Al-Ghazālī's Epistemology. Abū Ḥāmid al-Gazālī (1056/7-1111 AD) was a Persian philosopher and a polymath born in the Khorasan region of Iran. Much of his philosophical writing concerned epistemological questions about the limits of human reason. In the contemporary West, he is best known for his philosophical treatise against the twenty dogmas of the Avicennian tradition in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers [Tahāfut al-falāsifa]* and his encounter with skepticism in the *Deliverance from Error [al-Munqidh min al-dalāl].*

1. Metaphilosophical views

Ghazālī is sometimes portrayed as an anti-philosophical thinker who ended the "Golden Age" of Islamic philosophy (Starr 2015). However, this characterization is deeply misguided. Firstly, after Ghazālī and under his influence, philosophy in Islamic lands went through an unprecedented period of productivity and flourishing until at least the 18th century (Wisnovsky 2004; Griffel 2021). Second, Western historians' portrayal of Ghazālī as anti-philosophical often results from a simple but common mistake of identifying the term "*Falsafa*" with philosophy. While it is true that Ghazālī extensively argues against Falsafa in his writings and many other medieval Arabic and Persian texts after him, the term "Falsafa" refers exclusively to a family of Avicennian doctrines and methods (Griffel 2021, chap. 2). Ghazālī was received as a staunch defender of 'Hikmah,' which literally means 'wisdom,' but it colloquially refers to philosophy understood as a field of inquiry, not strictly constrained by Avicennian methodology.

Accordingly, Ghazālī's disagreement with *Falsafa* is metaphilosophical. In particular, he argues extensively against what he took to be the epistemological assumptions of Avicennism about the nature of philosophical knowledge. Broadly speaking, his criticism of Avicennism is a criticism of philosophical rationalism, i.e., the view that fundamental philosophical questions can be answered by rational reflection alone. By contrast, he holds that philosophical insight can be gained only if rational reflection is accompanied by a type of experiential knowledge distinct from ordinary first-hand sensory experiences of the material world (see section 3).

Ghazālī's arguments against *Falsafa* often involve an immanent critique. He starts by assuming that foundational knowledge requires the highest form of certainty. Following Al-Fārābī (870-950 AD), one of the central figures in the Falsafa tradition, Ghazālī suggests that rational certainty requires demonstrative proof of the impossibility of doubt (Al-Ghazālī 2016, 217; 2006, 20; for a summary of Al-Fārābī's view on certainty see Black 2006). He notes that, for the most part, Avicennians can successfully meet this standard of certainty in logic and mathematics (see section 3 for a caveat). However, they overplay their hand when they extend the same methods to answer substantive metaphysical and philosophical questions. He offers several arguments for this claim.

First, Ghazālī argues that pervasive disagreement is a sign of uncertainty. As he sees it, while there is no pervasive disagreement in logic or mathematics, metaphysics is filled with ongoing controversies. He writes:

> Had their metaphysical sciences been as perfect in demonstration, free from conjecture, as their mathematical, they would not have disagreed among themselves regarding [the former], just as they have not disagreed in their mathematical sciences. (2002, 4; also see 2006, 35)

In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he supplements this argument from disagreement with a detailed analysis of arguments in favor of and against some fundamental metaphysical doctrines. He analyzes twenty dogmas of Avicennism and purports to show that arguments against these doctrines are at least as strong as arguments in their favor. For Ghazālī, the main epistemological takeaway is that with

rationalist methods alone, we would not be able to prove fundamental metaphysical theses with certainty because for every persuasive argument for, e.g., the pre-eternity of the world, there are persuasive arguments against it as well. In other words, he tries to show that the disagreements among the proponents of Falsafa are not accidental but stem from a deep feature of the tradition. He insists that his purpose in writing the *Incoherence* is not to falsify any specific Avicennian thesis, but to "reveal" an incoherence" in their philosophical enterprise (2002, 46). The incoherence in question is then methodological in that, on the one hand, Avicennian philosophers demand an extremely high bar of certainty for every premise of their sciences, and on the other hand, they cannot prove the impossibility of doubting their fundamental commitments (Al-Ghazālī 2002, 9; Griffel 2005).

Finally, Ghazālī offers a deeper diagnosis. He argues that Falsafa is methodologically flawed because it designates the role of securing an absolutely certain foundation for knowledge to the faculty of reason, but reason cannot deliver the goods. To see how this argument works and what his alternative proposal looks like, it would be helpful to look at his skeptical argument in his autobiography.

2. Encounter with skepticism

Ghazālī's *Deliverance from Error* is an intellectual autobiography summarizing some of his main epistemological views. In the Western tradition, the work is often celebrated because of the remarkable similarities between its skeptical arguments and Descartes' arguments in the *Discourse on Method (1637)* and *the Meditations on First Philosophy (1641)* (Najm 1966; Götz 2003; Moad 2009; Parvizian 2020; C.f. Kukkonen 2009; 2016; Hadisi 2022). Here, I will focus on Ghazālī's original argument.

