ‘What is the Lord of the worlds?’ (mā rabbu`l-`ālimin) [Q. 26:23] like someone who asks about His whatness [or ‘quiddity’, māhiyya], [Moses] responded to him only through a reference to [God’s] acts, for acts were more manifest to the questioner. Thus [Moses] said [in response], ‘Lord of the heavens and the earth’ [Q. 26:24]. Pharaoh said to those around him, ‘Do you not hear [this]?’ [Q. 26:25] like someone who is accusing [Moses] of having begged the question about whatness. [Finally, when] Moses said, ‘Your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers’ [Q. 26:26], Pharaoh called him insane (nasabahu il`l-junūn), for he was asking about image and whatness (al-mithāl wa`l-māhiyya) while [Moses] was responding about acts. Thus [Pharaoh] said, ‘Indeed your messenger, who has been sent to you, is insane’ [Q. 26:27].

I am not aware of any study that puts these passages together. Yet they are so closely related that they cannot be read in isolation from one another:

1. Both passages present a hierarchy of spiritual lights ascending to the First Source – God – called in the first passage ‘the Light of lights’ (nūr al-anwār) and in the second, ‘the Lord of lords’ (rabb al-arbāb) (note the similar structure of both expressions). This terminology reflects the respective Qur’anic substrata of these passages: the Light Verse in the first case, and a number of ayas from Sūrat al-An`ām (Q. 6:76–9), describing Abraham’s ascent to belief in God through a sequence of intermediary ‘lords’, in the second.

2. In both cases a Qur’anic aya about ‘turning’ or ‘turning the face’ is quoted. In the first passage, this is Q. 2:115, \textit{Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God} (fa-aynamā tuwallū fa-thamma wajhu`l-lāh); in the second passage this is Abraham’s final confession, Q. 6:79, \textit{I turn my face as a true believer to Him who created the heavens and the earth} (innī wa`jahu wajhiya li`lladhī faṭara`l-samāwātī wa`l-ardā ḥanīfan).
Furthermore – and this is especially striking – in both passages God is designated by a pronoun: the masculine singular *personal* pronoun *huwa* in the first passage and the masculine singular *demonstrative* pronoun *alladhī* in the second.

In both cases, important conclusions are drawn from this designation, both using the term ‘reference’ (*ishāra*). In the first case, God is said to be the only ‘he’ in existence, i.e. the only real existent, with the implication that there can be no reference *save to Him* (*lā ishāra illā ilayhi*). In the second case, God is said to be the ‘He who’ (*alladhī*), an unspecified reference (*ishāra mubhama*), with the implication that God *can have no analogous correspondence* (*munāsaba*).

Finally and most significantly, there are important philosophical terms ‘hidden’ in each of the passages. In Passage A, this is the term *huwiyya*, translated above as ‘he-ness’ but also meaning ‘existence’.

The theme of God as the only true existent is central to al-Ghazālī’s metaphysics. It occurs, most famously, as the highest stage of professing God’s oneness, *tawḥīd*. In the *Mishkāt* itself, as we have seen toward the end of Passage A, al-Ghazālī draws a distinction between two types of *tawḥīd*, characteristic of the commoners and the
select respectively. The commoners believe in the plain meaning of the *shahāda*, ‘There is no god but God’. The elect, by contrast, have a more esoteric version, which reads: ‘There is no god but He’. An even more esoteric version, ‘There is no he but He’ (*lā huwa illā huwa*) is mentioned earlier in the same passage without attribution. The implication is that this is the *tawḥīd* of the elect among the elect, *khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*, a group mentioned elsewhere in the *Mishkāt*.15

In several of his works al-Ghazālī discusses *tawḥīd* and divides it into a number of levels or stages (*marātib*). The best known – fourfold – classification is found in Book 35 of the *Ihya*’ (Kitāb al-Tawḥīd wa’l-tawakkul), in the corresponding sections of Kitāb al-Arba’īn and the Persian *Kimiyya-ye sa‘ādat*, and in Kitāb al-Imāl fī ʿishkālāt al-Ihya’ – a work supplementary to the *Ihya* and written to rebut criticisms directed at the latter.16 A slightly different classification is presented in one of al-Ghazālī’s Persian letters.17 There, *tawḥīd* is divided into six levels. In the following discussion I shall take the fourfold classification of the *Ihya* as a basis, providing references to other classifications in endnotes where appropriate.

In Book 35 of the *Ihya*’ al-Ghazālī divides *tawḥīd* into four levels and compares them, respectively, to a nut’s husk of the husk, husk, kernel and kernel of the kernel, progressing from the most outward dimension to the innermost.

1. The first level is purely superficial. By it al-Ghazālī means enunciating the *shahāda* not by the heart but by the tongue alone; this is the *tawḥīd* of the hypocrites (*tawḥīd al-munāfiqin*).18

2. The second level affirms the meaning of the *shahāda* (*ma’nā al-lafẓ*)19 by the heart as recognised by the commonality of Muslims. This is the view of the commoners (*i’tiqād al-ʿawāmm*). It is compared to a knot (‘*uqda*) upon a person’s heart;²⁰ religious innovation (bid’a) strives to loosen and untie this knot, whereas *kalām* protects it (al-Ghazālī refers in this context to his *kalām* treatise *al-Iqtisād fī l-i’tiqād*).²¹

3. The third level implies envisioning the *shahāda* by way of disclosure (*bi-ṭarīq al-kashf*) by means of ‘expansion of the chest’ (*inshirāḥ al-ṣadr*)²² and illumination by the light of truth (or God: *nūr al-aqqūn*).²³ This is the station of those ‘drawn near [to God]’ (*maqām al-muqarrabīn*). They see all things, despite their plurality, as originating from a single source, God. In this stage of *tawḥīd* God is the only agent (*fāʾīl*), to which all other existents are subjugated (*musakhkharūn*);²⁴ this is why it is called *tawḥīd al-fiʾl* or *tawḥīd fīʾl-fīʾl*,²⁵ it is this stage of *tawḥīd* that is the foundation of *tawakkul*.²⁶

4. Finally, the fourth level implies envisioning God as the only existent. This is the highest purpose of *tawḥīd*, called ‘the contemplation of the righteous’ (*mushāhadat al-ṣiddīqīn*) or, in Shi‘i parlance, ‘obliteration in *tawḥīd*’ (*al-fanāʾ fīʾl-tawḥīd*), inasmuch as one who sees in existence nothing but God ceases to
see himself. In this stage one sees the universe (\textit{al-kull}) not insofar as it is many but insofar as it is one (\textit{min ḥaythu innahu wāḥid}). This contemplation is sometimes lasting but more often comes as a flash of lightning.

It is important to note that in referring to the fourth level of \textit{tawḥīd} al-Ghazālī is not speaking of a purely subjective state of the mystic, who, being totally devoted to and focused on God, sees nothing else – not even himself – in existence; whose vision, however, does not correspond to the actual state of affairs, where both God and creation exist. Such purely subjectivistic interpretation ignores the fact that the fourth level of \textit{tawḥīd} has, for al-Ghazālī, an important cognitive content, which he seeks to analyse and explain in rational terms or through images, as we shall see below. It is with this cognitive content and the ontology revealed therein, not merely with the psychological state that leads to its realisation, that he is primarily concerned. This is why he is not content with the Ṣūfī designation of this state as ‘obliteration’ (\textit{fanāʾ}), which overemphasises the subjective and experiential side, and insists on calling it \textit{tawḥīd}, emphasising its ontological aspect.

It is for this reason, too, that al-Ghazālī is careful to reject alternative ontological interpretations of this state: he wants to ensure that the ontology it reveals is adequately interpreted and understood. This is the purpose of the following comment, made by al-Ghazālī in the Persian letter mentioned above, in which he criticises the ‘ecstatic’ Ṣūfis al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) and Abū Yazīd al-Bīstāmī (d. 261/874 or 264/877–8) who, in his view, failed adequately to interpret their experience:

Those who have reached this stage are overcome in it by a state similar to intoxication (\textit{sokrī}) and in this intoxication are prone to err in two ways. First, they may think that there has occurred a conjunction (\textit{ttešālī}) [with God] and express it in terms of [God’s] indwelling (\textit{ḥoölāl}) [within them]. Second, they may think that there has occurred a union (\textit{tteḥādī}) [with God]: they have become [God] Himself and the two have become one … [like those who say] ‘I am the Real [i.e. God]’ and ‘Glory be to Me’ [i.e. al-Ḥallāj and al-Bīstāmī respectively]. When this intoxication gives way to sobriety they understand that they have been in error. [Al-Ghazālī then goes on to refute these interpretations on philosophical grounds.]

