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The Light Verse between Philosophy and Sufism: A Comparative Analysis of the Interpretations by Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī

Felsefe ve Tasavvuf Arasında Nūr Āyeti: İbn Sīnā ve el-Ğazālī'nin Tefsirlerinin Mukayeseli Bir Tahlili

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Abstract: This article analyzes two treatises written from philosophical and Sufi perspectives as interpretations of the Light Verse (*āyat al-nūr*) (Q.24:35), namely *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt* and *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. They were authored by Ibn Sīnā (d.428/1037) and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111) respectively, two exceptional authoritative scholarly figures of Islamic sciences with a very high representative power with their writings in diverse dimensions of philosophical and Sufi studies. The article examines the epistemological implications of the philosophical and Sufi ontological designs expressed in the treatises and compares their contents concerning the origin and beginning of existence and the relationship between God and all other beings. The article particularly concentrates on the interpretations regarding the following fundamental questions addressed in the treatises: What is the origin and reality of existence? What kind of ontological and epistemological relationships are there between different kinds of beings? Moreover, what kind of ontological and epistemological connections are there between God and man?

Ibn Sina presents masterful examples of philosophical and religious symbolism in his treatise. The central intellectual theme of this work is the possibility and necessity of prophecy. He presents expositions on this subject-matter in his other works too, but we do not witness in his other books another example of him discussing the issue in full detail by focusing on a single qurʾānic verse. The semantic horizons of his expressions in the treatise go far beyond the conventional peripatetic formulations centered on logic: he speaks of spiritual pleasures and happiness, worship, acts of worship, ascetic practices, and spiritual purification. Al-Ghazālī also wrote an independent commentary on the Light Verse. His interpretations of the verse seem to be mostly following the Sufi tradition. However, as the article illustrates with multiple examples, al-Ghazālī's statements closely resemble Ibn Sīnā's formulations in both the structure and arrangement of his explanations and their content. Therefore, the relationship between these two treatises appears to be one of complementarity, offering two interrelated perspectives rather than presenting opposing or contradictory ontological and epistemological theories. This study aims to make a modest contribution to the relevant academic studies in Islamic philosophy and Sufism by analyzing the philosophical and Sufi contexts and implications of the statements in these two treatises concerning the Light Verse.

Key Words: Light (*Nūr*), The Light Verse, Existence, Knowledge, Prophecy, Ontology, Epistemology, God-Universe Relation, God-Man Relation, Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī

Öz: İslam düşünce gelenekleri içerisinde aralarında hararetli karşılıklı tartışmaların cereyan ettiği akımlardan ikisi felsefe ve tasavvuftur. Felsefe ve tasavvufun hususen nazarî boyutları bu tartışmaların iyice alevlendiği alanlardır. Her iki disiplin mensupları kendilerine mahsus ontolojik ilkeler üzerine inşa ettikleri epistemolojik teorilerle birbirini test ve tenkit etmişlerdir. Duyular ve zihin fonksiyonları temelli ortaya konan genel felsefî bilgi teorileri yanında bilgiyi daha varoluşsal bir çerçevede ele alan tasavvufî epistemolojiler söz konusudur. Sufilerin *haller* ve *makamlar* diye isimlendirdiği bu varoluşsal epistemolojiye göre bilgi sadece duyular ve zihnin mantıksal bir üretimi değildir; kendi bireysel varlığının mâhiyet ve hakikati hakkında olgun bir şuûr seviyesine erişemeden bilgide kesinliğe ulaşılamaz. Bir başka ifadeyle sufinin vücûdu şuûrunu/vecdini belirler; onun vücûdunun neticesi olmayan bir vecdi tecrübe etmesi öngörülmez. Böylesine ferdî tecrübeye dayalı (*tatmayan bilmez*) ve varoluşsal karakterli (*olmayan bilmez*) bilgi teorisi tasavvuf ontoloji ve epistemolojisine yönelik peşin bir kabul ve hüsn-ü zan taşımayan entelektüel muhitlerce şiddetli eleştirilere maruz kalmıştır. Daha ziyade duyular ve zihin merkezli kategorik bilgiye itibar eden bu muhitler sufilerin yaklaşımını kontrolsüz bir sübjektivizm ve hatta epistemolojik bir kaos olarak nitelemişlerdir. Onlara göre bilgi daha objektif ilke ve ölçütlere dayanmalıdır ve mantıksal olarak da doğrulanıp yanlışlanabilmelidir; ferdî tecrübenin bu biçimde öncelenmesi bilgide doğruluk ve kesinliğin büsbütün izafileşmesine ve hatta ortadan kalkmasına yol açar.

Sufilerin manevi makam ve hallere göre tanzim ettikleri bilgi teorilerinin dıştan (*zāhir*) içe/öze (*batın*) doğru açılımlarla seyreden ortak-merkezli bir yapısı vardır. Bu epistemolojik yolculuğun nihai hedefi Allah Teala hakkında güvenilir bilgiye (*maʿrifetullāh*) ulaşmaktır. Yolculuğun tevhit noktasına iki yönlü hareketle vasıl olunur: bir taraftan ibādet ve riyazetlerle Rabbine yakınlaşmak isteyen insan, diğer taraftan nuranî tecellileri ile kuluna yol gösteren Rabb; insanın bu yolculuk sürecinin bir başka ismi de tenevvür, yani nurlanmadır. Bu bağlamda *nur* insanın metafizik terakkisinin en merkezi kavramı haline gelmektedir. *Nur* kelimesi Kur'an-ı Kerîm'de sıklıkla geçer (kırk üç kez) ve Kur'ân ifadelerindeki olağanüstü lafız ve mana sembolizmin zirve örneklerinden biri de Nur Ayeti'dir (Nûr 24:35). Bu ayet üzerine farklı İslami ilimlerin bakış açılarıyla çok sayıda müstakil tefsirler yazılmıştır: ayetin ifadeleri lügavî tazammunlarından kelamî açılımlarına, felsefî imalarından tasavvufî işaretlerine kadar türlü yönlerden tefsir ve izah edilmiştir.

Biz bu çalışmamızda Nūr Ayeti'nin tefsiri olarak felsefe ve tasavvuf nokta-i nazarından kaleme alınmış iki risaleyi tahlil konusu yapacağız. Söz konusu alanlardaki telifatıyla temsil gücü çok yüksek iki müstesna müellif olan İbn Sînâ (ö. 428/1037) ve Ebu Ḥâmid el-Gazâlî (ö. 505/1111) tarafından yazılan iki risale üzerinden sürdüreceğimiz çözümlemelerimiz boyunca bir taraftan risalelerde dile getirilen felsefî ve tasavvufî ontolojik dizaynların epistemolojik çıkarımlarını inceleme konusu yaparken diğer taraftan da varlığın kaynağı ve başlangıcı ve Tanrı-âlem ilişkisine dair sundukları içerikleri karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz edeceğiz. Risalelerde değinilen aşağıdaki temel sorulara yönelik izahları tahlillerimiz boyunca hususen öne çıkaracağız: Varlığın kaynağı ve gerçekliği nedir? Farklı varlık türleri arasında ne tür ontolojik ve epistemolojik ilişkiler söz konusudur? Tanrı ve insan arasında nasıl bir varlık ve bilgi irtibatı vardır?

İslam felsefesi tarihinin, özellikle de peripatetik felsefî geleneğin, zirve siması kabul edilen İbn Sînâ *Risâle fî İşbâti'n-Nübuvvât* başlıklı risalesinde Nûr Âyeti çerçevesinde oldukça yoğun felsefî ve dinî sembolizm örnekleri ortaya koymaktadır. Risaledeki ana inceleme konusu nübüvvetin imkânı ve gerekliliği meselesidir. İbn Sînâ nübüvvet konusu hakkında diğer eserlerinde de açıklamalar yapmaktadır, ancak meseleyi müstakil bir ayet üzerinden bütün tafsilatıyla tartıştığının bir başka örneğine diğer kitaplarında şahit

olamamaktayız. Risaledeki ifadelerinin semantik ufukları mantık merkezli bilindik peripatetik izahların çok ötesine taşmaktadır. Filozof bu eserinde manevi lezzet ve mutluluklardan, ibadetlerden, riyazetlerden ve tenezzühten bahsetmektedir. El-Gazâlî de Nur Âyeti üzerine *Mişkâtü'l-Envâr* başlıklı müstakil bir çalışma kaleme almıştır. Âyetle ilgili tefsirleri daha ziyade tasavvufî geleneği takip ediyor görünmektedir. Ancak çalışmamız boyunca örneklerini zikredeceğimiz üzere el-Gazâlî'nin ifadeleri hem izahlarının kurgu ve yapısı hem de içerikleri itibariyle İbn Sînâ'nın ifadelerine oldukça yakın düşmektedir. Dolayısıyla inceleme konusu ettiğimiz bu iki risalenin ilişkisi birbirleriyle kategorik olarak çelişen ontolojik ve epistemolojik teoriler öne sürüyor olmalarından ziyade birbirini tamamlayan iki perspektif ihtiva ettikleri mahiyetinde görünmektedir. Çalışmamız Nur Âyeti merkezli olarak yazılan söz konusu iki risaledeki ifadelerin felsefî ve tasavvufî bağlam ve açılımlarını tahlil ederek bu sahalardaki ilgili akademik çalışmalara mütevazı bir katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nur, Nur Ayeti, Varlık, Bilgi, Nübüvvet, Ontoloji, Epistemoloji, Tanrı-Âlem İlişkisi, Tanrı-İnsan İlişkisi, İbn Sînâ, el-Gazâlî

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a shining star, kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the east nor of the west. Its oil almost shines even if no fire touched it. Light upon light! God guides to His light whom He wills. And God sets forth parables to men and God has knowledge of everything. (Q.24:35)

Introduction

The Light (*al-Nūr*) is one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God (*al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*) in Islam, and the Light Verse (*āyat al-nūr*) in the Qur'ān has been interpreted by many Muslim scholars of religious studies throughout the centuries from diverse perspectives.[1] The Sufis have paid particular attention to this verse and written various individual commentaries and exegeses on it. From the standpoint of the Sufis, this verse alludes to critical points regarding the reality and origin of existence. The verse sheds light on the very nature of beings, the relationship among them, and the meaning and purpose of life in general. Furthermore, many Muslim scholars have strived to understand the ontological and epistemological relationship between God and man in the light of this verse. What is the origin of all existence and what are their realities? What kind of ontological and epistemological connections exist between them? To find justifiable answers to such questions, Muslim thinkers have expounded on theological, philosophical, and spiritual ideas relating to this verse.

The relationship between human knowledge and God's knowledge and the individual's role in the process of acquisition of knowledge are crucial and specific research areas for Muslim philosophers. To provide reasonable explanations for these significant issues, Muslim intellectuals have attempted to present their works based on religious and other sources at different levels of emphasis. While theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and jurisprudents (*fuqahā'*) expressed their ideas in a language and method closely aligned with qur'ānic and other foundational religious texts, often avoiding speculative thought, philosophers (*falāsifa*) and, in a specific context, Sufis (*ahl al-taṣawwuf*) preferred a more sophisticated and symbolic language to articulate their theories. Some Sufi authorities, for instance, maintained a truly defiant theory of knowledge that can be neither tested nor even described by others. They argue that knowledge ultimately means a form of individual *taste* (*dhawq*). According to their statements, just like it is in the case of scientific definitions of concepts such as health and drunkenness differentiate deeply from the very nature of experiencing health and drunkenness, knowledge of metaphysical experiences may vary depending on the spiritual state and station of the knower. These Sufis define knowledge experientially and existentially.

