The Quest for the Unknown: On al-Ghazālī’s Critical Thinking and Epistemology in Islamic Tradition

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Abstract

This study elaborates on al-Ghazālī’s critical inquiry into major intellectual traditions that hold some bearing on religion, with special reference to his sustained critique of pure reason as introduced to Islamic metaphysics by philosophers. Al Ghazālī’s critique scheme places high premium on the standards of rationality, yet exhibits the deficiency of reason in metaphysical realms in order to establish a legitimate space for revelation. The study elaborates the Qur’ānic perspective of critical thinking which has provided the inspiration for al-Ghazālī and then identifies several intellectual standards of assessment and sound reasoning, which al-Ghazālī employed in his critique and coherently integrated with Islamic epistemology. This includes the demand for evidence to support a claim, the relationship between reason and revelation, and the quest for objectivity. The study aims to chart a trajectory of critical and intellectual thinking that is grounded in reason and guided by revelation.

Keywords: Critical thinking; al-Ghazālī; revelation, critique of pure reason; Islamic epistemology.

Introduction

As living beings, we are exposed to various types of pollution released into the environment largely due to many of our activities. Organic and inorganic pollutants have devastating effects on our physical health and on the environment at large. Due to our technological achievements however, we have developed different monitoring mechanisms to keep our air, water and food supplies clean, even though at times, our means of protection only exacerbate the situation.

As rational beings from different cultures and orientations we are equally exposed to various types of ideas and thoughts – true and false concepts, valid and invalid arguments, etc. – that are no less detrimental to our mental and spiritual health than air, water and soil pollutants are to our physical health. We are, however, not as stringent in taking care of
mental health as we are to our physical health. ‘Critical thinking’ is a mental filter that ensures that only the right ideas make their way into our perceptions. Given the overwhelming amount of information we have at our disposal, and particularly in the age of information and communication technology, critical thinking helps us separate fact from opinion and distinguish between rational claims and emotional ones. It identifies logical flaws in arguments, evaluates evidence and draws conclusions on the basis of good evidence. Critical thinking requires a fair recognition of the strength and the weakness of an argument, just as it helps to present a point of view in a structured, clear, and well-reasoned way. In short, critical thinking refers to “a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends.”

Critical thinking thrived in Islamic history not as an independent discipline but as a technique of analysis and intellectual discourse employed in the formation and development of many religious disciplines. For example, ‘ilm al-jadal (science of dialectics or argumentation) is based on advancing evidence to show which of the juristic rulings or theological perspective is more sound. According to Imam al-haramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), one of the early scholars to write on this discipline, any error committed on fundamental or secondary matter of religion by a learned man must be identified and corrected by another learned man. Such critique, which must be supported by burhān (demonstrative proof) and husn al-jīdāl (good arguments), is a religious duty and part of al-amr bi-al-maruf wa-al-nahy ‘an al-munkar (enjoining the virtue and forbidding the vice). Like ‘ilm al-jadal, ijtihād is a critical-cum-creative intellectual discipline used for extrapolating legal rulings from the Qur’an and Sunnah. A mujtahid (a person who practices ijtihād) would be critical of the existing madhāhib (legal schools) and creative in generating new ones or updating old juridical pronouncements on pressing problems in accordance with the strength of the evidence of the Qur’an and Prophetic Sunnah.

“Mental filter” is used here as a cognitive skill of thinking critically about thinking. It is not used to describe a cognitive distortion that happens when a person is focusing only on the negative aspects of a situation and filtering out all of the positive ones. See “Mental Filter,” Retrieved from http://panicdisorder.about.com/od/livingwithpd/tp/Mental-Filter.htm.


4 For more on the relationship between ijtihād and creative or critical thinking, see J. Badi and M. Tajdin, Creative Thinking: An Islamic Perspective, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2005), pp. 69-109; and S. Sikandar Shah and M. Wok Mahmud, “Critical Thinking and Its Implications for
ascertain the authenticity and credibility of hadith, scholars of hadith developed various stern measures, unprecedented in the history of textual critique.

Muslims scholars of various schools made use of critical thinking in their intra and inter-scholarly engagements. There were theological critiques among the Ash'arites, Mu'tazilites, Shiites, Khawarijites etc., and many critical encounters between Muslim theologians and philosophers and between them and the Jewish and Christian theologians. There were also critiques among the jurists of Islamic schools of jurisprudence: Hanafites, Malikites, Shafi'ites, Hanbalites, Zaydis, Imamites etc. and their critical engagements with the Sufis.

