DENIAL AND SKEPTICISM
IN AL-GHAZALI'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract;
This paper presents an elaboration on Al-Ghazali's intellectual and spiritual struggle in searching for certitude to establish secure basis for his theory of knowledge. The elaboration starts with introducing Al-Ghazali's definition and classification of knowledge, discussing the important of both sacred and profane knowledge as he categorizes of them into personal and collective obligations, and develop into presenting his schema of knowledge. Further discussion then focuses on essential staging in his intellectual and spiritual inquiry to reach the final stage of a personal testimony of doubtless true knowledge. Initiated with a total denial of knowledge to abolish uncertainty to its fullest extent, his struggle then proceeded to the level of extreme skepticism proceeding establishment of his fundamental theory of knowledge.

Keywords: *Denial – Skepticism – Knowledge*

Introduction

It needs simply a glance at al- Ghazali's career to see that the issue of knowledge was of the utmost concern to his intellectual and spiritual life. The fact that he had to experience a period of crisis, struggling to establish a secure basis for his theory of knowledge, shows how seriously he regarded the problem (far more so, in fact, than any other Muslim scholar who has written on epistemology). This says a great deal, given the importance of the issue to the development of Islamic thought.

Although al-Ghazali was not alone "in searching for experiential certainty in inner knowledge" as other Muslim thinkers such as al-Suhrawardi, Ibn Sina, and Abu al-Barakat also essentially deal with this theme of "self-awareness and its implications," the drama into which it brought on his life makes his quest exceptional. For al-Ghazali, the issue of knowledge is inseparable from the issue of belief in God. This clearly shows in his artful and sometimes persuasive writing on the deeper aspects of the issue. For the current purpose, however, our elaboration will focus mainly on his accounts on definitions and classifications of knowledge, denial of all knowledge, and skepticism.

II. Knowledge: Definitions and Classifications

Al-Ghazali's principal definitions of knowledge as classified by F. Rosenthal fall into at least four categories:

1. Knowledge as the "process of knowing," which is "identical with knower and the known," a notion that al- Ghazali expresses in such statements as: " Knowledge is the through which one knows" or "Knowledge is that through which the essence is knowing"

2. Knowledge as cognition or as he simply defines it: "knowledge is cognition"

3. Knowledge is faith, for he writes: "knowledge is the perception (tasawwur) of things through thorough understanding (tahaqquq) of quiddity and definition and apperception (tasdiq) with regard to them through pure, verified (muhaqqaq) certainity."

4. Knowledge as "remembrance" and "imagination" or as "an image, a vision, an opinion "which he demonstrates in such assertion as: "knowledge is an image that conforms to the object known, like a picture (surah) or sculpture (naqsh), which is the image of the thing."

In addition to his various definition of knowledge, al-Ghazali delineates as well some divisions of knowledge. In his "Book of knowledge" in the *Ihya*, he opens the issue by distinguishing knowledge, from the point of view of what man is obliged to know, into knowledge, or science, of individual obligation (*fard ayn*) and that of collective obligation (*fard kifayah*). These two categories of knowledge may be further subdivided as well. Under the heading of individual obligation, and in harmony with legal or technical concepts, al-Ghazali includes knowledge of the foundations of Islam and other fundamental religious practices such as beliefs, works, and prohibition. Further of explanation of various individual condition related to the issue is presented as well using a very legal vocabulary. The obligations and prohibitions, according to al-Ghazali, will be different for individuals based on whether they may be classified as adult or minor, sane or insane, sound of body or suffering from certain physical disabilities such as blindness, deafness, or the like. He also state that this knowledge of personal obligation is necessary only when the time for a particular obligation is at hand. For example, knowledge of fasting is necessary when midday arrives..

Al-Ghazali also particularly mentions the knowledge of "beliefs and actions of the heart" as part of the knowledge of individual obligation. However, as with aforementioned, this type of knowledge is also accompanied by certain conditions. He explains that if a person experiences some doubt concerning his faith, either naturally or due to some outside influences, he is obliged to seek knowledge which can dispel this doubt

As for the knowledge of collective obligations, al-Ghazali first devides the subject into "sacred "(*shr'iya*) and "profane" (*ghayr shar'iya*) sciences. Moreover, these two divisions are further subdivided into "praiseworthy"(*mahmud*)and "blameworthy" (*madhmum*), and " permissive" (*mubah*). All the sacred sciences, understood to have been acquired from the Prophet, are considered praiseworthy. In further discussion however, al-Ghazali warns people not to be distracted by sciences which might appear

praiseworthy.

