MOVING IN MYSTICAL WAYS: THE DIALECTIC OF AL-GHAZALI AND IBN RUSHD IN ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY

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Epistemology, or the study of how knowledge is formed, played a foundational role in early Islamic intellectual life. Medieval Muslim scholars and theologians often took opposing stances in heated debates around epistemic questions concerning the nature of knowledge, rationality, and faith. Some of these scholars were inspired by classical Greek philosophers, while others wished to denounce the actions of all philosophers as unsuitable and impious. By holding contradictory positions, two Muslim scholars – namely al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd – established a dialectic structure that can be seen as a productive framework for philosophical advancement in the Islamic world and one which became influential on many philosophers to come.

Epistemology is generally described as the theory of knowledge and, as such, can be understood as the study of how knowledge is formed, namely, what it is possible to have knowledge of and, to some extent, what knowledge is "real" or valid. In early Islamic intellectual life, epistemic exploration was equally foundational to theology and philosophy because of questions central to both: what can we know of God, where does knowledge come from, and how does a Muslim determine, with certainty, what they know. In addition, what kind of knowledge is paramount. Clearly the Quranic revelation is of singular importance, but are recorded traditions (*hadith*) or the chain of transmitters (*isnād*) to be trusted?[1] Or can rational knowledge, acquired through one's intellectual ability, be considered a true and moral source?[2] These epistemic questions presented a particular thorn in the side

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[1] Andrew Rippin and Teresa Bernheimer, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 5th ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), 47-48.
[2] One *ayāh* that refers to the gift of knowledge specifically is 58:11, from the *surah al-mujadila* (which imparts many social protocols): "…Allah will raise up those of you who believe and who

of medieval Muslim thinkers and scholars, as some were inspired by classical Greek philosophers and others wished to denounce the actions of philosophers as unsuitable and impious. By holding contradictory positions, two medieval Muslim scholars – namely al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd – established a dialectic structure that can be seen as a productive framework for philosophical advancement in the Islamic world and became influential on many philosophers to come.

While classical philosophy in the Islamic world largely grew out of scholarly study and response to Aristotelian texts, named *falsafa* in Arabic, its roots are also found in original Arabic texts, such as theological works and the mystical explorations of Sufism.[3] Certainly, much of the *falsafa* tradition can be traced to the cultural enrichment that took place within the empire-building expansion of Islamic conquest. As the Arab conquests expanded the Islamic world throughout the 7th to 9th centuries, settling Muslim populations in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Persia and beyond, Muslim scholars' interaction with other cultures and ideas increasingly influenced the direction of their intellectual projects and philosophical inquiry.[4] An extensive translation movement was established in Baghdad,[5] supported by the patronage of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833).[6] Rendering foreign texts into Arabic made accessible a library of ancient literature on diverse subjects such as mathematics, medicine, and philosophy.[7] Muslim theology and *falsafa* was irrevocably changed by exposure to newly available works of Greek logic and philosophy, as Islamic scholars utilized the back-and-forth method of rational dialectic, termed *kalām*, to discuss theological puzzles, develop ideas, and pose questions that had gone unvoiced before now.[8] A group of theologians named the Mu'tazila became well known for using this style of argumentation and relying on the Greek philosophical assumption that human reason is a reliable source of knowledge; this could be seen roughly as a beginning for Islamic epistemology.[9] Certain Mu'tazilite doctrines were especially controversial and divisive, such as "the createdness" of the Qur'ān, God's "unity", as well as the primacy of human reasoning, free will, and responsibility.[10] The Mu'tazilites believed that since the human faculty of reason can make moral judgements, and it would be unjust of God

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have been granted (mystic) Knowledge." There are similarly numerous hadiths which credit the Prophet with extolling the benefits of seeking knowledge to Believers.

[3] Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3, no. 445.

[4] Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1405: The Making of a Civilization* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 127-128.

[5] Specifically, the translation movement was initiated by Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775) as he founded Baghdad and was continued by his son al-Mahdī (r. 775-785).

[6] Najib G. Awad, "Creatio Ex Philosophia: Kalām as Cultural Evolution and Identity-Formation Means in the Early Abbasid Era," *Muslim World* 109, no. 4 (October 2019): 510.

[7] Egger, 89, 128-129.

[8] Rippin and Bernheimer, 75.

[9] Egger, 134.

[10] Egger, 117; Adamson, 6-7.

to punish people for deeds they were constrained to do (and God is presumed 'just'), human beings must be free to act either morally or immorally.[11] Like many Muslim scholars, Mu'tazilite philosophers (*falasifahs*) al-Fārāabī (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (d. 1037) adapted Neoplatonic arguments and Aristotle's deductive methods to suit an Islamic context, promoting human reason and empiricism as a source of objective knowledge – a major point of contention for critics.[12] One such traditionalist, al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) was a respected jurist, polymath, and Sufi thinker; he pushed back against the discipline of *falsafa* in his masterwork, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* [*Tahafat al-Falasifah*].[13]

Abū Hāmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī was born around 1058 CE in Tabarān-Tūs, Iran and studied Ash'arite theology in Nishapur, and became a celebrated scholar and teacher at the caliphal courts in Isfahan and Baghdad. [14] As described in his autobiographical work, *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazālī left his esteemed position in Baghdad in 1095 after suffering a crisis of confidence. He became convinced his life was a "thicket of attachments" and unacceptably motivated by the desire for acclaim and "public recognition", which led him to doubt 'worldly' and empirical ways of knowing.[15] This reveals his deep preoccupation with moral and devotional use of knowledge; as Joseph Lumbard articulates, for al-Ghazāl" īwhat we *do* with the knowledge [is key], the knowledge is no good unless we actually use it to better ourselves".[16] Discarding the trappings of prestige, he made pilgrimages to Damascus, Jerusalem, and Mecca seeking a "strong, intellectual faith" through the mystical-experiential knowledge he had studied in Sufi texts.[17] Al-Ghazālī subsequently returned to Tūs a transformed man and opened a small Sufi lodge/school (*zawiya*) where he taught until his death in 1111 CE.[18]