Imam al-Ghazali is one of the greatest minds brought up within the Islamic intellectual tradition of critical discourse. As Hallaq rightly observed, al-Ghazali drew attention from many of his contemporaries and has received greater attention from modern researchers than any other thinker in medieval Islam. What earns al-Ghazali this unique recognition is in fact, as this study advances, a form of critique grounded in Islamic epistemology that he exhibited throughout his inquiries. Such critique is widely recognized but not independently studied. In his address on the occasion of the celebration of the 900th anniversary, Amadou-Mahtar Contemprary Ijtihad, American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, vol. 27, no. 4 (2010), pp. 45-67.


4 He is acclaimed by a number of historians of religion as the most influential Muslim thinker after the Prophet. (See S. M. Zmeiner A Modern Seeker after God: Showing Islam at Its Best in Life and Teaching of Al-Ghazali Mystic and Theologian of the 11th Century (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1928, p. 21; William Montgomery Watt, The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953; Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Al-Insān al-Ghazali bayna Mādīlāt al-Wājibāt (Beirut: Mu‘asseb al-Rāslān, 1994), p. 11.). On the occasion of the celebration of the 900th anniversary of his death in 1985, based on the Hijri calculation (505-1405), the Executive Board of UNESCO restated that al-Ghazali "made a major contribution to the evolution and enrichment of Islamic Thought and ethics" and that his work had "left an indelible imprint on other cultures."

5 Twenty-six years later, in 2011, the world's scholarly community repeated the commemoration based on the Gregorian calculation (1111-2011). For example, The Muslim World journal published two special issues—vol. 101, no. 4, 2011 & vol. 102, no. 1, 2012—consisting of 11 articles to commemorate year 1111, the year al-Ghazali died. Similarly, Islam & Science journal published a special issue in its vol. 9, no. 2, 2011. As documented in al-Ghazali’s website http://www.ghazali.org, scores of academic dissertations, colloquia, chairs in academic intuitions of higher learning and scholarly books and journal articles have studied from various angles the enduring legacy of al-Ghazali.

M'Bow, the then Director General of UNESCO, acknowledged that al-Ghazālī’s approach in systematically subjecting the intellectual traditions previously established to critical analysis was exemplary in its scrupulousness. According to Parvez Manzoor, al-Ghazālī’s critique, is “the most cogent intellectual argument of the monotheistic faith in medieval times.” It was well appreciated within and outside the Islamic circles, being a source of inspiration for many Jewish and Christian intellectuals, particularly in medieval times. Al-Akiti notes that “al-Ghazālī’s balancing of the forces transcends the bounded concerns of his own religion and engages the perennial concerns of all and sundry, atheists and theists alike.”

Critical thinking, as used in this study, refers to several intellectual standards of assessment and skills of sound reasoning, which al-Ghazālī employed in his critique and coherently integrated with Islamic epistemology. This includes objectivity, rationality, consistency, relevance of evidence and whether the premises provided lead to a logical conclusion. This study sets out to examine al-Ghazālī’s approach to critical thinking. The study first elaborates the Qur’ānic perspective of critical thinking which has provided the inspiration for al-Ghazālī and then proceeds to identify features of al-Ghazālī’s critique, including demand for evidence to support a claim, integration of reason and revelation, and the quest for objectivity. Based on textual analysis of al-Ghazālī’s works, primarily Tāḥāfūt al-Falāṣfāḥ [The Incoherence of the Philosophers], Munqīdḥ min al-ḥalāl [The Deliverer from Error], and Iḥyā’ Ulūm al-Dīn [The Revival of the Religious Sciences], the study aims to exhibit an alternative trajectory of critical and intellectual thinking founded on Islamic epistemology.
The Qur'an on Critical Thinking

The Qur'an places high premium on rational thinking. As such, it raises many thought-provoking questions concerning the existence of God and His unity; the essence of man; the origin of the universe and its ultimate destiny; the creation of the seen and unseen worlds; and the nature of reality and ultimate purpose of existence. Furthermore, the Qur'an makes it abundantly clear that none will make sense of its parables and narratives, appreciate its legislations and teachings or grasp the meaning of its āyāt in the created cosmos and those in the revealed Qur'an itself except ʿulū al-ḥalāb, a term which may broadly refer to scholars endowed with wisdom, intellectual integrity, sound reasoning, fair judgement and open-mindedness (Qur'an, 2:269; 3:7, 190; 12:111; 38:29; 39:21). It also condemns factors that impede rational thinking, such as taqlīd (blind imitation) (Qur'an, 2:170; 5:104; 31:21; 43:21-24), ḥawā (pursuit of caprice) (Qur'an, 5:48, 77; 6:56, 119; 28:50; 47:14; 23:71), and zann (pursuit of conjecture in the face of certitude) (Qur'an, 10:36; 53:23, 28). Phrases used in the Qur'an to encourage thinking includes awalam yatafakkārū (Do they not reflect) (Qur'an, 7:184), awalam yandūnī (do they not consider) (Qur'an, 7:185), afālam yaddabbarū (do they not ponder) (Qur'an, 23:68), afālā taʿqīlān (Will you not use your reason?) (Qur'an, 2:44; 7:169), to mention a few.