For the profane or the secular sciences, he classifies some branches as being praiseworthy "are those whose knowledge the activities of this life depend such as medicine or arithmetic, "science medicine" is necessary for the life of the body" while arithmetic is necessary for "daily transaction and division of legacies and heritance." The blameworthy sciences he defines as magic, talismanic science, juggling, or trickery.

Some branches of philosophy, since philosophy itself does not stand alone as a single branch of knowledge, are classified differently according ton their function and involvement, Arithmetic, for instance,, is considered permissible or even praiseworthy when it is related to the necessities of the daily life, as mentioned before. Nevertheless, al-Ghazali again warns people against this science which may lead them into blameworthy acts because of the innovations which are routine practice in this field.

The tendency of classifying knowledge was not a new trend in al-Ghazali's era for it often appeared in the views of earlier Muslim thinkers. Like other traditional philosophers, Abu Ali al-Husain Ibn Sina (d.429/1037), for instance, shows deep consideration for the classification of sciences corresponding to his view of a "hierarchy of knowledge." Based on this ground of thought, Ibn Sina even made efforts to integrate different types of sciences and ways of attaining knowledge into his extensive formulation. At this point, Ibn Sina shows an open possibility of various methods regarding his epistemological concept, as Sayyed Hosein Nasr recalls: "he used not on but many methods to gain knowledge, ranging from intellectual intuition and illumination to ratiocination, observation, and even experimentation."

The same trend can even be seen in the field of Mysticism. For example, al-Qusyairi (d. 465/1073) categorized sciences into three branches: the science of the philosophers, thinkers or sages, (*arbab al-'Uqul*), the science of religious scholars, and the science of the mystics (*arbab al-ma'arif*). Together with this, he asserts a parallel classification for these three branches of science. He classifies the first branch as the science of certitude (*'ilm al-yaqin*), the second as the essence of certitude (*'ayn al-yaqin*), and the third as the truth of certitude (*haqq al-yaqin*).

A classification of knowledge which implies a somewhat similar hierarchy to Qusyairi's arrangement can also be found in the schematic view of al-Ghazali's division of knowledge, as presented by Lazarus Yafeh:

Knowledge (*al-'ilm*):

Intellectual knowledge   Religious

('*Ulum 'aqliyah*)   ('*Ulum shar'iya diniyah*)

Necessary knowledge: Acquired knowledge
('*Ulum daruriyah*)   ('*Ulum muktasaba*)

Worldly knowledge   Heavenly knowledge
('*Ulum dunyawiyah*)   ('*Ulum Ukhrawiyah*)

Knowledge of the heart   Knowledge of God
('*Ilum ahwal al-hal*)   the Most High,
Of His Attribute
and His Works
('*Ilm al-mukasyafa*)

He asserts these divisions in both the *Ihya'* and the *Munqidh*, which means that he maintained, if not established, the theory upon finding certitude after passing through his spiritual crisis. We will therefore refer to this scheme, due to its clarity and simplicity, in our further discussion of al-Ghazali's epistemology.

III. Denial of all knowledge

What prompted al-Ghazali's questioning of the reliability of his personal knowledge in particular and of his theory of knowledge in general was his adoption of the Neoplatonic notion that true knowledge is supposed to be completely trustworthy, that is, fre from any possibility of doubt. To attain such degree of knowledge, the basis or the sources of knowledge being sought must consequently be solid and proven reliable. This recognition made him realize the inherent weakness of the sources of his knowledge. He writes:

It was plain to me that sure and certain knowledge is that knowledge in which the object is disclosed in such a fashion that no doubt remains along with it, that no possibility of error or illusion accompanies it, and that the

mind cannot even entertain such a supposition. Certain knowledge must also be infallible; and this infallibility or security from error is such that no attempt is made by someone who turns stones into gold or a rod into a serpent… Thereupon I investigated the various kinds of knowledge I had, and found myself destitute of all knowledge with characteristic of infallibility…

This realization allowed al-Ghazali to see that his own knowledge was derived through blind acceptance (*taqlid*), which then becomes the first approach he criticized. Even though later on he does allow or even oblige the application of *taqlid* for certain people when dealing with a higher level of knowledge, or more precisely the level of true vision of things divine. At this point the issue of *taqlid* is inseparable from the issue of different degrees of belief. Therefore, his criticism here means more to the application of the method in his personal case.

Al-Ghazali describes his abandonment of *taqlid* as "breaking the glass of his naïve belief," which, once shattered, cannot be repaired by patching." What must be done to restore the belief is that "the glass must be melted once again in the furnace for a new start, and out of it another fresh vessel formed." Thereupon he begins to deny all the beliefs that he has previously held, except those concerning the three fundamental religious beliefs: God, Prophecy, and the Last Judgment, which are too deeply rooted in him to be shaken altogether." Other than these, the only beliefs that he retained were those of sense perception and necessary or *a priory* truths, which tell us that "ten is more than three," that a thing cannot both exist and not exist at the same time, nor be "necessary and impossible simultaneously."

