

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S THOUGHT CONCERNING THE NATURE OF MAN AND UNION WITH GOD

Introduction. It is generally agreed that al-Ghazālī commands the respect not only of all generations of Muslims, but also of all ages of truth-seekers. This respect is deserved because of the peculiar combination in the man of the capacity for mystical experience and the rationality of a powerful intellect. Mysticism has been rejected scornfully by orthodox theologians and rationalists for its annihilation of the gulf between God and man, for its making supreme a human, psychological experience. It has been accused of making the Self God, and God the Self. Al-Ghazālī manages to slip by these objections while fully maintaining the validity of his mystical experiences. He manages to give his spirit free reign without letting his beliefs and tenets degenerate into pure emotional subjectivism. He does not allow his feelings to be the sole interpreter of his experiences, but bids his intellect direct and channel his revelations along an orthodox line. Nor is the intellect to him a restraint; for it is the specifically human quality (as opposed to animal) and is next-to-highest in the scale of human faculties. In the finality al-Ghazālī places inspiration, the transcendental prophetic spirit, above the intellect; but in practice he is prudent and allows his intellect to some degree the control of his ecstasy.

In this combination of rationality and mysticism al-Ghazālī can, perhaps, be compared to St. Augustine who similarly gave his mystical experiences orthodox interpretations. The intellects of both men allow their profound and many-sided spiritual insights to become communicable (even though the Supreme can only be experienced) in two ways: (1) Through their intellects both men universalize their experiences by talking of them in terms of what can be known, instead of muttering wholly subjective, externally meaningless phrases; and (2) both recommend themselves for general reading by accepting the bounds of orthodoxy. The importance of these techniques of communicability cannot be over-emphasized. There is no doubt that the mystic "sees" something which is outside the range of reason and which is beyond the vision of most human beings. Equally certain is it that these mystics thus obtain spiritual insights from which other people can learn and benefit. The art is to make these insights understandable and acceptable to other people—a rare accomplishment indeed, for the mystic is too inclined to think only of himself and his revelation and, therefore, to talk in obscurities. We are all familiar with the pretentious, esoteric-sounding phrases which make us wonder whether what lies behind them is the fullness of Divine revelation, or emptiness of mind.

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Al-Ghazālī, however, seems to escape both this kind of obscurity and offense to the orthodox, although his balance sometimes totters at precarious levels. It is worthwhile, in studying such a unique man, to inquire just how he maintains his balance. Can he keep it perfectly? Can he combine orthodoxy and mysticism without distinction of either? Can intellect and ecstasy always work together, or do they never come into conflict?

In answering such questions it is pertinent to examine al-Ghazālī's views concerning the nature of man and his intelligence, and his position in regard to the idea of union or identity with God. By doing so we can understand how reason and ecstasy fall into his scheme of things, and how far he stretches orthodoxy toward pantheism, a magnet for all those who have mystical experiences.¹

The Nature of Man and His Intelligence. As Wensinck says: "L'idée de l'origine divine de l'homme domine toute l'anthropologie de Ghazzali."² This recurrent theme of the divine origin is what makes it possible for him to think that men can approach God by deed and through the ecstatic experience. It is, of course, utterly opposed, as al-Ghazālī himself points out,³ to the naturalistic view that man is merely a higher type of animal with no lasting spiritual being. And, more subtly, it is opposed to Niebuhr's view of the dual nature of man. Like al-Ghazālī, Niebuhr believes that the nature of man lies in between those of God and the animals; but, whereas al-Ghazālī lays greater emphasis on the divine side of man, he tries to maintain the middle path. Sin, Niebuhr says, has two facets. One is the forgetting of our divine nature and acting like animals, the other is the forgetting of our animal nature in striving to be God. Niebuhr would certainly say that al-Ghazālī erred in the latter direction.

But further discussion on al-Ghazālī's view of the dual nature of man is necessary. Here the issue of the difference is raised between Niebuhr and al-Ghazālī as a delicacy to tantalize us while we peruse al-Ghazālī's thought on this subject. For the idea of "un être mi-animal, mi-divin" is certainly, as Wensinck points out, more Christian than Neoplatonic or Muslim.⁴ Yet perhaps it is Neoplatonic influence which makes al-Ghazālī turn this idea in such a different direction.

The discussion of the Platonic-Neoplatonic ingredients in al-Ghazālī's thought in itself constitutes material for a separate study.