Nevertheless, the type of reasoning the Qur'an encourages is the one that recognises its own limitation. Such reasoning would exercise its rights in areas within the rational dictate and believes in al-ghayb (the unseen), as established in revelation, which are not necessarily irrational but simply go beyond the ambit of human reason.

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14 This may include questioning what is known as āyāt mutashābihat (allegorical verses) of the Qur'an (Qur'an, 3:7). To ask many unnecessary, trivial questions, as posed by Banū Isrāʾīl to Prophet Mūsā (Qur'an, 2:67-73), was also discouraged (Qur'an, 5:101-102). Other than that, the Qur'an nurtures inquisitive mind (Qur'an, 2:259-260; 7:143; 16:43; 25:59) and extensively employs questioning technique in the formation of the Islamic worldview (see Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu et al, “Al-As'ilah al-Qur'āniyyah wa-Dawruhū fī Taqrīr Ruʿyāt al-Īnām lil-Wujūd”, Journal of Islam in Asia, Special Issue 2 (2011), pp. 1-33. Retrieved from http://www.iium.edu.my/jiasia/ojs-2.2/index.php/Islam/issue/view/16.
The Qur'ān then calls humans to stop to think, ‘and never to stop thinking (Qur'ān, 12:1-2; 38:29; 43:1-3) in areas within the reach of human reason. According to Hashim Kamali, the Qur'ānic references to thinking occur in conjunction with basically five major themes: primarily the belief in the Oneness and munificence of God (tawḥīd); reflection on the Qur'ān; man and the universe; historical precedent; and the act of thinking itself.15 ‘Abd al-Karim Nawfān ‘Ubaydāt classifies areas where the Qur'ān calls for rational thinking into four, namely: reflection on God’s āyāt (signs) in the creation; reflection on God’s laws in nature; reflection on the wisdom behind Shari‘ah; and reflection on God’s law in history.16 In discussing over this wide array of fundamental questions, man is encouraged to think systematically; hence he is at liberty to think individually or in pairs (Qur'ān, 34:47) and draw conclusion on the basis of evidence presented before him in āālq (cosmos, horizons) and anfūs (human disposition, human community) (Qur'ān, 41:53). Anyone who does not use his reason properly is likened to a beast or even worse (Qur'ān, 7:179; 25:44).

While the word naqd (Arabic word for ‘critique’ or ‘criticism’) has no root in the Qur'ānic vocabulary, its synonyms can be found, such as tabayyānū (ascertain the truth) (Qur'ān, 49:6), li-yarāza (to separate the bad from the good), (Qur'ān, 8:37). Other than that, critical thinking is one of the discursive styles17 the Qur'ān employs extensively when making its case for the existence and unity of God, creation, resurrection, the necessity of revelation, etc. Therefore, man is invited to think deeply and critically and to rethink: could there be any flaw in this divinely designed system of being? (Qur'ān, 67:3-4). On human interactions, the Qur'ān calls for fair judgment (Qur'ān, 5:8; 6:152), willingness to consider new ideas and the courage to pursue the truth thereof (Qur'ān, 43:21-24; 39:18). It advises not to delve into any matter which one is unfit for (Qur'ān, 3:66; 17:36), not to accept any claim without evidence (Qur'ān, 49:6) and to ensure that the evidence truly supports the claim (Qur'ān, 3:168; 46:11; 34:34-37). Furthermore, it faults those who blindly follow their ancestors, saying that those ancestors themselves were not less irrational than their successors: “When it is said to them: ‘Follow what Allah has revealed;' They say: ‘Nay! We shall follow the ways of our

17 For other thinking styles that can be identified in the Qur'ān see Jamal Badi and Mustapha Tajdin, Creative Thinking, pp. 33-68.
fathers. *What! Even though their fathers were wholly unintelligent and had no guidance?* (Qur'an, 2:170).