The notion that it is not only in a mystic’s subjective experience but also in actuality that (in the last analysis) there is nothing in existence save God is a striking one, and al-Ghazālī is very much aware that it will raise some eyebrows. He therefore attempts to forestall criticism by offering a variety of partial but complementary explanations. The most revealing of these is to be found in the first part of the \textit{Mishkāt} and in the Persian letter mentioned above. These texts are cited below side by side: the former in paraphrase, the latter in translation.
Al-Ghazālī describes a hierarchy (tartīb) of lights. This hierarchy is not infinite but ascends to a First Source (manba‘ awwal) – the Light in and of itself (al-nūr li-dhāthi wa-bi-dhāthi), above which there are no lights and from which the entire hierarchy shines forth. This Light deserves the name of light more than secondary lights.

Moreover, the name ‘light’ as applied to other lights is a pure metaphor (majāz maḥd), since their luminosity is borrowed (musta‘āra) (for if considered in their essence (dhāt) they have no light whatsoever) and the relation of the thing borrowed to the borrower is a pure metaphor (nisbat al-musta‘ār ilā-l-musta‘īr majāz maḥd).

Non-existence is utmost darkness; existence is utmost light.

Existence is divided into two kinds: existence proper to a thing and existence borrowed from elsewhere (mā li‘l-shay‘ min dhāthi wa- ... mā lahu min ghayrihi). That which exists by virtue of borrowed existence is pure non-existence (‘adam maḥd) if considered in its essence, God alone is the Real Existent (al-mawjūd al-ḥaqq) and the Real Light.

There is nothing in existence save God. Everything is perishing save His Face [Q. 28:88]: not perishing at a certain time [in the future] but from eternity to eternity (azalan wa-abadan).

Each thing has two faces: one toward itself, another toward its Lord. With regard to the former, it is non-existence; with regard to the Face of God it exists. Therefore, there is no existent save God and His Face. Therefore, everything is perishing save His Face [Q. 28:88] from eternity to eternity.

Know that the existence of all things is a loan (‘ārīyya) and comes not from the essence of [these] things (az dhāṭ-e chīzhā) but from God, while the existence of God is essential (dhāṭt) and does not originate from anything else. Rather He is the Real Being (hast-e be-haqīqa), while all other things are [only] seeming beings (hast-e nomāy) with regard to someone who does not know that [their existence] is a loan. However, he who has understood the real nature of things sees with his own eyes that Everything is perishing save His Face [Q. 28:88], [perishing] from eternity to eternity (azalan va-abadan), not [merely] at some particular time [in the future]. Indeed, all things at all times are non-existent (ma‘dīm) as far as their essence is concerned (az ānjā ke dhāṭ-e vey ast), since non-existence and existence come to them not from their essence but from the essence of God. Therefore, this existence is metaphorical (majāz), not real (haqīqī). Hence, the statement that there is no other existent save [God] is correct.
Here, in the *Mishkât* and the Persian letter, al-Ghazâlî provides theoretical justification for his radical claim that ‘There is nothing in existence save God’: the ‘borrowed’ and hence ‘metaphorical’ nature of the existence of created things.37

What is the origin of this idea? In order to answer this question let us notice that while consonant with important developments within the Şûfi tradition38 al-Ghazâlî’s monistic ontology is critical of some aspects of that tradition (the ecstatic pronouncements of al-Hallâj and al-Bistamî as well as Şûfi terminology) and on the other hand can be shown to stand on a firm philosophical foundation. Specifically, it bears a striking structural resemblance to, and integrates important elements of, Avicenna’s quiddity/existence distinction and the proof for the existence of God.39

According to Avicenna, it is not to their quiddities (‘whatnesses’, māhiyyât) that most existents owe their existence, for if they did, they would exist necessarily in virtue of what they are and could not not-exist. Since, however, this is patently not the case, their existence must be due to an external efficient cause: it is ‘borrowed’, in al-Ghazâlî’s terminology. As Avicenna demonstrates, the chain of efficient causes cannot be infinite and must have a beginning – the first efficient cause, i.e. God, who alone is ‘necessary of existence’ (wâjib al-wujûd), that is, necessarily existent in virtue of what He is (li-dhâtihi), and not merely ‘possible of existence’ (mumkin al-wujûd), that is, capable of both existence and non-existence as the rest of existents.

It can be seen that in the passages cited above al-Ghazâlî’s discussion follows the structure and conceptual framework of Avicenna’s argument quite closely, with only occasional modifications and ‘re-naming’ of some of the concepts:

1. Al-Ghazâlî’s ‘light’ (in the *Mishkât* passage) is another term for existence, as al-Ghazâlî himself makes clear in *Mishkât*, Part 1, §40.40

2. The hierarchy of lights, emanating light upon one another, corresponds to Avicenna’s chain of efficient causes, bestowing existence upon one another. The First Source of these lights corresponds to Avicenna’s first efficient cause.

3. The ‘borrowed’ nature of existence corresponds to the fact that in Avicenna’s system existence is bestowed upon a quiddity by an external efficient cause (and ultimately by the First Cause).

4. The perpetual ‘perishing’ of all existents corresponds to their ‘possible’ nature (imkân) in Avicenna’s system. This explains why, according to al-Ghazâlî, their perishing is ‘from eternity to eternity’ (azalan wa-abadan): although, in contradistinction to Avicenna, al-Ghazâlî sees the world as created in time, the world’s possible nature, that is, its being capable of existence or non-existence, is nevertheless eternal.41
5. Finally, the two ‘faces’ of existents – directed at themselves and at God – correspond to their quiddity and existence respectively. The ‘Face of God’ is the flow of existence in created things.42

Furthermore, on several occasions, Avicenna claims that contingent existents, taken in themselves, are ‘void’ (bāṭila) and ‘deserve non-existence’ (tastāḥiqqu’l-’adam). In the following remarkable passage from Ilāḥiyyāt, Book 8, Chapter 6, he even uses the concept of ‘face’ and quotes the same Qur’anic aya – Q. 28:88 – to substantiate this claim:43

[The Necessary of Existence] is sometimes also called Real (ḥaqq), since the belief in Its existence is real. Moreover, there is nothing more deserving this reality (aḥaqq bi-hādhihi’l-ḥaqīqa)44 than That the belief in whose existence is real, and not only real but eternal, and not only eternal but is also due to Itself, not to another. The quiddities of other things, however, do not … deserve existence (lā tastāḥiqqu’l-wujūd); rather, taken in themselves, when their relation to the Necessary of Existence is severed, they deserve non-existence (tastāḥiqqu’l-’adam). This is why they are all void (bāṭila) in themselves and real (ḥaqqa) by It, becoming actualised with respect to the face that is adjacent to It (wa-bi’l-qiyyās ilā’l-wajh alladhī yalīhī hāṣila). This is why everything is perishing save His Face [Q. 28:88], and thus He is more deserving [than anything else] to be [the] Real (aḥaqq bi-an yakūna ḥaqqa).

Al-Ghazālī’s use of the concept of ‘face’ in the Mishkāt and of the Qur’anic phrase everything is perishing save His Face undoubtedly goes back to this and similar Avicennian passages. It is also worth noting that when al-Ghazālī speaks of the fourth degree of tawḥīd he usually calls God ‘the One, the Real’ (al-wāḥid al-ḥaqq),45 providing a direct link to this passage by Avicenna, in which God’s name ‘the Real’ is analysed. Moreover, in his commentary on the Divine Names, al-Maqsad al-asnā fi sharḥ ma’ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā – a work written after the Iḥyā7 but prior to the Mishkāt46 – al-Ghazālī explains that the name al-ḥaqq refers to the essence (dhāt) of God insofar as it is necessary of existence (wājibat al-wujūd), again alluding to Avicenna.47 All this leaves al-Ghazālī’s debt to Avicenna beyond reasonable doubt.