Epistemological scepticism, i.e. questioning the means of acquiring knowledge, was a primary facet of al-Ghazāl'īs theological investigations. With *Tahafat al-Falasifah*, he set out to refute the Aristotelian *falasifahs* by showing that there were natural and ascribed limits to reason. For instance, humans should not conjecture anything that might govern or curtail God's actions and abilities, as God is

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[11]Adamson, 6.
[12]Egger, 135-136.
[13]Frank Griffel, "al-Ghazālī," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last revised September 22, 2014, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/al-ghazali/.
[14]Griffel.
[15]Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error" in *Philosophical Questions: East and West*, ed. Bina Gupta and J. N. Mohanty (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 130-31; Joseph Lumbard, "Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī and *The Art of Knowing*," YouTube video, 34:38, June 16, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5MS2YsqCO8.
[16]Lumbard, 0:40-0:52.
[17]Griffel; al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error," 135.
[18]Griffel.

omnipotent,[19] and, moral knowledge is inherent and divinely inspired, thus the most important kinds of knowledge are unattainable "by observation".[20] Ultimately, al-Ghazālī meant to dismantle the philosophical systems of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sina, cast doubt on theories which opposed doctrinal religious teachings, and disillusion those who regarded the philosophers as infallible.[21] Although al-Ghazālī expressed disgust with philosophers and their 'superior approach', ironically, he had no qualms using similar, rational methods to make his arguments against philosophical knowledge.[22] In essence, al-Ghazālī can be read as nonpartisan: he deconstructs religious orthodoxy, criticizing theologians for their "excessive reliance on authority and tradition,"[23] while arguing that philosophy's main fault is an illegitimate use of logic, such as its application in religious problems, considered by some theologians to be *bila kayf* (i.e., conundrums better left "without asking/ knowing how").[24] Perhaps, as Albertini asserts, this is due to the epistemic tenet that knowledge is formed in an "individual mind seeking truth," and not through quoting authoritative texts ad infinitum – revealing al-Ghazāl'īs mystical tendencies concerning what is knowable.[25]

Many of the major theological/ epistemological debates al-Ghazālī grappled with were picked up by subsequent Islamic philosophers, and centuries later, by Western philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Hume.[26] One vocal opponent was Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), Latinized as Averroes, who sought to reconcile religious doctrines with rational, Aristotelian formulations in defense of philosophy in Islamic society.[27] His dialectic response to al-Ghazāl'īs *Tahafat*, named *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, tackled all of the great premises, refuting the eternal nature of the world, the divine limits of cause and effect, and a literal reading of 'Miracle stories' in the Qur'an.[28] Ibn Rushd took the stance that epistemic inquiry is advocated by the Qur'an and thus the search for knowledge, i.e.

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[19]Adamson, 42.
[20]Al-Ghazālī, "Deliverance from Error," 134.
[21]Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī, *Tahafut al-Falasifah [Incoherence of the Philosopher]*, trans. Sabih A. Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963), 8, http://ghazali.org/works/taf-eng.pdf; Avital Wohlman and David B. Burrell, Al-Ghazālī, Averroës and the Interpretation of the Qur'an: Common Sense and Philosophy in Islam (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 23.
[22]Egger, 204.
[23]Tamara Albertini, "Crisis and Certainty of Knowledge in Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) and Descartes (1596-1650)," *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 1 (January 2005), 3.
[24]Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley, 2013), 24.
[25]Albertini, 3.
[26]Edward O. Moad, "Al-Ghazālī on Power, Causation, and 'Acquisition,'" *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 1 (January 2007): 8; Edward O. Moad, "Between Divine Simplicity and the Eternity of the World: Ghazālī on the Necessity of the Necessary Existent in the Incoherence of the Philosophers," *Philosophy and Theology* 27, no. 1 (2015): 55.
[27]Egger, 203.
[28]Leaman, 31-45; Isra Yazicioglu, "Redefining the Miraculous: Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd and Said Nursi on Qur'anic Miracle Stories," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13, no. 2 (October 2011): 92.

philosophy, should be a Muslim duty; whether a person attained specialized knowledge would be determined by their God-given abilities. [29]

Both, al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd, wrote in response to predecessors adding unique perspectives on theological and epistemic questions and provided a fruitful legacy for dialectical discussion. These remarkable minds were frequently using the same tools to come to different conclusions, as they worked through fundamental yet esoteric problems. Ibn Rushd saw the intellect, and thus philosophy, as a divine gift sanctioned for thoughtful, deductive processes. Al-Ghazālī felt that acquiring (mystical) knowledge happened through mysterious means: God was sole author of the "light cast into his heart," curing and dispelling intellectual doubt within him.[30] Rather than truly being at cross-purposes, these keen intellects transmuted their opposition and disagreement into fertile and common ground.

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[29]Adamson, 39.

[30]Adamson, 42. In al-Ghazālī's own words: "At length God cured me of the malady; my being was restored to health and an even balance; the necessary truths of the intellect became once more accepted, as I regained confidence in their certain and trustworthy character. This did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast." Al-Ghazālī, *"Deliverance from Error,"* 3.

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