One passage in Sūrat al-Naml on establishing the unity of Allah is worth mentioning. The passage begins with the following question: ḍ-Allāh ʿamū mā yushrikūn (Who) is better? — Allah or the false gods they associate (with Him)? The passage then proceeds to recount Allah’s creations and provisions one after another: He Who has created the heaven and earth...; He Who has made the earth habitable...; He Who answers the distressed when he calls upon Him...; He Who guides in utter darkness. Giving all this grand creation and majestic design as evidence of the existence and unity of Allah, the Qur’an then continues to repeat after each bounty enumerated: “could there be any divine power besides Allah?” If the kufr are still not open to this supporting evidence, then the burden of proof is placed in their court to defend their claim and justify their belief in atheism, deism or polytheism: “Qul laa tātur bursūnakum in kuntum sādiqīn” “Bring forth your proof, if you are telling the truth!” (Qur’an, 27:59-64). Subsequently, it is declared that they have no solid ground for their denial, particularly of the issues related to the Hereafter: “No, but their knowledge of the Hereafter has reached a deadlock giving occasion to uncertainty. No, but their doubt stands as the beacon of the unwise, in fact, their notion of the Hereafter has fallen on the blind spot” (Qur’an, 27:66).

Al-Ghazālī’s Intellectual Inquiry

Imam Abū hāmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī (450-505/1058-1111) is a prominent Muslim jurist, theologian, philosopher and Sufi. Born in Tus in Persia, al-Ghazālī received education in his hometown and then in Jurjān and finally in Nishapur in today’s northern part of Iran. At the Nizamiyya Madrasa (al-Madrasah al-Nisāmiyyah) in Nishapur, he learned fiqh (jurisprudence), logic and ʿilm al-kalām (science of theology) from an influential Ash’arite theologian, Imam al-haramayn al-Juwayni and later became a renowned teacher at another Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad and that of Nishapur where he himself had been a student. He wrote profusely on various branches of knowledge that have significant bearing on religion, including Islamic jurisprudence and legal theory, logic, philosophy, theology, comparative religion and Sufism. He is better known for his Iḥyāʾ ʿUkām al-Dīn, which is considered to be his magnum opus.

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18 This translation is based on al-Muntakhab due to its literary style in rendering this particular āyah. See http://www.islamawakened.com/quran/27/66/default.htm.
Al-Ghazālī lived within an environment where a number of individuals prided themselves as the custodians of intellectual inquiry and thus ridiculed some religious values while others held some religious beliefs devoid of rationality. The basic fundamental epistemological question al-Ghazālī addressed then concerns al-‘ilm bi-haqā’iq al-ummūr (the knowledge of realities), which will lead to al-‘ilm al-yaqīnū (the knowledge of certitude).19

From the outset, al- Ghazālī recognized knowledge as being the best of all things, and further being the root of saʿādah (happiness) in this world and in the Hereafter; its acquisition is to pursue the best and its dissemination is the best of all occupations.20 Believing in the indivisibility of al-haqīq (the Truth), that all true knowledge comes from Him and all leads to Him, al- Ghazālī was determined, right from the period of adolescence, to pursue truth wherever it takes him.21

The first guiding principle of enquiry al- Ghazālī set forth is to study these sciences thoroughly and objectively. He cautioned that “to refute a doctrine before having thoroughly comprehended is like a stab in the dark” and that it is not possible for one to know what is defective in any science until one masters that science, equals its most learned exponents and even surpass them; only then could one’s critique be justified.22 To that end, al- Ghazālī acquired major intellectual traditions previously established and classified the seekers after truth into four groups: theologians, philosophers Batinites and Sufis. With great boldness and courage, he treaded an intricate path to investigate the truth claim of each group and eventually found all wanting except Sufism which he considered to be the true science of the Hereafter.

Batinite esotericism is founded on two main doctrines; the infallibility of the Imam and the primacy of esoteric interpretation of the Shari‘ah which can be known only by the instruction of the the infallible Imam. According to al- Ghazālī, posing the authority of infallible Imam as a source of knowledge at the expense of the authority of reason and exoteric interpretation of the Shari‘ah is absurd. If it is possible that there is another infallible imam other than Prophet Muhammad, it would have been equally possible for other groups to proffer their respective i‘fallible imams and this will lead to multiple infallible imams ad infinitum, this is absurd. Similarly, if the Batinite esoteric interpretation is valid, it is also

19 Al-Ghazālī, Al-Munqīd th min al-da‘l, p. 42.
22 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
possible to have other multiple valid interior interpretations and even several valid interior interpretations of the Batinite esoteric interpretation itself. In such instances mutual understanding and communication will be demolished. Through *reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to absurdity) mode of argumentation, he demonstrated how such Batinite teaching is false because it could deconstruct the entirety of the Sharī'ah.24 Al-Ghazālī authored *Fadā’ih al-Batiniyyah wa-Fadā’il al-Mustazhirīyyah* [The Infamies of the Batinites and the Virtues of the Mustazhirites] and *al-Qisṣās al-Mustaqqīm* [The Correct Balance] in critique of Batinite epistemology.