Ghazālī's initial skeptical episode starts when he notes that most of his beliefs have been accepted "through mere conformism *[taqlīd]* to parents and teachers" (2006, 19–20). He thus wants to rid himself of "uncritical beliefs, the beginning of which are suggestions imposed from without" (2006, 20). Thus, Ghazālī's skeptical crisis starts because he requires internal access to the justification behind his beliefs. In addition to this internalist assumption, Ghazālī accepts two further assumptions about the nature of certainty and the sources of knowledge. He holds that a combination of these three assumptions results in radical doubt.

First, he demands that at least the foundations of his beliefs must be immune from doubt. As we saw, this is based on a strong conception of certainty. Ghazālī claims that rational certainty requires positive proof that it is impossible to doubt the belief in question (2006, 20, 22). Second, he accepts the assumption that the primary sources of knowledge are reason and sensibility. That is, other cognitive faculties (e.g., imagination) depend on the deliverances of sensibility and reason. Hence, if reason and sensibility are not immune from doubt, then no other belief will be immune from doubt (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 21). As we will see, he will revise both assumptions in his response to skepticism.

From here, the argument for radical doubt takes three steps. First, he offers an Argument from Illusion, which casts doubt on all perceptual beliefs. He notes that perceptual experiences can conflict with one another or with one's other beliefs (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 21). For example, he considers the case of an object that is moving very slowly such that its motion is not detectable by us in short periods. In one instance, we see the object as motionless, but later, we observe that it has moved. Ghazālī holds that as far as perception goes, these two experiences are on par (i.e., the experience as of a motionless object and the experience as of a moving object). He contends that we can decide which experience is misguiding us only by rational reflection. After discussing several examples, he concludes:

> In the case of this and of similar instances of sense-data, the sense-judge makes its judgments, but the reason-judge refutes it and repeatedly gives it the lie in an incontrovertible fashion. (2006, 21)

For Ghazālī, this suggests that beliefs based on sensation alone cannot secure the foundation for certain knowledge. Put differently, without the faculty of reason to sift through perceptual experiences and identify possible illusions and conflicts, we would not have any way of proving the impossibility of doubting a given perceptual experience. Hence, the certainty of any given perceptual belief depends on the operations of the faculty of reason. Reason is thus a more fundamental or "higher" cognitive faculty (For a detailed analysis of Ghazālī's cognitive psychology and its debt to Avicenna, see Treiger (2012)).

Consequently, Ghazālī inquires to see if reason is immune from doubt. He notes that certain "primary truths" of reason seem indubitable. He cites the necessary truths of mathematics, logic, and metaphysics as instances of the primary truths of reason (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 22). Can we prove the impossibility of doubting these rational primary truths?

First, Ghazālī initiates a challenge: he notes that both in dreams, as well as in imaginatively "concentrated" or immersive experiences of, e.g., the Sufis, we can "see phenomena which are not in accord with the normal data of reason" (2006, 22–23). The basic idea seem to be that immersive and concentrated episodes of imagining could violate some mathematical, metaphysical, or even logical constraints. For example, consider someone who dreams that they are simultaneously in Tucson and Chicago; or, someone who immerses in thinking about a time travel story. Ghazālī takes it for granted that we are aware of the possibility of such experiences. He goes as far as saying that God gives us fanciful dreams to acquaint us with the possibility of these experiences (Al-Ghazālī 2016, 141). Our awareness of these possible experiences, he notes, has epistemological implications. Can we use our reason to prove the impossibility of doubting the data of reason against the data of these experiences?

Ghazālī answers negatively, and this is the final step of his skeptical argument. We can reconstruct his argument as follows (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 23):

1. Any rational proof must presuppose the truths of some "primary truths of reason."
2. Therefore, any rational proof for the impossibility of doubting the primary truths of reason must presuppose the truths of some primary truths of reason.
3. Therefore, on pain of circularity, we cannot give rational proof for the impossibility of doubting the primary truths of reason.

The crucial first premise of this argument alludes to the Avicennian thesis that before forming any assent, some basic rational concepts must be presupposed (Avicenna 2010, 3; Black 1990, 74). The second premise employs the strong assumption about "rational certainty" that we outlined above. In short, the argument purports to show that reason can prove its basic assumptions only by begging the question, but by reason's own light that is not an admissible method of proof.

Ghazālī concludes that like sensibility, reason is not immune from doubt. That is so because reason cannot deflect the challenge that is raised by immersive imaginative experiences which seem to have nonrational structures. But given the assumption that reason and sensation are the only primary sources of knowledge, it would follow that none of our beliefs are truly immune from doubt. This results in a state of radical doubt.

3. Ghazālī's positive proposal

Ghazālī's response to skepticism is sometimes portrayed as mere fideism (Wilson 1996, 1820). Ghazālī writes:

> At length God Most High cured me of that sickness. My soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument.

