

Ghazālī's Transformative Answer to Skepticism.

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I offer a reconstruction of Ghazālī's encounter with skepticism in the *Deliverance from Error*. For Ghazālī, I argue, radical skepticism about the possibility of knowledge ensues from intellectualist assumptions about the nature of justification. On the reading that I will propose, Ghazālī holds that foundational knowledge can only be justified via actions that lead to transformative experiences.

1. Introduction

It is common to try to excite the curiosity of contemporary philosophers in Ghazālī's skeptical argument in the *Deliverance from Error* [*al-munqidh min al-dalāl*] (c. 1100) by highlighting its similarities with Descartes' well-known skeptical arguments in the *Discourse on Method* (1637) and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).¹ But not only this Cartesian-inspired reading gets the argument of the *Deliverance* wrong, it also backfires quickly. Reading Ghazālī through the lens of the Cartesian *Meditations* renders his solution to the skeptical challenge hopelessly fideist,

¹ Some commentators explain this alleged similarity by appealing to features of the genre of intellectual autobiography. Stephen Menn suggests that in this genre, the author presents a radical shift in worldview, and skeptical puzzles (like the dream argument) are natural and effective means to that end. On Menn's account, the basic structure of the genre can be traced back to Galen (129 -216 AD) (Menn 2003, 147). Others insist on a more direct historical linkage between Ghazālī and Descartes, alleging that the latter reproduced the argument of the former deliberately and without proper attribution. Catherine Wilson notes that V. V. Naumkin has found definite "proof" of the fact that Descartes had read Ghazālī's *Deliverance* (Wilson 1996, 1022). Wilson cites Naumkin (1987). Mohammad Alwahaib notes that the source of Naumkin's speculation is the work of the 20th century historian, Othman Al-Kaa'k, which was reported in Al-Ahram daily newspaper (Al-Kaa'k 1976). In the newspaper, Al-Kaa'k claims to have "visited the National Library in Paris and looked at the Cartesian Collection, where he found a Latin translation of 'Al-Monqith' [*Deliverance*] with comments written in Descartes' handwriting: "this will be added to our method" (Alwahaib 2017, 17). I have not seen a verification of this claim anywhere else. Ignacio Götz offers historical arguments to cast doubt on this simple textual transmission narrative. He speculates about a more complicated and perhaps oral historical lineage from Ghazālī to Descartes (Götz 2003, 13–15).

and to that extent uninteresting for many of his contemporary readers. For instance, Catherine Wilson writes²:

The parallel [of Ghazālī's *Deliverance*] with Descartes' *Discourse on Method* and the first two books of the *Meditations* is unmistakable; so too is the divergence: Descartes's natural light leads not to fideism but to the exact sciences. (Wilson 1996, 1820)

Likewise, Muhammad Ali Khalidi writes:

The parallels with Descartes' intellectual crisis and bout of skepticism [...] have often been noted. However, the similarity between the two accounts stops more or less at the point at which the two philosophers find themselves in a state of radical doubt. After that, Ghazālī's solution may be regarded as fideist, while Descartes' is plainly rationalist. (Khalidi 2005, xxvi)

In this paper, I show that the most interesting aspects of Ghazālī's encounter with skepticism have been obscured by this comparative framework. I thus will try to focus on Ghazālī's argument in the *Deliverance* in its own rights. My aim, however, is chiefly reconstructive.³ I try to show that from Ghazālī's work we can extrapolate (a) an argument for a daunting form of radical skepticism, and (b) a non-intellectualist solution to this type of radical skepticism. This solution amounts to what I will call *anti-skeptical transformative internalism*: roughly, the view that we can overcome radical skepticism only by acting in certain ways, and thereby going through transformative experiences.

² Some recent commentators argue that Descartes and Ghazali face a similar skeptical problem, and offer a similar solution to it. Najm argues that "the two cases of dealing with the problem of doubt are profoundly comparable, and more significantly, that the solution of the problem of doubt is essentially the same" (Najm 1966). Omar Moad argues that the two philosophers are essentially concerned with the same epistemological problem, namely, skepticism albeit with different "orientations" (Moad 2009, 92). Parvizian argues that Descartes and Ghazālī are concerned with the same problem, and their solution is similarly fideist (Parvizian Forthcoming). My attempt is in the opposite direction. I try to show that the problem of skepticism, and its solution is fundamentally different for Ghazali – and that it is philosophically interesting in its own right.

³ Insofar as the purely historical aspects of this paper go, I am mostly in agreement with Taneli Kukkonen's excellent work in recent years (2016a; 2016b; 2012; 2009). Whereas Kukkonen does a great job of placing Ghazali's encounter with skepticism in the context of the Avicennian faculty psychology, my task is to provide an analytic reconstruction that can highlight the contemporary relevance of Ghazali's argument. I think this is valuable because many of the previous attempts at reconstruction come to Ghazali through the lenses of Cartesian skepticism, and to that extent get him wrong. I thus think of my task as complementary to the recent scholarly attempts by Kukkonen and others (e.g., Griffel 2004; Treiger 2012).

In §2, I offer an exposition of Ghazālī’s first formulation of the problem of skepticism in the *Deliverance*. In §3, I reconstruct Ghazālī’s argument against skepticism by looking at his second encounter with skepticism towards the end of the *Deliverance*. I conclude by noting how these two encounters can shed light on each other.

2. The First Encounter with Skepticism in the *Deliverance*

In the *Deliverance*, Ghazālī encounters skepticism not only in the well-known first few pages of the book, but also later and prior to his experimentation with mystical practices of Sufism. I argue that these two encounters with skepticism, albeit different in certain aspects, share something in common – as an indication, both crises are resolved by what Ghazālī calls the “divine light.” In this section, I offer an exposition of Ghazālī’s first encounter with skepticism and finish the section with an interpretative puzzle about his resolution of this skeptical episode. Then, in §3, I go on to argue that we can better understand Ghazālī’s enigmatic and abrupt resolution of the first skeptical episode by looking at his solution to skepticism in the second instance.

2.1. *Some preliminary terms*

In what follows, I rely on two central concepts about epistemic justification. First, I argue that the relevant form of skepticism that Ghazālī tackles questions the possibility of knowledge for *internalist* accounts of justification.⁴ And at this stage, I contrast this view with an *externalist* account of justification. I use *internalism* as a theory of epistemic justification that demarcates the domain of possible knowledge:

INTERNALISM: *S* can know *p* only if *p* can be arrived at by subjecting *S*’s feasibly accessible epistemic reasons to rational inquiry.⁵

As I use the term, *e* is an epistemic reason for *S* only if *e* is a fact (about the world, or about *S*’s best theory of the world) that favors *p*.⁶ In other

⁴ Compare this with a weaker form of skepticism which admits that knowledge is possible but denies its actuality.

⁵ My formulation of internalism in the epistemic case reflects the formulation we often find in debates about internalism with respect to having a reason in practical matters (Williams 1979)

⁶ One’s epistemic reasons can include both evidential facts from perception, memory, imagination, *etc.* and non-evidential facts about theory virtues, one’s conceptual framework, *etc.* For our purposes, we can stay neutral on questions about the relation between evidential and non-evidential epistemic reasons. For instance, it may be true that all non-evidential epistemic reasons are ultimately reducible to the evidential ones.

words then, internalism sets two conditions on the possibility of knowledge. We can know p only if:

- **[Favoring]** the set of facts that are feasibly accessible to us favor p , and
- **[Derivability]** this favoring relation between the set of feasibly accessible facts and p can be uncovered by us via *rational* inquiry.

According to this form of internalism, p falls out of the domain of S 's possible knowledge if either p is not favored by the facts that are feasibly accessible to S , or p cannot be rationally derived from S 's feasibly accessible epistemic reasons. In either of these cases, all else being equal, the internalist would prescribe skepticism towards p for S .⁷

By contrast, epistemic *externalism* denies that the possibility of knowledge depends on our access to the relevant body of epistemic reasons, or on our ability to derive the right conclusion from the right body of epistemic reasons. In other words, epistemic reasons, on the externalist account, are not defined in terms of an *accessibility* relation. To be sure, for most externalists, too, there must be a basing relation – knowledge is more than lucky true belief. So, on their account, S knows p only if p is based on the relevant epistemic reason e . But there is no requirement that S must be in any way in position to be aware of e ; nor is there a requirement that S must be in any way in position to be able to derive p from e . For example, on the externalist account, the relation between the basis of knowledge and the state of knowing can be a reliable causal relationship that the agent herself is not even in position to be aware of.

2.2. *The First Skeptical Argument of the Deliverance*

In what follows, I divide Ghazālī's first encounter with skepticism into three steps: (a) the setup, (b) the skeptical argument, and (c) the resolution.⁸

a. Setup (1): Initial doubt

Ghazālī initiates the skeptical episode with a simple expression of philosophical awakening.⁹ Invoking a famous saying from prophet

⁷ I say “all else being equal” because one could hold that we do not have any epistemic grounds to believe in p , and yet hold that we should continue believing in p on practical grounds.

⁸ Along the way, I flag some of the similarities and differences between Descartes and Ghazali. On my reading, while they do share quite a bit in the first stage (setup), their paths radically diverge after that.

⁹ As many have noted, a very similar kind of philosophical awakening can be seen in Descartes. The references that I have listed in footnote 3 are relevant, but more specifically on this point: Sharif (2013, 11–14) and Descartes (1996, 12 (17)).