‘Īlm al–kalām is primarily a protective science meant to safeguard the Islamic creed against heretical innovations. The emergence of heretics and innovators gave kalām science its legitimate place. Going beyond that by dwelling into the nature of the Reality and Divine attributes, is what subjected kalām to Ghazālī’s critique.25 According to him, the theologians’ way of argumentation falls short of leading to certainty in faith, and even when it does it entails some elements of doubt and tasfi’d, as their proofs are not demonstrative but rather dialectical; the premises of which the theologians adapted from their opponents.26 Al-Ghazālī’s critique of theology was not born out of ignorance or contempt, but rather stemmed from his being an insider who had been at the forefront of the discourse for years, and only after knowing its limitations did he decide to desert it and turn it inside-out. He authored *Iljām al–‘Awām ‘an ‘Īlm al–Kalām* (Warding off the Masses from Sciences of Theology) in critique if ‘īlm al–kalām. He did not deny the efficacy of kalām in safeguarding the Islamic creed and enlightening a lower level of intellectual curiosity;27 but for the knowledge of certainty, he found kalām to be a dead end: “the road to the realities of knowledge is closed from this direction” *(al-taifiqa ilā haqā’iq al-ma’rifah min hadīkā al-wajh masdūd).*28

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23 *Reductio ad absurdum* is an argument in which if a statement leads to an absurd conclusion, the statement cannot be true. For example if assumption that 'motion is possible' leads to the absurd conclusion that the runner completes an infinite series of tasks, then motion is impossible no matter how things appear. See Maurice F. Stanley, *Logic and Controversy* (Australia: Wadsworth, 2002), pp. 333, 375.


25 Ibid., p. 49.

26 Ibid., p. 49; Al-Ghazālī, *‘Uṣūl al-Dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 75–77.


28 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 95.
Like *kaḥm*, *fiqh* is reduced to the science of the minimum requirement of religion concerning exterior bodily rituals and worldly matters. These rituals, according to al-Ghazālī, cannot ascertain sincerity (which is the attribute of heart), which are necessary for the salvation in the Hereafter. However, because in Islam this world is closely intertwined with the Hereafter, the former being the seed-ground of the latter, observing the religious rituals, as expounded by fuqaha, is necessary for the spiritual formation of individuals and communities and indispensable to prepare one for the Hereafter. On that basis, he condemned some extremist Sufis who claimed to have reached a state of certainty where they were no longer required to perform *salāh* (prayer) and were permitted to drink alcohol and commit other prohibited things with impunity. Such an attitude is by far worse than *kufr* because its aim is to destroy the religion from within. Other than that, he believes that Sufism is the true science of certainty that can lead to salvation in the Hereafter.

His fiercest critique was primarily against the philosophers’ conclusions in *ilāhiyyāt* (metaphysics/theology). In this encounter, he adopted rational arguments of the Mu’tazilite, Karrāmite and Waqīfīte theologians who were often at odds with his Ash’arīte theology, weaving them all into a suitable epistemic and argumentative framework to combat what he perceived to be a greater harm of philosophers.

**Claim with Supporting Evidence**

Weighing a claim against its supporting evidence is central to al-Ghazālī’s critical readings, and particularly of philosophical writings, where one is cautioned not to accept or reject anything simply on the basis of personality which is associated with it. His favorite quote in this respect is a statement attributed to ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib that “lā ta‘rif al-haqq bi–al-rijāl; 'irīf al-haqq ta‘rif ahlihi” (Do not know the truth by the men, but know the truth, and then you will know who are truthful). Al-Ghazālī often cited this quote to ridicule people who embraced the heretical teachings of the philosophers in metaphysics because of their impression in the philosophers and in their mathematical sciences. In logic, such an attitude could amount to the logical fallacy of *ad verecundiam* or the inappropriate appeal to authority, as it associates

truth with people. The fact remains, however, that if a person is adept in a given science that does not necessarily make adept in other unrelated sciences just as his ignorance in a given discipline does not necessarily make him wrong in other disciplines:

Rather, every art has people who have obtained excellence and preeminence in it, even though stupidity and ignorance may characterize them in other arts. The arguments of the ancient philosophers in mathematics are demonstrative whereas those in metaphysics are conjectural.33