It suffices here to say that al-Ghazālī's symbolism reminds us of Platonic ideas⁵ and that his belief that the soul belongs more to the realm above than to this earth is a Platonic element.⁶

In *Kimiya' al-Sa'adah* al-Ghazālī expresses his view concerning the dual nature of man in this way:

Man has two souls, an animal soul and a spiritual soul, which latter is of angelic nature. The seat of the animal soul is the heart, from which this soul issues like a subtle vapour and pervades all the members of the body. . . . It may be compared to a lamp carried about. . . . The heart is the wick of this lamp, and when the supply of oil is cut off for any reason, the lamp dies. Such is the death of the animal soul. With the spiritual, or human soul, the case is different. It is indivisible, and by it man knows God. It is, so to speak, the rider of the animal soul, and when that perishes it still remains, but is like a horseman who has been dismounted. . . .⁷

Man, in answering the question of how we are to know the real essence of man, since he has both angelic and animal qualities, al-Ghazālī says: "the essence of each creature is to be sought in that which is highest in it and peculiar to it."⁸ Note that here al-Ghazālī says the core of the difference between his thought and that of Niebuhr: al-Ghazālī says that the highest of man's two natures is his angelic essence; Niebuhr says that the balance between these two is his human essence. Yet the difference is reducible to a matter of emphasis, even while saying that man should rise "from the rank of beasts to that of angels" and be "conscious of his superiority as the climax of created things," al-Ghazālī hastens to add that at the same time he should "learn to know also his helplessness. . . ."⁹ Despite his stressing the angelic as the real essence of man, al-Ghazālī cannot forget the animal side because he is quite conscious of man's weakness and helplessness.

Yet it is interesting to note how far afield this different emphasis separates him from Niebuhr and other Christians who interpret the "change mi-animal" as meaning that man's place during his life on earth is on earth because of his sin. For al-Ghazālī thinks of this world as something alien to the essential nature of man. "This world is a stage or market-place passed by pilgrims on their way to the next . . . the nature of man has descended into this world of water and clay"¹⁰ in order to acquire some knowledge of the works of God. And again: "The reason of the human spirit seeking to return to that upper world is that its origin was from thence, and that it is of angelic na-

¹ For al-Ghazālī's works, the discussion is restricted to those available in English or French translation.

² *La Pensée de Ghazzali* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1940) p. 10.

³ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (Cairo: A. H. 1322); Eng. tr. with Introduction by W. H. T. Gairdner (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1924) p. 89. Also al-Ghazālī, *Al Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (Damascus: 1934); Eng. tr. *The Confessions of al-Ghazālī* by Claud Field (London: John Murray, 1909) pp. 25-6.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

ibid., p. 88.

ibid., p. 47.

⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (Cairo: A. H. 1343); Eng. tr. *The Alchemy of Happiness* by Claud Field (London: John Murray, 1910), p. 52.

ibid., p. 23.

ibid., p. 30.

ibid., p. 43.

ture. It was sent down into this lower sphere against its will to acquire knowledge and experience."¹¹ "Against its will" is here the revealing phrase, because it shows that al-Ghazālī thinks that the soul neither basically belongs here nor desires to be here.

Wensinck quotes passages which show that al-Ghazālī believes that every child is born with a pre-disposition toward faith and knowledge of God, and that the soul is capable of perfection through education and recollection of its primordial divine state.¹² He concludes that "l'idée chrétienne du péché originel est remplacée ici par l'idée que la chute se répète pour chaque individu."¹³ That is to say, in Christian theology there was one fall, that of Adam for the original sin; but in Ghazalian theology every individual soul falls from Heaven. This means that al-Ghazālī, rather than believing in the divine origin of the father of mankind, the fall, and the consequent taint of sin on every human being, believes that every individual human soul has a divine origin, and that the fall is for experience instead of for punishment. To the Christian, man by nature belongs on earth because he is a sinner; to al-Ghazālī man does not belong on earth by nature because his original essence is alien to the world.

Thus we see that al-Ghazālī's idea of the divine origin of man should make him think that since man does not belong in the world he should try to stay out of it by paying attention solely to matters of the soul while taking care of only the basic bodily needs: food, shelter, and clothing.¹⁴ The spirit of man should constantly strive for its original nearness to God. This is its natural yearning and chief work on earth.