However, his preservation of self-evident knowledge did not free him from suspecting its reliability. After observation he realized how sense perception is just well unreliable and even deceitful. An ordinary example is the misleading nature of sight, for it is a property of the naked eye to see things smaller at a distance or to be unable to detect motion at extremely fast speeds.

This fact not only shook but also destroyed his confidence in sense perception. Furthermore, once he found he could no longer rely on sense perception, he began to scrutinize the reliability of necessary truth as well. By comparing this case to that of dreams, which are believed to be reality while one is asleep but which then vanish as soon as the person wakes up, he suggests that there might be another reality behind this reality of awakening. He writes, "The fact that such a supra-natural apprehension has not manifested itself is no proof that it is impossible."

This loss of reliance on self-evident knowledge shook al-Ghazali's mental state so severely that it affected his physical condition as well. It was at this point that he entered the phase of skepticism, where he underwent a period of both intellectual and physical crisis which lasted for about months.

During this period he found himself helpless, for it seemed That there was no way of ever regaining certainty about anything because his trust in the necessary truth as the root of demonstration had vanished It was not until after

God cured the "malady" that he could regain confidence in believing in the necessary truth again. He says, "this did not come about by systematic or marshaled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast."

In the later positions of his autobiography al-Ghazali even admits that his faith was restored on the basis of certain other sources of knowledge he had previously denied. This is pointe out by E.L. Ormsby who sees in al-Ghazali's account of this process a construction of "artful correspondences." He writes:

> … dreams misled, but later are seen co contain prophetic knowledge; the intellect could err, but later discovers its proper unerring function in the provision of demonstration. The senses transfigured by the truth stand revealed as the most trustworthy instruments of perception. The fact that nothing is what it seems to be inspired panic and confusion in his skeptical state, but in his converted state, this same fact stands as a guarantor of the possibility of transcendent knowledge.

A point to be considered here is that the main theme of this denial together with the crisis and its cure, constitutes the primary discussion in the central issue of epistemology. His bewilderment during his uncertainty and insecurity as to the data of sense perception was a process of setting his position on the issue of the nature of knowledge, which is the issue of appearance versus reality." His reappreciation, albeit with certain modifications, of the authorization of sense perception, as well as of the intellect, and even his affirmation of his experience of intuitional knowledge when God shone light into his heart, functions as a deliberate means of building a foundation for reliable sources of knowledge in his concept of epistemology. This in a sense is "the courage to know and the courage to doubt" combined.

A parallel procedure is adopted later by Rene Descartes (d.1650), who illustrates the problem as follows:

> Suppose he had a basket full of apples and, being worried that some of the apples were rotten, want to take out the rotten ones to prevent the rot spreading. How would he proceed? Would he not begin by tipping the whole lot out of the basket? And would not the next step be to cast his eye over each apple in turn, and pick up and put back in the basket only those he saw to be sound, leaving the others?... Now the best way they can accomplish this is to reject all their beliefs together in one go, as if they were all uncertain and false. They can then go over each belief in turn and re-adopt only those which they recognize to be true and indubitable. Thus I was right to begin by rejecting all my beliefs.

IV. Skepticism

It is mentioned before that skepticism was a very important stage in the re-establishment of al-Ghazali's fundamental theory of knowledge; therefore, it seems worthy to look at some ancient traces of this system of thought. The term is derived from the Greek word *skepsis* whish originally meant "consideration"

or "doubt." In the field of philosophy it was then defined as "the view that reason has no capacity to come to any conclusions at all, or else that reason is capable of nothing beyond very modest results."

Tendencies to skeptical thinking seem to begin in the pre-Socratic era. Heraclitus (c. 540-475) saying that "everything is in flux and that one can't step twice into the same river," for example, was an important lead to skepticism. This theory was then further elaborated by Cratylus (fl. 410 B.C) into a deeper skeptical thought, asserting that "since everything is changing, one can't step once into the same river, because both that river and oneself are changing." A serious tendency of skepticism was even prompted by Xenophanus (570-c. 470 B.C) in his proposition of questioning "the existence of any criterion of true knowledge," suggesting that one will not be able to distinguish f skeptical the truth, if he happened to come across it, from the error.A much more serious form of skeptical thought was represented by Gorgias, whose assertion we will come across later.