Muhammad, he notes that “inherited beliefs lost their hold” on him when he observed that,

[...] the children of Christians always grew up embracing Christianity, and the children of Jews always grew up adhering to Judaism, and the children of Muslims always grew up following the religion of Islam. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 19)

He notes that this conformist method of acquiring beliefs is contrary to the dictates of a “natural disposition” [*fiṭra*]¹⁰ for knowledge. “Consequently,” he writes:

I felt an urge to seek the true meaning of the original *fiṭra*, and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through mere conformism [*taqlīd*] to parents and teachers. I wanted to sift out these *uncritical* beliefs, the beginning of which are suggestions *imposed from without* [*talqīnāt*], since there are differences of opinion in the discernment of those that are true from those that are false. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 20; emphasis added)

I think that Ghazālī’s initial worries with the conformist methods of acquiring beliefs indicate an initial commitment to internalism. He starts by highlighting a contrast between “beliefs that are imposed from without” and beliefs that are examined and endorsed by a critical reflection “from within.” He then casts a shadow of doubt over his beliefs *because* they are given to him through external mechanisms that are opaque to him. After all, he will go on to argue that many of his beliefs about Islam are indeed true. However, here, he voices the worry that these beliefs, in their current state, are in tension with the healthy disposition for knowledge precisely because he is not in position to recognize their ground. Later, when I reject the simple *fideist* reading of Ghazālī’s solution to skepticism, I will return to this point, and analyze his approach to internalism more carefully.

b. Setup (2): Indubitability Criterion

After casting a shadow of general suspicion over his beliefs, Ghazālī recognizes the need to specify a criterion for suspension of judgment: Under what conditions should we suspend judgment?

Ghazālī responds by specifying a set of demanding conditions for certain knowledge.¹¹ He writes (bracketed numbers are mine):

¹⁰ It is difficult to find an exact translation for *fiṭra*. Other suggestions are “temperament”, “constitution”, “what is in man at his creation”, etc. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 85–86, n. 22)

¹¹ Descartes, too, takes an almost identical step, and defines a indubitability criterion for knowledge (Descartes 1996, 12 (18)). However, arguably, Descartes’s formulation is less demanding because he does not endorse Ghazālī’s third condition.

... I began by saying to myself: “What I seek is knowledge of the true meaning of things. Of necessity, therefore, I must inquire into just what the true meaning of knowledge is.” Then it became clear to me that [i] sure and certain knowledge is that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, [ii] nor is it accompanied by the possibility [*imkān*] of error and deception, [iii] nor can the mind even suppose such a possibility [...] [E]very knowledge unaccompanied by *safety from error* is not sure and certain knowledge. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 20; emphasis added)

In other words, we can claim with certainty that we know *p* only if:

- [i] [actual-certainty] we *actually* have no doubt about *p*,
- [ii] [modal-certainty] we *cannot* doubt *p*, and
- [iii] [proof-certainty] we can positively establish the impossibility of doubting *p*.

Admittedly, Ghazālī’s formulation of proof-certainty in the above passage is vague. However, as we will see below, both Ghazālī’s Argument from Illusion and the Dream Argument make sense only if we attribute this demanding third condition to him. Since actual-certainty is entailed by satisfying either modal-certainty or proof-certainty, I will only focus on the latter two conditions. In short then, what Ghazālī calls the condition of “safety [*amān*] from error”¹² can be summarized as encompassing a modal condition on knowledge, and a proof condition on that modality.

Finally, it is worth noting that these are conditions on *certain* knowledge. At this point in the text, Ghazālī is seeking a foundation for all knowledge. Accordingly, the standard of success is that much stricter because this is the highest possible epistemic achievement. The same standard may not apply to ordinary subsequent beliefs.

c. Setup (3): The Source Hypotheses

Initially, Ghazālī seems to accept two hypotheses about possible sources of knowledge and their normative structure¹³:

TWO-SOURCES : There are two sources of knowledge, sensation and reason.

¹² Ghazālī’s conception of “safety” (as either the impossibility of doubt or as having a positive proof for the impossibility of doubt) is much more demanding than the contemporary usage of “safety” in epistemology. For example, on one version of Williamson’s influential account, ‘safety’ amounts to immunity from being “easily” wrong (2000, 147).

¹³ Descartes, too, accepts both hypotheses. For his endorsement of Two-Sources, see (Descartes 1996, 26-27 (37-39)). For Trickle-Down, see (Descartes 1996, 12 (18)) and (Descartes 1996, 63 (481)).

TRICKLE-DOWN : If a source of knowledge *S* is not immune from doubt, then all claims to knowledge based on *S* are not immune from doubt.

Ghazālī's relationship to the Source Hypotheses is complicated. Initially, when he sets up the skeptical challenge, he does seem to endorse both hypotheses:

Now that despair has befallen me, the only hope I have of acquiring an insight into obscure matters is to start from things that are perfectly clear, namely sense-data and self-evident truths [of reason] [...] Is my reliance on sense-data and [...] self-evident truths [of reason] [...] a verifiable safety containing no deception or danger? (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 21)

As we will see, after showing that sensibility and reason are not immune from doubt, he concludes that *no* beliefs based on sensibility and reason are immune from doubt. Thus, he accepts TRICKLE-DOWN. I see no indication that he will ever revise this commitment.

However, Ghazālī's relation to TWO-SOURCES is complicated. Initially, he seems to endorse TWO-SOURCES because first he argues that reason and sensibility are not immune from doubt; and then he concludes that *none* of his claims to knowledge is immune from doubt. But this inference could be valid only if he were committed to TWO-SOURCES. So, initially he accepts the thesis. But as we will see, as part of his solution to the skeptical challenge, he will revise this commitment.

d. Skeptical Argument (1): Outline

After setting the stage up by indicating his commitment to internalism about epistemic justification, and the Source Hypotheses, Ghazālī's argument to radical skepticism takes three steps:

1. Argument from Illusion
2. Dream Argument
3. Internalist Circle

On the assumption that the claims of the setup are true: **first**, the Argument from Illusion establishes that sensation is not a reliable source of certain knowledge. **Second**, the Dream Argument poses a challenge to prove the impossibility of doubting reason as a reliable source of certain knowledge. And **third**, the Internalist Circle establishes that this proof cannot be given.

In Ghazālī's view, these arguments suffice to establish genuine radical doubt. That is, given the assumptions of the setup, Ghazālī holds that we end up in a position where we should suspend *all* judgment. Notably then, for Ghazālī, the state of radical doubt is more seriously

threatening than it is for Descartes.¹⁴ Consequently, Ghazālī’s solution to radical doubt is going to be more revisionist than Descartes’ relatively conservative solution. Descartes’ solution is conservative in that he does not think that in order to answer skepticism, we need to revise our commitment to internalism or the Source Hypotheses (both of each, Descartes seems to also endorse). Ghazālī, on the other hand, revises both these commitments from the setup.¹⁵

e. Skeptical Argument (2): Argument from Illusion

The first argument is meant to show that sensation, as one of the two sources of knowledge, is not immune from doubt. To establish this point, Ghazālī considers both cases where sensation malfunctions according to its own proper functioning, and cases where sensation does everything according to its norms and yet fails to represent reality. Sensory illusions are examples of the first kind (e.g., when one “looks at a star and sees it as something small, the size of a dinar” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 21; C.f. Aristotle 1984, 1.[25])). But he often puts more emphasis on the latter cases because they show that some aspects of reality are essentially inaccessible to the faculty of sensation. An ordinary example of the latter case is this:

[The sense of sight] looks at a shadow and sees it standing still and motionless and judges that motion must be denied. Then, due to experience and observation an hour later it knows that the shadow is moving, and that it did not move in a sudden spurt, but so gradually and imperceptibly that it was never completely at rest. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 21)

So, where sensation can only see standstill shadows, reason can construct the slowly moving object. The slowly moving object is an object of knowledge that falls out of the domain of possible knowledge for sensation.¹⁶ In the background, he is working with a traditional method for demarcation of different psychological faculties. As he notes in the *Deliverance*:

Man gets his information about the “worlds” by means of perception. Each one of his kinds of perception is created in order that man may get to know thereby a “world” of the existents —

¹⁴ Descartes’s skeptical argument takes us to a state that provisionally *looks like* a state of radical doubt. But, famously, he denies that he can actually doubt everything he assents to. In particular, he cannot doubt his belief that he exists, *etc.*

¹⁵ Of course, that is not to say that Ghazālī’s skepticism is more radical than Descartes’ in every respect. For example, as Moad points out, Ghazālī does not seem particularly concerned with external world skepticism (Moad 2009).

¹⁶ A more sustained discussion can be found in the *Niche of Light*, where he lists seven imperfections of sensibility (Al-Ghazālī 1998, 5–9).

and by “worlds” we mean the categories of existing things. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 59).