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1   To cite only a few examples in this context, we may mention *Risālat al-Nūriyya wa-Kawkab al-Durriyya* by Jamāl Khalwatī (d.889/1494), *Miṣbāḥ al-Asrār* by Ismāʿīl Rusūkh al-Dīn b. Aḥmad Anqarawī (d.1041/1631), *Risāla fī Tafsīr Āyat al-Nūr* by Ibrāhīm al-Qirimī (d.1042/1632), *Tafsīr Āyat al-Nūr* by Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1050/1641), and *al-Risāla al-Nūriyya wa-al-Mishkāt al-Qudsiyya* by Dāwūd b. Muḥammad al-Qārṣī (d.1169/1756).

Consequently, they employ a rather symbolic instead of straightforward and literal language, -most often poetry and stories- to express their ideas. Their understanding of an ontological hierarchy of existence, which presents a different subject-object relationship, requires a specific ontology-epistemology balance. According to this epistemological theory, different explanations for the same object at different stages of the spiritual path are quite possible.

In this article, I will attempt to examine the interpretations of the Light Verse by two leading Muslim scholars, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (d.428/1037) and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111). The reason why I have chosen these two is due to my belief that they occupy, in their parts, salient positions in Islamic intellectual history. The former, I believe, is the most distinguished of the peripatetic philosophers (*Mashshā'iyya*) in Muslim world, and the latter, is the cornerstone personality in the history of Islamic thought in general, but with a particular concentration on Sufism. They both wrote epistles interpreting the Light Verse. An examination of their writings on it would be a captivating scholarly analysis, for one can examine the philosophical accounts through Ibn Sīnā's writings and spiritual-theological accounts through al-Ghazālī's records. In the context of this examination, I will attempt to discuss their theories of knowledge focusing primarily on their understanding of the Light Verse, as a process of attaining real knowledge. While I focus primarily on their interpretations, I will also extend my investigation to present and analyze briefly their general epistemological theories.

Due to the very symbolic and metaphoric nature of the Light Verse, it is possible to interpret the verse in many different ways. Usually, Muslim exegetes (*mufassirūn*) and theologians have been precocious in overinterpreting this verse. After all, it is considered one of the ambiguous (*mutashābih*) verses in the sense that its ultimate meaning cannot be arrived at through merely rational deductions or linguistic/terminological interpretations.[2] Nevertheless, the very poetic and symbolic nature of the Light Verse has attracted extensively different interpretative efforts on the part of philosophers, Sufis, and speculative thinkers. The symbolism could allow scholars to read this verse and offer an interpretation following their epistemological conceptions and arguments. Thus, this specific verse has often been interpreted in symbolic ways that invite various metaphors for diverse epistemologies.[3] Yet,

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2   As a general study concentrating on the notion of light (*nūr*) in the Qur'ān through especially exegetical (*tafsīr*) literature see Çelik, "Kur'ān-ı Kerīm'de Nūr Kavramı," 123-171. Çelik notes that the word *nūr* is mentioned forty-three times in the Qur'ān in various meanings that include "light", "God", "the Qur'ān itself", "the Prophet Muḥammad", "faith (*īmān*)", "Islam (*islām*)", and "guidance (*hidāya*)". Çelik analyzes the lexical and terminological meanings of the *nūr* within the context of its relational semantic components in the Qur'ān such as *nār* (fire, radiator), *ḍiyā'* (light, brightness), *shurūq* (rise [of the sun], radiation), *wuqūḍ* (ignite, burn), and *ṭulū'* (rising, becoming visible), as well as its antonyms mentioned in the Qur'ān such as *ẓulma* (darkness), *ghurūb* (setting [of the sun, a star...], going away, absence), *takwīr* (being folded up [in darkness], being darkened), *inkidār* (being thrown down, falling), *ṭams* (effacement, obliteration), *ṭufū'*(extinguish), and *khibā'* (abatement).

3   In his article on the Light Verse, Gerhard Böwering analyzes the verse first through other qur'ānic attestations related to the notion of light (*nūr*) against the cultural and religious background of Arabia during the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad, and second through relevant Sufi interpretations of the Qur'ān commentaries written by Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d.412/1021), 'Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī (d.465/1072), and Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-

it is still interesting to ask whether the interpretations by Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī had any comparable aspects or did they share a larger polemic or discussion on epistemology through the reflection of this verse.

At the same time, I would like to clarify the significant point that both Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī treat philosophy as *hikma* (sophia), a term that does not correspond to the general modern meaning of highly rational philosophy. Relying solely on current philosophical categorizations, one can easily draw deceptive conclusions about Ibn Sīnāʾs and al-Ghazālīʾs original philosophies and label them as rationalist, spiritualist, mystic, and the like.

In this specific context, I am aware of the possible drawbacks facing my topic. In the case of Ibn Sīnā, for instance, relying on such a symbolic and specific subject, one may draw unjustifiable conclusions concerning the authentic character of his philosophy. I do not, however, intend to neither excessively mysticize Ibn Sīnāʾs general philosophy nor to unduly philosophize al-Ghazālīʾs mainstream thought. Likewise, in the case of Ibn Sīnā, although I feel the relevance to the subject, to avoid distortions, I do not intend to address controversial academic debates surrounding Ibn Sīnāʾs "Oriental philosophy" (*al-ḥikma al-mashriqiyya*).[4] Another challenge, in the case of al-Ghazālī for instance, derives from the difficulty of understanding his final philosophical conclusions. Due to his long ceaseless intellectual journey, it is not easy to decide which one of his ideas represents the real and final thought of al-Ghazālī. We may see different theoretical approaches in his different

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Malik al-Daylamī (d.593/1197). Böwering's assertions regarding the Light Verse look deeply religiously motivated, as he repeatedly attempts to find certain similarities between the words and passages of the Light Verse and forms of early Christian worship. Based on his subjective religious conviction that the Qurʾān in general and this verse in particular was a collection of statements originating from Eastern Christian sources, in addition to some other religious and cultural sources of that geography, he puts them in relation without showing any historically causal and academically credible connections between them. In this regard, he presents certain superficial resemblances between the parts of the Light Verse and elements from Jewish and Christian biblical lore and Eastern Christian practices of prayer. Böwering extends his comparisons related to the notion of light in Sufism to gnostic conceptions, Hellenistic Judaism, Manichaean ideas, Neoplatonic philosophy, and Iranian traditions of Mazdaism and Zurvanism. He maintains that all these religious and philosophical traditions constituted the spiritual and cultural background in which Sufism flourished. For further details of his discussions see Böwering, "The Light Verse: Qurʾānic Text and Ṣūfī Interpretation," 113-144.

4   In this debate, current scholars take generally two opposite positions. While a group of scholars, Dimitri Gutas is one of the active representatives, argues that the real philosophy of Ibn Sīnā in Islamic philosophy has a peripatetic character, another group of scholars, S. Hossein Nasr being one of their leading members, argues that Ibn Sīnāʾs final decision on Islamic philosophy is something different from his peripatetic philosophy, namely, "Oriental philosophy". For this debate see, Gutas, *Avicenna and Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*; Gutas, "Avicenna's Eastern ("Oriental") Philosophy: Nature, Contents, Transmission," 159-180; Gutas, "Avicenna-Mysticism," 1: 79-83; Gutas, "Ibn Ṭufayl on Ibn Sīnāʾs Eastern Philosophy," 222-241; Gutas "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy," 5-25; Gutas, "Intellect without Limits: The Absence of Mysticism in Avicenna," 351-372; Nasr, "Ibn Sina's 'Oriental philosophy'," 247-251; Rapoport, "Sufi Vocabulary, but Avicennan Philosophy: The Sufi Terminology in Chapters VIII-X of Ibn Sīnāʾs *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*," 145-196; Rapoport, *Science of the Soul in Ibn Sīnāʾs Pointers and Reminders: A Philological Study*.
For further reading see the works of Henry Corbin, Carlo A. Nallino, Amélie M. Goichon, Shlomo Pines, and especially on, so-called, Knowledge by Presence (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*), Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*.

works. For example, in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* and *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn,* al-Ghazālī does not employ the same argumentative methods. I will, however, base my investigation on his later works, particularly on *Mishkāt al-Anwār*.[5]

Ibn Sīnā on the Light Verse

Ibn Sīnā has been regarded as the unique member among the Muslim philosophers who built an elaborate and complete philosophical system. Although his system was severely criticized in certain respects by al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.606/1209), Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328), and some other Muslim thinkers, his intellectual influence has been dominant in the Muslim philosophical tradition for ages. His main success appears in his outstanding reconciliation between the highly rational and intellectual tradition of Hellenism and the religious system of Islam. His borrowings from earlier Muslim philosophers, especially from al-Fārābī (d.339/950), do not reduce his value in Islamic intellectual history. His masterly composition of those early accounts and extraordinary subtle methodology in devising and arguing philosophical concepts overshadow the unoriginal aspects of his system.[6]

In his treatise, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt wa-Taʾwīl Rumūzihim wa-Amthālihim* (*On the Proof of Prophecies and the Interpretation of the Prophets' Symbols and Metaphors*)[7], Ibn Sīnā examines the human faculty of acquiring knowledge in general and of receiving prophecy in particular. His discussions in this context follow the typical framework of his emanative metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology. The treatise consists of two parts.

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5   According to George Hourani's list of the chronology of al-Ghazālī's writings, *Mishkāt al-Anwār* is one of his later works. Hourani, "A Revised Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings," 299-300.

6   Rahman, "Ibn Sina," I, 480.

7   Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt li-Ibn Sīnā* (*Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt wa-Taʾwīl Rumūzihim wa-Amthālihim*). The treatise is translated by the same editor. Ibn Sīnā, "On the Proof of Prophecies and the Interpretation of the Prophets' Symbols and Metaphors", 112-121. Throughout my analyses, I will refer directly to the Arabic original of the treatise with my translations, but I will also make use of the English translation.

    At the same time, I need to mention that there is a scholarly controversy in modern scholarship over the textual authenticity of this treatise. Throughout his work *Prophecy in Islam*, Fazlur Rahman makes references to the *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt* as a genuine and natural work of Ibn Sīnā. Marmura himself discusses the question of authenticity in his introductory notes to his edition of the Arabic text. He presents a number of parallel passages and arguments from the main works of Ibn Sīnā like *al-Shifāʾ* and concludes that he does not find good reasons for doubting the authenticity of this treatise. On the other hand, a few other modern scholars including Herbert Davidson, Dimitri Gutas, and Alexander Treiger question the attribution of this work to Ibn Sīnā. Davidson raises doubts regarding its authenticity and describes his scholarly position as "not convinced". Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect*, 87. Gutas provides a brief content and terminological analysis of the treatise and finds it inauthentic. He lists a few reasons for his argument and states, for instance, that the text of *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt* does not mention at all the central Avicennian theory of *ḥads* in the explanation of the Light Verse, which is indefensible in Gutas' opinion. In his view, even though Ibn Sīnā did actually write some short allegorical interpretations of certain qurʾānic verses, his basic understanding of the nature of revelation is "an imaginative 'translation' of demonstrative truths in figurative language accessible to the masses." Gutas, *Avicenna and Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*, 485-489 and 506. Treiger repeats some of the related discussions stated in earlier studies like by Davidson and concludes that the authenticity of this treatise is open to question. *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī's Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennian Foundation*, 133.