The fourth degree of tawḥīd represents, therefore, an interpretation – a radical interpretation, one may add – of Avicenna’s metaphysics. This interpretation is a monistic one: ‘There is nothing in existence save God’. Even though this interpretation does not do justice to Avicenna’s system as a whole,48 we do find in Avicenna passages – such as the one just quoted – that can be taken to support this
view. It is primarily on such passages that al-Ghazālī’s monistic interpretation of tawḥīd is based.

Monotheism: Commentary on Passage B

Let us now turn to Passage B and the monotheistic perspective. Hermann Landolt in his important study on the Mishkāt, ‘Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft’, published in 1991, pointed out that this passage is closely related to the third part – the so-called ‘Veil Section’ – of the Mishkāt. This section is devoted to an interpretation of the Veils Ḥadīth: ‘God has 70 [in some versions: 70,000] veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the glories of His Face would burn up everyone whose sight perceived Him’. Following this Ḥadīth, al-Ghazālī presents a classification of human beings into four categories: (1) those veiled from God by pure darkness, (2) those veiled by darkness mixed with light, (3) those veiled by pure light, and finally (4) the attainers (al-wāṣīlūn). It is essential for our purposes to deal with the last two categories in detail.

The third category is divided into three groups: first, those (group 3.1) who know the true meaning of the divine attributes (such as speech, will, power and knowledge) and realise that there is no connection between the application of these terms to God and to other existents, including humans. Hence they avoid naming God by these attributes and refer to Him merely through the relation (iḍāfa) He has to created beings, as did Moses in his response to Pharaoh’s question ‘What is the Lord of the worlds?’ (Q. 26:23). This group believes that the Lord transcends the meanings of the attributes and is the mover and caretaker of the heavens (muḥarrīk al-samāwāt wa-mudabbiruhā).

The second group (3.2) realises that there is plurality in the heavens and that each sphere is moved by a separate angel, the angels being multiple and analogous to stars (nisbatuhum ilā [read fī?] al-anwār al-ilāhīyya nisbat al-kawākib). Hence they conclude that the Lord is the mover of the outermost celestial body encompassing all the spheres (al-jīrī al-aqṣā al-munṭawī ‘alāl-aflāk kullihā), who is untouched by plurality.

The third group (3.3) realises that the mover of the outermost celestial body causes the motion of the heavens directly (bi-ṭarīq al-mubāshara). Since it is not fitting for the Lord to be the direct cause of motion, the mover of the outermost celestial body cannot be the Lord but an angel, standing at the Lord’s service and analogous to the moon (nisbatuhu ilā [read fī?] al-anwār al-ilāhīyya al-maḥḍa nisbat al-qamar). They believe that the Lord is the Being that is obeyed by this mover (al-muṭā’ min jihat hādhāʾl-muḥarrīk) and moves the universe not directly but by way of command (bi-ṭarīq al-amr).
So far the threefold division of the third category. Finally, the fourth category (group 4), the attainers, are those who realise that even this obeyed one (al-mu††fi) has a quality that is at odds with pure singularity, ‘on account of a secret that cannot be disclosed in this book’, and that the obeyed one is analogous to the sun among [sensible] lights (nisbat hādhā’l-mu††fi nisbat al-shams fi’l-anwār). This is why they turn their faces away from the movers of the heavens, the mover of the outermost celestial body, and the obeyed one, by whose command it is moved, toward Him who created (fatara) them all.

As noted by Landolt, both Passage B and the Veil Section are parallel to, and based on, Abraham’s gradual ascent to belief in God in Q. 6:76–9. According to the Qur’anic passage, Abraham saw a star and declared, ‘This is my Lord (hādhā rabbī)’ (Q. 6:76), yet when the star disappeared beneath the horizon, Abraham said, ‘I do not like those that set (al-āfilin)’ (Q. 6:76). Then the moon rose and Abraham declared again, ‘This is my Lord’ (Q. 6:77); but the moon set, too. Next, the sun appeared and Abraham exclaimed, ‘This is my Lord, [for] this is greater’ (Q. 6:78). Finally, after the sun disappeared as well, Abraham renounced all forms of idolatry and proclaimed, ‘I turn my face as a true believer to Him who created the heavens and the earth’ (Q. 6:79).

In the case of Passage B the Qur’anic substratum is evident, since this passage alludes to Abraham’s ascent to belief in God by quoting the relevant ayas. In the case of the Veil Section, too, the threefold division of those veiled by pure light is based on the Qur’anic account of Abraham’s ascent. The three groups 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 are differentiated according to which among the Lord’s angels they mistakenly believe to be the Lord: whether the movers of the heavens, analogous to the stars (group 3.1), or the mover of the outermost celestial body, analogous to the moon (group 3.2), or the obeyed one, analogous to the sun (group 3.3). Finally, the fourth category, the attainers, go beyond all these and turn their faces toward Him who created them all, as Abraham did.

What makes the connection between Passage B and the Veil Section even closer is that in Passage B al-Ghazālī is not speaking of physical lights (the stars, the moon and the sun), but of a spiritual and angelic hierarchy that runs parallel to the physical one. The ‘star’, the ‘moon’ and the ‘sun’ that the ‘traveller’ encounters on his way are not the physical star, moon and sun but the spiritual substances (angels) corresponding to these. The ‘traveller’, in fact, encounters in succession the very same three angels that the three groups 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 mistakenly view as the Lord.

Why does the traveller turn away from the ‘sun’ – i.e. from the ‘sun-angel’ (=the obeyed one of the third part of the Mishkāt)? According to Landolt, he does so because the ‘sun-angel’ is ‘greater and higher than the moon-angel’ and, being ‘related to something less perfect’ than itself, is itself imperfect. This however is
not precisely what al-Ghazālī says. Al-Ghazālī’s text reads (to quote Passage B again): 59

He ascends in the same manner till he reaches the [angel] whose image (mithāl) is the sun. He sees that it is greater and higher [than the previous angel], yet he sees that it [too] admits of having an image through possessing a kind of analogous correspondence (munāsaba) with it. But analogous correspondence with something imperfect is also an imperfection and a ‘setting’ [ufūl, cf. Q. 6:76]. This is why he says, ‘I turn my face as a true believer to Him who created the heavens and the earth’ [Q. 6:79].

It is clear that the imperfection of the sun-angel derives not from the fact that it is greater and higher than the moon-angel, as Landolt interprets it, but from the fact that this angel has a physical image (mithāl) – the sun – with which it has analogous correspondence (munāsaba). This, in my view, helps solve one of the puzzles of the Veil Section, namely why al-Ghazālī refrains from identifying the obeyed one with the Lord: the obeyed one falls short of the ultimate perfection precisely because it still has an image in the sensible world – the sun. This may be the meaning of al-Ghazālī’s statement quoted earlier that ‘the obeyed one has a quality that is at odds with pure singularity and utmost perfection, on account of a secret that cannot be disclosed in this book’. 60

According to Passage B, only God Himself transcends any analogous correspondence. 61 God is the ‘He who’ (alladhī) of the Qur’anic aya that describes the last stage of Abraham’s ascent: ‘I have turned my face as a true believer to Him who (li’lladhī) created the heavens and the earth’ (Q. 6:79), and ‘He who’ is an unspecific reference (ishāra mubahama) whose referent can have no analogous correspondence. Indeed, al-Ghazālī explains, if someone were to ask, ‘what is the image (mithāl) of the referent (mafhūm) of “He who”?’, this question would have no conceivable answer. 62

As al-Ghazālī further explains, the terms ‘heavens’ and ‘earth’ stand for the two worlds, the spiritual/intelligible ‘world of concealment and the [divine] kingdom’ (‘ālam al-ghayb wa’l-malakūt) and the bodily/sensible ‘world of possession and manifestation’ (‘ālam al-mulk wa’l-shahāda). 63 Thus, al-Ghazālī’s exegesis of Q. 6:79 implies that although there is analogous correspondence (munāsaba) between the worlds – the sensible world consisting of images (amthila) of the intelligible one – He who created these worlds (alladhī faṭara’l-samāwāt wa’l-ard) has no image and transcends (mutanazzih) any analogous correspondence.