He then goes on to identify several faculties of “perception”, e.g., sensation, reason, and prophecy. Each faculty is a distinct faculty of perception in that it gives us information about distinct kinds of objects in the world – as he puts it, each faculty “perceives certain classes of existents” (Ibid.). So, for instance, where sensation is needed to perceive concrete physical objects, it has no access to the universals. In other words then, there is a correspondence between Ghazālī’s ontology of kinds of objects and his faculty-psychology: different psychological faculties are postulated as perceiving instruments for different kinds of objects.¹⁷

Now, I think we can appreciate the force of Ghazālī’s Argument from Illusion even quite independently from the metaphysical assumptions of his faculty-psychology. The argument relies on two premises. First, as we just saw, Ghazālī notes occasional errors and limitations of sensible judgment. And second, he notes that to be safe from the possibility of these errors we need to rely on reason. From these two considerations, he concludes that sensation on its own cannot be the ground of certain knowledge. But is this a good argument?

Initially, one might worry that the unreliability of a limited subset of sensory experiences may not cast doubt on the deliverances of sensory experiences wholesale. This is especially a likely objection for those who come to Ghazālī after reading Descartes. In the *Meditation*, Descartes, too, points to occasional sensory illusions. However, he is quick to note that sensory illusions make only a small subset of sense-perceptions: “there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire” (Descartes 1996, 12-13 (18)). Of course, Descartes does not hold that sensation is the foundation of all knowledge, either. However, he does not think that sensory illusions suffice to establish this point. So, is Ghazālī simply oblivious to this Cartesian observation?

I do not think so, because Ghazālī’s argument relies on a conception of the indubitability criterion that he does not share with Descartes¹⁸: for Ghazālī, sensibility is safe only if we can positively prove that it is impossible to doubt its deliverances. But judgments based on sensation, he holds, cannot provide this kind of proof. To see why, first, consider how he states the conclusion of his Argument from Illusion:

In the case of this and of similar instances of sensation, the judging-sense makes its judgments, but the judging-reason

¹⁷ For a discussion of Ghazālī’s faculty psychology and especially its relation to the Avicennian orthodoxy see Trieger (2012) and Kukkonen (2012).

¹⁸ As I noted in footnote 12, while Descartes seems to endorse the modal-certainty condition, it is not obvious that he would endorse Ghazālī’s stronger proof-certainty condition.

refutes it and repeatedly gives it the lie in an incontrovertible fashion. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 21; translation modified)

Unlike Descartes, Ghazālī holds that sensation makes its own judgments.¹⁹ For example, sensation makes the judgment that a star above is smaller than a dinar. But then, reason comes in via “geometrical proofs”, and “demonstrate that [the star] surpasses the earth in size” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 21). I read Ghazālī’s anthropomorphic language of “the judging-sense says x ” to mean this: were we to make a judgment by relying on the rules and information of sensation alone, we would say x . (And I apply the same model to his anthropomorphic language of “the judging-reason says x .”) Thus, for Ghazālī, the main conclusion of the Argument from Illusion is this: Were we to make a judgment by relying on the rules and information of sensation alone, our judgment would not be safe. That is so, *because* when sensation delivers a judgment there is always the possibility that this judgment is in the subset of sensible judgments that are false. But safety, in Ghazālī’s narrow sense, requires a positive proof that it is impossible for this particular judgment of sensation to be false. However, this further proof, he claims, must be made by relying on rules and information of reason.

But can we not rely on sensation to correct our false sensible judgments? For example, I see a broken stick in water. I take the stick out, and now see that the stick is not broken. Have I not corrected my false sensible judgment by relying on another sensible judgment?

I think Ghazālī’s claim is that in these cases, as far as information and rules of sensation are concerned, we are delivered two sensible judgments that are on the same footing: first, our sensible judgment is that the stick is broken, and second, our sensible judgment is that the stick is not broken. But since on pain of contradiction both cannot be true, we need to adjudicate between these two sensible judgments, and that the adjudication between these sensible judgments is left to reason.

A similar argument is developed by Ghazālī himself in the *Niche of Light* [*Mishkāt al-Anwār*] (written in around the same time as the *Deliverance*).²⁰ Here, he notes that sensation can see other objects but it “cannot see itself, while the rational faculty perceives other things and its own attributes” (Al-Ghazālī 1998, 6). The idea seems to be this: sensation cannot take a reflective stance on itself. As long as we rely on rules and information of sensibility alone, all episodes of sensation are on par. However, reason has the capacity to reflect on the judgments of sensation and its own judgments, and adjudicate among them: I can run through

¹⁹ Descartes’ view on this issue is complicated. He does hold that sensation produces its own representations or ‘ideas’ (Descartes 1996, 27 (39)). However, he denies that just by producing ideas, sensation also judges them to be true. On his account, it is a further act of will to accept or reject ideas that are brought about by sensation (Descartes 1996, 39 (56)).

²⁰ The exact date of neither book is known. But they are both written towards the end of Ghazālī’s life (Al-Ghazālī 1998, xvii).

my thoughts, find an inconsistency, and reject it. In this sense, he insists that reason is a “higher” faculty of knowledge.

In short then, for Ghazālī, we cannot arrive at *certain* knowledge if we base our judgments on sensation because every time we make a judgment based on sensation, a task is left for us, namely to inquire whether from the standpoint of reason, that sensible judgment withstands scrutiny and tests of consistency with other judgments. Of course, in ordinary cases we do not need absolute certainty, and thus we often just rely on sensible judgments. But, Ghazālī’s claim is that when sensation is called upon to be the certain foundation of all knowledge, then it must be in position to provide judgments that are provably safe. We could verify judgments of sensation via sensation if rules and mechanisms of sensation were not opaque to the standpoint of sensation. However, as the examples of perceptual illusion and limitation are meant to show, that is not the case. Sensation is incapable of such reflective adjudications. Thus, since sensation cannot establish its own certainty (i.e., prove the impossibility of doubting its claims), it cannot be *the* foundational source of knowledge. Therefore, unlike its Cartesian counterpart, Ghazālī’s Argument from Illusions is meant to cast doubt on sensation wholesale.

f. Skeptical Argument (3): Dream Argument

Ghazālī introduces the Dream Argument by imagining a comeback on behalf of sensation after its dismissal in the Argument from Illusion:

The sense-data spoke up: “What assurance have you that reliance on rational data is not like your reliance on sense-data? Indeed, you used to have confidence in me. Then the reason-judge came along and gave me the lie. Were it not for the reason judge, you would still accept me as true. So there may be, beyond the perception of reason, another judge. And if the latter revealed itself, it would give the lie to the judgments of reason. ... The mere fact of the nonappearance of that further perception does not prove the impossibility of its existence. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 22)

The last sentence of this passage utilizes the most demanding aspect of Ghazālī’s Indubitability Criterion once more: namely, the demand for proof-certainty. Reason is now being challenged to offer a positive proof that there *cannot* be another faculty which could undermine reason’s judgments in much the same way that rational reflection can undermine some sensible judgments. He then continues:

[W]hile everything you believe through sensation or intellection in your waking state *may be true in relation to that state*, what assurance have you that you may not suddenly experience a state which would have the same relation to your waking state as the latter has to your dreaming, and your waking state would be dreaming in relation to that new and further state? If you found yourself in such a state, you would be sure

that all your rational beliefs were unsubstantial fancies. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 22; emphasis added)

Unlike its Cartesian counterpart, Ghazālī’s Dream Argument thus targets reason as the foundation for certain knowledge.²¹ The chief claim is this: the proof-certainty condition requires a positive proof for the impossibility of doubt. For the sake of argument, Ghazālī is happy to grant that rational principles are consistent and transparent: so, from the standpoint of reason, we seem to be able to adjudicate among our judgments, and even be certain that this or that judgment corresponds to rational rules, while the others do not. But this only passes the buck, for how can we acquire certainty that our rational principles are the right ones? The paragraph that immediately follows the above passage raises this worry by noting that the possibility of a third source of knowledge (in addition to reason and sensibility) has not been ruled out:

It may be that this state beyond reason is that which the Sufis claim is theirs. For they allege that, in the states they experience when they concentrate inwardly and suspend sensation, they see phenomenon *which are not in accord with normal data of reason*. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 22–23; emphasis added)

In other words, although, for Ghazālī, the Argument from Illusion establishes that sensation cannot be the foundation for certain knowledge, the Dream Argument only raises a challenge: namely, the challenge of positively proving that basic rational principles cannot be undermined by any other standpoint (e.g., the standpoint of mystic experiences of the Sufis which are “not in accord with normal data of reason”). This takes us to the final step of the skeptical argument: Can we positively prove that those other nonrational standpoints (e.g., of mystic experiences) cannot undermine our rational judgments?

g. Skeptical Argument (4): The Internalist Circle

Ghazālī considers and answers the above question negatively:

When these thoughts occurred to me they penetrated my soul, and so I tried to deal with that objection. However, my effort was unsuccessful, since the objection could be refuted only by proof. But the only way to put together a proof was to combine primary cognition. So if, as in my case, these were inadmissible, it was impossible to construct the proof. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 23)

²¹ Notably, Descartes’ Dream Argument does not cast any doubts on the deliverance of reason. “For whether I am awake or asleep,” he writes, “two and three added together are five” (Descartes 1996, 14 (20)). Rather, for Descartes, the Dream Argument targets the authority of sensation. As we saw, unlike Descartes does not think that the Argument from Illusion undermines the authority of sensation wholesale, and he thus presents the Dream Argument as a further argument against sensation as the foundation of knowledge.