The first part concentrates on the proof of prophethood and its essence. The general nature and content of this part may be found in some other writings of Ibn Sīnā with somewhat different statements.[8] The second and longer part presents an interpretation of certain symbols mentioned in the Qurʾān and ḥadīths. His detailed interpretation of the Light Verse in the second part represents the unique character of the treatise from our perspective. Even though Ibn Sīnā refers to the same verse in his *al-Ishārāt wa-al-Tanbīhāt*, his analysis therein is very brief and simple without any analytical elaboration.[9] The two parts are concentrically related, as the first part sets the context and background of the second part. Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the Light Verse cannot be contextualized properly without understanding his comprehensive theory of prophecy in his holistic philosophical system.

Ibn Sīnā asserts that the human being has an exclusive faculty (*quwwa*) by which he is different from the rest of animals and other things. This faculty is called the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*). All human beings without exception have this faculty, but since its various powers differ among men, its particulars are not equally shared by all of them. Accordingly, man has a first power qualified to become informed with the universal forms abstracted from matter, which in itself has no form. Hence this power is called the material intellect (*al-ʿaql al-hayūlānī*) by analogy with prime matter (*hayūlā*). The material intellect is an intellect in potentiality in the same way that fire in potentiality is a cold thing, not in the sense in which fire is said to have the potentiality to burn.[10]

Next, according to Ibn Sīnā's statements, man has a second power. Since this power contains the generally accepted opinions, it possesses the capacity and the positive character to conceive the universal forms (*al-ṣuwar al-kulliyya*). This is also an intellect in potentiality, but in the sense in which it is said that fire has the potentiality to burn.[11]

In addition to these two, Ibn Sīnā continues, man has a third power: the acquired intellect (*al-ʿaql al-mustafād*) that is actually informed by the forms of the universal intelligibles (*ṣuwar al-kulliyyāt al-maʿqūla*) of which the previous two powers form a part when these have become actualized. The material intellect does neither actually nor essentially possess

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8   Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifāʾ: al-Ilāhiyyāt*, 435-443; Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysics of the Healing: A Parallel English-Arabic Text = al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-Shifāʾ*, Michael Marmura (ed. and trans.), 358-366. For a detailed analysis of Ibn Sīnā's understanding of prophecy within his larger theory of the human soul, see Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology: An English Translation of Kitāb al-Najāt, Book II, Chapter VI with Historico-Philosophical Notes and Textual Improvements on the Cairo Edition* and Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*.
    Ibn Sīnā refers to the Light Verse in one of his earlier works as well, namely *al-Mabdaʾ wa-al-Maʿād*, but he does not present any sophisticated interpretation therein either. Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mabdaʾ wa-al-Maʿād*, 117. I owe this last reference to the anonymous reviewer of the acticle.

9   Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa-al-Tanbīhāt*, II, 390-391; Ibn Sīnā, *Remarks and Admonitions, Part One: Logic*; Ibn Sīnā, *Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions, Part Four*. Ibn Sīnā wrote some other treatises in a spiritual tone, in which he presents examples of his commentaries on qurʾānic verses, such as his interpretations of the last three chapters of the Qurʾān: *sūrat al-ikhlāṣ*, *sūrat al-falaq*, and *sūrat al-nās*. For further details, see Ḥasan ʿĀṣī, *al-Tafsīr al-Qurʾānī wa-al-Lugha al-Ṣūfiyya fī Falsafat Ibn Sīnā*, 106-125.

10 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 43.

11 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 43.

this third power. Therefore, the existence of the acquired intellect in the material intellect is due to something in which it exists essentially (*bi-al-dhāt*) and that brings what was potential (*mā kāna bi-al-quwwa*) into actual (*ilā al-fiʿl*). Ibn Sīnā calls this cause the universal intellect (*al-ʿaql al-kullī*), the universal soul (*al-nafs al-kullī*), and the world soul (*nafs al-ʿālam*).[12]

Ibn Sīnā states that the reception from the universal active intellect occurs in two ways, either directly or indirectly. Accordingly, the rational soul receives sometimes directly and other times indirectly, and this shows that it does not essentially possess the capacity to receive directly, but it possesses it accidentally. This capacity, then, must exist essentially in something else from where the rational soul receives it. Ibn Sīnā calls this source of reception the angelic intellect (*al-ʿaql al-malakī*), which receives essentially without mediation and by its very reception causes the powers of the soul to receive.[13] Furthermore, Ibn Sīnā argues, that in terms of receiving and being received, there are various degrees of strength and weakness, ease and difficulty, and this capacity to receive is not infinite. Because there are certain power limits for the human soul to receive intelligibles in the direction of both weakness and strength.[14]

According to Ibn Sīnā's formulation, the degrees of perfection among the causes differ from each other. In this context, he presents a whole hierarchy of existence, starting from the earliest and simplest forms of existence to the more advanced ones and ending in the most perfect existence. He lists the subdivisions of existence as follows: individual essences (*anniyyāt*); not-self-subsisting individual essences (*al-anniyyāt qāʾima bi-ghayr dhātihā*); self-subsisting individual essences (*al-anniyyāt qāʾima bi-dhātihā*); forms that are in matter (*ṣuwar mulābasa li-al-mawādd*); immaterial, essential forms (*lā fī mawādd*); inorganic (*ghayr nāmiya*) forms and materials that constitute bodies (*ajsām*); organic (*nāmiya*) forms and materials that constitute bodies (*ajsām*); non-animals (*ghayr ḥayawān*); animals (*ḥayawān*); non-rational, irrational (*ghayr nāṭiq*) animals; rational (*nāṭiq*) animals; the rational that does not possess reason by positive disposition (*bi-ghayr malaka*); the rational that possesses reason by positive disposition (*bi-malaka*); the rational by positive disposition that does not become completely actual (*ghayr khārij ilā al-fiʿl al-tāmm*); the rational by positive disposition that becomes completely actual (*khārij ilā al-fiʿl al-tāmm*); that which becomes completely actual does so through mediation (*bi-wāsiṭa*); that which becomes completely actual does so without mediation (*bi-ghayr wāsiṭa*). Ibn Sīnā identifies this last category as "prophet (*nabī*)" who possesses the ultimate perfection in his hierarchy of existence. In prophet, the degrees of excellence in the realm of material forms come to the highest point. This capacity of perfection exclusively enables the prophet to stand above and rule all the genera above which he excels.[15] He is not just capacitated or entitled to this mission, but also obliged or even necessitated to perform it.

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12 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 43-44.

13 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 44.

14 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 45.

15 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 46-47.

Ibn Sīnā states that the message carried by prophets is termed "revelation (*waḥy*)", which is itself an emanation (*ifāḍa*) from the universal intellect (*al-ʿaql al-kullī*). As for the angel, he is the received emanating power that descends on the prophets. The message and the messenger are considered best for furthering man's good in both this perishable and the eternal worlds as regards knowledge and political governance. Ibn Sīnā concludes his arguments concerning the affirmation of prophecy and its essence by his clear declaration that the prophethood of the Prophet Muḥammad represents the best example of the truthfulness of the institution of prophecy in this regard.[16]

What we understand from all these remarks is that following his well-known emanative metaphysics, Ibn Sīnā sees the entire existence as a chain of beings proceeding from God. The value of things in this chain is conditioned by the proximity of their existence to God and the prophet stands highest in this scale. The prophet is also the link between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, and he has critical metaphysical, epistemological, social, and political functions for the human race. Ibn Sīnā thus contextualizes prophecy as a natural, possible, and even necessary institution for mankind in his philosophical system.

Against the background of this general introduction to the meaning and function of prophecy for humankind, Ibn Sīnā goes into his philosophical interpretation of symbols from the Qurʾān and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad in the language of imagery and symbols. He states that it is a convention in prophethood to express his teachings in symbols and hints. He narrates an interesting anecdote regarding the same convention from the history of philosophy. According to this narration, the foremost Greek philosophers and prophets made use of symbols and signs in their works so that they could hide their secret doctrines from unqualified people. Ibn Sīnā gives the names of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato as having done so. Plato even criticized Aristotle for abandoning this tradition in his writings and for revealing wisdom (*ḥikma*) and making knowledge manifest. As a response to his teacher's criticism, Aristotle defended himself by asserting that even though he had done so, he still left many intricate statements in his works that could only be understood by distinguished intellectuals. Ibn Sīnā applies the same practice to the Islamic tradition and asserts that the Prophet Muḥammad followed the same tradition, as he brought knowledge and guidance first to uneducated nomads and then to the whole human race.[17]

When it comes to the specific case of the Light Verse, Ibn Sīnā maintains that as an equivocal (*mushtarak*) term, *light* (*nūr*) has two meanings, one is essential (*dhātī*), the other is metaphorical (*mustaʿār*). The essential meaning indicates the perfection of transparent inasmuch as it is transparent. As Aristotle mentioned, Ibn Sīna notes, the metaphorical meaning is to be comprehended in two ways: either as the good (*khayr*) or as the cause that leads to the good (*al-sabab al-mūṣil ilā al-khayr*). In this context, for Ibn Sīnā, light

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16   Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 47.

17   Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 48.

has a metaphorical meaning and includes both senses: i.e., God in Himself is the good and the cause of everything good. The same judgment applies to the essential (*dhātī*) and the nonessential (*ghayr al-dhātī*). *The heavens and the earth* (*al-samāwāt wa-al-arḍ*) refer to the "whole". *The niche (mishkāt)* indicates the material intellect (*al-ʿaql al-hayūlānī*) and the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*). Ibn Sinā talks about the physical qualities of a niche to reflect the light it holds. The walls of a niche are close to each other and for this reason, the niche is excellently predisposed to be illuminated. For if the walls of a place are closer to each other, the place naturally reflects the light it holds more strongly and brilliantly. In this symbolism, the actualized intellect (*al-ʿaql bi-al-fiʿl*) is likened to light, and its recipient (*qābiluhu*) is likened to the recipient of light, which is transparent. Air is the best of transparent things and it reaches its utmost transparency level in the niche. Similarly, the material intellect, which is to the acquired intellect as the niche is to the light, is symbolized by the niche.[18]

Ibn Sīnā argues that *the lamp* (*miṣbāḥ*) indicates the acquired actualized intellect (*al-ʿaql al-mustafād bi-al-fiʿl*). Because, philosophically speaking, light means the perfection of the transparent and that which moves it from potentiality to actuality. Thus, the relationship between the acquired intellect and the material intellect is similar to the relationship between the lamp and the niche.[19]

Ibn Sīnā maintains that the statement, *in a glass* (*fī zujāja*), indicates an intermediate level or place between the material intellect and the acquired intellect. This level is related to these two intellects as the lamp is related to light and the niche. Otherwise, the light is not able to reach and thus cannot be seen through the transparent (air) without a medium. This medium is the oil vessel with the wick, from which the glass comes out, for glass is one of the transparent things receptive to light. The following expression *is as it were a shining star* (*ka-annahā kawkab durriyy*), implies that the glass is the pure transparent one, rather than the opaque colored one, for nothing colored is transparent. The phrase, *kindled from a blessed tree, an olive* (*yūqad min shajara mubāraka zaytūna*) stands for the cogitative power (*al-quwwa fikriyya*), which functions as subject (*mawḍūʿ*) and material (*mādda*) for the intellectual acts (*al-afʿāl al-ʿaqliyya*) in the same way that oil functions as subject and material for the lamp.[20]