Al-Ghazālī has another way of looking at the nature of humankind besides the dualistic—the animal-angel, physical-spiritual—concept. He is fond of reiterating, in various fashions, a scale of human faculties. This scale of faculties may be said to fit within the dualistic concept of man, for the lowest degree is purely animal, the highest near divine. The exposition found in *Mishkāt al-Anwār* may be taken as representative of al-Ghazālī's thought which varies in detail on this subject. (1) The sensory spirit is found in the lowest animal and the smallest infant. (2) The imaginative spirit is "the recorder of the information conveyed by the senses. It keeps that information filed . . . so as to present it to the intelligential spirit above it, when the information is called for." It is the faculty of memory. Infants and the lowest animals do not have it. (3) The intelligential is specifically human faculty, the apprehender of ideas, the "axioms

necessary and universal application"—i. e., universal or absolute truths. (4) The discursive or ratiocinative spirit "takes the data of pure reason and combines them, arranges them as premisses, and deduces from them informing knowledge." It branches from one proposition into two, by taking previous conclusions and drawing fresh conclusions from them, "and so goes on multiplying itself *ad infinitum*." (5) The transcendental prophetic spirit compasses what is beyond the intelligential and discursive spirits: "several of the sciences of the Realms Celestial and Terrestrial, and pre-eminently theology, the science of Deity."¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī himself would distinguish the highest faculty by saying it does not deal in definitions as do the intelligential and discursive, but in experience. You can be instructed in ideas and premisses, but you have to experience ecstasy.¹⁶ Similar schemes are found in *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*¹⁷ and in *Kimiyā' al-Sa'ādah*.¹⁸ A comparison of these with the one in *Mishkāt*, however, will show that there are variations in the number and descriptions of faculties, but yet that al-Ghazālī is saying essentially the same thing each time he describes the phases. An examination of the different statements of what is really the same scheme indicates that al-Ghazālī has a constant notion of the nature of man's faculties, but that he has no set dogmatic system concerning them.

Al-Ghazālī reiterates these stages or phases because they are so important to him, to his readers, and to anyone who tries to consider what man is. There will always be naturalists who limit the nature of man to that of a higher animal, but al-Ghazālī correctly perceives that there is a gulf between man and the animals in that man can create ideas, concepts, premisses, and conclusions. And he further reprimands those who would limit man to the function of reason, who would deny him the possibility of the divine gift of vision or inspiration. For on this highest plane there are marvels and wonders as far beyond the reach of intelligence as is the intelligence beyond the discriminating faculties and the senses. "And here, a word to thee, thou recluse in thy rational world of the intelligence! . . . Be weary of making the ultimate perfection stop at thyself!"¹⁹

Pantheism? Having seen al-Ghazālī's views concerning the nature of man, we can now look at his idea of man's relation with God. Beginning the body of the discussion, however, I should like to state it clear that the final interpretations are taken from *Mishkāt al-Anwār* because it is my belief that that book, of the sources used, most clearly expresses al-Ghazālī's own inner belief. There is much

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹² *Op. cit.*, pp. 44-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁴ *Kimiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, p. 44.

Mishkāt, pp. 81-6.

This is suggested in *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 42.

p. 51.

p. 60.

Mishkāt, p. 82.

directly contradictory material among the several books; but I believe this was intended by our author, different material being presented to different audiences with conscious purpose. An examination of the tone and style of the various books will indicate that *Mishkāt al-Anwār* is the most mysterious, recondite, and serious. The direct homely analogy and delightful little tales which are found in *Al-Munqidh* and *Kīmiyā'*, for instance, vanish to be replaced by broader, less defined symbolism, pregnant with hidden meaning. Despite the emphasis Scherer lays on the fact that *Ayyuhā 'l-Walad* was written for a learned man,²⁰ it appears to be both more patronizing and more particularized than *Mishkāt*. That is, talking on a lower plane and on the particular subject of knowledge being no good without action according to it, it does not make the attempt to approach the heart of the divine mystery to the extent that *Mishkāt* does. *Mizān al-'Amal* is also a learned work, but is more concerned with the practical "way" of the mystic and, therefore, is not directly pertinent to the following discussion.

In the section which classifies the various degrees of light *Mishkāt al-Anwār* presents what is "hardly less than an outline of a philosophy of religion."²¹ This section renders concrete and precise as much as is possible the central facets of al-Ghazālī's thought, and so it is worthwhile here to give a brief summary of the degrees of light:²²

I. Those veiled by darkness are the Atheists who think nature the cause of the world and those who, in seeking riches, renown, domination, satisfaction of lusts, make Self their God.

II. Those veiled by mixed light and darkness:

A. Of those veiled by the darkness of the senses the lowest group is idol-worshippers and the highest is the dualists who worship absolute light—and darkness.

B. The highest class of those veiled by the darkness of the imagination denies all aspects of corporality to Allah except one: that of direction. It thinks of Him literally as "up above" and, therefore, cannot refrain from making Him referable to upward direction. The view of this class is that something which cannot be said to have position or dimension either in the world or without the world cannot be imagined to exist at all.