Here is one way to illustrate the force of this argument: We want to know whether there is a standpoint beyond reason which can undermine it. The Argument from Illusion has already shown that while reason can undermine sensation, sensation cannot undermine reason. So, if we could show that the TWO SOURCES is true, it would follow that there is no other source of knowledge beyond reason which could undermine it. Hence, all we need to block the path to skepticism is to prove that TWO SOURCES is safe: i.e., to prove that it is impossible to doubt the TWO SOURCES. Can we do that?

Ghazālī argues that on pain of circularity we cannot prove the impossibility of doubting the TWO SOURCES. This argument goes through only if we attribute Internalism about epistemic justification to Ghazālī. Given Internalism, the only way to establish that TWO SOURCES holds is to derive it from some feasibly available epistemic reasons. But any such derivation, Ghazālī claims, would have to rely on some “primary cognition” [*ulūm ‘awwaliyy*]. In the *Deliverance*, Ghazālī calls these primary cognitions the “data of reason” [*al-‘aqliyyat*] (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 22). Roughly speaking, primary cognition stands for foundational rational propositions and concepts.²² In the *Aims of Philosophers* [*Al-Maqāsid al-Falāsifa*], we can find a more descriptive definition:

Every conception and assent is divided into that which is primarily comprehended without investigation and reflection [i.e. *primary cognition*] and that which would not be acquired unless one investigated [i.e. *acquired cognition*]. (Al-Ghazālī 2000, 12; my translation)²³

²² To be more precise, Ghazali accepts the basic Avicennian framework that all cognition (or, knowledge) is either an assent or conception. In the background we have Avicenna’s formulation: “Assenting comes about only by means of syllogism (*qiyās*) and whatever is like it” (Avicenna 2010, 3). He then adds: “Conception [*taṣawwūr*] is knowledge that comes first and is acquired by means of definition (*ḥadd*) and whatever is like it” (Avicenna 2010, 3; translation modified). Conceptions “comes first” in that they have a primacy over assents. That is, the capacity to use concepts is presupposed in making any assent. As Avicenna puts it elsewhere, “every assent is accompanied by a conception [*taṣawwūr*], but not the converse” (Avicenna, *Madkhal*, 17.10-17, as translated in Black 1990, 74). Likewise, in the *Deliverance*, Ghazālī asserts that knowledge is either an assent or a conception (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 34). He then defines assenting as a kind of knowledge where “the way to know something is through demonstration or proof [*al-burhān*]” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 34; translation modified). He then adds that conception [*taṣawwūr*] is the other form of knowledge where “the way to know it is the definition [*ḥadd*]” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 34; translation modified). Elsewhere, he also accepts the primacy of conception over assent (Al-Ghazālī 1952, 8 (4b)). These terms, the associated distinction between primary and acquired cognition, can be traced back at least to ‘Uyūn al-Masā’il [*The Sources of Questions*] that is attributed to al-Farābī (Wolfson 1943, 115–16).

²³ An English translation from Hebrew is available (Al-Ghazālī 1952).

To look at his examples, primary “assents” (roughly, propositional knowledge) include knowing that “Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other.” And primary “conceptions” (roughly, knowledge of concepts²⁴) include knowing concepts like ‘things’ and ‘being’. Our knowledge of these concepts and propositions are “primary” in that we do not acquire them through ‘rational investigation’— rather, knowing them is a necessary condition for the possibility of any use of reason. In Book I of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* [*Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*], he identifies at least a subset of primary cognition as innate knowledge in that he calls it a type of “knowledge that comes into being in the disposition of a child” (Al-Ghazālī 2016, 255).

Now, the Internalist Circle exploits the fact that every derivation must rely on some primary cognition. In particular, Ghazālī claims that any rational argument to prove TWO SOURCES would have to rely on some primary conception. That is so because that proof would presumably include some assent (roughly, propositional knowledge), and *any* assent relies on some primary conceptions. As Ghazālī writes:

Every assent is necessarily preceded by two conceptions. For example, unless we understand ‘world’ and its definition and ‘create’ and its definition, we cannot assert that the world was created. (Al-Ghazālī 2000, 12; my translation)

Ghazālī’s skeptical challenge is then this: Any derivation of the claim that there is no standpoint beyond reason must rely on concepts that are merely presupposed from the standpoint of reason (i.e., it must rely on primary concepts of reason). Thus, any such argument must simply presuppose that our claims to knowing the primary concepts and primary propositions are themselves safe. But if so, any attempt to prove the safety of the TWO SOURCES would succeed only if we could prove the safety of our primary concepts. Evidently then, any rational proof of the safety of primary concepts of reason would be hopelessly circular: because it will have to rely on those very concepts.

In short, the Indubitability Criterion demands a positive proof that reason *cannot* be doubted. We need this positive proof because, as Ghazālī puts it, “[t]he mere fact of the nonappearance of that further [...] [standpoint] does not prove the impossibility of its existence” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 22) (i.e., he demands the satisfaction of what I called *proof-certainty*). However, given Internalism, any such proof must rely on some primary cognition that seems certain from the standpoint of reason. This is circular.²⁵

²⁴ There are at least two ways to understand the expression “knowing a concept”: First, knowing how to use a concept, say, in patterns of inference. Second, knowing the definition of a concept. Ghazālī does identify primary conception with “understanding the definition” of a concept (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 34; 2000, 12).

²⁵ Arguably, the argument is similar to the Pyrrhonian problem of criterion (Sextus Empiricus 1949, bk. I, chap. VI., §12, 19.)

h. Radical Doubt

Ghazālī's reflections on the Source Hypothesis, internalism, and the Indubitability Criterion results in radical doubt. He holds that reason cannot establish its own authority. Given his original aim to find a foundation for knowledge that is certain, skepticism seems warranted. Immediately after offering the Internalist Circle argument, he writes:

This malady was mysterious and it lasted for nearly two months. During that time I was a skeptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 23)

Notably, he characterizes this skeptical episode in terms of a “malady”. Below, as we will see, he will characterize the solution to skepticism in terms of “regaining health and equilibrium,” too.

2.3. Ghazālī's “Resolution” of the first skeptical episode: a puzzle

As I noted earlier, many commentators have characterized Ghazālī's solution to skepticism as simply “fideist”.²⁶ To be fair, at first sight, the anti-skeptical “argument” of the *Deliverance* looks astonishingly abrupt and simple:

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)

The passage seems to suggest that a *particular* act of grace resolved the skeptical challenge. If this is right, Ghazālī's solution to skepticism is indeed merely fideist, and thus philosophically uninteresting unless we accepted the required theological assumptions. But I think this reading is textually misguided.

First, it is important to read the above passage about God's grace in light of the passage that immediately follows:

Therefore, whoever thinks that the unveiling [*kashf*] of truth depends on precisely formulated proofs has indeed strained the *broad* mercy of God. [...] The Apostle ... said: ‘God Most High created men in darkness, then sprinkled *on them* some of His light.’ From *that light*, then, the unveiling of truth must be sought. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 23–24; emphasis added)

The “light” which resolves the skeptical challenge is one that reflects “the broad mercy” of God. “Broad mercy” [*raḥma wāsa*] is a Qur'anic term,

²⁶ See fn. 3.

referring to God’s grace that encompasses everything, at least insofar as they actively seek God’s grace.²⁷ The light is thus a feature that is available to all persons were they to seek it. Therefore, the passage that immediately follows Ghazālī’s puzzling resolution of skepticism should give us a pause to consider the philosophical promise of his account: What general features of human psychology (or, “soul”) represent the light which can take us out of the state of radical doubt?

Secondly, on the simple fideist reading, the “light” that restores the authority of reason functions like a brute causal force that “imposes a belief from without.” This must be puzzling given how the initial doubt was motivated: He wanted to make sure that he knows the ground of his beliefs because otherwise, even if they were true, his beliefs did not amount to knowledge. So, how could he resolve the skeptical challenge by relying on a “light” that is just induced in him by an external force? Put simply, how can he know that the source of this light is God, instead of a Demon Deceiver?

Now, an advocate of the simple fideist interpretation could complicate their story and reply:

[Externalist reading]: Ghazālī starts the Deliverance by assuming internalism. He shows that internalism results in radical doubt. He thus drops the internalist assumption, and adopts externalism. So, although God’s light is an external source of justification (in that, as a source of knowledge, it is opaque to the knower), we can rely on it and legitimately make claims to knowledge.

After all, the view that I will attribute to Ghazālī has a similar shape: I will argue that he starts the book with one account of justification and the skeptical challenge persuades him to revise that account.

However, I think the externalist reading does not fit well with the rest of the *Deliverance*. In particular, I want to highlight Ghazālī’s argument against *Ta’līmism* just a few pages later in the text. The term stands for a subgroup of *Shia* Muslims, and Ghazālī has a complicated historical relationship with them.²⁸ For our purposes, it is enough to focus on his chief philosophical argument against them. In the *Deliverance*, he identifies the main doctrine of *Ta’līmism* in the following way:

²⁷ “I cause My Punishment to smite whomsoever I will, though My Mercy encompasses all things [*rahmati wāsat*]. I shall prescribe it for those who are reverent, and give alms, and those who believe in Our signs” Quran (Nasar 2017, 7:156)

²⁸ He argues against *Ta’līmism* in more details in Al-Ghazālī, *The Just Balance* [*Al-Qistās Al-Mustaqīm*]. For an overview of Ghazālī’s relationship to *Ta’līmists* (a subgroup of *Ismā’īlīs*) see Brewster’s Introduction (1978, xi–xiii).