It might be useful, at this point, to make an excursus on al-Ghazālī’s theory of analogous correspondence (munāsaba), or parallelism (muwāzana), between the two
worlds, to which he resorts in this passage. In the second part of the Mishkāt the following explanation is provided:

Divine mercy (al-rahma al-ilāhiyya) made the world of manifestation parallel to (‘alā muwāzana) the world of [divine] kingdom, so that there is nothing in this world that is not an image (mithāl) of something in the world of kingdom. Sometimes one and the same thing [in the world of manifestation] is an image of several things in the world of [divine] kingdom; and sometimes one and the same thing in the world of [divine] kingdom has many images in the world of manifestation. In order to be an image a thing has to bear some kind of likeness to (mumāthala) and match (muṭābaqa) [that whose image it is].

On the epistemological level, the analogous correspondence between the two worlds is highly significant, for if it did not exist one would be unable to ascend to the world of [divine] kingdom at all. This is why al-Ghazālī regards this analogous correspondence as a sign of divine mercy. On the ontological level, the analogous correspondence between the two worlds results from the fact that the world of manifestation is caused by the world of kingdom and, as al-Ghazālī says, ‘the caused is always parallel to (muwāzāt) the cause and imitates (muḥākāt) it in some way, be it proximate or remote’. In other words, the image corresponds to that whose image it is precisely because it is caused by it and hence receives its imprint.

At this point, we need to ask ourselves how, in al-Ghazālī’s view, an image corresponds to that whose image it is? What kind of analogous correspondence does the obeyed one, for instance, have to the physical sun? The answer to this question can be found in al-Ghazālī’s discussion of the use of images in a different yet related field, that of dreams and dream interpretation. Significantly, this discussion, too, occurs in the second part of the Mishkāt, immediately after the discussion of the traveller’s encounter with the three angels:

The science of dream interpretation (‘ilm al-taʾbīr) will teach you how images are coined (mithāl darb al-mithāl), for dream (ruyā) is a part of prophecy. Do you not see that in a dream the sun is to be interpreted as a sultan, because they share, and are similar in (almushāraka wa’l-mumāthala), a spiritual meaning (maʿna rūḥānī), namely being above all (al-istiʿlā’ alāʾl-kāffa) and having their effects emanating on all [the rest]. [Similarly] the moon is to be interpreted as a minister, for while the sun is absent it emanates its light upon the world through the mediation of the moon, just as the sultan emanates his lights upon those who are absent from his presence through the mediation of the minister.
From this passage we learn that al-Ghazālī’s ‘image’ (mithāl) does not resemble that whose image it is in any direct sense but through sharing the same ‘spiritual meaning’ or, in modern terms, an abstract quality. Furthermore, and this is important, this quality is relational and refers to the role the two analogues play in their respective systems. The only sense in which the sultan, for instance, is similar to the sun is that they share an abstract quality, ‘being above all’, and perform the same function in, and relate in the same way to other members of, their respective systems: the sultan to the minister and the subjects and the sun to the moon and the sublunar world. Al-Ghazālī’s analogous correspondence (munāsaba) is therefore systemic: the two systems – in this case, the system of a country’s administration and the system of celestial luminaries – correspond to each other as a whole.

This holds true also for cosmological symbolism: the similarity of the obeyed one to the sun is not direct. Rather, they share the same abstract quality, ‘being above all’ again, and the same function, emanating lights upon the angel or the luminary immediately beneath them. Here too the analogous correspondence is systemic: the two systems – that of spiritual lights and that of celestial luminaries – correspond to each other as a whole.

It is in this sense that God is said to have no image and transcend any analogous correspondence: no abstract quality pertaining to created beings – not even the obeyed one’s quality of ‘being above all’ – can be legitimately predicated of God, whose function in the universe, as its Creator, has no counterpart within the created universe itself.

Monism and Monotheism: The Relationship Between the Two Perspectives

I hope to have shown that both the monistic and the monotheistic perspective are present in al-Ghazālī’s Mishkāt al-anwār. It might be useful at this point to discuss how the two are related. I therefore suggest looking at the two passages analysed in the course of this study from the point of view of Avicenna’s quiddity/existence distinction, already invoked in the first section of this study. The terms huwiyya and māhiyya, ‘encoded’, as we have noticed above, in Passages A and B respectively, provide a formal justification for this approach.

Once we do so, it becomes clear that Passage A, which I have called monistic, analyses the relation between God and the world from the perspective of existence. From this perspective, contingent quiddities, considered in themselves, are sheer non-existence (‘adam mahd). They borrow existence from God. God, by contrast, is pure existence, which lends itself out to non-existent quiddities to render them ‘quasi-existent’. In the last analysis, however, only God exists in the real sense, only He has a ‘he-ness’ (or ‘existence’, huwiyya) and only He can be referred to (lā ʾishāra illā ilayhi). The tawḥīd of the elect among the elect, ‘There is no he but He’
(lā huwa illā huwa), means simply that, there being nothing but God, any reference is a reference to Him.\textsuperscript{71}

Passage B, by contrast, focuses on *quiddities*. From this perspective, God is not similar to any other being, either because God has no quiddity at all other than His existence (as Avicenna taught) or because His quiddity is in some other way totally unlike those of other existents.\textsuperscript{72} On the level of quiddity, of ‘what they are’, God and creatures are incomparable. It is for this reason that Passage B – and the Veil Section related to it – stress that God has no image (*mithāl*) and transcends any analogous correspondence (*munāsaba*) to created beings.

It is also possible to look at the two passages from the point of view of the standard opposition between, and complementarity of, *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, or God’s immanence and transcendence. Seen from this perspective, Passage A represents *tashbīh* carried to its logical conclusion: to the degree that a contingent existent exists it is identical with God (or God’s Face) and, conversely, to the degree that it is not identical with God it does not exist (is ‘sheer non-existence’). Passage B, by contrast, represents the *tanzīh* perspective, highlighting the absolute incomparability between God and creatures.

Passages A and B can also be regarded as representing two different ways to reach the stage of facing God. The first way is *conceptual*; it consists in rejecting the very concept of contingent quiddity as being ultimately unreal and non-existent. This leaves one immediately facing God alone as the only real existent. The second way is *experiential*; it leads to the same conclusion through the (often gradual) leaving behind of all the contingent existents as being not-God and hence as ultimately irrelevant.\textsuperscript{73} One faces God only at the very end of this process, after all the veils have been removed and all contingent existents, in the world of manifestation and the world of [divine] kingdom alike, have been rejected.

The following passage at the very end of the Veil Section describes the attainment of this stage by followers of the second way:\textsuperscript{74}

[The attainers] arrive at an Existent who transcends (*munazzah*) everything that [one’s] sight has perceived before them. The glories of His Face, the First, the Supreme, have burnt up everything that the observers’ sight and insight (*bāšar al-nāźirīn wa-baṣīratuhum*) have apprehended. They find Him transcending and incompatible with (*muqaddasān munazzahān*) everything that we described previously.

Next, they are divided [into two groups]: With regard to some [4.1], everything that their sight has perceived is burnt up, effaced and annihilated, yet they remain contemplating the [divine] beauty (*jamāl*) and holiness as well as contemplating themselves invested with beauty through the arrival at the divine
presence \( (al-\text{hadra al-il\text{\-}ahiyya}) \). Thus, with regard to them, only the objects of sight \( (al-\text{mubsar\text{\-}at}) \) have been effaced, but not the seer \( (al-\text{mubsir}) \).

Another group \([4.2]\) goes beyond these. They are the elect among the elect \( (khaw\text{\-}\bar{a} al-khaw\text{\-}\bar{a}) \). The glories of His Face have burnt them up and the power of the [divine] sublimity \( (jal\text{\-}l) \) overwhelmed them.\(^{75}\) They are effaced and annihilated in themselves \( (f\text{\-}\text{fan\text{\-}tihim 'an anfusihim}) \). Only the One, the Real remains. The meaning of His aya everything is perishing save His Face becomes their experience and state \( (dhawqan wa\text{-}\text{lah}) \). We have referred to this in the first part \([of the Mishk\text{\-}t]\), mentioning how they use and construe the term ‘union’ \( (itti\text{\-}h\text{\-}\text{\-}d) \). This is the utmost limit of the attainers \( (nih\text{\-}yat al-w\text{\-}\text{\-}sil\text{\-}\text{\-}n) \).

