

***Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought:
Al-Ghazali's Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennian
Foundation.
Culture and Civilization in the Middle East***

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Since the appearance of his polemical work, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahâfut al-Falâsifah*), Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111) has stayed at the center of the debate regarding the fate of philosophy in Muslim societies. The reactions to his thought and writings have varied from one critic to another; while Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd (d.1198) was defending 'the first teacher' of the Peripatetics, Aristotle, against al-Ghazali and blaming his conclusions as incoherent in his response to al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (*Tahâfut al-Tahâfut*), another book of al-Ghazali, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihyâ' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*), was being burnt for its philosophical tendencies in the Muslim West. In addition to the alleged philosophical tendencies of *the Revival*, his *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkât al-Anwâr*), and especially the third chapter of the book, has raised some question marks regarding his stance toward philosophy. From this book it seemed that al-Ghazali was promulgating the cosmology of the philosophers that he condemned harshly in the *Tahâfut*. During the early phase of the Ghazalian studies some scholars had tried to solve these contradictions by denying the authenticity of the philosophical passages and works attributed to al-Ghazali. However, in recent decades a consensus about the authenticity of these works has been slowly emerging among the Ghazalian scholars.

Another somewhat vague solution to these apparent contradictions has been proposed referring to the end of *The Scale of Action* (*Mîzân al-'Amal*) in which al-Ghazali says that every man has three sets of doctrines and the third one of them is the one held between the man and God in secret. According to this proposal al-Ghazali held esoteric and exoteric teachings at the same time and presented his thought accordingly depending on the circumstances and the audience. By phrasing

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this controversy surrounding al-Ghazali as “the al-Ghazali Problem”, W. H. T. Gairdner has given the gist of it in his 1914 article.

Treiger’s book *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought* can be seen as a contribution for the solution of this problem. Following the footsteps of Dimitri Gutas, his PhD advisor when he was a graduate student at Yale University, Treiger’s contribution comes from the philosophical side of the debate. At this point it should be noted that according to Gutas the defining moment for the later developments in Islamic thought was the translation movement of Greek heritage and its incorporation and appropriation into Arabic through the peripatetic (mashshâi) tradition in general, and Ibn Sînâ in particular. In accord with his teacher, Treiger’s argument presented and tried to be substantiated throughout the book is that even though al-Ghazali had tried to cover up his dependence on philosophy throughout his whole career, he was heavily dependent on the writings of Ibn Sînâ when he was developing his theory of mystical cognition. In this matter, he had adopted Ibn Sînâ’s noetics and the theory of prophecy almost completely by replacing its terminology with a more mystical sounding terminology that he derived from the more acceptable traditional religious sources. He had presented his teachings in this manner in order to escape from the criticism of the religious scholars as exemplified during the Nishapur controversy. With Treiger’s own words; “in the guise of a critic, al-Ghazali was, in fact, one of the greatest popularizers of philosophy in medieval Islam, indeed a kind of a “Trojan horse,” which brought Avicenna’s philosophy into the heart of Islamic thought. After al-Ghazali, Islam became once and for all inundated with Avicennian ideas.” (p. 104)

Besides the introduction and the conclusion sections, Treiger divides his book into five chapters. He also adds two appendices after the conclusion section. In the introduction he points out a recent paradigm change in the Ghazalian studies. According to Treiger, “scholars have identified considerable problems with al-Ghazali’s presentation of his engagement with philosophy.” (p. 3) His *Incoherence* is not based on the *Intentions (Maqâsid)* as claimed by himself, so the *Intentions* was probably written at an earlier time rather than the time al-Ghazali had claimed. The sophistication of the *Incoherence* suggests a lifelong engagement with philosophy, so his claim that he mastered it in two years with an additional year of reflection cannot be credible. Al-Ghazali’s *Deliverer (al-Munqidh)* was written as an apology related to the Nishapur controversy, so his narrative pertinent to philosophy in this work must be taken with a grain of salt. With these problems at hand, “the question of al-Ghazali’s intellectual leanings, his attitude to philosophy, his methodology, and his theological agenda has therefore to be opened anew.” (p. 4) Following the general

outline of this new paradigm, Treiger gives the methodological principles followed throughout the book. These principles are 1- "al-Ghazali is a theologian (in the generic sense of the term "theology" is not identical with *kalâm*)." 2- "Avicenna's philosophy is a key for understanding of al-Ghazali." 3- "One cannot study al-Ghazali's theology by examining only one, or only some, of his works in isolation; one has to consider synoptically his entire corpus." 4- "Unless there is clear evidence to the contrary, one ought to assume that al-Ghazali is consistent in his *thought* even if he appears inconsistent in his *terminology* and *manner of presentation*." 5- "Al-Ghazali's way of writing is pedagogic rather than scientific." (p. 5-7) After explaining each principle in detail, he states the objective of the book as "an exploration of al-Ghazali's theory of mystical cognition and of its Avicennian underpinnings." (p. 8) He also gives the list of al-Ghazali's works in chronological order as a table. Like all the tables used in the book, this one also proves to be very useful for the reader.