[They hold that] there must be authoritative teaching and an authoritative teacher, and also [...] that not every teacher is suitable, but that there must be an infallible teacher. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 44)

The theory plays a twofold dialectical role in the context of the book: on the one hand, *Ta'limists* are represented as those who are sympathetic to skepticism against the authority of ordinary human reason and sensation. On the other hand, they try to solve the problem by relying on an “authoritative teacher,” i.e. a religious leader or *imām*.

In response to them, Ghazālī emphasizes that there are possible false teachers. Either we must accept the authority of any teacher that comes our way, or we must have a reliable way of telling a false teacher from a true one. The former solution does not contradict the externalist reading, but it also does not seem to result in safe knowledge. Ghazālī insists that the possibility of false teachers is a real problem, and thus he rejects this horn of the dilemma.

The second horn of the dilemma requires having a method to tell a true teacher from a false one. But to know whether a teacher is authoritative or not, one needs to know the character of the teacher. The latter knowledge is never safe. He concludes that authoritative teachers cannot be the fundamental source of knowledge:

The Apostle of God [...] even said: ‘I judge by externals, but God undertakes to judge the hearts of men.’ This means: ‘I judge according to the most probable opinion resulting from the witnesses’ statements, but they may err about the matter. The prophets had no way to be safe from error in such cases involving personal judgment; how, then, can anyone else aspire to such safety? (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 46)

Notably, this is not an isolated attack on *Ta'limism*.²⁹ Ghazālī is equally concerned with the problem of false prophets. As Frank Griffel has forcefully argued, Ghazālī maintains that we can tell a false prophet from a true one by relying on our “theoretical knowledge about the effects of a prophet’s work” (Griffel 2004, 142). For example, following the teachings of a true prophet leads to a flourishing life, while following a false

²⁹ In the *Just Balance* (1978, 6–7), Ghazālī seems to adopt an inconsistent position by accepting the authority of Prophet Muhammad as a fundamental source of knowledge. However, firstly, in the *Deliverance*, he describes the *Just Balance* as “an independent work aimed at explaining the scale for weighing knowledge and showing that *he who fully understands it has no need for an infallible Imam*” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 49–50; emphasis added). So, it seems that Ghazālī’s own reading of the *Just Balance* is compatible with his internalist commitments in the *Deliverance*. Secondly, it is important to note that in the *Just Balance*, he treats the teaching of the Prophet as an *additional* source of certainty. After stating his independent standards of knowledge, he notes: “*to this [standard of knowledge] I add the fact that I know its author [God] and the one who teaches it [Gabriel] [...] and who uses it [Mohammad]*” (Al-Ghazālī 1978, 10; emphasis added).

prophet leads to misery. Thus, on his account, we can tell a false prophet from a true one by looking at the relation between their teaching and human flourishing. But at this point, I am not interested in Ghazālī argument against *Ta'limism per se*, or his view of verifying a true prophet. Rather, I want to highlight that throughout the *Deliverance* (and in his other works on prophecy), he remains committed to the idea that unless one can recognize the ground of one's judgment, one may not make a claim to certain knowledge. Thus, Ghazālī seems to remain committed to the basic tenets of internalism for the remainder of the *Deliverance*.³⁰ In a memorable passage he writes:

[...] there can be no desire to return to servile conformism once it has been abandoned, since a prerequisite for being a servile conformist is that one does not know himself to be such. But when a man recognizes that, the glass of his servile conformism is shattered – an irreparable fragmentation and a mess which cannot be mended by patching and piecing together: it can only be melted by fire and newly reshaped. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 25)

As we saw, Ghazālī's problem with servile conformism is that it commits one to "uncritical beliefs, the beginning of which are suggestions imposed from without" (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 20). Thus, we must read Ghazālī as either inconsistent (in criticizing his opponents with internalist standards that he fails to meet in answering skepticism, and more importantly, in developing his account of verifying a true prophet); or as having a conception of God's light as a solution to skepticism which does not reduce it to a brute causal force that imposes a belief on the seeker of knowledge "from outside."

What follows is written in the spirit of curiosity to see if we can read Ghazālī in a more charitable manner. In a sense, the following aims to answer a textual puzzle: What, according to Ghazālī, is the feature of human psychology that corresponds to a divine "light" which we can employ to overcome skepticism?

³⁰ For similar reasons, Anthony Booth attributes what he calls Moderate Anti-Evidentialism to Ghazālī: "For all except one proposition, *S* ought to believe that *p* for non-epistemic reasons" (Booth 2018, 122). On Booth's reading, Ghazālī is an evidentialist only with respect to a single belief which identifies a true prophet. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to engage with Booth's account here. I just quickly note that the skeptical challenge of the beginning of the *Deliverance* cannot be resolved by identifying the true prophet via an *ordinary* evidential route either. After all, the Internalist Circle blocks *all* evidential reasoning. So, even if we accept Booth's account, Ghazālī must offer a modified version of evidentialism for the exceptional case of belief about true prophet. Some of Booth's later remarks indicate that he might be friendly to this suggestion (Booth 2018, 117–26).

3. The Second Encounter with Skepticism in the *Deliverance*

In the rest of this paper, I look at Ghazālī's solution to the skeptical challenge in light of what he says in the second part of the *Deliverance* and in the *Niche of Light*. Textually, my point is that in reading Ghazālī's response to skepticism, we must note that the notion of "light" is a technical term for him. When understood in its proper technical sense, Ghazālī's claim that the "light" resolves the skeptical challenge is philosophically interesting.

3.1. *The second crisis*

The skeptical "crisis" that we discussed in Section 2, appears in the first few pages of the *Deliverance*. In those pages, Ghazālī is talking about a crisis in his youth which he claims to have lasted for about two months.

Towards the end of the book, Ghazālī discusses a second personal crisis that takes place some years later. This time, he is already an established scholar in Baghdād. In a number of moving passages, he laments that he has engaged the sciences and knowledge only at a superficial level. He reports an episode of talking to himself:

Away! Up and away! Only a little is left of your life, and a long journey lies before you! All the theory and practice in which you are engrossed is eyeservice and fakery! (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 53–54)

This episode lasts for about six months, leading to what seems like depression:

I struggled with myself to teach for a single day, to gratify the hearts of the students who were frequenting my lectures, but my tongue would not utter a single word: I was completely unable to say anything. As a result that impediment of my speech cause a sadness in my heart accompanied by an inability to digest; food and drink became unpalatable to me so that I could neither swallow broth easily nor digest a mouthful of solid food. That led to such a weakening of my powers that the physicians lost hope of treating me. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 54)

I argue that this second crisis is also skeptical in nature. There are three reasons for this claim. First, the crisis comes as a result of "search for truth." This becomes clear when we note his characterization of the process that leads to this second crisis:

When God Most High [...] had cured me of this sickness [i.e. the first skeptical crisis], I was of the view that the categories of those seeking the truth were limited to four groups. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 24)

The four groups that he names are rational theologian [*kalām*], Aristotelian philosophers [*falsafa*], *Ta'limists*, and *Sufis*. He continues:

I then said to myself: “The truth cannot transcend these four categories, for these are the men who are following the paths of the quest for truth. Hence, *if the truth eludes them, there remain no hope for ever attaining it [...]*” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 25; emphasis added)

Note the conditional form of the last claim. Although God has cured him of his skeptical malady for now, the path to the possible despair of skepticism is still open. In other words, the solution to the first skeptical episode was in some sense *incomplete*: if that weren't the case, the possibility of never attaining truth would not remain so lively. Therefore, it is a *desideratum* on any reading of the first skeptical argument that there must be something preliminary and not fully developed about its resolution.

Second, after experimenting with rational theology, Aristotelian philosophy, and *Ta'limism*, he does rediscover his “malady”. Just like the original skeptical episode of his youth, this episode is characterized in medical terms. And more importantly, the reason he finds himself in this stage is his worry that all his claims to knowledge are mere “fakery” and that he does not really understand what he claims to know. In short, many years later, he is again uncertain whether his claims to knowledge are genuine.

Third and most notably, Ghazālī characterizes the “cure” to this second skeptical crisis in terms of a “light” as well, namely the one and only “light on earth from which illumination can be obtained” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 57). So, there is a strong *prima facie* case to identify the “light” that resolves the second crisis with the one that resolves the first crisis. Firstly, both “lights” are the sources of certain knowledge. Secondly, he insists that there is *only one* light that is ultimately the source of certain knowledge. So, not only the conditions that are resolved are similar (i.e. they are both skeptical episodes), but also the cure is similar – it is characterized as *the* “light”.³¹

Fortunately, unlike the first case, Ghazālī tells us much more about the nature of the “light” that cures the second skeptical crisis. In this second episode, he notes that he discovered the light by adopting the Sufi set of ascetic practices, including long periods of seclusion and meditation. He claims to have engaged in these practices for two years in travel, and for another ten years upon return to Iran. Notably, he claims that these *practices* lead him to the regain *certain knowledge*:

For ten years I remained in that condition. In the course of those periods of solitude things impossible to enumerate or details in depth were disclosed to me. This much I shall mention [...]: 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

³¹ Götz does not elaborate on this, but he also seems to identify the “light” that cures the first and the second crisis (2003, 6).

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!* (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 56–57; emphasis added.)