C. Those veiled by darkness of the intelligence see that Allah transcends all direction. They formally repudiate anthropomorphism,

pantheism, but they fail to see that in saying their God hears, sees, etc., they think of these attributes in terms of their own faculties.

III. Those veiled by pure light: All classes in this third degree avoid denoting Allah by attributes.

A. The first class refers to Him in terms of His creation by saying He is the Mover of the Heavens.

B. This next class perceives that the mover of every several heaven is a separate being, and that all the Heavens are enclosed by an outer sphere. It is the Lord Who communicates motion to this outer sphere.²³

C. This class sees that the communication of motion to the outer sphere is a service to the Lord and must be done by an angel at His command. The Lord Himself is the Obeyed-One.²⁴

IV. Those who Attain have seen that, were this Obeyed-One identified with Allah, the unity of Allah would be impaired "on account of the mystery which it is not in the scope of this book to reveal."²⁵ Therefore, IT is transcendent of every characterization which can be made—i.e., nothing can be predicated of God.

A. For the first class of Those who Attain "the whole content of the perceptible is consumed away . . . the seen things, but not the seeing soul, are obliterated."²⁶

B. The highest class "are themselves blotted out, annihilated. In self-contemplation there is no more found a place, because with self they have no longer anything to do. Nothing remaineth any more save the One, the Real. . . ."²⁷

Were this last the only statement of al-Ghazālī we should read, there would be no doubt in our minds but that his finality is pantheistic.

Yet there are complexities centering around these facts: (1) al-Ghazālī was accepted by orthodoxy. (2) Others of his books appear to repudiate pantheism entirely. (3) In *Mishkāt* itself appear contradictions of this apparent belief in annihilation of the individual soul in Allah's being the only real Existence.

Discrepancies between his recondite and popular books can make us wonder if al-Ghazālī dissimulated his true views under the cover of his popular books and thus feigned his way into orthodoxy. The

Gairdner points out that in Ghazālī's time this system of concentric spheres of the first mover was simply a matter of astronomy and was considered axiomatic by all thinkers. (*Der Islam*, V, p. 134).

The provocative idea is that of comparing the belief of this class to the Logos doctrine in the Gospel of John.

Mishkāt, p. 96.

Ibid., pp. 96-7.

Ibid., p. 97.

Gairdner discusses the question of pantheism in a more technical and thorough fashion than this article attempts in his Introduction to *Mishkāt* and Article 13 in *Der Islam*, V, pp. 122-53.

²⁰ In Introduction to *Ayyuhā 'l-Walad* (Beirut: the American Press, 1937), pp. 12 & 15.

²¹ Gairdner, in Introduction to *Mishkāt*, p. 4.

²² Gairdner (Introd. to *Mishkāt*, pp. 5-8) gives a more complete outline which includes inferences concerning which sects and schools Ghazālī would include in each degree. Gairdner also gives an analysis of the significance of these degrees of light in *Der Islam*, V, 1914, pp. 122-9.

sincerity of the man thus comes into question. For there can be no doubt concerning the import of what he says in *Al-Munqidh*:

The degree of proximity to Deity which they attain is regarded by some as a termixture of being, by others as identification, by others as intimate union. But all these expressions are wrong. . . . Those who have reached that state should confine themselves to repeating the verse—

"What I experience I shall not try to say;
Call me happy, but ask me no more."⁴⁸

This admonition seems utterly opposed to the description in *Mishkāt* of Those who Attain. But perhaps this passage from *Mishkāt* is more in keeping with the passage from *Al-Munqidh*:

But the words of Lovers Passionate in their intoxication and ecstasy must be hidden away and not spoken of. . . . Then when that drunkenness abated and they came again under the sway of the intelligence, which is Allah's balance scale upon earth, they knew that that had not been actual Identity, but only something resembling Identity . . .⁴⁹

Yet al-Ghazālī goes on to explain and qualify the passage—he will not repudiate the idea that identity is experienced. He even quotes the notorious al-Hallāj⁵¹ as one who has reached the "Mystic Verities":

those words of the Lover at the height of his passion:—
"I am He whom I love and He whom I love is I;
We are two spirits immanent in one body."

For it is possible for a man who has never seen a mirror, to look into it, and think that the form which he sees in the mirror is the form of the mirror itself, "identical" with it . . .⁵²

And he tries further to reconcile this mystic experience of identity with what he knows to be true, namely that God and man cannot be identical.

In relation to the man immersed in this state, the state is called, in the language of metaphor, "Identity"; in the language of reality, "Unification." Beneath these verities also lie mysteries which we are not at liberty to discuss.

Here al-Ghazālī makes a distinction between "identity" and "unification" which he does not make in the passage in *Al-Munqidh*.