Concerning the part, *neither of the east nor of the west* (*lā-sharqiyya wa-lā-gharbiyya*), Ibn Sīnā asserts that *east* and *west* lexically derive from the place from where light emanates and the place light is quenched, respectively. In similar order, the two words are metaphorically used for the place where there is light and the place where there is no light. Likewise, this part of the verse symbolizes that in the absolute sense, cognitive power is not one of the pure rational powers where light emanates without restriction. This is the

18 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 49-50.
19 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 50.
20 Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 50-51.

meaning of saying, *a . . . tree . . . neither of the east*. Nor is it one of the animal powers where light disappears. This is the meaning of *nor of the west*.[21]

Ibn Sīnā maintains that the section, *its oil almost shines even if no fire touched it* (*yakād zaytuhā yuḍīʾ wa-law lam-tamsashu nār*)*,* indicates the praise of the cognitive power. In the part, *even if no fire touched it*, the word *touch* designates connection (*ittiṣāl*) and emanation (*ifāḍa*). As for the word *fire,* he states that in reality fire is colorless, though people customarily take it to be luminous. When the similarity between metaphorical light and real light and between the instruments and consequences of the two kinds of light is taken into consideration, the essential subject that causes a thing to be in another is likened to what is customarily regarded as a subject, which is the fire itself. Furthermore, since fire surrounds the elements (*ummahāt*), that which surrounds the world is likened to fire. This notion of surrounding is not in the spatial sense but in a verbal metaphorical sense. And this fire refers to the universal intellect (*al-ʿaql al-kullī*).[22]

At the same time, Ibn Sīnā points out that this universal intellect is not the true God, the First, as Alexander of Aphrodisias believed; he attributed this belief to Aristotle. This universal intellect is multiple inasmuch as it consists of the forms of many universals, though in one respect it is one. Therefore, this universal intellect is not essentially one, but accidentally so. For, it acquires its oneness from Him who is essentially one, the one God.[23]

In poetic language, Ibn Sīnā summarizes his discussions above regarding the interpretation of the Light verse as follows:

The soul is like a glass lamp, and knowledge

Is light (-giving fire), and the wisdom of God is the oil.

If it is lit, you are alive,

And if it is darkened, you are dead,[24]

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21   Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 51.

22   Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 52.

23   Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, 52.

24   Quoted in Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, 40. For more symbolic, spiritual, and mystical accounts of Ibn Sīnā in a similar context see, Shams Inati, *Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism*. This work is the translation of the fourth part of Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ishārāt wa-al-Tanbīhāt*, which deals mainly with Ibn Sīnā's spiritual ideas. The work does not, however, seem a regular and ordinary Sufi document, but rather a philosophical investigation in a symbolic and ambiguous language. The section, the Ninth Class: On the Stations of the Knowledge, especially, is related to my article. Concerning this section which focuses on the experience of the Sufi, Inati states that based on the originality and nature of this Ninth Class, the fourth part of the *Ishārāt* came to be known as a work on Sufism. In this part, Ibn Sīnā describes the spiritual journey without referring to its traveler by the name *Ṣufī*, but only by the name *ʿārif*. *ʿĀrif* knows by direct experience, as opposed to *ʿālim* who knows by reason or natural means. Inati concludes that regardless of names the spiritual traveler described in the Ninth Class is regarded as having the same kind of experience commonly attributed to the Sufi. For this reason, starting from the Middle Ages commentators on this part of the *Ishārāt* have traditionally been recognized as a work on Sufism. Inati himself agrees with this recognition. Shams Inati, *Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism*, 4. In the *Ishārāt*, Ibn Sīnā classifies human souls depending on their achievement in attaining to theoretical and moral perfections. In the Ninth class

Upon this specific understanding of the theory of knowledge, I would like to extend Ibn Sīnā's epistemology a little further around his interpretation of the Light Verse. But, before commencing the Avicennan epistemology, I would like to deal briefly with his doctrine of being, which I consider a crucial point to evaluate his theory of knowledge in particular and his philosophical system in general. In addition, his thoughts concerning the body-mind relationship and his elaborate analysis of the human soul and intellect encompass significant elements in his epistemological theories.

Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of Being, like those of previous Muslim philosophers, such as al-Fārābī, is emanationistic. From the Necessary Existent, God, emanates the first intellect alone, because, from a single, absolutely simple entity, only one thing can flow out. The nature of the first intellect is, however, not absolutely simple anymore, because then it is only *possible*, rather than being *necessary-by-itself*, and its possibility has been actualized by God. This dual, i.e., actuality and possibility, nature of the emanatory process continues until the tenth, the lower intellect, which rules the sublunary world and is identified as Angel Gabriel by the Muslim philosophers.[25] This doctrine of being is inspired by the Neoplatonic Theory of Emanation. It was also this doctrine that led Ibn Sīnā to develop his very subtle idea of the essence-existence difference to avoid the criticism addressed to the Aristotelian form and matter relationship.

Ibn Sīnā emphasizes the significance of the body-mind relationship in the epistemological process. He exemplifies his theory with a supposed person, created in an adult state, but in such a condition that he is created in a void where his body is not able to touch anything and where he is not able to perceive anything of the external world. Moreover, he is not able to see his own body, and the organs of his body cannot touch one another, thus he does not have any sense-perception at all. This supposed person can affirm neither anything from the external world nor the existence of his very body, but he can, nevertheless, affirm the existence of his self as a purely spiritual entity. Therefore, according to this symbolization, the mind is a substance independent of the body (the affinity with Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*).[26]

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particularly, presenting an elaborate philosophical argument about the distinctions among an ascetic (*zāhid*), a worshipper (*'ābid*), and a knower (*'ārif*), Ibn Sīnā discusses the steps through which the knower must pass to reach his objects. After the two preparatory steps, i.e., willingness *(irāda)* and spiritual exercise *(riyāḍa)*, depending on the capacity of his soul, a spiritual traveler through the nine steps reaches the Truth. In this epistemological investigation, especially towards the last steps, Ibn Sīnā points out that true knowledge has a spiritual character that lies most often outside worldly affairs and cannot be properly described by this worldly reason and language.

25   Rahman, "Ibn Sina," I, 481. For a more general understanding of Ibn Sīnā's theory of the ontological distinction between God and the world, see Fazlur Rahman, "Ibn Sīnā's Theory of the God-World Relationship," 38-52. According to Rahman's statements, Ibn Sīnā is the first Muslim philosopher to formulate explicitly the concept of contingency in order to express a radical distinction between God and the world. Ibn Sīnā refers to God as Necessary Being, that is self-existing, original, and uncaused, while everything else is caused and brought into existence by Him.

26   Rahman, "Ibn Sina," I, 487. In modern academic studies on Islamic philosophy, this philosophical question is commonly called Ibn Sīnā's "flying man" (or "floating man") argument, which is a thought experiment of self-awareness and compared frequently to Descartes' *cogito* argument. For this argument, see for instance, Michael

For Ibn Sīnā, in real sense, the soul is an independent substance and is our transcendental self. It is therefore indestructible and immortal, even after the destruction of the body. On the other hand, however, the soul and body have a very close relationship that may affect even the intellect, further, all the other psycho-physical acts and states include both, mental and physical aspects.[27]

Following the Greek tradition, Ibn Sīnā bases his theory of knowledge on the idea that all knowledge is some kind of abstraction on the part of the knower of the form of the thing known. He focuses on the degrees of this abstracting power in different cognitive faculties: sense perception, imagination, and intellect. Sense perception needs the very presence of matter for its cognitive act. Imagination does not need the presence of actual matter but cannot know without material attachments and accidents which give the image its particularity. Intellect is the only cognitive faculty that cognizes the pure form in its universality. It seems, as Fazlur Rahman argues, that by the way of this theory of the grades of abstraction, Ibn Sīnā tries to keep himself away from the objection to which Aristotle's theory of cognition describes all cognition as the abstraction of form without its matter. This Aristotelian doctrine raises questions, for if we accept perception as the knowledge of form alone, we should consequently question the existence of this form in matter. Furthermore, we should question our knowledge about the existence of that very matter. As a result of his explanations about this subject, Ibn Sīnā's position is generally regarded as a naïve realism.[28]

The significance of Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of perception arises from his distinction between internal and external perception. The external five senses are the means of the external perception. As for the internal perception, Ibn Sīnā divides it into the five faculties, which have no precedent in the history of philosophy.[29] By this categorization, his main purpose

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Marmura, "Avicenna's 'Flying Man' in Context,", 383-395; Ahmed Alwishah, "Ibn Sīnā on Floating Man Arguments", 49-71; Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich, "The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna's Flying Man Argument", 147-164.

27 Rahman, "Ibn Sina," I, 480-490.

28 Rahman, "Ibn Sina", I, 492-493.

29 For a more detailed classification of the human soul's faculties, see Majid Fakhri, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 143-150: Ibn Sīnā defines the soul as "the first perfection of an organic body", then he divides it into three levels. Despite its unity, the soul bears a series of faculties at each of its three levels. At the first level, "the vegetative (*nabātī*) soul", the soul possesses nutritive faculty, faculty of growth, and reproductive faculty. At the second level, "the animal (*ḥayawānī*) soul", it possesses motive (*muḥarrik*) and percipient (*mudrika*) faculties. The former encompasses appetitive (*bā'ith*), -which in itself includes concupiscent (*shahwa*) and passionate (*ghaḍabiyya*) faculties and motor (*fā'il*) faculties. The latter consists of two subdivided faculties, namely, outer (five senses) and inner powers. This very inner power, includes in itself *sensus communis* (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*), representative (*muṣawwira*), productive (*murakkiba*), estimative (*wāhima*), and retentive (*ḥāfiẓa / dhākira*) faculties. At the third level, "rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*)", the soul possesses two faculties, i.e., theoretical (*naẓarī*) reason and practical (*'amalī*) reason. The theoretical reason encompasses four sorts of reasons: potential/possible (*bi-al-quwwa*), habitual-holy reason (*bi-al-malaka*), actual (*bi-al-fi'l*), and acquired (*mustafād*). From this classification, it appears that Ibn Sīnā's understanding of the soul and its diverse faculties is not based on purely psychological level, but at the same time, this theory encompasses epistemological and further cosmological and metaphysical consequences. Furthermore, it is the concept of holy reason (*al-'aql al-qudsī*) through which Ibn Sīnā evaluates his theory of prophecy.

is to separate the different functions or operations on a qualitative basis and to present a distinction in reality for every clear idea.[30] The first internal sense, *sensus communis* (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*), is the basis of all the senses. This general sense integrates sense-data into percepts, and since none of the external five senses can carry out this function, it must be an internal sense. The second internal sense, the imaginative/representative (*muṣawwira*) faculty, conserves the perceptual images. The third internal sense, productive faculty (*murakkiba*), is also closely related to imagination, but this time, by combining and separating them, it acts upon these images. This faculty is pervaded by reason so that human imagination can deliberate and is thus the seat of the practical intellect. The fourth internal sense, estimative faculty (*wāhima*), is the most significant one. Immaterial motions such as usefulness and harmfulness, love, and hate in material objects are perceived by this faculty. Furthermore, this faculty is the basis of our character, whether influenced or uninfluenced by reason. This is also known as Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of *wahm*, which in addition to its moral importance, appears mainly as a purely psychological doctrine, explaining our instinctive and emotional response to the environment. For him, perception and imagination inform us only about the perceptual qualities of a certain thing, namely, its color, shape, size, and the like, rather than its real nature or *meaning*. To read or discern this *meaning*, an internal faculty of the organism is needed. The fifth and final internal sense, retentive faculty (*ḥāfiẓa*, *dhākira*), conserves *intentions* (*ma'ani*) in memory.[31]