It is astonishing for anyone to have such a high level of confidence in any doctrine. But it is even more surprising to hear this level certainty from Ghazālī who started the very same book with establishing such rigid standards for knowledge with certainty. However, this puzzling level of certainty makes better sense when we read what follows immediately:

For all their [Sufis] 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)

Thus, allegedly, these Sufi practices connect Ghazālī with the one and only light from which certainty can be gained, namely the light of the niche of prophecy. So, if my hypothesis is true that the light of that one gets through Sufism is in some sense the same as the light that saved Ghazālī from his first skeptical challenge (since, “beyond the light of prophecy there is no light on earth from which illumination can be obtained”), then we might better understand his first anti-skeptical argument by looking at his views about Sufism.

To try this, I will look at his commentary on Sufi practices in the second part of the *Deliverance* and *the Niche of Light*. The latter book is a detailed commentary on a single verse in Qur’ān (commonly known as the “Light Verse”)³² and an associated *hadīth* by Prophet Mohammad (commonly known as the “Veils Hadīth”).³³

3.2. *Revisiting the internalist circle*

Recall the last step of Ghazālī’s skeptical argument, i.e. the Internalist Circle: on the one hand, internalists accept rational derivations as the only standard of proof. On the other hand, all rational derivations must rely on some primary cognition of reason. Accordingly, he concludes that

³² “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche, wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is a shining star kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East or of the West. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth, even if no fire had touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His Light whomsoever He will, and God sets forth parables for mankind, and God is Knower of all things” Quran (Nasar 2017, 24:35).

³³ “God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived Him.” As reported in (Al-Ghazālī 1998, xvii)

on pain of vicious circularity, the skeptical challenge against the safety of primary cognitions could not be answered *via* “precisely formulated proofs” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 23).

To generalize, Ghazālī seems to think that internalists are trapped by their own standards of rational derivation. On their account, if there is no rational derivation from an agent’s epistemic reasons to a proposition *p*, then *p* is not a possible object of knowledge for her. To be sure, the agent’s epistemic position³⁴ could change if she tests new hypothesis and finds new evidence. However, there is a limit to this procedure. For the internalist agent, the space of possible objects of knowledge is pre-determined by the conjunction of standards of rational derivation, and one’s currently accessible epistemic reasons. One’s evidence could surely change. But there does not seem to be any escape from one’s standards of rational derivation (captured by one’s primary cognitions), nor is there any non-circular way to be certain that those standards are the correct ones. For Ghazālī that meant that our standards of rational derivation, and thus all our subsequent claims to knowledge, are not safe.

According to Ghazālī, Sufis can offer a path to knowledge with certainty precisely because they do not rely *only* on rational derivations to acquire knowledge. Rather, they also rely on a set of activities involving ritualistic mental and bodily practices that supposedly provide the Sufis with certain knowledge. This Sufi route to knowledge (if we could make sense of it) would work independently of primary cognitions because the acquired knowledge is not derived by a rational derivation.

In short, by accepting the Sufi path towards certain knowledge, Ghazālī abandons internalism in a limited sense. Here, he does not arrive at knowledge of the foundations of cognition by offering a *rational derivation* from one’s epistemic reasons. Instead, he claims to arrive at that knowledge by nonrational means – thus, if the Sufi method were a possible way of arriving at knowledge, it would not face the circularity problem in the same way.

3.3. *Transformative internalism*

However, in an important sense, Ghazālī still remains an internalist. To be sure, the resultant knowledge of the Sufi practices is not immediately available from the agent’s epistemic position. In fact, for this reason, at the outset, Ghazālī does not claim that he is certain that engaging in Sufi practices will result in certain knowledge. Rather, he treats it as a possible *experiment*, one that might result in certainty.

As we saw, textually, this engagement with Sufism comes after he has experimented with rational theology, Aristotelian philosophy, and

³⁴ As I use the term, an agent’s epistemic position consists of the facts that determine which epistemic reasons, and which derivations from those reasons, are available to her. To change one’s epistemic position amounts to either changing the body of available epistemic reasons, or changing the conditions of being able to derive something new from the given epistemic reasons.

Ta'limism.³⁵ Ghazālī is dismissive of *Ta'limism* wholesale. He acknowledges that rational theology and Aristotelian philosophy might provide knowledge in a qualified sense. Nevertheless, he does not think that they can help him arrive at the fundamental certain knowledge. For example, he acknowledges that mathematical truths are known with apodictic certainty (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 32). But that just means that from the standpoint of reason, the claims of mathematics can be proved with certainty. However, the certainty of reason itself as the foundational source of these claims to knowledge cannot be proved by mathematics or other sciences that presuppose the authority of reason. Likewise, he argues that *within* rational theology we can make certain proofs. But all those claims to knowledge remain conditional on proving the certainty of our basic sources of knowledge. As he puts it, this conditional or qualified sense of certainty “was not sufficient in my case, nor was it a remedy for the malady which I was complaining” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 26).

Eventually, he turns to Sufism for experimentation. But crucially, this experimentation is still directed at placing Ghazālī in an epistemic position where the ground for certain knowledge becomes transparent to him. This transformation, from an epistemic agent who were not in position to recognize the ground of his certain knowledge to a new kind of epistemic agent, amounts to Ghazālī’s answer to skepticism. Let me unpack this idea.

I speculate that Ghazālī tries to escape the Internalist Circle by abandoning the original rationalist internalism, and adopting transformative-internalism:

TRANSFORMATIVE-INTERNALISM: S can know p only if either:

- (a) p can be arrived at by subjecting S ’s feasibly accessible epistemic reasons to rational inquiry, or
- (b) p can be arrived at by subjecting S^* ’s feasibly accessible epistemic reasons to S^* ’s principles of inquiry where S can by nonrational means transfer herself into S^* .

The first clause of transformative-internalism is identical to the ordinary kind of internalism we have discussed so far. Ghazālī seems to hold that for non-fundamental truths (e.g., those discovered by rational theology or Aristotelian philosophy) the first clause is a legitimate principle for knowledge. That is, insofar as our conditional claims to knowledge go we can rely on the first clause. All those claims remain conditional in the sense that the first clause presupposes the authority of rational principles, but the rational principles cannot be grounded via the method of the first clause.

³⁵ “When I had finished with all those kinds of lore, I brought my mind to bear on the way of the sufis.” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 51)

The second clause concerns a special case. On the one hand, we are asked to think that there are epistemic reasons that are not accessible to an agent via rational reflection on their feasibly accessible epistemic reasons. On the other hand, we are told that it is possible, via nonrational means, to change the situation of the agent and make those reasons accessible to her. Now, Ghazālī has argued that in the special context of proving the safety of the foundations of knowledge, we cannot arrive at our target via rational reflection on our epistemic reasons. If so, he holds, we may have warrant to try to change our epistemic position via nonrational means in hope of uncovering epistemic reasons that were not accessible to us previously.

For Ghazālī, this warrant (to seek nonrational means to change our epistemic positions in search of new epistemic reasons) seems to be given by two kinds of consideration: First, in the context of dealing with skepticism, the epistemic stakes are high. We have arrived at a position where we are now casting doubt on all our beliefs. We saw that the first encounter with skepticism ended in radical doubt, and the second encounter was characterized as the last “hope for ever attaining” truth (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 25). These are both extremely bad epistemic positions to find ourselves in. Drastic epistemic situations, we may say, call for drastic epistemic policies. Second, and as I noted above, Ghazālī characterizes both skeptical episodes as deeply troubling in practical terms: they turned into physical maladies that needed to be cured. He thus seems to think that in dire situations we may have a practical reason to experiment with nonrational means of transforming our epistemic position to new positions that are not otherwise available to us.

But what does it mean to say that nonrational methods may transfer us into a new epistemic position, such that new epistemic reasons become available to us? And, perhaps more importantly, how is that an *internalist* answer to skepticism at all? That is, how are these nonrational methods different from a brute causal force? I answer these questions in turn.

3.4. The ladder of imagination

On my reading, Ghazālī holds that the right kind of nonrational methods can transfer us into a new epistemic position by actualizing a ‘higher’ capacity for knowledge, i.e., prophecy or ‘cultivated imagination’. Once actualized, the kind of knowledge that we acquire through this capacity has a kind of immediacy or certainty that is safe – it is impossible to doubt it, and that impossibility is positively established. In other words, Ghazālī argues that by going through these nonrational methods we discover that TWO-SOURCES is false, and that we have access to sources of knowledge other than reason and sensation.

First, Ghazālī contends that following the Sufi manual of physical and mental rituals and practices (what he calls, “the Way” [*ṭarīq*])³⁶ will result in having new kinds of experiences:

From the very start of the Way, revelations and visions begin, so that, even when awake, the sufis see the angels and the spirits of the prophets and hear voices coming from them and learn useful things from them. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 58)

It might be difficult to ignore Ghazālī’s heavily supernatural interpretation of these experiences. But at least certain aspects of his characterization of these experiences are familiar enough. For instance, he notes that the “most distinctive characteristic” of Sufi’s knowledge is that it:

... can be attained, not by study, but rather the taste [*al-ḍawq*], and the state [*al-ḥāl*] and “the exchange of qualities” [*tabaddul al-ṣifa*], meaning cultivation of virtue]. 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)

Crucially then, for Ghazālī, the knowledge that is provided by Sufism has, what we may call, a non-propositional character. It is a kind of knowledge through acquaintance. Putting the two passages together, then the following picture emerges: by way of following Sufi mental and bodily practices, one starts to have imaginative experiences from which one can *learn*, not in the sense of learning specific set of propositions, but in the sense of being acquainted with certain non-propositional truths.