It is clear that the experiential way, as practiced by the Şûfîs, often lacks the conceptual clarity required to explain what it is that one has experienced. Al-Ghazâlî reminds us of this by referring back to the first part of the Mishkât, where he criticised the ecstatic utterances of al-\text{-}Hallâj and al-Bistâmî, which in his view reflect erroneous interpretations of this experience as ‘union’ and ‘indwelling’ (see above). This is why al-Ghazâlî’s advice to those who have attained this experience – but are not qualified to interpret it – is to refrain from mentioning more than the poet’s line:\(^{76}\)

There was what there was, which I do not recall // so think [of me] well and do not ask for a [detailed] account \( (khabar) \).

On the other hand, neither is the conceptual way, the way of theoretical knowledge alone, sufficient in itself, for knowledge \( (\text{\text{cilm})} \) is inferior to experiential realisation, or ‘tasting’ \( (dhawq) \).\(^{77}\) It is only through a thorough philosophical training and experience (in this order) that one can hope to face God as al-\text{-}Hallâj and al-Bistâmî did, at the same time avoiding their errors in interpreting this experience.

**Al-Ghazâlî Between Philosophy and Şûfism**

It is this union between conceptual rigor and an experiential path, and more broadly between philosophy and Şûfism (in this order) that constituted al-Ghazâlî’s theological agenda. He did not, as is often believed, renounce philosophy to adopt a kind of un- or even anti-philosophical mystical worldview. To the contrary, he criticised precisely those tenets of Şûfism (the ecstatic pronouncements of al-\text{-}Hallâj and al-Bistâmî) that he considered philosophically untenable, while *his* Şûfism remained philosophical through and through.\(^{78}\) His use of Avicenna’s ideas, as we have seen especially in the first part of this study, represents an important milestone
in the history of the progressive integration of philosophical concepts, terminology and even methods – both Aristotelian (and subsequently Avicennian) and Neoplatonic – by the Şüfi tradition.\textsuperscript{79}

Lest the idea of a ‘philosophical Şüfiism’ sound like an oxymoron, let us take a brief look at a passage from Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī’s (d. after 442/1050) famous book on India. Al-Bīrūnī – more than half a century before al-Ghazālī’s time – regards the Şüfi tradition as having close affinity with philosophy, so much so that he derives the term ‘Şüfi’ from the Greek sophia, ‘wisdom’.\textsuperscript{80} Even more significantly, the passage in which this etymology occurs deals with monistic doctrines of the Ancient Greeks, in comparison to those of the Indians and the Şūfīs. It deserves to be quoted in full:\textsuperscript{81}

Before the emergence of wisdom [i.e. ‘philosophy’, ḥikma] through the Seven [Sages] called the Pillars of Wisdom (\textit{asāṭīn al-ḥikma}) … and the [further] refinement of philosophy (falsafa) at the hands of their followers, Ancient Greeks (\textit{qudam al-yūnāniyyīn}) followed a doctrine similar to that of the Indians (\textit{maqālat al-Hind}). Some of them maintained that all things are one … others ascribed real existence to the First Cause alone (\textit{kāna yarā al-wujūd al-ḥaqiqī līl-‘illa al-ūlā faqat}), for [the First Cause] is self-sufficient in [existence] (\textit{li-istighnā‘ihā bi-dhāṭīhā fihi}), whereas other [existents] are in need of It [in order to exist], and the existence of that which is in need of another in order to exist is like imagination and is not real (\textit{ka‘l-khayāl, ghayr ḥaqq}), so the only real [existence] is the One, the First. This is the opinion of the sophoi [\textit{al-Sūfiyya}, with a sīn!], i.e. wise men (\textit{ḥukamā‘}), for in Greek soph[ia] means wisdom and the philosopher is called pilāsūpā,\textsuperscript{82} i.e. lover of wisdom (\textit{muḥibb al-ḥikma}). When some people among the Muslims (\textit{fīl-Islām qawm}) began following a doctrine similar to theirs they were called by the same name, but since this term was not widely understood it was reinterpreted, on account of [their] reliance [on God] (\textit{li‘l-tawakkul}), to refer to the ‘porch’ (\textit{al-ṣaffa}) and they [were considered] to be the ‘people of the porch’ at the time of the Prophet.\textsuperscript{83} Afterwards, the term was corrupted [further] and came to be derived from [the word for] goat wool (\textit{ṣūf al-tuyūs}).\textsuperscript{84}

Whether or not there is a grain of truth in al-Bīrūnī’s etymology and his account of the history of Şūfism, it is evident that the Şūfism he had in mind was of a philosophical bent, with a pronounced monistic tendency. It is this trend of Şūfism that al-Ghazālī followed, reinforcing it further by integrating in his monistic ontology important elements of Avicenna’s metaphysics.
NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference ‘The Qur’an: Text, Interpretation and Translation’, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 10–12 November 2005. I wish to thank the organisers of the conference for inviting me to SOAS and the participants for important feedback. An earlier version of the first part of this paper was also presented at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in Seattle, 17–20 March 2006. I owe a similar debt of gratitude to the organisers and participants of the AOS meeting. Finally, my thanks go to the two reviewers at the JQS for their helpful suggestions and encouragement.


2 The questions of creation in time versus perpetual creation and creation ex nihilo versus creation from preexistent matter need not concern us here. What is important for our purposes is that the monotheistic paradigm acknowledges creation (in any sense of the term) as a real and fundamental fact.

3 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 1, §§52–4, p. 20, lines 3–20.


5 Adding muwaqqih as suggested by Landolt, ‘Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft’, p. 61, n. 166 (where muwaqqihān is almost certainly a mistake, and should probably read muwajjihān).

6 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 2, §§11–15, p. 27, line 15 to p. 28, line 19.

7 The perfect often has the performative meaning of ‘[a]n act which is just completed at the moment, and by the very act of speaking’ – W. Wright, A Grammar of the Arabic Language (2 vols, Cambridge: University Press, 1896–8 and reprints), vol. 2, p. 1B, §1d.

This term will be clarified in what follows.


For a comparable treatment of the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh see the passage from the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, Epistle no. 4.1 [42], referred to by Landolt, ‘Ghazâlî and Religionswissenschaft’, p. 29.

This formula occurs in al-Ghazâlî, Ihyâ’, bk 36, bayân 8, vol. 4, p. 444, line 28; Maqṣâd, p. 59, line 1; Mishkât, part 1, §42, p. 16 (as noted by Landolt, ‘Ghazâlî and Religionswissenschaft’, p. 60, this is the only section in the entire work entitled haqîqa’t al-ḥaqîqa’iq), and in one of al-Ghazâlî’s Persian letters, Makâtib, p. 19, line 8; cf. German tr. in D. Krawulsky, Briefe und Reden des Abû Ḥamdî Muḥammad al-Ghazâlî (Freiburg im Breisgau: K. Schwarz, 1971), p. 91. In Mishkât, part 1, §43, p. 17, line 3, ‘… and His Face’ is added (see paraphrase below). See also al-Ghazâlî, Kîmiyâ, ‘onvân 2, faṣl 8, vol. 1, p. 62; and the important passage in al-Ghazâlî, Maqṣâd, p. 58, lines 7ff. (quoted in B. Abrahamov, ‘al-Ghazâlî’s Supreme Way to Know God’, Studia Islamica 77 (1993), pp. 141–68, at pp. 159ff.).