Based on his detailed articulation of the dynamics of the external and internal perception, Ibn Sīnā elaborates on his doctrine of the intellect. He maintains that while the potential intellect in man is generated at a certain time and as something personal to each individual, in its very nature, it is an immaterial, indivisible, and indestructible substance. To explain the intellectual operation and the manner of the acquisition of knowledge, Ibn Sīnā argues that the main function of intellect starts with considering and reflecting upon the particulars of sense experience. In this way, our mind becomes prepared for the reception of the universal essence from the active intellect by an act of direct intuition (*ḥads*).[32]

On the other hand, Ibn Sīnā does not embrace a mechanical and deterministic acquisition of knowledge. For him, the origin of knowledge has a mysterious character and is related to intuition at every stage. Thus, concerning almost all intellectual knowledge man can only say 'It occurs to me', but not 'I know it.' He concludes that man should not be overly confident concerning his epistemological capacity, as he cannot completely be sure about the content, reality, and certainty of his knowledge. For him, any epistemological claim or theory for the human being that fails to notice this fundamental principle is not only wrong but blasphemous.[33]

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30   Rahman, "Ibn Sina," I, 493.
31   Rahman, "Ibn Sina", I, 493-494.
32   Rahman, "Ibn Sina", I, 495-496.
33   Rahman, "Ibn Sina", I, 496.

Ibn Sīnā exemplifies the ordinary human thinking mind with a mirror upon which there is a succession of ideas reflected from the active intellect. Before the acquisition of knowledge, the mirror was rusty. Constant thinking and re-thinking polishes the mirror and puts it into direct contact with the sun (i.e., the active intellect [*al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl*]) so that the mirror can readily reflect light.[34]

Based upon this sophisticated epistemological background Ibn Sīnā articulates his theory of prophecy. He argues that man has a simple, total insight, which is the creator of detailed, discursive knowledge. This is the creative reason or the active intellect, whose elaborate and formulated form is the *psychic* knowledge, not the absolutely intellectual cognition. He who possesses this power may have direct contact with the active intellect, and because he has a total grasp of reality, he is sure about the truthfulness of this knowledge. He has the capacity of full awareness of the meaning of each term in the process of reality. And such a person is the prophet.[35]

Ibn Sīnā presents a doctrine of prophecy upon Greek theories about the soul and its powers of cognition.[36] He states that people possess vastly different intuitive powers both in quantity and quality, and there must be an exceptionally gifted person who has the power of total contact with reality. This person does not need much instruction; he can, by his very nature, become the depository of the truth and attain a total cognitive touch with reality. Ordinary thinkers, on the other hand, may have an intuitive experience regarding a definite question but their cognitive touch with reality is always partial.[37] Consequently, prophetic knowledge, according to Ibn Sīnā's formulation, represents the highest development of knowledge attainable to the human being.

All these accounts indicate that Ibn Sīnā attempts to establish a close relationship between knowledge and belief. His statements on the intuitive faculty also support this point, for this faculty plays a significant role in his epistemic system. In terms of their receptivity to intuition, intellects have different capacities in the acquisition of knowledge, i.e., the movement from premises to conclusions. Furthermore, there is no guarantee to arrive at true results, even for high qualified intellects. Only a prophetic power has the intuitive faculty in its utmost degree and it can receive forms emanating from the active intellect. Ibn Sīnā also argues that human intellect is generally limited by its associations with bodily matters, and only after becoming relieved from the human body, as a soul, it can achieve epistemic and other perfections.[38]

In short, Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the Light Verse derived from his theory of knowledge, his understanding of the body-mind relationship, his elaborate analysis of the

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34 Rahman, "Ibn Sina", I, 497.

35 Rahman, "Ibn Sina", I, 497-498.

36 Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*, 11.

37 Rahman, "Ibn Sina", I, 499.

38 Nuseibeh, "Epistemology", 837.

human soul and intellect, and thus his conception of prophecy. In other words, he interprets the Light Verse following his holistic philosophical system. We may also argue that Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the Light Verse can be traced back to the specific type of Neoplatonism from which he was also inspired. As we already know, Ibn Sīnā received two types of Neoplatonism: the Neoplatonism of Alexandria, which had a purer Aristotelian nature, and the Neoplatonism of Athens, which had a more mystical character. He received the former through the intellectuals based in Baghdad and it had a more direct influence on Ibn Sīnā, while he received the latter through Neoplatonic commentators like Simlicius and it had a more indirect influence on him. In the case of his interpretation of the Light Verse, we can observe Ibn Sīnā's own philosophical and spiritual amalgamation or reconciliation of the two philosophical trends of Neoplatonism.

Al-Ghazālī on the Light Verse

Al-Ghazālī also interprets the Light Verse as a symbolic summary of his theory about attaining real knowledge in certainty.[39] In his treatise, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, focusing on the Light Verse and a ḥadīth related thematically to this qurʾānic verse, al-Ghazālī introduces examples of the spiritual dimension of his thought. He outlines a metaphysics of light based on his particular understanding of cosmological and psychological levels of existence, which includes a peculiar ontology and epistemology. His articulation of the metaphysics of light also frames al-Ghazālī's conception of knowledge of God, the relationship between God, the universe, and mankind. In his view, the metaphor of light concerning God is an extremely subtle question, which only those scholars who are firmly grounded in knowledge (*al-ʿulamāʾ al-rāsikhūn*) could understand its refined and insightful aspects. Besides, not every mystery is to be unveiled or divulged and not every reality is to be disclosed, because al-Ghazālī argues, according to some of those who know (*ārifūn*), divulging the secrets of Lordship (*rubūbiyya*) is unbelief (*kufr*). On the other hand, al-Ghazālī states that the knowledge of this question is not to be held back from those worthy of it; thus, there should be a delicate balance between keeping it away from those not deserving of it and those worthy of it. Al-Ghazālī concludes that the keys of human hearts are eventually in God's hand; He opens hearts when He wills, as He wills, and with what He wills.[40]

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39 As one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God (*al-Asmāʾ al-Ḥusnā*), the word *al-Nūr*, is specifically interpreted by al-Ghazālī in his treatise, *Kitāb al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*. Concerning this very name of God, al-Ghazālī describes *al-Nūr* as the visible one (*ẓāhir*) using whom everything is made visible, for that which is visible in itself and makes other things visible is called "light (*nūr*)". Al-Ghazālī treats light as an existential notion and identifies it with existence (*wujūd*); likewise, he identifies darkness (*ẓulma*) with nonexistence (*ʿadam*). He states that God is worthy of being named light in the real sense of the word because He is the one who is free from the darkness of nonexistence (*ẓulmat al-ʿadam*), and even from the possibility of nonexistence (*imkān al-ʿadam*), and He is the one who draws everything from the darkness of nonexistence to the manifestation of existence (*ẓuhūr al-wujūd*). According to al-Ghazālī's formulation, existence is a light that overflows upon all things from the light of God's essence, for He is *the light of the heavens and earth*. Al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*, 115-116. For a readable translation of the work see al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God* (*al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*), David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (trans.).

40 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 39-40.

As we will see in the following pages, the spiritual psychology that al-Ghazālī formulates with respect to the expressions of the Light Verse entails apparent affinities with the characteristics of Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the same verse, as well as with the other writings of the latter which include sophisticated symbolism in a spiritual tone.[41] Al-Ghazālī wrote the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* toward the end of his life and thus encompasses the most mature phase of his argumentations in relation to his ideas in question.[42]

Al-Ghazālī argues that one should follow a balanced methodology in understanding the qurʾānic statements. He refers to a ḥadīth on the authority of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib in which the Prophet Muḥammad calls attention to the gradational meanings of the verses of Qurʾān and says, "The Qurʾān has an outward (*ẓāhir*), an inward (*bāṭin*), a limit (*ḥadd*), and a stational (*muṭṭalaʿ*)." As the two extreme positions from opposite directions in Islamic history, al-Ghazālī gives examples of esotericism (*Bāṭiniyya*) and literalism (*Ḥash[a]wiyya*) in their approach to the qurʾānic text. In his view, nullifying the outward meanings (as in the case of the Bāṭiniyya) or inward meanings (as in the case of the Ḥash[a]wiyya), both positions cannot comprehend real natures and subtleties of the qurʾānic expressions.[43]

The *Mishkāt* consists of three chapters (*faṣl*). The first chapter is the longest one and explains the meaning of the first part of the Light Verse: *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*. This chapter focuses on the explanation that the real *light* is God alone and that the name *light* for everything else is a sheer metaphor (*majāz maḥḍ*), without reality. The second chapter concentrates on clarifying the similitude of *the niche* (*mishkāt*), *the lamp* (*miṣbāḥ*), *the glass* (*zujāja*), *the tree* (*shajara*), *the olive oil* (*zayt*), and *the fire* (*nār*). The third and final chapter analyzes the meaning of the light mentioned in the ḥadīth: "God has seventy veils (*ḥijāb*) of light (*nūr*) and darkness (*ẓulma*); were He to lift them, the august glories of His Face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived Him."[44]

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41 The general literary style of the *Mishkāt* also reminds us of that of the *Ishārāt* by Ibn Sīnā, especially the last three chapters (*namaṭ*) of the *Ishārāt*. The literary and thematic tone in the ninth chapter of the *Ishārāt*, the Stations of the Knower (*Maqāmāt al-ʿĀrifīn*), seems to be influential on al-Ghazālī's tone in the *Mishkāt*. Even the style and subheadings of the *Mishkāt* such as *daqīqa* (fine point), *ḥaqīqa* (reality), and *ishāra* (allusion) contain close similarities with those of the *Ishārāt*, e.g. *ishāra* (allusion), *tanbīh* (admonition). For further comparisons see Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa-al-Tanbīhāt*.

42 It is also important to note that modern scholarship includes controversy over the textual authenticity of the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. W. Montgomery Watt questions the authenticity of its third section, considering it to be spurious. He argues that this part is excessively Neoplatonic in nature, of which al-Ghazālī is utterly critical in his other widely-known works. For the details of his discussions, see Watt, "A Forgery in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt*?" 5-22; Watt, "The Authenticity of the Works Attributed to al-Ghazālī," 24-45. Watt does not present any substantial attestations to prove the reliability of his assertions; his claims are mere discussions based on subjective comparisons he makes between the *Mishkāt* and Neoplatonism. Abū al-ʿIlā ʿAfīfī and Herbert Davidson are among the scholars who convincingly argue that Watt's assertions do not contain any acceptable evidence and credibility regarding this question. For the details of ʿAfīfī's arguments, see the critical textual analysis he presents in the introduction to his edition of the *Mishkāt*, Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 30-31. For Davidson's evaluations, see Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect*, 134-135.

43 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 73.

44 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*.