To be sure, here, Ghazālī is following a rich Sufi tradition with all its subtleties, but at least some of those insights can be extracted from that tradition. The basic idea is that we can engage in concentrated physical and mental exercises which, in turn, would interact with us in somewhat surprising ways. They are “surprising” in that although in one sense we create them, we still learn new information from them. For instance, consider a much tamer example of an immersive, concentrated, and cultivated imaginative exercise:

I recently read Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*. I read the book over a long period of time, read one page at a time, at specific hours. I would often pause and imagine the scenes. I would go overboard and fantasize about things that were not in the actual novel but could have been. Of course, when I was engaged in these activities, I was not thinking about them as

³⁶ Often, Sufis documented these practices in Sufi “manuals”. For a translated example of an influential 10th century manual, see (Kalābādhi 2000)

an exercise – I was not thinking *about* the images, but the imagined world itself. My imagination became somewhat obsessive to the point that I started having dreams about the story. But then, something even more interesting happened: I started to surprise myself. I “discovered” new things about the characters, I had conversations with them, and I was often persuaded by them to think differently about this or that matter. The imagined world started having a life of its own, and as a result, I was learning in unexpected ways.

What we have here is a description of immersive imaginative exercise. For Ghazālī, it is a basic feature of the psychology of imagination that while one-off acts of imagination are often misleading, a cultivated faculty of imagination can transform our epistemic position by offering us experiences where we “see [...] hear voices [...] and learn useful things” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 58). Again, the basic idea is familiar enough. For instance, consider Susana Schellenberg’s discussion of “imaginative immersion” as opposed to one-off imaginative acts:

Imaginative immersion has a range of different functions. It allows us to escape from the real world; it allows us to identify with fictional characters; and perhaps most importantly it allows us to learn and develop. By acting and feeling as if we have a perspective different than our own, we can learn what to do were we to have that perspective. When children play chase, a game widespread among mammals, they may pretend to be chased by a predator or to be a predator. Chase play is not only fun; it trains for events that are hazardous and costly. The more immersed children are in the game, the more they invest in the game; the more invested in the game they are, the more educational the game is. (Schellenberg 2013, 507–8)³⁷

Notably, the subjects of immersive imagination learn *because* they “lose themselves in imagination such that the fictional world in some way, at least temporarily, becomes the real world” (Schellenberg 2013, 507). Of course, this modern account of immersive imagination is at best a distant relative of Ghazālī’s account of cultivated imagination. But Ghazālī does explain the psychology of Sufi practices, and *how* they transfer our epistemic position in a manner that is at least similar in outline. Recall that in the *Deliverance*, the one and only “light” that resolves his second skeptical episode comes through following the Sufi rituals of mental and physical exercises. But what is the relevant psychological change that takes place, in virtue of which he comes to claim an extremely high degree of confidence in the certainty of his knowledge?

I think the answer is based on a model similar to our account of immersive imagination in that for Ghazālī, the Sufi practices cultivate his imagination, and as a result his epistemic position change. On his

³⁷ Schellenberg is relying on (Steen and Owens 2001)

account, imaginative exercises can transform our epistemic position *because* in entertaining these images and ideas, we willingly “let go”. We thus teach ourselves new things by letting our imagination play freely.³⁸ This is possible because the logic of free play of imagination, so to speak, is not the logic of rational derivation. Thus, when imagination is concentrated and immersive, Ghazālī suggests, it takes a life of its own, and it can thus transform us. 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.* (Al-Ghazālī 1998, 34)

So, although ordinary imagination “comes between you and light,” Ghazālī *identifies* purified or cultivated imagination with a faculty that makes a new kind of knowledge available to us, i.e., the faculty of prophecy. That is, in the case of a completely cultivated imagination, he holds, the faculty just is the very “niche of light” of the prophet. Ghazālī thus claims that a cultivated faculty of imagination is the ladder to the source of certain knowledge (i.e., the light of prophecy). In an enigmatic passage, he writes:

That which occurs in dreams is related to prophetic characteristics, just as [the number] one is related to forty-six, while that which occurs in wakefulness is more closely related than this. I suppose this relationship is that of one to three. (Al-Ghazālī 1998, 35)³⁹

For Ghazālī, the model for gaining access to the certain knowledge of prophecy is to place oneself in dream-like states willingly and outside the context of dreams. Insofar as these states are dream-like, they have an element of losing control and letting the images take control. But insofar

³⁸ For a recent argument on how skilled and cultivated imagination can be a reliable source of knowledge, see Kind (2020). Though, Kind puts a lot of emphasis on cases where imagination tries to be a substitute for perception or reasoning – that is, cases where imagination tries to constrain itself from what she calls ‘transcendent’ or ‘fantastical’ uses. On the view I’m attributing to Ghazālī, the real prize in the truth-conducive use of imagination comes from cultivating the transcendent and fantastical uses to the extreme.

³⁹ The reference is to Prophet Mohammad’s saying: “The veridical dream is one forty-sixth part of prophecy.” (al-Hindi 2016, 9:9:445. No. 41407/15)

as these are “wakeful” dream-*like* states, they have the characteristics of an agential, internally transparent mode of knowing things.⁴⁰ He writes:

it may happen that some of the prophetic lights rise up and take control. Then the senses do not draw him [i.e. the one engaged in the imaginative exercise] to their world and do not keep him occupied. He witnesses in wakefulness what someone else would witness in a dream. (Al-Ghazālī 1998, 35)

Recall that in the *Deliverance*, Ghazālī identified the one and only light that can give us illumination and certain knowledge with the light of prophecy. We just saw that he identifies the niche of the light of prophecy with a cultivated faculty of imagination. Thus, for Ghazālī, *the* light which is the foundation of all knowledge must be first sought *through* the efforts of the cultivated faculty of imagination.⁴¹

Let’s recap. The initial shape of Ghazālī’s solution to skepticism is this: there is a kind of knowledge that one could gain *not* by rational reflection on one’s epistemic reasons. At the same time, this is not a knowledge that is just “imposed from outside.” Rather, by engaging in a set of concentrated and immersive imaginative practices, one may place *oneself* in a new epistemic position where one gains access to a new source of cognition – namely, cultivated imagination (and this is now a denial of the Two Sources thesis).

We wanted to know what it means to say that nonrational methods may transfer us into a new epistemic position, such that new epistemic reasons become available to us. And the answer was: a cultivated imagination may acquaint us with certain experiences and truths that were not available to us via sensation or reason. But suppose we accepted Ghazālī’s claim that by going through certain imaginative exercises we become acquainted with possibilities that were not otherwise accessible to us. Why should we then accept that these possibilities are in any sense superior to the possibilities that rational reflections on our epistemic reasons were availing us? In other words, recall how Ghazālī’s Dream argument ended. We were left with the unresolved puzzle: The standpoint of Sufi mystical experiences are different from the standpoint of reason. But how do we adjudicate which one has authority over the other? To put the same point differently: How is this an answer to the skeptical challenge?

⁴⁰ Or, as we saw, he notes in the *Deliverance*, “even when awake, the sufis see the angels and the spirits of the prophets and hear voices coming from them and learn useful things from them.” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 58)

⁴¹ Note, this falls short of saying that the light of prophecy *is* an imagined content. Rather, the point is that imagination is the ladder that takes us to that light – a ladder that we may have to kick afterwards.

3.5. *Answering skepticism*

Now, clearly Ghazālī holds that there is a standpoint that is more authoritative than reason. Towards the end of *Deliverance*, he offers a hierarchy of faculties of knowledge. At the lowest level, he places the power of senses. Then he places the power to discernment between senses (i.e., the capacity to have good taste). Then he places the power of reason. Then he writes:

Beyond the stage of intellect there is another stage. In this another eyes is opened, by which man sees the hidden [...] and other things, from which the intellect is as far removed as the power of discernment is from the perception of perception of intelligibles and the power of sensation is from things perceived by discernment. And just as one able only to discern, if presented with things perceptible to the intellect, would reject them and consider them outlandish, so some men endowed with intellect have rejected the things perceptible to the prophetic power and considered them wildly improbable. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 60)

Here he makes two claims. First, that there is a source of cognition above reason, namely prophecy. And second, the claims of prophecy are by nature inaccessible to the standpoint of reason. So, again, how do we know that the cultivated faculty of imagination (which, as we saw above, in the perfect case, just is the faculty of prophecy) gives us a superior standpoint over reason?