Yet the whole problem of Ghazālī's sincerity does not turn on the factor of absolute consistency between *Al-Munqidh* (and other popular books) and *Mishkāt*. Al-Ghazālī himself held the view that the adept had three different doctrines: (1) the tradition of one's past life and the region in which he lives, (2) the doctrine one uses in explanation and teaching which is variously adapted according to the

⁴⁸ p. 48.

⁴⁹ *Mishkāt*, p. 60.

⁵⁰ Gairdner thus identifies the unnamed person in note to *Mishkāt*, p. 61.

⁵¹ *Mishkāt*, pp. 60-1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

different levels of one's pupils, and (3) the doctrine one believes within oneself, which remains a secret between the self and God.⁵⁴ This is not hypocrisy; it is merely good sense. The masses cannot understand certain things and will object to what they cannot understand. Therefore, certain things must be concealed from them or simplified for them. This is exactly the difference between *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* and *Kimiya' al-Sa'adah* on the one hand, and *Mishkāt al-Anwār* on the other. The passage quoted from *Al-Munqidh* and the comparable passage from *Mishkāt* both show al-Ghazālī's great prudence because he is warning honest Šūfīs not to express themselves in a manner which will offend the orthodox. Yet to the populace he says: "Do not try to express yourselves at all because saying you feel union or identity is wrong"; whereas to the more learned and thoughtful, although he still advises caution in speech, he opens a discussion about the words of an extreme pantheist and attempts to justify them or explain them in terms of orthodoxy. *Al-Munqidh* is the safer book, but not because al-Ghazālī says there things which are contrary to his true belief. Al-Ghazālī simplifies in *Al-Munqidh* and there avoids discussion of some of the highly controversial points; but he virtually says the same thing in both books, namely, that the mystic feels that he experiences identity but that such a thing does not objectively happen and must not, therefore, be spoken of as identity. In both books he is teaching, but in each on a different level. Adapting different works to different classes of audiences requires both great wisdom and great art, and we must not condemn al-Ghazālī for it!

Gairdner makes much of the fact that al-Ghazālī is a tantalizing author, that he refuses to discuss something further just when we are coming to the climax and revelation.⁵⁵ It is true that this is dramatic art on the part of our writer, but it is not only this. Al-Ghazālī simply reaches points at which the continuation of discussion would transgress on the bounds of that doctrine that could not be taught but was reserved a secret between the self and God. Gairdner wants to know to whom al-Ghazālī revealed these mysteries, but I would say he did not necessarily reveal them to anyone. He kept them to himself because they were inexpressible in word-concepts.

The clue to the situation is found in the previously-quoted passage from *Mishkāt*:⁵⁶ "when that drunkenness abated and they came again under the sway of the intelligence, which is Allah's balance scale upon earth, they knew that that had not been actual Identity,

⁵⁴ al-Ghazālī, *Mizān al-'Amal* (Cairo: A. H. 1322); Fr. tr., *Critère de l'Action*, par Hikmat Hachem (Paris: Librairie Orientale et Américaine, 1945), pp. 146-9.

⁵⁵ In Introduction to *Mishkāt*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ p. 60.

but only something resembling Identity." Al-Ghazālī experiences, lives, and believes a paradox. It is evident from his description of the highest degree of light that he actually feels identity and believes that feeling the greatest gift of God. It is equally evident that when his ecstasy leaves him, his intellect, "Allah's balance-scale," tells him that this could not have been actual identity. Al-Ghazālī had too long studied the different sects of Muslim orthodoxy to let his subjective experiences be his only guide. His philosophical, theological mind bade him recognize the sense to such statements as "the sample (man) must be commensurate with the original (God), even though it does not rise to the degree of equality with it . . ." ³⁷ and "manifester is prior to, and above, manifested, though He be 'with' it; but He is 'with' it from one aspect, and 'above' it from another." ³⁸ God, then, is other than His creatures and must remain so. The worth of the ecstatic experience cannot be denied, but it seems incompatible with the equally valid experience that man is not God and God is not man. Al-Ghazālī feels pantheism, but he reasons the otherliness of God. The person who believes in these two incompatibles is forced to a level of belief which is beyond complete, consistent expression.

It has been seen that al-Ghazālī steadily rates the faculty of revelation higher than that of intellect in his various scales. But it has also been seen that the intellect maintains the highly important function of "Allah's balance-scale." Intellect and ecstasy both implement and temper one another, for al-Ghazālī marries the two in a system of religious belief which he can only partially reveal to us. Al-Ghazālī's occasional pantheism is indubitable, yet his orthodoxy impeccable. How this can be is the secret between him and Allah.

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³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.