According to Landolt, ‘Ghazâlî and Religionswissenschaft’, p. 60, n. 161, the phrase ‘there is nothing in existence save God’ is a ‘famous dictum summarising ontological tawhid, attributed by ‘Ayn al-Qudât to Ma‘rûf al-Karkhi (Tamhidât [ed. ‘Oseyrân, Moṣannafât-e ‘Eynoloqodâšt-e Hamadânî (Tehran: Dânešghâh-e Tehran, 1962), p. 256)’. He goes on to say that others, like Najm-e Râzî and Sennânî, attribute it to Junayd (citing Der Islam 50 (1973), p. 56). See also W.C. Chittick, ‘Rûmî and waḥdat al-wujûd’ in A. Banani et al. (eds), Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rûmî (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 70–111, at p. 71; p. 105, n. 4 with further references; I am indebted to Kazuyo Murata for bringing Prof. Chittick’s article to my attention. The historicity of the attribution of this phrase to such early authorities as Ma‘rûf al-Karkhi or Junayd is however somewhat suspect. Junayd’s discussion of tawhid (A.H. Abdel-Kader, The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd (London: Luzac, 1976), pp. 68–75 and Arabic part, pp. 51–7) although fascinating in its own right, makes no reference to this phrase or idea. I am grateful to Prof. Gerhard Böwering for discussing this point with me and providing important references on the history of this idea in the Şûfi tradition.

It should also be mentioned that in less esoteric contexts al-Ghazâlî uses the fuller formula ‘There is nothing in existence save God and His acts’ (layyâs fi’l-wujûd illā ‘llâh wa-af’alûhu), speaking, as it were, from the point of view of the third degree of tawhîd (e.g. al-Ghazâlî, Jawâhir, part 1, ch. 3, p. 11, lines 1–2; Maqṣâd, p. 58, lines 9–10; Mustaṭfâ, muqaddima, da’âma 1, fann 2, imtihân 2, vol. 1, p. 69, lines 11–12; cf. Ihyâ’, bk 31, vol. 4, p. 38, lines 5–6 (‘There is none in existence save God, his attributes and his acts’); Ihyâ’, bk 36, vol. 4, p. 452, penultimate line (God’s essence and acts are the only existents)). Yet, the problem of how the shorter formula, expressing the fourth degree of tawhîd, is to be interpreted still remains. (On the fourth degree of tawhîd see below.)

15 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 3, §33 (quoted in the Section ‘Monism and Monotheism: The Relationship Between the Two Perspectives’ below), where Q. 28:88 is mentioned as their ‘experience and state’ (dhwāq wa-hālān).


17 Al-Ghazālī, Makātīb, pp. 15ff.; Krawulsky (tr.), Briefe und Reden, pp. 79ff. In this letter al-Ghazālī responds to several queries pertaining to topics raised in his Mishkāt al-anwār and Kīmiyāʾ ye saʿādat, including the discussion of tawḥīd in the Mishkāt. See Garden, al-Ghazālī’s Contested Revival, pp. 104ff. for a discussion of this letter and its historical context.


19 Al-Lafz here refers to lafż al-tawḥīd, i.e. the shahāda; cf. al-Ghazālī, Ihyāʾ, bk 35, bayān 2, vol. 4, p. 342, line 14, line 19. The expression maʿnā al-lafz is not to be understood in the sense of ‘literal meaning’.

20 This pun makes creative use of the fact that the Arabic word for knot (ʿuqda) comes from the same root as the word for view or opinion (iʿtiqād).

21 Al-Ghazālī, Ihyāʾ, bk 35, bayān 2, vol. 4, p. 344, line 12. This is not the place to discuss al-Ghazālī’s attitude to kalām. See the nuanced and detailed discussions in Ihyāʾ, bk 1, bāb 2, bayān 2, vol. 1, p. 40, lines 11ff.; Ihyāʾ, bk 2, ch. 2, vol. 1, pp. 146–52 (on the legal status of kalām). Cf. al-Ghazālī, Munqidh, §§21ff., pp. 66ff., esp. §21, p. 66.

22 Al-Ghazālī, Ihyāʾ, bk 35, bayān 2, vol. 4, p. 343, lines 7–10. Expansion of the chest was impossible in the second stage of tawḥīd due to the knot on the heart that prevented it from expanding.

23 Note that the third level of tawḥīd is connected to ‘knowledge’ (ʿilm) in the triad īmān (or iʿtiqād)–ʿilm–dhwāq; cf. al-Ghazālī, Mustaṣfā, muqaddima, daʾāma 1, fann 2, imtiḥān 2, vol. 1, p. 68, lines 7–8, where īmān is connected to kashf wa-insirāḥ: ‘wa-annā al-ʿilm . . . fa-īnnaḥu kashf wa-insirāḥ, wa-l-iʿtiqād ʿuqda ‘alāl-ʿqalb, wa-l-ʿilm ibāra ‘an inhīlāl al-ʿuqad.' On the light cast by God into al-Ghazālī’s chest and the subsequent shārḥ al-sadr see Munqidh, §§15ff., pp. 62ff., where this light is described as ‘the key to most knowledge’. See discussion of this motive in H. Lazarus-Yafeh, Studies in al-Ghazzalī (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 284–90.

24 Al-Ghazālī, Ihyāʾ, bk 35, bayān 2, vol. 4, p. 344, lines 18–19: ‘fa-īnnaḥu al-fāʿil ʿalāl-ʿinfrād dīna ḡayrīhī, wa-mā siwāḥu musakhkharaūna ā īstiqālāh lahum bi-tahrīk dharrā min malakūt al-samāwāt wa-l-ard.’ See also al-Ghazālī, Munqidh, §45, pp. 77ff. where God’s being the only true agent, the rest of the universe being subjugated (musakhkhara) to Him, is the only correction offered by al-Ghazālī to the philosophers’ teachings in the domain of physics.


that Ṣūfī terminology is introduced with some reservation and explained in terms of al-Ghazālī’s own theory. Moreover, the ending ‘obliteration in tawḥīd’ was probably added by al-Ghazālī himself to make the Ṣūfī term closer to his own. Cf. al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 1, §48, p. 18 (paraphrased in note 32 below); Makātīb, p. 18, lines 21–2; Krawulsky (tr.), Briefe und Reden, p. 90 (the Ṣūfīs are called ahl-e baṣīrat).

28 In the Mishkāt, al-Ghazālī calls this ‘pure singularity’ (al-fardānīyya al-maḥḍa) (‘istaghraqū bi’t-fardānīyya al-maḥḍa’) (part 1, §45, p. 17, lines 16–17); ‘al-mustaghraq bi’t-fardānīyya’ (part 1, §57, p. 21, line 12); cf. part 1, §54, p. 20, line 20). He clarifies that the realm of singularity (mamlakat al-fardānīyya) is the end of the creatures’ ascent (montahā mi’rāj al-khalā’iq) (Mishkāt, part 1, §55, p. 21, line 1; §57, p. 21, line 18), since any ascent presupposes plurality, and in the realm of singularity all plurality is abolished (Mishkāt, part 1, §55).


31 See note 27 above.

32 Al-Ghazālī, Makātīb, p. 19, lines 15–20; Krawulsky (tr.), Briefe und Reden, pp. 91–2. In the first part of the Mishkāt al-Ghazālī argues along similar lines: ‘The ecstatic pronouncements of al-Hallāj, al-Bistāmī and their likes are due to intoxication (sukr) and passionate love (‘ishq); these people do not reach real union (ḥaqqat al-itiḥād), which is impossible, but what resembles union (shibh al-itiḥād)’ (Mishkāt, part 1, §46). The correct term to describe this state is, in relation to the person who attains it, ‘obliteration’ (fanā’) or rather ‘obliteration of obliteration’ (fanā’ al-fanā’); and in relation to That in which he is immersed (al-mustaghraq bihi), tawḥīd (Mishkāt, part 1, §48; Buchman mistranslates ‘in relation to the one immersed in it’, taking bihi to refer to the state (ḥāla), which is impossible grammatically as well as from the point of view of the content, since al-Ghazālī is distinguishing here between sāhib al-ḥāla and al-mustaghraq bihi, and they cannot both refer to the person who attains the state). For a similar interpretation of al-Hallāj and al-Bistāmī see also al-Ghazālī, Maqṣad, p. 139; and cf. al-Ghazālī, Fadā’ih, p. 109 where several groups who believed in ḥulūl, including the ecstatic Ṣūfīs, are discussed. Cf. al-Ghazālī, Munqidh, §96, p. 102 for implicit criticism of ecstatic Ṣūfīs; Mizān, ch. 4, p. 207, lines 7–14 (taken out in the corresponding discussion in Iḥyā’, bk 21, bayān 4); Iḥyā’, bk 30, bayān 2, vol. 3, p. 556, lines 6ff.