Neo-Platonist peripatetic philosophy was adapted to the Islamic thought by some prominent Muslim philosophers such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (428/1037). Some of the philosophical doctrines as taught in the writings of these philosophers are obviously at odds with the Islamic teachings. In his Tahāfut al-Falāṣīfah, al-Ghazālī engaged philosophers in a fierce intellectual debate over twenty doctrines of their teachings, seventeen of which he adjudged as heretical while he declared three as bordering the outright disbelief. These are: the assertion that the world is eternal; the denial of God's knowledge of particulars; and the denial of the bodily resurrection.34 He went on to demonstrate that none of the arguments to support these teachings fulfill the conditions and high epistemological standard of bərḥān,35 (apodeixis, demonstrative proof) that the philosophers themselves have set forth. According to him, the said philosophers merely rely upon unproven, dialectical premises that are conventionally accepted only among themselves.36 In the fourth introduction to his Tahāfut, he says:

We avoid the phraseology used by the mutakallimīn and the Jurists, adopting for the time being the terms used by the Logicians, so that the whole thing might be cast into a different mould, and the method of the logician may be followed in the


34 Al-Ghazālī, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, p. 230; Al-Munqidh, pp. 60–61.

35 The word “burḥān” is a Qur'ānic term used in philosophy to refer to apodeixis, demonstrative proof.

36 Al-Ghazālī, Al-Munqidh, p. 59.
In this book, we will speak to them in their language – I mean their logical terminology. We will make it plain that in their metaphysical sciences they have not been able to fulfill the claims laid out in the different parts of the logic and in the introduction to it, i.e. what they have set down in the *Kitab al-Burāḥān* on the conditions for the truth of the premises of a syllogism, and what they have set down in the *Kitab al-Qīyas* on the conditions of its figures, and the various things they posited in the “Isagoge” and the “Categories.”

The issue at stake here is epistemological and logical. Al-Ghazālī agreed with philosophers that demonstrative proof would lead to certainty while dialectical proof would fall short. He then contended that while the philosophers’ arguments in mathematics and, to a certain extent, some other natural sciences are demonstrative, their argument in metaphysics are dialectical and thus the philosophers differed among themselves more in the latter and less in the former. Bringing dialectical proof to deny the truth firmly established in revelation is like prioritising *zann* (conjecture) and *takhmūn* (speculation) over *tahqīq* (positive inquiry) and *yaqīn* (certainty). Relying on *zann* or *takhmūn* in places where *yaqīn* or *tahqīq* is required is a gross charade and miscarriage of intellectual integrity. On that ground, Al-Ghazālī faulted ancient philosophers for compromising their own principles in logic, charging the Muslim philosophers for practising *taqlīd*, in the sense that they merely repeated these teachings from the founders of their movement without critically examining them.

The logicality of the philosophers’ teachings in metaphysics is also questioned. According to Al-Ghazālī, these teachings are based on invalid...
arguments because their conclusions did not necessarily follow from their premises. Even on issues in which he concurred with philosophers, he still contended that philosophers were unable to set a demonstrative rational proof to show that heaven is an animal, a living being with soul: “their doctrine in this question is one of those views whose possibility is not to be denied, nor its impossibility claimed. While al- Ghazālī believed that it is more likely that heaven truly has a life, “for God is capable of creating life in every body,” he still insisted that the philosophers’ conclusion does not follow necessarily from the premises provided and thus their argument is a purely arbitrary assertion “tahakkum mahd” that has no support.

Drawing on the rational conceptual framework, al- Ghazālī exhibited the deficiency, contradiction and incoherence in the epistemological foundations of the philosophical inquiry into the metaphysical realm, in order to establish a legitimate space for revelation. It is then expected that the validity of religious assertions, as entrenched in revelation, should be recognized, especially in areas where demonstrative proofs are simply unattainable.

Reason and Revelation

The compatibility of reason and revelation forms the cornerstone of Ghazālī’s scheme of Islamic critical thinking. Muslim intellectuals generally believe that there could be no ‘real’ contradiction between reason and revelation as both are ultimately traced to the same source, Allah the Almighty. It is not plausible that revelation will establish or negate a fact which reason demonstratively holds to be otherwise; just as reason will not validate or deny a fact against that which is unequivocally stated in revelation.

42 In logic, invalid argument refers to “a deductive argument in which the conclusion does not follow necessarily from the premises – that is, a deductive argument in which it is possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.” See Greg Basham, et al., Critical Thinking, p. 83.
43 It should be noted that the issue here is not whether the teachings of the philosophers are true or not, but that it is based on irrelevant and thus illogical premises. Other than that, the Qur’an has testified that heavens and earth glorify Allah and obey His command (17:44; 41:11).
44 Al-Ghazālī, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, pp. 147–151.
45 Ibid., p. 3.
While al-Ghazālī was at odds with philosophers over their metaphysical teachings, he strongly defended the credibility of rational demonstrative proof, they prided themselves with. According to him, reason forms the basis of understanding revelation. Reason is like an eye and revelation is like the Sun both of which are interdependent and equally needed for one to see.47 He is convinced that Islamic teachings are established on both reason and revelation and that the result of demonstrative proof will be in conformity with revelation on the ground that truth cannot negate truth. On that account, he pronounced that “al-shar‘ ‘aqlun min al-khārij wa-al-‘aql shar‘un min ad-dakhil” (revelation is reason from without, and reason is revelation from within).48