On the surface, Ghazālī's response is unlikely to move many of his contemporary readers. However, as we will see, there is still an interesting element that we can extract from his strategy. First, let's see Ghazālī's own answer:

Now if a man born blind did not know about colors and shapes from constant report and hearsay, and were to be told about them abruptly, he would neither understand them nor acknowledge their existence. But God Most High has brought the matter within the purview of His creatures by giving them a sample of the special character of the prophetic power: sleeping. For the sleeper perceives the unknown that will take place, either plainly, or in the guise of an image the meaning of which is disclosed by interpretation. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 60)

Ghazālī thinks it is obvious that (1) sometimes dreams represent reality, and that (2) they represent "prophetic" facts about the future which reason cannot access.⁴² This attitude towards dreams is even clearer in the paragraph that follows immediately:

⁴² Also see Ghazali (1998, 34–35; 2016, 141)

If a man had no personal experience of dreaming and someone were to tell him: “There are some men who fall down unconscious as though they were dead, and their perception, hearing, and sight leave them, and they then perceive what is ‘hidden’;” he would deny it and give apodeictic proof of the impossibility of saying: “The sensory powers are the causes of perception. Therefore one who does not perceive such things when his powers are present and functioning a fortiori will not perceive them when his powers are suspended.” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 60–61)

Here, again, Ghazālī seems to presuppose that “veridical” dreams are actual. Since veridical dreams are actual, and they do represent reality that reason or sensation cannot access, he goes on to argue that there is another source of cognition that is superior to reason and sensation – namely, prophecy. He thus revises the Two Sources thesis.

Now, of course, we might be skeptical about the existence of ‘prophetic’ dreams – especially, under the description of dreams that give us knowledge of future events. Or, at best, even if we thought that might be possible, our attitude towards such things falls far below the kind of absolute certainty that Ghazālī was after. However, I think the main idea behind Ghazālī’s argument is obscured by focusing on his attitude towards veridical dreams *per se*. Rather, I think, the argument takes a surprising and interesting turn. I reconstruct his argument as follows:

1. If through cultivated imagination I come to know some x with safety, then cultivated imagination is safe.
2. I followed the Sufi practices [i.e., I cultivate my imagination in a special way], and I [Ghazālī] came to know x with safety.
3. Thus, cultivated imagination is safe.

The first premise must be easier to accept – it seems intuitive that only a safe source of knowledge can provide particular instances of knowledge with safety. So, if a source of knowledge actually provides a piece of knowledge with certainty, then (at least in the relevant domains) it is a safe source of knowledge. Ghazālī thus writes, “the proof of [the] *possibility* [of prophecy] is its existence.”⁴³

The second premise is of course much more controversial. After all, the Sufi practices is one among many other types of immersive imaginative experiences one could have. How can Ghazālī know that the Sufi practices can give us any safe knowledge, i.e. how can he prove that the deliverances of Sufism cannot be doubted?

Now, first, note that the choice between the Sufi practices and other possible imaginative experiences cannot be adjudicated by reason

⁴³Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance*, 61.

or sensation. Of course, one could treat the content of an immersive imaginative experience *as if* it were a content of sensation or a rational judgment. But that would be like telling a child that her arms are not actually wings when she is pretending to fly. In that case, our claim would be correct only in a defective sense, because we would be misunderstanding the norms of the child's game. To generalize, it is one thing to say the Sufi practices and other possible imaginative experiences cannot be adjudicated by reason or sensation, and another thing to say that the Sufi practices and other possible imaginative experiences cannot be adjudicated *at all*. Likewise, it is one thing to say that the epistemic reasons that are accessible to me via reason and sensation do not favor Sufi practices over other possible imaginative exercises, and another thing to say that I have *no* accessible epistemic reasons that favor one set of practices over the other. In other words, if Two Sources is false, then our understanding of how internalism works must be modified.

Thus, the mere fact that immersive imaginative experiences are not evaluable by rational standards give Ghazālī an opening. This is why he often insists that even ordinary 'false' dreams have an epistemic significance. For him, dreams as a type are in the family of states that resemble prophecy and mystic experiences. It is true that in representing this world, some dreams are mere illusions. However, he seems to think that as a type of representation, *all* dreams point to the existence of a standpoint that is *independent* from reason and sensation. In the *Revival* he writes:

those who are sleeping, once they have distanced themselves from the realm of the senses, draw near to that realm [of the hereafter], *for sleep is the brother of death, so they may see in their sleep creatures bearing these qualities [...]*" (Al-Ghazālī 2016, 141; emphasis added)

Similar to the Dream Argument, the above passage makes the point that there *is* a kind of experience, e.g. of dreaming, immersive imagination, or prophecy that is not subject to the rules of reason and sensation. This gives us an opening for a kind of experience that follows a different set of rules. In other words, it is an opening for Internalism with three sources: sensation, reason, and cultivated imagination. Each source of knowledge provides access to a set of epistemic reasons. The rules of "deriving" knowledge from those epistemic reasons is different depending on the source.

And now, we are at the final step of the argument: for Ghazālī, the safety of the Sufi practices can *only* be experienced by the inquiring agent herself. That is, for the kind of epistemic reason which cultivated imagination avails us, the proper rules of derivation are inherently private to the subject of those experience. Notably, this is not to say that the basing of knowledge on those experiences is inaccessible to the knower (i.e., Internalism is not rejected). Rather, it is to say that the basing relation is accessible to the knower and only to the knower (note: we may accept Internalism, and reject the idea that all derivability relations are publicly available to other agents than the subject of knowledge).

Admittedly, this must be somewhat disappointing, but also inescapable. It is disappointing because we cannot evaluate Ghazālī's second premise unless we actually and earnestly follow the Sufi practices. Ghazālī promises us that by so doing, we will come to have experiences that have a certain epistemic mark: they establish their own safety. And it is inescapable that we would end up with a solution like this because taking immersive imagination as a genuine source of knowledge is motivated by thinking that first-personal experiences are epistemically unique and not reducible to third-personal testimony and descriptions. He thus writes:

The properties of prophecy [...] can be perceived only by fruitional experience as a result of following the way of Sufism. For you have understood that only because of an example you have been given, viz., sleep; were it not for this, you would not assent to that. If, then, the prophet has a special quality of which you have no example and which you in no wise understand, how can you find it credible? Assent comes only after understanding. But the example needed occurs in the first stages of the way of Sufism. Then, through this example, one obtains a kind of fruitional experience commensurate with the progress made plus a kind of assent to what has not been attained based on analogy with what has been attained. So this single property we have mentioned is enough ground for you to believe in the basis of prophecy. (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 62)

In summary then, the argument exploits a general feature of cultivated imaginative experiences: they are first-personal and immersive in such a way that they cannot be genuinely apprehended from the standpoint of rational inquiry. Cultivated imagination does not establish a truth by way of rationally deriving a premise from given epistemic reasons. They are thus not subject to the worries that concerned the Internalist Circle. To put things crudely: the world of immersive imagination is a wild world, and Ghazālī claims that because of this unruliness, and not despite it, one *can* find a safe source of knowledge in it.

Finally, let me turn to the interpretative puzzle of the paper: What can we learn about Ghazālī's abrupt resolution to the first skeptical episode by looking at the second skeptical episode? As the above passage shows, Ghazālī's conception of 'transformative experiences' is gradual and developmental.⁴⁴ Even false dreams have an important epistemic function: they give us a primitive taste for the kind of cognitive state that is potentially available to us. We now can explain that:

⁴⁴ Contrast with the often dramatic, one-off experiences that are discussed in contemporary literature on 'transformative experiences' (Paul 2016).

- (1) The “light” that cured Ghazālī’s skepticism in his youth was not sufficient to protect him from the skeptical maladies of his older age. From the very short description that he leaves us with, all we can say is that the first skeptical episode comes to an end because he has some, albeit unsophisticated, imaginative experience of the light of prophecy. Thus, although he can see the light of cultivated imagination to a degree, he cannot fully grasp it.
- (2) As we just saw, Ghazālī indicates that this sort of unsophisticated imaginative experience “occurs in the first stages of the way of Sufism” (Al-Ghazālī 2006, 62). Later, when the Sufi cultivates his faculty of imagination, he can “obtain a kind of fruitional experience” that was not previously available to him. In other words, he now understands the light which he knew only partially in his youth. “Assent comes only after understanding” (ibid.).

And these features together satisfy the desideratum that I posited earlier. We can now explain why the resolution of the first skeptical challenge was incomplete, why the second episode was hanging over Ghazālī’s head, and still, we have the outlines of an account to say in what sense the first “light” was still related to the light of prophecy. Ghazālī insists that many imaginative experiences serve as “analogy”, “example”, or primitive instance of the full-fledged imaginative experiences of prophecy. On my reading, the first skeptical episode comes to an end, because Ghazālī is acquainted with one such early example of prophetic imaginative immersion.

4. Conclusion

I positioned my reading of Ghazālī as an alternative to what I called the simple fideist reading. The alternative that I have offered is still to some extent fideist, but matters are more complicated than it looked at first. For one thing, as we saw, Ghazālī insists that the Sufi path (and by extension, the path of Prophet Muhammad) is the *only* kind of immersive imaginative exercise that can get us to safe knowledge. I offered no argument for that claim to exclusivity, partly because I do not think he offers any good arguments for that claim. Indeed, if we follow his lead in accepting that claims of immersive imagination can be verified or falsified only by first-hand personal experiencing, then it seems impossible to establish a claim to exclusivity (unless we had enough time and resources to go through all possible regiments of imaginative immersion).

However, the reading is still fideist – or ‘mystical’ – in an important sense: the solution to the skeptical challenge is an invitation to follow a set of physical and mental exercises that somehow, in a way that in principle we cannot understand from our current point of view, would bring us knowledge with certainty. It is hard to see why someone would

accept this invitation unless they were desperate – and that is perhaps why Ghazālī describes the sheer desperation of his skeptical state so dramatically.⁴⁵

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