33 The text is not clear: ‘ū khūḍ gashṭ’ (Krawulsky translates: ‘dass sie selbst vergingen’). I suggest amending it to ‘ū khodā gashṭ’, ‘he became God’.

34 See, e.g., al-Ghazālī, Iḥyā’, bk 35, bayān 2, vol. 4, p. 343, lines 14ff. (cf. Kīmiyā, bk 38, ch. 2, vol. 2, pp. 532ff.); bk 36, bayān 8, vol. 4, p. 444, line 28 to p. 445, line 5 (and cf. Iqtiṣād, Introduction, p. 4, lines 1ff.); Imlā’, p. 309, lines 26–9; Maqṣad, p. 58, line 9 to p. 59, line 2 (quoted in Abrahamov, ‘Supreme Way’, pp. 159ff., esp. p. 160, n. 87). In the Maqṣad al-Ghazālī argues that everything is God’s acts, but insofar as they are God’s acts, produced by the divine power, they are inseparable from God, just as the light of the sun is inseparable from the sun. On the image of the sun and its rays see note 71 below.)
36 Cf. al-Ghazâlî, *Mishkât*, part 1, §§38–9 for a shortened version of this parable (omitted in the paraphrase cited here).
37 Note the rhetorical background of the terms *musta‘âr* and *majâzâ*, both meaning ‘metaphorical’. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for pointing this out in his or her comments.
41 Notice how the question of creation becomes irrelevant in the monistic paradigm. What matters is that created existents are perpetually perishing (both ‘before’ – if this is a meaningful expression – and after creation); it is their eternal ‘possible’ nature that comes to the fore.

42 This has already been noticed by Landolt, ‘Ghazâlî and Religionswissenschaft’, p. 61.
Monism and Monotheism in al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-anwār*


44 Here and below notice Avicenna’s puns on the root *ḥ*-qa-qa.


47 Al-Ghazālī, *Maqṣad*, p. 172, lines 13–14; cf. the section on *al-haqq* in *Maqṣad*, pp. 137ff., which is clearly modelled on the passage from Avicenna’s *Ilāhiyyāt*, bk 8, ch. 6, quoted above.

48 For Avicenna, both the Necessary of Existence and the contingent beings can be said to exist in the proper sense (the existence of the contingent beings is *not* metaphorical), yet the degree to which they ‘deserve’ existence differs, and hence the term existence is predicated of them ‘by gradation’ (*biʾl-tashkik*). See the discussion of ‘graded terms’ (*asmāʾ mushakkika*) in Avicenna’s *Maqūlāt* of the *Shīfā*, ed. G. Anawati et al. (Cairo: Wizārat al-Maʿārif, 1378/1959), bk 1, ch. 2, p. 10, line 8 to p. 11, line 4, where ‘existence’ is used as an example. I intend to deal with the question of the ‘gradation of existence’ (*tashkik al-wujūd*) in Avicenna in a forthcoming study.

49 Watt’s view that the third part is not authentic (Watt, ‘A Forgery in al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt*?’) is to be rejected, among other reasons because there are (partial) parallels to this section in other works of al-Ghazālī; see Landolt, ‘Ghazālī and *Religionswissenschaft*’, p. 27, n. 34 for references, to which one can add al-Ghazālī, *Kīmiyāʾ*, *ʿonvān* 2, *faṣl* 5, vol. 1, p. 57ff. However, as Landolt notices (p. 72), ‘only a careful examination of the whole manuscript tradition, plus external evidence’ will be able to settle the question completely.

50 Moses’ response is ‘Lord of the heavens and the earth’ (*rabbuʾl-samāwāt waʾl-ʿard*) (Q. 26:24, also a grammatical *iḏāfa* in Arabic). Both Pharaoh’s question and Moses’ response are quoted and discussed in al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt*, part 2, §15 (Passage B above).

51 It goes beyond the scope of this article to provide identifications of these groups. This subject is in need of further study. For tentative identifications based on earlier scholarship (Gairdner and Landolt) see Buchman’s notes to his translation of the *Mishkāt*, p. 67, n. 14, nn. 16–18.

52 The construction *nisbatu X nisbatu Y* (‘X is analogous to Y’) is related to the more common construction *mathalu X mathalu Y* (‘X is similar to Y’). The reading *fī* instead of *ilā* is, as far as I know, not attested in the manuscripts of the *Mishkāt*; however, it seems superior, for al-Ghazālī is speaking about the rank of the angels *among* the intelligible lights (analogous to the rank of the stars, the moon and the sun *among* the sensible lights (*fīʾl-anwār al-maḥsūsa*)), not about their relation *to* the intelligible lights, of which they, after all, form a part.

53 *Min jiha* serves simply to indicate the agent of the passive participle (cf. *min qibal* in Modern Standard Arabic). Both Buchman (*Mishkāt*, p. 51) and Landolt (‘Ghazālī and *Religionswissenschaft*’, p. 41) seem to mistranslate the sentence. *Min jiha* in this function occurs in *Munqidh*, §45, p. 78, line 7 (*bal hiya mustaʾmalā min jiha fāṭirihā*) as well as in, e.g., Ps.-Ammonius, see Ulrich Rudolph, *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios: Ein

54 Davidson, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellec, pp. 134f., p. 142 argues that the angels that move their celestial spheres directly and by way of command are, respectively, the souls of the spheres and the incorporeal intelligences. If this is correct, the moon-angel and the sun-angel (=the obeyed one) are, respectively, the soul and the intellect of the outermost celestial body. Notice that in Maqāṣīd, Metaphysics, p. 128, lines 3–4, al-Ghazālī draws a distinction between the souls of the spheres, who set the spheres in motion ‘bi-tarʿīq al-мubahara wa’l-fī’, and the separate intelligences, who do that indirectly, ‘bi-ṭarʿīq al-ʾishq’ (that is, through the spheres’ love to them). This reference, not supplied by Davidson, supports his position.


56 As Frank Griffel kindly informed me, the idiosyncratic reading of the old Cairo edition (Cairo: Muḥā’at al-Šidq, 1322/1904–5, p. 55, lines 1–12), ‘nisbat hādhāʾl-mutāḥ ilāʾl-wujūd al-ḥaqq nisbat al-shams ilāʾn-nār aw nisbat al-jamr ilā jawhar al-nār al-ṣīr’ (underlying Gairdner’s translation of the passage), is not attested in the manuscripts that he consulted. My gratitude goes to him for generously sharing with me a draft of his critical edition of the passage.

57 Al-Ghazālī is very clear on this point: Mishkāt, vol. 2, §12 (‘yantahī ilā mā darajatuhu darajat al-kawākib’); §13 (‘mā fawqahu mimmā rutbatuhu rutbat al-qamar’); §14 (‘yantahī ilā mā mishālhuʾl-shams’). In the Iḥyāʾ (bk 30, bayān 2, vol. 3, p. 555, line 13ff.) al-Ghazālī makes it clear that neither was Abraham misled by the spiritual lights analogous to these.

58 Landolt, ‘Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft’, pp. 51–2: ‘[At the highest stage of his ascent] Abraham … points to “He who” (allādhī). That means, Ghazālī explains, that the mystic (sālik) at the final stage of his “ascent” reaches a point where he “turns his face” from the “sun”, because the sun, being “greater” and “higher” (than the moon), is eo ipso “related” to something “less perfect” — whereas the act of “turning his face to He [sic!] who originally created” is by itself “undetermined” (ishārā mubhama), given that “the concept of He who” (maḥfūm allādhī) is, as such, beyond any conceivable referent; and “what is beyond any relation is the True First (al-ʾawwal al-ḥaqq)”.

59 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 2, §14, p. 28, lines 6–8.

60 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 3, §31, p. 51. Landolt, again, assumes that the imperfection derives from the fact that the obeyed one has a relation to the moon-angel insofar as it is obeyed by it (‘Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft’, p. 50). This is different from my suggestion put forward here that the imperfection has its origin in the obeyed one having a sensible image, i.e. the sun.