In the first chapter, al-Ghazālī outlines a metaphysics of light based on fundamental Islamic sources and interprets the word light (*nūr*) and its plural (*anwār*) variously as physical light and lights, the eye, the intellect, the prophets, supernatural things, and ultimately God Himself. Al-Ghazālī considers God as the source of these lights and even the only real source of light. He presents an ontology, epistemology, cosmology, and psychology based on the principle that the real light is God alone and anything else called light is only a metaphor. He repeatedly notes that God is the unique actual light in all existence, as the word light is predicated for other things solely figuratively.[45]

Al-Ghazālī states that the word light has threefold meaning; for the common people (*ʿawāmm*), for the spiritual elect (*khawāṣṣ*), and for the exceptionally distinguished spiritual elect (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*). He further asserts that God is the highest and ultimate *light* and that beside Him there is no real, true light at all.[46]

In the first sense, from the perspective of the common people, the word light designates a manifestation (*ẓuhūr*), or appearance as a relative (*iḍāfī*) term, because a thing might be manifest to one person while remaining non-manifest to another; therefore, both its manifestation and non-manifestation are relative. Furthermore, its manifestation and its non-manifestation are relative to the faculties of perception (*idrākāt*). The most powerful and the most obvious perceptive faculties, in the opinion of the common people, are the senses in general, and the sense of sight (*baṣar*) in particular. In relation to this sense of sight, things are divided into three: a) those which cannot be visible in themselves, such as dark bodies; b) those which can be visible in themselves, but cannot make visible anything else, such as bright bodies or stars and fire before it blazes up; c) those which can be visible in themselves, and also make visible other things, such as the sun and the moon, a lamp, and a flaming fire; and *light* is a name for this third kind. Consequently, *light* is an expression for that which is visible in itself and makes other things visible, such as the sun. This constitutes the definition and the reality of light in its first sense.[47]

In the second sense, from the perspective of the spiritual elect, the seeing spirit (*al-rūḥ al-bāṣira*), which is also called the seeing eye (*al-ʿayn al-bāṣira*) and the seeing light (*al-nūr al-bāṣira*), is called light. Al-Ghazālī goes into the details of the actualization of perception and argues that the very essence of light is the manifestation to perception. This perception is conditional upon the existence of two things together at the same time: light and seeing

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45 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 41.
The *Mishkāt al-Anwār* has been translated into major European languages: into English by William H. T. Gairdner and David Buchman, into German by ʿAbd-Elsamad ʿAbd-Elhamīd Elschazlī, into French by Roger Deladrière, and into Italian by Laura Veccia Vaglieri and Roberto Rubinacci. Throughout my references to the work, I have used the Arabic text of *Mishkāt* edited by Abū al-ʿIlā ʿAfīfī but also benefitted from the translations provided by Gairdner and Buchman with some modifications of mine. Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār: The Niche for Lights*, William H. T. Gairdner (trans.); al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār: The Niche of Lights*, David Buchman (trans.).

46 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 41.

47 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 41-42.

eye. For, even though the light is that which is manifest and makes manifest, in the case of the blind for instance, it cannot be functional; light is neither manifest nor does it make things manifest to the blind. This situation indicates that the existence of the seeing spirit and manifest light are equally necessary for the actualization of perception. Nonetheless, al-Ghazālī compares the degrees of the influence of the seeing spirit and the manifest light on the actualization of perception and deduces that the seeing spirit is superior to the manifest light because the former perceives by itself and through it perception takes place. As for the manifest light, it neither perceives by itself nor does perception take place through it; rather, when it is available there, perception takes place. Al-Ghazāli, hence, concludes that the seeing light (*al-nūr al-bāṣira*) deserves to be called *light* more than the seen light (*al-nūr al-mubṣar*) does. This is the second meaning of the term light, which is coined and used by the spiritual elect.[48]

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48 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 42. In this context, al-Ghazālī continues his explanations and comparisons further asserting that the light of physical sight (i.e. the eyesight) suffers from several kinds of defects. He enumerates seven imperfections inseparably attached to the eyesight. According to his statements, there is, however, a different eye in the heart/mind (*qalb*) of man, free from such imperfections. This perfect eye is variously called the rational faculty or intellect (*ʿaql*), the spirit (*rūḥ*), the human soul (*al-nafs al-insānī[yya]*). Al-Ghazālī prefers to call this faculty the intellect (*ʿaql*). The intellect, for him, is more properly called light than is the physical eye (*ʿayn*), for it is free from seven deficiencies. Al-Ghazālī itemizes the following differences between the light of the physical eye and that of the intellect in this regard:

1) The eye cannot see itself, but the intellect can perceive itself as well as the others. Moreover, the intellect perceives its knowledge of itself, and even its knowledge of its knowledge of its knowledge, and so on infinitely.

2) The eye does not see what is far from it and what is very near to it, while far and near are equal for the intellect. The intellect evaluates the perceptions and decides their conditions.

3) The eye does not perceive what is behind the veil, but the intellect does perceive not only what is behind the veil but also the realities of things beyond the veil of the heavens.

4) The eye perceives only the exterior surfaces and dimensions of things (i.e., molds and forms), but not their interiors (i.e., the realities). The intellect, however, penetrates the nonmanifest dimensions and mysteries of things and apprehends their realities, origins, very natures, causes, and laws.

5) The eye sees only a portion of what exists; it is not sufficient to apprehend all conceivables (*maʿqūlāt*) and many sensibles (*maḥsūsāt*). The eye does not apprehend sounds (*aṣwāt*), smells (*rawāʾiḥ*), tastes (*ṭuʿūm*), sensations of hot (*ḥarāra*) and cold (*burūda*), neither does it apprehend the percipient faculties, i.e., hearing (*samʿ*), seeing/sight (*baṣar*), smelling (*shamm*), tasting (*dhawq*). Furthermore, all the inner attributes of the soul (*al-ṣifāt al-bāṭina al-nafsiyya*) such as joy (*faraḥ*), happiness (*surūr*), grief (*ghamm*), sadness (*ḥuzn*), pain (*alam*), pleasure (*ladhdha*), love (*ʿishq*), appetite (*shahwa*), and the like are beyond its scope of catch. Thus, the eye is limited in its field of action. The intellect, however, can apprehend such concepts with their inward secrets and hidden characteristics. The intellect exclusively encompasses some other significant faculties such as imagination (*khayāl*), estimation/phantasy (*wahm*), reflection (*fikr*), recollection (*dhikr*), and memory (*ḥifẓ*).

6) The eye does not see what is infinite, it sees only the attributes of known bodies, which they can only be conceived as finite. The intellect, however, apprehends concepts, which cannot be conceived as finite.

7) The eye sees large things as small like it sees the sun as having the size of a shield and the stars in the form of coins. The intellect, on the other hand, apprehends that the sun and the stars are larger many times than the earth. Likewise, the eye sees the stars as though they are standing still and a boy as motionless during his growth. The intellect, however, comprehends the constant movement of the stars and the continuous growth of the boy and the movement of the stars constantly.

Having listed all these sorts of imperfections of the physical eye, al-Ghazālī argues that the intellect is free of them on the condition that it disengages itself from the influences of fancies (*awhām*), unreal imaginations (*al-khayālāt al-bāṭila*), and corrupt beliefs (*al-iʿtiqādāt al-fāsida*). Achieving this disengagement, however, is extremely difficult for the intellect. Al-Ghazālī notes that one may attain perfection of this engagement only after death, when veils are lifted, mysteries are disclosed, and good and evil become clear. He concludes that the eye is more worthy of the name

In the third sense, from the perspective of the exceptionally distinguished spiritual elect (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*), the light of wisdom (*nūr al-ḥikma*), namely the Qurʾān, is called light. Al-Ghazālī does not follow a straightforward logical line of presentation telling the reader clearly that the light of wisdom is the third sense of light, but the context, with its intense complexities and subtleties, reveals that beyond the first and second senses, there is a meaning of light for which al-Ghazālī uses the term *the light of wisdom*. Starting from the explanation of inherent limitations of the intellect, he moves to a further dimension of light which may be accessible through extraordinary means. The intellect is functional within the limits of logical rules as in the case of axiomatic truths: for instance, it knows that the same thing cannot be both eternal and created, or both existent and nonexistent; it knows that the same statement cannot be both true and false and that when a more specific thing exists, the more general must exist, e.g. if blackness exists, then color must exist, or if man exists, then animals must exist. But the intellect does not see the contrary of this as necessary, because the existence of blackness does not necessarily follow from the existence of color, nor the existence of man from the existence of animals. Al-Ghazālī states that there are many other self-evident propositions (*al-qaḍāyā al-ḍarūriyya*) regarding necessary (*wājibāt*), possible (*jāʾizāt*), and impossible (*mustaḥīlāt*) things, which set limits for the function of the intellect. He notes that there are other propositions that are not continuously joined by the intellect. The intellect must be shaken, awakened, and activated in such cases. The speech of wisdom (*kalām al-ḥikma*) is the best instrument to bring and activate the attention of the intellect in this regard; for when the light of wisdom radiates, the intellect comes to see in actuality (*bi-al-fiʿl*), though it was available there only in potentiality (*bi-al-quwwa*). Al-Ghazālī identifies the speech of God, especially the Qurʾān, as the greatest wisdom (*aʿẓam al-ḥikma*). He likens the function of the light of the sun for the physical eye to the function of the qurʾānic verses for the intellect and thus concludes that it is appropriate to name the Qurʾān *light*, just as the light of the sun named *light*.[49]

Al-Ghazālī repeatedly notes that that which sees itself and others is more worthy of the name *light*. A higher category of light is that which sees itself and others, while at the same time has the function of making other nonmanifest things seen. This third type of light is even more worthy of the name *light*; it should be called a *light-giving lamp* (*sirāj munīr*) on account of its pouring forth its light upon other things. Moreover, this characteristic exists in the holy prophetic spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*), through which many types of knowledge are poured forth upon created beings. Al-Ghazālī states that the Qurʾān names the Prophet Muḥammad a *light-giving lamp* (Q.33:46) in this context, and so are all other prophets; scholars should also be called lamps, but there are diverse differences between them.[50] The spirit of the Prophet Muḥammad is a *light-giving lamp* which is kindled by

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light than the ordinary light and the intellect is more worthy of the name *light* than the eye to the extent that in truth the intellect alone deserves the name *light*. Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 43-48.

49   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 49.