> On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 23)

However, despite the initial appearance, God's "light" which he identifies as "the key to most knowledge" is for Ghazālī a technical term that he expounds in the later pages of the *Deliverance* as well as his other writings (Al-Ghazālī 1998; 2016). First, the "light" does not seem to refer to just a particular act of grace from God for Ghazālī. Immediately after the above passage, he notes that God has "sprinkled" this light on every soul (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 23). It thus refers to a general psychological feature that is available to all.

Second, later in the *Deliverance,* Ghazālī returns to the theme of light which "is the key to most knowledge" and identifies it with the insights of Sufism. After ten years of Sufi meditation, he notes:

> I *knew with certainty* that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way of God Most High, their mode of life is the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethics the purest. Indeed, were one to combine the insight of the intellectuals, the wisdom of the wise, and the lore of scholars versed in the mysterious revelation in order to change a single item of Sufi conduct and ethic and to replace it with something better, *no way to do so would be found!* For all their motions and quiescences, exterior and interior, are learned from *the light of the niche of prophecy. And beyond the light of prophecy there is no light on earth from which illumination can be obtained.* (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 57; emphasis added)

He thus seems to identify Sufi knowledge with a knowledge that is absolutely certain. Moreover, he claims that this knowledge corresponds to the light beyond which there is no source of illumination. He thus thinks that this knowledge is the secure foundation of all other types of knowledge. But, first, does Ghazālī mean that one can "prove" the impossibility of doubting the Sufi knowledge? Otherwise, how can he claim this level of certainty? Second, in what sense does the Sufi knowledge ground other parts of knowledge, e.g., in mathematics or metaphysics?

In response to the first question, it is helpful to look at Ghazālī's magnum opus, the *Revival of Religious Sciences [Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn],* where he identifies the conception of certitude as providing rational proof for the impossibility of doubt as belonging to the "proponents of speculation" (2016, 216; Ranaee 2024). By contrast, he introduces the conception of certitude as employed by "the jurists, the people of the Sufi path, and the majority of scholars" which he identifies with a kind of lived experience of certainty: "it involves the manner in which this knowledge overwhelms and prevails over the heart" (2016, 218). Ghazālī takes this form of experiential certainty seriously because he insists that there is a kind of experiential knowledge that is not reducible to discursive knowledge. Importantly, the Sufi knowledge in question (which brings forth absolute certainty) is characterized as chiefly experiential. He writes:

> [M]ost distinctive characteristic" [of Sufi's knowledge is that it] … can be attained, not by study, but rather the taste *[al-ḏawq],* and the state *[al-ḥāl]* and cultivation of virtues *[tabaddul al-ṣifa].* How great a difference there is between your *knowing* the definition and causes of condition of health and satiety and your *being* healthy and sated! And how great a difference there is between your knowing the definition of drunkenness – viz. that it is a term denoting a state resulting from the predominance of vapors which rise from the stomach to the centers of thought – and your actually being drunk! (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 52; translation modified)

If there is an irreducibly experiential sort of knowledge (e.g., a drunk's knowledge of drunkenness), then it must come as no surprise that the certainty condition on this species of knowledge is different in form from the certainty condition on discursive knowledge. Ghazālī does not offer much more than a phenomenological description of the certainty condition of experiential knowledge. But as we saw, he seems to clearly distinguish it from the type of certainty we can acquire via proofs.

Finally, we can outline Ghazālī's positive proposal about the structure of philosophical knowledge. Ghazālī accepts the basic Aristotelian idea that sciences that are not merely dialectical [*jadali*] must start from first principles that are certain and are not merely accepted on authority or convention. In the last pages of the *Deliverances,* Ghazālī asks: How do we acquire these first principles for metaphysics, but also mathematics, logic, medicine, or astronomy?

Ghazālī maintains that insofar as we rely on reason alone, all these sciences remain merely dialectical because, in order to construct a rational proof for the first principles of, e.g., mathematics, we need to rely on some other mathematical concepts and assumptions. However, on his account, beyond reason and sensibility, we have another source of knowledge, namely, immersive imagination or 'prophecy.' The type of certainty that is appropriate for this other source of knowledge is not rational proof of the impossibility of doubt. Rather, the certainty in question is experiential. He thus maintains that all genuine fields of fundamental sciences, insofar as they are not merely dialectical, rely on these immersive imaginative or prophetic experiences. The first principles of our sciences are not rationally proven. Rather, we come to experience them as certain when we concentrate and cultivate our imagination (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 59–64).

Thus, Ghazālī's answer to skepticism points to his positive picture of the epistemology of philosophy, mathematics, and other fundamental sciences. It is a defense of the view that fundamental sciences must rely on the exercise of prophecy or immersive imagination. In the *Niche of Lights,* he writes:

> Imagination [*khīyal*] […] is solid and dense. It veils the mysteries and comes between you and lights, But when the imagination is purified so that it becomes like clear glass, then it does not obstruct the lights; rather it becomes a pointer towards the lights […] *Know that the low, dense, imaginal world became for the prophets a glass, a niche of lights, a purifier of the mysteries, and a ladder to the highest world.* (1998, 34)

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