One of the reviewers of this article has pointed out to me that my ‘interpretation that the Obeyed One falls short of perfection because susceptible of symbolisation, oddly does not explain why Ghazali says the secret of this falls outside the remit of the book’. This is certainly true, and possibly al-Ghazālī’s statement that this secret cannot be disclosed in this book should not be taken on its face value. Perhaps it alludes, somewhat more generally, to al-Ghazālī’s esoteric writing technique, employed most prominently in the Mishkāt, a technique that requires that a work be ‘decoded’ through constant reflection on and juxtaposition and careful analysis of certain passages. (This technique is employed by other authors as well, notably by Maimonides in the Guide of the Perplexed.)

61 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 2, §14, p. 28, line 10: ‘faʾl-mutanazzih ʿan kull munāsaba huwaʾl-ʾawwal al-ḥaqq’. 
62 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 2, §14, p. 28. My paraphrase here clears some inaccuracies of Landolt’s paraphrase quoted in note 58 above. First, al-Ghazālī, strictly speaking, is not saying that the act of turning the face is ‘undetermined’ but rather that ‘He who’ is an unspecific reference. Second, he is not saying that ‘the concept of He who (maḥfūʿ alladḥī) is, as such, beyond any conceivable referent’ but that the referent of this concept has no image (mithāl) and does not have analogous correspondence (munāsaba) with anything else.

63 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 1, §29, p. 11.


65 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 2, §§9–10, p. 27.

66 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 2, §9, p. 27.

67 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 1, §31, p. 12.

68 Al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 2, §17, p. 29. Admittedly, the term munāsaba is not used in this passage, but the context, explaining how images are coined, suggests that this discussion applies to cosmological images as well. The term munāsaba does occur in a parallel, but more extended, discussion of dream interpretation in al-Ghazālī, Ḥiyā’, bk 40, ch. 8, vol. 5, p. 204, line 5.

69 This is an allusion to the hadith ‘the veridical dream is one forty-sixth part of prophecy’.

70 On the correspondence in maʿnā rūḥānī see al-Ghazālī, Fayṣal, ch. 4, in the discussion of the five levels of existence, on the intellectual existence of the ‘Hand’ of God: ‘wa-man qāma ‘indahu al-burḥān ‘alā istiḥlālat yad li’llāh taʿalā hiya jāriḥa maḥsūsa aw mutakhayyala fa-innahu yuthbitu li’llāh subḥānahu yadan rūḥānīyya ‘aqliyya, aʾnī annahu yuthbitu maʿnā al-yad wa-haqiqatāhā wa-rūḥāhā, dīnaṣṣūratīhā, inna rūḥ al-yad wa-maʿnāhā mā bihi yāḥyīshu wa-yafʿalū wa-yuʿītī wa-yamnaʾu, wa-llāh taʿalā yuʿītī wa-yamnaʾu bi-wāṣītāt malāʾikatīhī’ (p. 36).

71 Notice also the striking phrase ‘There can be no reference to the light of the sun but only to the sun. Now, everything in existence relates to [God] as light relates to the sun’ (al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt, part 1, §54, p. 20, lines 17–18, at the end of Passage A). The image of the sun and its rays is used by al-Ghazālī in several works (see, e.g., the reference to the Maqṣad in note 34 above), usually in implicit parallel to God and His Face: just as the sun cannot be said to be greater than its light so also God cannot be said to be greater than His Face. Compare e.g. the following passages on the meaning of ‘God is greater’ (Allāhu akbar): (1) ‘The meaning of Allāhu akbar is not that He is greater than other things, since there is nothing else beside Him (bāʾey) for Him to be greater than it, for all existents come from the light of His existence [just as] the light of the sun is nothing but the sun and it is impossible to say that the sun is greater than its light. Rather the meaning of Allāhu akbar is that He is too great to be known by humans through rational inference (qeyās-e ‘aqāl)’ (Kīmiyā, ‘onvān 2, faṣl 8, vol. 1, p. 62, lines 17–22); (2) [The knowers] do not understand the meaning of Allāhu akbar as implying that He is greater than something else, God forbid, since there is nothing else beside Him (maʿāhī) for Him to be greater than it. Anything other than He does not have the rank of withness (maʿiyya) but the rank of following (tabaʾiyya). Moreover, anything other than He exists only with respect to the Face adjacent to Him. Therefore only His Face exists. It is impossible to say that He is greater than His Face. Rather the meaning of [Allāhu akbar] is that He is too great to be called “greater” in the sense of relation or correspondence (bi-maʿnālʿidāḥa waʿl-muqāyyasa) and too great for another to grasp the utmost limit of His magnificence, even be he a prophet or an angel’ (Mishkāt, part 1, §44, p. 17, lines 5–11; cf. also Arbaʿīn, bk 2, ch. 6, pp. 73–4).
The possibility that al-Ghazâlî followed Avicenna in believing that God has no quiddity other than existence has to be taken seriously. In the Maqâṣid, for instance, al-Ghazâlî says that it is because God has no mâhiyya that He cannot be known through rational inference (qiyyâs) (Maqâṣid, p. 97, line 2ff.). Admittedly, Maqâṣid is an Avicennian work, largely based on Avicenna’s Dâneshnâme (see J. Janssens, ‘Le Dânesh-Nâmeh d’Inb Sinâ: Un texte à revoir?’, Bulletin de philosopie médiévale 28 (1986), pp. 163–77); however, this passage does not seem to have a correspondence in the Dâneshnâme and is, in all likelihood, al-Ghazâlî’s own addition. This subject requires further study.

Al-Ghazâlî himself draws a distinction between these two ways. In the first part of the Mishkât (part 1, §45), al-Ghazâlî states that there are two ways toward the realisation that ‘There is nothing in existence save God’. Some of those who see only God in existence arrived at this realisation through a scientific cognition (‘irfânân ‘ilmîyyan), others – through an experiential state (lit. ‘state of tasting’, hâlan dhawqiyyan, cf. Mishkât, part 3, §33 quoted below). I prefer not to translate ‘irfân as ‘gnosis’, since this may be misleading. For this term see Mishkât, part 1, §66, p. 24, line 10, where it obviously means ‘cognition’ and has no mystical connotations.

Al-Ghazâlî, Mishkât, part 3, §§31–3, p. 51, line 17 to p. 52, line 8. Some of the elect among the elect (4.2), al-Ghazâlî continues, reach this realisation gradually like Abraham, others instantaneously (duf’ atan) like Muhammad.

Notice the contrast between the experience of jalâl here and the experience of jamâl by the previous group (4.1).

Al-Ghazâlî, Munqîdh, §96, p. 103, line 1, ‘wa-kâna mâ kâna minmâ lastu adhkuruha / fa-zunya khayran wa-lâ tas’al ‘ani’l-khabari’. The verse is by Ibn Mu‘tazz (metre: al-basît).


This subject will be treated in greater detail in my forthcoming PhD dissertation on al-Ghazâlî’s metaphysics, directed by Prof. Dimitri Gutas.

To the best of my knowledge, this process has not been sufficiently documented and analysed. A careful study of it would be an important contribution to the history of Sûfism and Islamic thought as a whole.

Al-Bûrûnî’s India was completed in 421/1030, shortly after the death of his patron Mahmûd of Ghazna. See C. Edmund Bosworth et al., art. ‘Bûrûnî’ in Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. 4, pp. 274–87, at p. 275b.


The form of this term as given by al-Bûrûnî is in fact Syriac, not Greek.

The ‘porch’ was part of the mosque in Medina, where the pious ‘people of the porch’ reportedly lived at the time of the prophet. For the translation ‘porch’ (as opposed to the more common but incorrect ‘bench’) see Lane’s entry in his Arabic-English Lexicon (Beirut:
Librairie du Liban, 1997), bk 1, pp. 1693–4: ‘An appertenance of a house … or of a building, like a wide bahw […] a kind of vestibule, or portico, for shade and shelter, open in front] with a long roof or ceiling’; the suffa of the mosque of the Prophet was ‘a covered place, an appertenance of the mosque, … roofed over with palm-sticks’. See also W.M. Watt, art. ‘Ahl al-ṣuffa’ in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edn.

84 On this trend in early Ṣufism, see the references cited in note 38 above.