50   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 51-52.

means of divine revelation (*waḥy*), and the similitude of that from which kindling takes place is *fire* (*nār*).[51]

According to al-Ghazālī's hierarchical classification of the meanings of light, the gradation of lights does not continue on to infinity but rises to the First Source, the First Light (*al-nūr al-awwal*), which is the light in itself and by itself, and to which no light comes from any external source. All lights shine forth from this light, according to their orders in this hierarchy. This last one is the furthest and highest light, which is the origin of all other lights and the worthiest of the name *light*; the name *light* for things other than the First Light (named also the Real Light [*al-nūr al-ḥaqq*]), is a mere metaphor.[52] Likewise, al-Ghazālī argues, is the case of existence (*wujūd*), for existence, can be divided into two: the existence that a thing possesses in itself (*min dhātihi*) and the existence that a thing possesses from another (*min ghayrihi*). When a thing has existence from another, its existence is borrowed, and thus metaphorical (*mustaʿār*), having no existence by itself; in reality, this form of existence in itself is pure nonexistence (*ʿadam maḥḍ*) based on the fact that its existence is related to and dependent upon another, and for this reason, it is not a true existence. Hence, al-Ghazālī concludes, the real existence (*al-mawjūd al-ḥaqq*) is God, just as the real light (*al-nūr al-ḥaqq*) is God. He points to the Sufis (*ʿārifūn*) as those who can comprehend the metaphorical and real subtleties of the question that *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*.[53]

In the second chapter of the *Mishkāt*, al-Ghazālī embarks on clarifying the similitude of *the niche* (*mishkāt*), *the lamp* (*miṣbāḥ*), *the glass* (*zujāja*), *the tree* (*shajara*), *the olive oil* (*zayt*), and *the fire* (*nār*) mentioned in the Light Verse. Just like the case in the first chapter, in the second chapter, he presents his discussions in a highly symbolic language mixed with Sufi and philosophical terms and concepts. He states that the exposition of the similitude of these qurʾānic words involves two poles, between which there is a limitless distance; but still, he wants to allude to them briefly through symbolism (*ramz*). The first pole clarifies the secret and method of using similitude (*tamthīl*) and the way in which the spirits of the meanings are captured by similitudes (*amthila*); it explains how a mutual relationship is established meanings and similitudes and how a balanced relationship is set up between the visible world (*ʿālam al-shahāda*), which provides the material of the similitude, and the world of dominion (*ʿālam al-malakūt*), from which the spirits of the meanings descend. The second pole, al-Ghazālī continues, deals with the layers of the spirits of the human clay (*ṭabaqāt arwāḥ al-ṭīna al-bashariyya*) and the degrees of their lights (*marātib anwārihā*). The meanings and similitudes of the Light Verse may only be clarified once these two poles can be comprehended properly. Al-Ghazālī makes references to the two Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad, ʿAbd Allāh b. Masʿūd and Ubayy b. Kaʿb, who interpreted *the light* and *the niche* in the Light Verse as the faith and the heart.[54]

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51   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 70.

52   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 54.

53   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 55.

54   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 65.

When it comes to explaining the secret and method of using similitude, al-Ghazālī states that the cosmos consists of two worlds: *spiritual* (*rūḥānī*) and *bodily* (*jismānī*); they might also be called *sensory* (*ḥissī*) and *intellectual* (*ʿaqlī*), or *high* (*ʿulwī*) and *low* (*suflī*). When the two worlds are regarded in themselves, the terms *spiritual* and *bodily* should be preferred; when they are viewed in relation to the eye that perceives them, the terms *sensory* and *intellectual* are more proper; and when they are considered concerning one another, then the terms *high* and *low* are better descriptions. These two types of worlds could also be termed *the world of the kingship and visible* (*ʿālam al-mulk wa-al-shahāda*) and *the world of the unseen and sovereignty* (*ʿālam al-ghayb wa-al-malakūt*) respectively. Al-Ghazālī argues that the multiplicity of all these terms may confuse and bewilder ordinary people and cause them to imagine many different meanings, but for those to whom the realities are unveiled this multiplicity of terms is not a problem. The world of sovereignty is an unseen world, as it is concealed from the majority, while the sensory world is a visible world because everyone can perceive it. The sensory world is a ladder to the intellectual world. Al-Ghazālī asserts that there should be a connection and relationship between the two worlds to proceed from the sensory world to the intellectual world; otherwise, progressing toward the intellectual world would be blocked, and thus travel to the presence of Lordship and proximity to God would be impossible and inconceivable. In this context, he situates religion (*dīn*) as a necessary communication channel between the two worlds and states that it is the divine mercy (*al-raḥma al-ilāhiyya*) that made the visible world parallel to the world of sovereignty, and thus everything in the visible world is a similitude (*mithāl*) of something in the world of sovereignty.[55]

Al-Ghazālī states that in the world of sovereignty, there are noble and high luminous substances (*jawāhir nūrāniyya sharīfa ʿāliya*) called *angels* (*malāʾika*), from which lights effuse upon human spirits, and because of these lights these angels may be called *lords* (*arbāb*). In this context, God is *Lord of the lords* (*rabb al-arbāb*). These angels have different levels of luminosity and their similitudes in the visible world would accordingly be the sun, the moon, and the stars.[56]

As for his discussions on the second pole, al-Ghazālī outlines the gradations of luminous human spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-bashariyya al-nūrāniyya*) and argues that the knowledge of this divine design is a precondition for understanding the similitudes of the Qurʾān regarding the Light Verse. According to al-Ghazālī's classification, which reminds us of Ibn Sīnā's categorization of the faculties of the human soul mentioned above with the exclusion that al-Ghazālī replaces the word soul (*nafs*) with spirit (*rūḥ*), the luminous human spirit consists of five spiritual levels.[57]

55   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 65-67.
56   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 67.
57   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 76.

The first level is the sensible spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥassās*), the recipient of the information brought by the five senses (*al-ḥawāss al-khams*); it seems to be the root and first appearance of the animal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥayawānī*), for it is the basic quality of being an animal genus as existing in the infant as well.[58]

The second level is the imaginative spirit (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*), the recorder and memory of the information brought by the senses. It is the depository of filed information for the intellectual spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ʿaqlī*) above it when there is a need for this information. The infant, at the beginning of his growth, does not possess this faculty. That is the reason why when an infant sees a certain present thing he wants it, while he forgets about it when it is removed from his sight and does not yearn for it until he becomes a little older, when he begins to cry for it demand it even when it is out of his sight, because its form remains preserved in his imagination. Some but not all, animals have this faculty. For example, the moth which perishes at the flame many times because of its passionate love for brightness has not this faculty; for if it had a remembering spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥāfiẓ*) that fixed the pain brought by its sense to it, it would not return to the flame after having been hurt once by it. In the example of a dog, however, it is observable that it has the imaginative spirit; for when it is beaten once with a stick, it runs away whenever it sees the stick again.[59]

The third level is the intellectual spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ʿaqlī*) which perceives meanings and concepts beyond the senses and imagination. Possessed specifically by humans, this faculty is found neither in beasts nor in children. The objects of its perception are universal self-evident knowledge (*al-maʿārif al-ḍarūriyya al-kulliyya*).[60]

The fourth level is the reflective spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*). This faculty takes pure intellectual data, next combines and arranges them, and deduces higher forms of knowledge from them. Then it takes, for example, two conclusions thus far learned, combines them again, and derives another conclusion; this is a never-ending process.[61]

The fifth level is the holy prophetic spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*) that is peculiar to prophets (*anbiyāʾ*) and some friends of God (*awliyāʾ*). At this level, flashes of the unseen (*lawāʾiḥ al-ghayb*) and the rules of the next world (*aḥkām al-ākhira*), and some of the knowledge of the realm of the heavens and the earth (*min maʿārif malakūt al-samāwāt wa-al-arḍ*) are disclosed. Furthermore, some of the lordly knowledge (*min al-maʿārif al-rabbāniyya*) that the intellectual and reflective spirits cannot reach may be accessible at this level. Al-Ghazālī asserts that this dimension of the spirit may entail unusual and wondrous occurrences that could be unexplainable to ordinary human senses and rational faculty. In this context, he uses the examples of poetry and music to differentiate the holy prophetic

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[58] Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 76.

[59] Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 76-77.

[60] Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 77.

[61] Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 77.

spirit from the intellectual and reflective spirits. To be able to enjoy the aesthetic quality of a piece of poetry or music, one is required to possess a specific kind of artistic taste, which goes beyond the perceptive limits of ordinary senses and rational capacity. Those who are deprived of this taste cannot distinguish harmonious measures, rhythms, and melodies from the disharmonious.[62]

Al-Ghazālī argues that the specific prophetic taste (*al-dhawq al-khāṣṣ al-nabawī*) may well be understood through analogies and symbols. He classifies human beings into three concentric categories with regard to appreciating the significance of this spirit. The first category entails the general principle that everyone should strive to become one of those people who experience something of the holy prophetic spirit, for the friends of God have a large portion of it. If one is not able to *taste* personally of this spirit, one should make a serious effort to attain *knowledge* of it through analogies (*bi-al-aqyisa*) and attention-calling remarks (*tanbīhāt*), and thus become one of those people who have knowledge of this spirit; and this is al-Ghazālī's second category. As for the third category, he states that if one is not able to become one of those belonging to these two categories, then one should at least have faith (*īmān*) in the holy prophetic spirit. Following the same line of argumentation, al-Ghazālī sees knowledge (*'ilm*) above faith (*īmān*), and tasting (*dhawq*) above knowledge (*'ilm*); for tasting is a finding (*wijdān*) but knowledge is only a drawing of analogies (*qiyās*), and having faith (*īmān*) is a mere acceptance (*qabūl*) through imitation (*bi-al-taqlīd*). Al-Ghazālī encourages the reader that one should have a good opinion (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) of the people of finding (*ahl al-wijdān*) the people of gnosis/knowledge (*ahl al-'irfān*) in this regard.[63]

Al-Ghazālī views all five of the human spirits as lights based on his interpretation that they make many types of existent things manifest including the sensory and imaginative things. While animals and mankind share certain levels and functions of spirit, the human being has a higher and nobler level and function of spirit, because it is created for more sublime, distinguished, and exclusive objectives. The spirits are created for the animals basically to be their instrument (*āla*) in their search for nourishment. They were created for mankind as a means to acquire the sciences of this-worldly subject-matters, as well as the principles of the noble religious sciences.[64]

In the last part of the second chapter of the *Mishkāt*, al-Ghazālī presents a parallelism between these five human spirits and *the niche*, *the glass*, *the lamp*, *the tree*, *the olive oil*, and *the fire* mentioned in the Light Verse. He lists his design of symbolism as follows:

a) *The niche* in the Light Verse symbolizes the sensible spirit, which is the recipient of the information brought by the five senses. According to al-Ghazālī's analogy, the specific characteristics of the sensible spirit are comparable to the lights coming out of several

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62   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 77-78.

63   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 78.

64   Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 78-79.

holes, like the two eyes, the two ears, the two nostrils, and the like; and hence, the most appropriate similitude for this spirit in the visible world is the niche for a lamp in a wall.[65]

b) *The glass* represents the imaginative spirit (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*), which is the recorder and memory of the information brought by the senses. The imaginative spirit possesses three characteristics. First, it is made of the clay of the dense (*kathīf*) low world, because the objects of imagination have definite and limited sizes, shapes, dimensions, relations, nearness, and farness. Another characteristic of a dense thing that is described by the attributes of bodies (*bi-awṣāf al-ajsām*) is that it veils the pure intellectual lights (*al-anwār al-ʿaqliyya*) which cannot be compared with descriptions related to directions, measures, nearness, and farness. Second, when this dense imagination (*al-khayāl al-kathīf*) is purified, refined, polished, and controlled, it becomes parallel to the intellectual meanings (*al-maʿānī al-ʿaqliyya*) and leads to their lights; it does not prevent the light that shines from the meanings. Third, initially, imagination is much needed because intellectual knowledge cannot be organized and stabilized without it. Based on these three characteristics of the imaginative spirit, al-Ghazālī asserts that under this-worldly conditions, it is only in glass one can observe the same peculiarities concerning physical light. For glass originally is a dense substance, but when it is purified and made clear, it does not veil the light of the lamp anymore; rather, it becomes transparent and transmits the light properly. Moreover, it keeps the light safe from external damage. Therefore, al-Ghazālī concludes that *the glass* in the Light Verse perfectly symbolizes the imaginative spirit.[66]

c) *The lamp* signifies the intellectual spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ʿaqlī*), which perceives meanings and concepts beyond the senses and imagination, and through which the perception of noble, divine knowledge (*idrāk al-maʿārif al-sharīfa al-ilāhiyya*) comes about. Given the doctrine that the prophets are *light-giving-lamps*, al-Ghazālī argues, *the lamp* in the Light Verse fittingly indicates the intellectual spirit.[67]

d) *The tree* stands for the reflective spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*), which takes pure intellectual data, combines and arranges them, and deduces higher forms of knowledge from them. The reflective spirit begins with a single principle and then turns into many sophisticated branches; finally, it reaches conclusions that are its fruits (*thamarātuhā*). Later on, these fruits go back and become seeds for similar fruits of the future, and this fertilization process goes on and on. In this world, al-Ghazālī asserts, the most appropriate similitude of the reflective spirit in this regard is the tree. He provides further details for the specific mention of the olive in the verse and states that since the fruits of the reflective spirit are functional for multiplying, combining, arranging, and fixing the lights of knowledge, its

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65 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 79.