However, Muslim scholars are divided on which to resort to when there is ‘apparent’ contradiction. Some, like Ibn Taymiyyah49 (d. 728/1328) and Ibn al-Qayyim50 (d. 751/1350) emphasized the primacy of revelation in the sense that reason should be brought to the apparent meaning of revelation. Others like Ibn Rushd51 (Averroes) (d. 595/1198) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razi52 (d. 606/1209), say that revelation should be interpreted in conformity with rational dictate. Al-Ghazālī’s position is closer to the second group. Essentially, to uphold the integrity and validity of the demonstrative proof, passages of revelation whose literal meaning is not in conformity with rational demonstrative proof must be interpreted allegorically through different levels of ta‘wil (allegory) that he outlined as ‘Canons of Ta‘wil’.53 Unless the demonstrative proof of reason is firmly recognised, the credibility of revelation will be at stake, “for it is by reason that we know scripture to be true.”54 Nevertheless, he believes that demonstrative proof cannot be established to validate or refute metaphysical realms, as that is the prerogative of revelation, the central argument between him and the philosophers.

54 Al-Ghazālī, Qānūn al-Ta‘wil, p. 21.
The Quest for Objectivity

Another distinctive characteristic central to al-Ghazālī’s critique is his passion for objectivity. In his Maqāsid al-Falāṣifah (the Aims of the Philosophers), which is a prelude to his Tahāfut al-Falāṣifah, al-Ghazālī gave an objective account of the philosophical teachings and their arguments in order to subsequently be able to refute them in his Tahāfut.⁵⁵ Knowing that he has nothing to gain in refuting weak arguments, which he deliberatively ignored,⁵⁶ he presented strong arguments of his adversaries as objectively as possible and even often, as Dūnyā observes, clearer in al-Ghazālī’s representations than in their original sources.⁵⁷

In addition, despite his sustained critique of philosophy, al-Ghazālī did not fail to recognise those burhān-based objective philosophical disciplines that do not hold anything opposed to Islam, such as mathematics and, most importantly, logic. According to al-Ghazālī, logic is a necessary prerequisite for any rational argument⁵⁸ and indeed for all theoretical sciences to the extent where he asserted that “the sciences of whoever did not incorporate it are unreliable.”⁵⁹ He considers logical fallacy where logical premises are compromised deliberately or otherwise as “a track of reasoning whence Satan often sneaks in” (madākhil al-shayṭān fī al-nazar) to mislead human minds. Once this track is heavily protected with good reasoning, Satan will have no way to penetrate.⁶⁰

Discrediting the veracity of such sciences established on demonstrative proof will lead those who appreciate demonstrative proof to the conclusion that Islam is founded on ignorance. Al-Ghazālī dubbed anyone who denies them as “sādīqun lil-islām jāhil” (an ignorant friend of Islam),⁶¹ whose behaviors do grave disservice to Islam:

The harm inflicted on religion by those who defend it not by its proper way is greater than the harm caused by those who attack it

⁵⁶ Al-Ghazālī, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, p. 13.
⁶¹ Al-Ghazālī, Al-Mungidh min al-Daʾīl, p. 57.
in the way proper to it. As it has been said:
"a rational foe is better than an ignorant friend."62

When charged with incorporating maxims of ancient philosophers, al-Ghazālī contended that much of their statements in political science and moral philosophy have been borrowed from the early prophets of God and from the Sufis respectively and that by adopting these words he was simply reclaiming and disentangling the lost truth. Even if these maxims are found exclusively from the writings of the philosophers, why should they be shunned when these words in themselves are rational, supported with convincing evidence and not in contradiction with the Qur'ān or Prophetic Sunnah?! Al-Ghazālī is convinced that if Muslims follow such a line of reasoning, and of rejecting every truth which by chanced may have been proclaimed first by their adversaries among the heretics, they will be denied many truths; and the mubtālūn (impostors) among the philosophers will then deny them the right to wisdom, stripping them of all good things by skilfully incorporating or mixing them in their works. To al-Ghazālī, the truth must be extracted even from the fool; and the proximity between truth and falsehood does not make truth false and falsehood true. Every word or science must be evaluated by virtue of its own merit irrespective of its protagonists or antagonists.63