In the first chapter, Treiger's deals with three terms 'heart, intelligence, and knowledge (*qalb*, '*akl*, and '*ilm*).' He identifies them as "the most elementary building blocks of al-Ghazali's noetics." (p. 17) At the end of the chapter he adds another term cognition (*ma'rifah*) and explains its relation to the concept of knowledge. The second chapter is titled as "the science of unveiling." The title is the translation of '*ilm al-mukâshafah*. He starts the chapter by outlining *the Revival*. According to this outline, al-Ghazali presents *the Revival* as a book not about the science of unveiling but about the science of practice (*'ilm al-mu'âmalah*). However, as pointed out by Lazarus-Yafeh, al-Ghazali turns into different directions throughout the book and Treiger takes these turnings as hints toward the science of unveiling. He also briefly mentions the background of the term in earlier Sufi circles. In the third chapter, two terms are explored, tasting (*dhawq*) and witnessing (*mushâhadah*). According to al-Ghazali, understanding of tasting requires a state which cannot be achieved through an intellectual effort. He often uses examples in order to convey what he means with the term tasting. His examples come from the experiences of sexual pleasure, health, and intoxication. A child or an impotent person cannot taste the pleasure of having sex even if it is possible for him to make a comparison from other pleasures unless he involves in this activity. As for the understanding of the term witnessing, al-Ghazali divides people into three classes; the common folk who imitate the authority without questioning, the dogmatic theologians who use their reason, and the cognizant (al-'ârifûn) who witness through the light of certainty. Treiger claims that his examples are mostly taken from the works of Ibn Sînâ and this threefold division of people is a rendering from the classes of people pointed out by Ibn Sînâ. (p. 60-62) In the fourth

chapter, the author examines the connections between al-Ghazali's notions of inspiration and revelation (*ilhâm* and *wahy*) with Ibn Sînâ's notion of intuition (*hads*). He also makes a comparison between the interpretations of these two scholars regarding the famous Verse of Light (The Qur'ân, 24:35). The fifth chapter is about al-Ghazali's attitude toward philosophy. According to Treiger, al-Ghazali endorses many philosophical teachings that he condemns in *Incoherence*. This leads him to conclude that the *Tahâfut* is a pseudo-refutation. (p. 93-96) He answers the question of why al-Ghazali wrote this work by quoting Frank Griffel. Griffel expresses that "by criticizing a selected number of teachings in the *falâsifa's* metaphysics and natural sciences, al-Ghazali aims to make room for the epistemological claims of revelation." Treiger's understanding of 'revelation' as used by al-Ghazali includes both prophecy and post-prophetic mystical cognition. Another work of al-Ghazali examined in this chapter is his *Deliverer* (*al-Munqidh*). Treiger reports the historical setting that had caused al-Ghazali to write this book. This incident is known as the Nishapur controversy, and *Deliverer* must be read in this context. If read in this context, al-Ghazali's attitude toward philosophy would be better understood. After a well written conclusion section, the author adds two appendices to the book. The first one is about the pen (*al-qalam*) and the preserved tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfûz*) and their significance in al-Ghazali's mystical cognition. The second one is about the translation of the word *tahâfut*. Since the critical edition of al-Ghazali's *Tahâfut* by Maurice Bouyges the word is rendered by incoherence. Treiger asserts that the word 'precipitance' renders the meaning of the word more correctly.

Almost one third of the book consists of the translations from a wide range of writers and sources most of which come from the works of al-Ghazali and Ibn Sînâ. The author always provides the original key terms in transliterated form. This adds more credibility to his already superior translations. His presentation of the concepts explored in the book is extremely clear and can be read independently for a better understanding of al-Ghazali's core teachings. The reader might feel that the author is mostly successful in substantiating his claims and showing the parallelism between the thoughts of al-Ghazali and Ibn Sînâ. However, the passages translated for the demonstration of this parallelism indicate a careful selectiveness from the author's side. It seems that the traditional religious sources and the writings of Sufis quoted by al-Ghazali intentionally neglected in order to emphasize the influence of philosophy more over these sources. This attitude clearly reflects the approach of Gutas toward Islamic thought in general. In conclusion, the book is an invaluable contribution to the Ghazalian studies. Its holistic approach will widen the

possibilities for further studies. The engaging endnotes and the extensive bibliography will surely be helpful to emerging scholars of al-Ghazali.