66 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 79-80.

67 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 80.

likeness ought to be the olive tree, rather than the quince, apple, pomegranate, or other kinds of trees. The olive tree is purposefully mentioned among all trees because the quintessence (*lubb*) of its fruit is olive oil (*zayt*), which is the material that feeds the lamps and which has the unique characteristic of having a brighter radiance with little smoke, as against all other oils. According to al-Ghazālī's accounts, since the reproductivity of fruits and offspring is generally characterized by the adjective *blessed* (*mubārak*), the tree whose fruits do not end at a defined limit is even more worthy of this characterization and thus called *blessed tree* (*shajara mubāraka*). Likewise, since the branches of pure intellectual thoughts cannot be related to directions, nearness, or farness, then this tree may well be described to be *neither of the east nor of the west*.[68]

e) *The fire* represents the holy prophetic spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*) that is peculiar to prophets (*anbiyāʾ*) and some distinguished friends of God (*awliyāʾ*). Al-Ghazālī notes that the reflective spirit is divided into two kinds: a type that needs instruction, warning, and help from the outside so that it may acquire multiple forms of knowledge (*anwāʿ al-maʿārif*); and another type that has a very intense purity to the extent that it is, as it were, awakened itself without help from outside. This second type is naturally worthy of being referred to by the words, *Its oil almost shines even if no fire touched it*, because among the friends of God are those who have attained a very high level of spiritual purification and thus whose light would shine so bright that it functions almost independent of the help of the prophets, while among the prophets are also those whose light would shine almost independently of the help of the angels as a result of their absolute degree of perfection. Al-Ghazālī finds all these similitudes in the Light Verse meaningful and insightful statements.[69]

Having analyzed his design of a parallelism between the five human spirits and *the niche*, *the glass*, *the lamp*, *the tree*, *the olive oil*, and *the fire* mentioned in the Light Verse, al-Ghazālī concludes that the lights of the human spirit are ranked in levels: sensible, imaginative, intellectual, reflective, and holy prophetic spirits in succession. The organization and relationship between the lights of the human spirit are exemplified by the lamp within the glass and the glass within the niche. This special existence of a graded succession of lights is expressed in the Light Verse as "Light upon light!"[70] Al-Ghazālī closes his discussions in the second chapter of the *Mishkāt* by reminding the reader of the fact that this symbolism becomes clear only to the hearts of true believers or to the hearts of the prophets and the friends of God, not to the hearts of the unbelievers; because in this context, light means guidance (*hidāya*).[71] And the ultimate source of all lights is the First Light (*al-nūr al-awwal*), the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), Who bestows lights upon whomever He wishes.[72]

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68 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 80-81.
69 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 81.
70 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 81.
71 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 82.
72 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 83.

With all these accounts, al-Ghazālī does not seem to consider himself a typical peripatetic philosopher, instead, a theologian, a Sufi. He, however, at the same time emphasizes the theoretical depth of theological and spiritual doctrines. His expositions on conventional Sufi notions entail elements of Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics.[73] For in his other writings, such as *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa,* and *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl,* concerning the strictly philosophical question of the relation between the truth and certainty, he argues that since philosophy does not produce certainty in metaphysical questions, it cannot assure the truth. Al-Ghazālī asserts that the relation of necessity which exists between the premises and the conclusions of a logical syllogism is not able to satisfy both the mind and heart at the same time. True knowledge is apprehended through divine inspiration as a consequence of spiritual enlightenment. The truth has an existential basis in that once the heart becomes the owner of it, the mind then obtains certainty. This, however, does not mean that al-Ghazālī denies the binding nature of human reasoning, especially logical and mathematical reasoning. He calls attention to the limited capacity of logical reasoning in metaphysics, for which he declares that it may be attainable by spiritual experience and taste (*dhawq*). Therefore, although his starting point is philosophical, he arrives at conclusions very far from ordinarily philosophical.[74]

In his criticism addressed to philosophers, to argue that philosophers do not prove certainty of knowledge and religious truths, al-Ghazālī uses philosophical techniques, rather than theological and dialectical argumentations. Doing this, he prefers an even more rationalistic position than Ibn Rushd (d.595/1198), who in his *Faṣl al-Maqāl* and *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* tries to legitimize the study of philosophy on the basis of theological and jurisprudential justifications. Describing theology as a rationalistic discipline, al-Ghazālī keeps religion and philosophy well separated, being aware of the essential irreducibility of two positions and types of argumentations.[75] In his view, this world is not a mere phantasm. He declares that natural sciences and physical theories cannot be judged by spiritual and theological accounts. Moreover, he argues that whoever attempts to contest the mathematical proofs by literal interpretation of religious texts damages religion, for the methods of natural sciences are different from those of religion.[76]

In summary, al-Ghazālī maintains that just as sense perceptions fall short of intellection, so intellect itself falls short of grasping the nature of the spiritual experience. Thus, for him, the spiritual experience belongs to a different category of knowledge and should not be put aside only because it cannot be handled by reason. If reason, however, is incapable of accessing the truth-value of spiritual experience, the only other possible criterion is to experience the

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73 In his article on the *Mishkāt*, Alexander Treiger focuses on the problem of monism versus monotheism in al-Ghazālī's thought and argues that al-Ghazālī's statements bear striking structural and terminological resemblance to Ibn Sīnā's metaphysical formulations, as al-Ghazālī' integrates important elements of Ibn Sīnā's themes and concepts into his own writings. Alexander Treiger, "Monism and Monotheism in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār*," 8-9.

74 Massimo Campanini, "al-Ghazālī", 258-259.

75 Campanini, "al-Ghazālī", 261-262.

76 Campanini, "al-Ghazālī", 269.

spiritual dispositions themselves. Step by step, al-Ghazālī underlines that there must be a reliable and convenient way to truth. To understand the reliability of reason in various fields, we must know the limitations of intellectual knowledge. There are some possible errors caused by intellectual decisions on the one hand and by sense perceptions on the other hand. In the final analysis, knowledge of God does not depend on purely intellectual process, but on revelation and faith. Therefore, although true knowledge includes a certain logical process, it is nonetheless a divine gift. There is a higher form of human apprehension superseding rational comprehension that reaches its zenith when God reveals truths to prophets.

Conclusion

Through their interpretations of the Light Verse, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī protrude as the representatives of different intellectual trends in Islamic thoughts. Both scholars attribute their epistemological assumptions and arguments to the several metaphors they pick from this well-known symbolic verse and thus reach their own readings of this verse. There exists a level of similarity between their interpretations in the sense that both thinkers formulate a spiritual and symbolic epistemology. Where did this similarity derive from? Although a comparison in such a specific verse, which in itself has a spiritual and symbolic character, indicates similarities between the two authors, the general spirit of their ideas characterizes peculiar nuances. We know that the Neoplatonic philosophy has a mystical nature in itself, and its ontological and epistemological structure resembles those of Muslim spiritualists. Yet, in the case of Ibn Sīnā, who never gives us any evidence about his personal Sufi practices, experiences, and concrete spiritual contacts with any Sufi figure, we are not able to determine to what degree or in which sense his interpretations have a Sufi origin, in contrast to al-Ghazālī who declares himself as such. Depending on such pieces of evidence, we may say that their understandings of spirituality and Sufism are different. Given their *a priori* premises, both draw their own conclusions. Since the topic of this article alludes mainly to metaphysical symbols, a proper logical and analytical comparison between the premises and conclusions of Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī lies beyond the scope of this study. On their intellectual journeys, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī seem to observe different considerations (i.e., religious, philosophical, and social) in different degrees.

At the same time, we should clarify our definitions of philosophy and Sufism concerning their ultimate goals and conclusions in general, and Ibn Sīnā's and al-Ghazālī's in particular. Although I am aware of the fact that even among Sufis there are various spiritual tendencies such as the different motifs used by Ibn ʿArabi (d.638/1240) and Rumi (d.672/1273), nevertheless, due to their different paradigms, Ibn Sīnā seems to embrace a speculative and philosophical Sufism, while al-Ghazālī prefers a practical and experiential one. What is not doubtless though is the historical and textual fact that both scholars were deeply interested in theoretical aspects of Sufism.

Both thinkers examine the human faculty of acquiring knowledge with a specific ultimate destination of their inquiries, which is the possibility of prophecy for mankind. Ibn Sīnā's discussions in this context follow a more typical framework of his emanative metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology, while al-Ghazālī's formulations make a more direct reference to general Islamic religious terminology. Ibn Sīnā's analysis of the proof of prophethood and its essence in his treatise is a unique contribution to Islamic philosophical tradition since no other Muslim philosopher before him attempted to deal with this complex philosophical question using purely philosophical vocabulary and categories. Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the Light Verse appears to be a case study of his theoretical expositions concerning the human acquisition of various types of knowledge, including prophetic knowledge. Throughout his discussions, Ibn Sīnā introduces his conception of ontology and epistemology and sees the entire existence as a chain of beings proceeding from God. He values things in this chain depending on the proximity of their existence to God and considers the prophet to be standing on top of this existential and epistemological hierarchy. Ibn Sīnā contextualizes the prophet as the necessary link between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, who is in charge of critical metaphysical, epistemological, social, and political functions for the benefit of mankind.

Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the Light Verse is dependent upon his theory of knowledge, his understanding of the body-mind relationship, his elaborate analysis of the human soul and intellect, and his conception of prophecy. Throughout his explanations in this regard, he relies on basic Islamic religious sources in addition to philosophical theories, particularly Neoplatonic emanationist metaphysics.

Al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the Light Verse is a symbolic summary of his theory of attaining certainty in knowledge. His treatise, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, concentrates on this qur'ānic verse. The *Mishkāt* designs a metaphysics of light based on a certain type of cosmological and psychological levels of existence, which offers a peculiar perception of ontology and epistemology that includes al-Ghazālī's conception of knowledge of God, the relationship between God, the universe, and mankind. As we have seen above, the spiritual psychology that al-Ghazālī outlines regarding the vocabulary of the Light Verse incorporates noticeable affinities with the formulations of Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the same verse. Al-Ghazālī's classification of the ontological and epistemological faculties of the human soul follow generally Ibn Sīnā's categorization of the faculties of the human soul with some minor changes like al-Ghazālī's replacement of the word soul (*nafs*) with spirit (*rūḥ*). This fact could be another indication of al-Ghazālī's masterful appropriation and naturalization of Ibn Sīnā's philosophical discussions within his own works, as well as within traditional Islamic scholarly culture.

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