Al-Ghazālī’s Legacy

Al-Ghazālī drew many admirers and critics from all branches of knowledge he wrote on. Among his immediate followers are Asa’d al-Mayhānī (d. 523/1130 or 527/1132–33) and ‘Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadhānī (d. 525/1131). According to al-Mayhānī, nobody will arrive at al-Ghazālī’s level of insights and his virtue unless he reaches—or at least almost reaches—intellectual perfection. Al-Hamadhānī therefore believed that al-Ghazālī belongs to a select group of few scholars firmly rooted in the knowledge of the outer as well as the inner meaning of the Qur’ān.64

Among his critics are Ibn Rushd and Ibn Taymiyyah. Ibn Rushd concurred with al-Ghazālī on the necessity of ta’wil of verses that do not

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62 Al-Ghazālī, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, p. 6.
63 Al-Ghazālī, Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl, pp. 64–65.
conform to demonstrative rational dictate. \(^65\) However, in his rebuttal work, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (Incoherence of the Incoherence), \(^66\) a book he wrote specifically to charge al-Ghazālī with the very logical fallacies and contradictions al-Ghazālī had earlier charged philosophers with, he considered al-Ghazālī as an amateur philosopher-cum-theologian whose arguments are mostly equally dialectical and not demonstrative. \(^67\) Ibn Taymiyyah confronted al-Ghazālī on multiple fronts on logic, Sufism and philosophy, charging him for unnecessarily blending the works of the prophets with those of the philosophers and explaining the former in the latter terms. For that he believes that al-Ghazālī was infected with the illness of Ibn Sinā’s *al-Shīla*. \(^68\)

Nevertheless, his scholarship was never seriously disputed. He constructed the ugliness of the philosophers’ aims, doctrines and their supporting arguments on metaphysics in his *Maqāsid al-Falāsifah*, deconstructed the bad of their arguments in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* and reconstructed the Islamic alternatives in *Qawā'id al-aqā'id of Iḥyā' Ulūm al-Dīn*. \(^69\) With al-Ghazālī, Sufism is no longer an irrational fantasy into the metaphysical world; similarly, there is no way forward for Sufi without passing through and remaining observant of religious duties as expounded in fiqh. Also, as al-Qaradāwī puts it, “al-Ghazālī taught Sufism to *fiqh* and *fiqh* to Sufism,” \(^70\) connecting *kālām* with Sufism and *fiqh*, relating philosophy with religion and bringing them all into closer contact for mutual recognition. The breadth and depth of his inquiry, the methodology he employed, the objectivity he exhibited and the arguments he advanced for or against the sciences he studied, coupled with his analytical mind to simplify the complexities in a grand scheme of Islamic intellectual and critical thinking, have left an enduring Ghazālīan mark in Islamic scholarship, earning him admiration from his supporters and respect from his critics.

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\(^70\) Y. al-Qaradāwī, *Al-Imām al-Ghazzālī bayna Mādhūn wa-Nāqūdīn*, p. 15.
Conclusion

Al-Ghazālī’s critical engagement with philosophers is not intended to undermine philosophy as an intellectual inquiry into the nature of things within its ambit, but was rather geared against that type of philosophical reasoning which claims to be autonomous, and sufficient enough to give a coherent answer to ultimate human concerns or to decipher all the mysteries and complexities of existence. Within the philosophical, rational conceptual framework, he demonstrated how such reasoning would eventually lead to self-annihilation, exhibiting the unbridgeable lacuna in the episteme of reason that could be filled only by revelation from God.

The standard of rationality is indispensable for any critical thinking, and for Islamic thought to be critical it has to be rational. Revelation as a source of knowledge is another standard that qualifies a critical thinking to be Islamic. Revelation establishes values many of which are ‘rational’ and some are not ‘irrational’, in the sense that they are not necessarily contradictory to reason, but simply beyond the ambit of human rationality. The process of recognition is not top-down – where revelation imposed itself or is imposed on reason – but rather bottom-up where reason realizes something ‘real’ that is transcendental. It is here where al-Ghazālī placed revelation. To coherently integrate both reason and revelation has been the landscape of al-Ghazālī’s critique. While it is possible to chart another line of Islamic critical thinking as done by Ibn Taymiyyah, for example, there is no doubt that al-Ghazālī drew on epistemology and values which are characteristically Islamic.

Critical thinking need not tread on atheistic, heretical or secular trajectories and religiosity is not synonymous with dogmatism, fanaticism or close-mindedness. As shown in this study, critical thinking is a disciplined intellectual reasoning containing shared, universal values that cut across generations, cultures and religions. People of sound reasoning would have much to appreciate therein, though they may equally have few to disagree with.