However, the figure that is recognized as the founder of the skeptical tradition or "the first to perfect the system and ethics of skepticism" is Phyrrho of Elis (c.360-270 B.C), who was as well regarded as an extreme skeptics then are often called Pyrrhonist, and their system is known as Pyrrhonism. Deriving some portions of proposition from Protagorean relativism, Pyrrho established a solid ground for his assertion *regarding* the relativity of all perceptions and opinion, asserting that "if sense and reason were deceptive singly, no truth could be expected from the two combination. Perception does not give us things as they are, but as they appear in accidental relations." Together with this he also states that "we must suspend all judgment, committing our selves to a non-committal silence concerning everything."

In the *Encyclopedia of Philisophy* the term skepticism is described as "a critical philosophical attitude" which "questions the reliability of the knowledge claims made by philosophers and others," and that "skeptics have organized their questioning into systematic sets of arguments aimed at raising doubt." Therefore skepticism may be considered as the negative response in any question related to the validity of knowledge.

Questions related to the validity of knowledge include: "Is the human mind capable of discovering or finding any genuine knowledge?" or "when or under what conditions is knowledge valid?" The two opposing schools of thought that propose contradictory answers to the questions are skepticism, which negates the possibility of knowledge, and positivism, which restricts knowledge to "the facts of objective experience" only.

Further discussion of skepticism comprises types or degrees of terminology. In the field of philosophy, there are at least three possible types suggested. The first, favored by Aristocrates, is "the attitude of suspending judgment and questioning all assumptions and conclusions so that each one will be forced to justify itself before the bar of critical analysis." The second, represented by the phenomenalism of Kant, is "the position that knowledge deals only with experience of phenomena, and that the mind of man is unable to know the source or ground of experience." The third, proposed by the Greek

Gorgias, asserts "that knowledge is impossible and the quest of truth is in vain."

Comparing these three degrees of skepticism to al-Ghazali's position as a skeptic, we can see that he can only be classed in the first or the second degree. It may even be that he was, as he in fact admits, naturally curious about the realty of everything since a very young age, which means that the nature of his skepticism from the beginning was a means of releasing the mind from blind acceptance and the like. In other words, the nature of skepticism is to propose intellectual criticism to prevent oneself from making an error in claiming truth.

Another factor excluding him from the third degree of skepticism is the reality that he never lost his faith in the three fundamental religious beliefs even during the period when he declares that he was suffering heavily from doubt. This shows that he was never so far advanced in his skepticism as to deny the existence of truth. His skepticism and denial genuinely relied on other truths. This is the type of skepticism which limits itself to "stimulating philosophical reflection," to warning people against being inattentive by saying: "Don't be too sure," "You may be wrong," or "Be tolerant and open-minded."

This spirit of toleration of various approaches to the truth is suggested in his *Munqidh* where he pictures different remedies for different particular, individual maladies regardless of the fact that he chooses for himself the path of "immediate, living experience" of the "metaphoric al taste" as only access to the deepest truth. To some extent though, al-Ghazali also appears close to favoring Gorgias' affirmation when he first asserts the incommunicability of the aforementioned taste of direct experience.

If such is the nature of al-Ghazal's skepticism, it an be said that in view of the fact that he was able to regain faith in the possibility of attaining knowledge, this method constituted a perfect bridge linking a negative response with a positive affirmation of validity. It is, in other words, a persuasive strategy that leads one to his concept of truth through step by step experience, rather than by merely offering cogent arguments.

Certain scholars, however, question the genuineness of the nature of al-Ghazali's skepticism, for "there had existed along history of skeptical thoughts within the Islamic world." One example related to this account is that of an earlier scholar, Salih Ibn Abd al-Quddus, who wrote a *Book of Doubts* (*Kitab al-Syuhuk*) which is so persuasive that "whoever reads it, doubts concerning what exists until he fancies that it does not exist, and concerning what does not exist until he fancies that it does exist."

Watt's explanation even proved that al-Ghazali's *Munqidh*, presented as an account of his procedure in searching for certitude which started with the confusion of his skeptical thought, "can not be accepted as an accurate chronological record of events." It is suggested that his period of skepticism "must have been preceded by some study of Philosophy" and its connections with skepticism.

V. Conclusion

The elaboration above, showing how earnestly he took the process of

denying all uncertainty in his life and how critically the period of skepticism he had to go through upon deciding a long journey to certitude, says a great deal of his personal attitude upon the matter. To some extent this pictures what Corbin illustrates as that he "confronted the problem of knowledge and of personal certitude to its fullest extent." His schematic composition of the *Munqidh* represents a perfect strategy leading to his attaining certainty of true knowledge which he, in Corbin's presentation, identifies as "the knowledge through which the known object is utterly disclosed (to the spirit), in such a manner that no doubt can exist with regard to it, and no error can tarnish it." It is referring to this method in his autobiography that Corbin writes: "when he speaks about true knowledge, what he says rings with the authenticity of personal testimony."