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Cover Page Footnote

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Knowledge through Divine Light: Ghazali's Notions of Mystical Cognition

Maisara Maasoum Kamal¹

Abstract

Illumination, or knowledge through divine light, is a type of mystical cognition that Abu Hamid Ghazali regarded to be the cause of his rescue from his famous skeptical crisis. According to him, this type of divine knowledge is the apex of knowledge, to which all other sciences are subordinate. The receptive organ of this knowledge is the heart, a divine and cognitive subtlety that is distinct, although related, to the physical heart. Such is done by removing the veils that obstruct divine light from reaching it by means of what the Sufis call 'the science of unveiling'. The disclosure of knowledge that occurs once veils are removed is transmitted in states (*ahwal*) and are cognized through taste (*dhawq*), which means that the knowledge is non-discursive and non-communicable. This research explores the metaphysical hypothesis behind the possibility of mystical cognition and investigates its nature according to Ghazali's perspective.

Keywords

Abu Hamid Ghazali; Mystical Cognition; Illumination; Divine Knowledge; The Science of Unveiling; Epistemology; Metaphysics; Sufism

Introduction: Divine Light

As Zora Hesova remarks, "illumination or knowledge through light is a central theme of medieval philosophy, especially in the Islamic tradition" (Hesova, 65). Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Al-Ghazali, the 'proof of Islam', is one of the most prominent figures in Islamic history who discussed mystical cognition as a way of knowledge through divine light. Ghazali's famous crisis shed light on such mystical cognition, being a "malady [that] was mysterious and lasted for nearly two months", in which he suffered from extreme skepticism, similar to that which occurred to Descartes (Ghazali, 4). In the *Munqidh*, he claims that "at length God Most High cured [him] of that sickness" and his "soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again 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 [his] heart" (Ghazali, 5). And that light, he says, "is the key to most knowledge" (Ghazali, 5).

Ghazali argues that "whoever thinks that the unveiling of truth depends on precisely formulated proofs has indeed straitened the broad mercy of God", and recalls the prophet's reply when he was asked about a certain verse (6:125) in the Quran: "It is a light which God casts into

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the heart” (Ghazali, 5). Ghazali, commenting on the Hadith, says that this light is “the unveiling of truth [that] must be sought” (Ghazali, 5). The function of the heart as a recipient of that divine light is of extreme significance when explicating the possibility of such mystical knowledge. As the Munqidh only explains that this light is from God and lacks elaboration on its source, one may recourse to see how this concept becomes “a full-fledged epistemic notion” in other texts of his (Hesova, 66). As Hesova notes, “in Ghazali’s texts, light is generally a name for that which quenches the thirst for knowledge, ends intellectual confusions, and brings certainty about orientation and spiritual bliss, even if it is not recurring rapture” (76). It is non-conceptual and non-discursive knowledge, a means on attaining perspectives on higher transcendent realms of reality, which is why it cannot be expressed in words.

The relationship between light and knowledge is particularly emphasized in Ghazali’s *Niche of Light*, a commentary on the verse of light (24:35) from the Quranic Sura ‘*The Light*’, in which he aims “to develop a theory of knowledge based on the central theme of light and illumination” (Hesova, 71). According to him, the Quranic verse is evidence “that man can know and should know through divine light, and that some people, especially the prophets, are capable of supreme knowledge” (Hesova, 71). The end of the first chapter of this book depicts a hierarchy of lights being shed and reflected from higher to lower beings, the first being the light that is with God, given that the light verse is “the only passage in the Qur’anic text that explicitly and directly compares God to light” (Hesova, 72). This ascension of light does not only show that “the true light is spiritual, but also that the true meaning of the word is God, nothing else” (Hesova, 72). By analyzing several of Ghazali’s most prominent works, this paper attempts to outline the possibility of knowing through divine light according to Ghazali and elaborate on the nature of such mystical cognition.

The Possibility of Mystical Cognition: The Heart and The Preserved Tablet

Being ultimately a non-discursive knowledge, Ghazali did not expound much on the object of knowledge through divine light rather than on its human subject, particularly the soul, which the Quran calls *rūh* (spirit), the philosophers call *nafs* (self), particularly the ‘tranquil’ *nafs*, and the Sufis call *qalb* (heart). Ghazali sometimes even refers to it as “the ‘inner eye’ (*‘ayn bātina*), which is characterized by insight (*basīra*) the way the external, physical eye (*‘ayn zāhira*) is characterized by sight (*basar*)” (Treiger, 31). Ghazali “defines all those concepts as an organ receptive to knowledge (or to the immaterial realities)”, but for simplicity this concept would henceforth be referred to as the heart (Hesova, 81). Like Ibn Sina, Ghazali considers the heart as a cognitive organ, that when purified, veils are removed to make it receptive to divine knowledge through enlightenment. The foundation of such belief is essentially philosophical, i.e. the belief in the immateriality of the soul or heart and its potential for perfection. Ghazali defines it as the locus of human’s ability to gain cognition of God (*mahall mā’rifat Allāh*) that “is characterized as the core and the true reality of a human being (*jawhar al-ādamī, ḥaqīqat al-insān*)” and “is a ‘lordly and spiritual subtle entity’ (*latīfa rabbānīya rūḥānīya*) that has a certain connection (*‘alāqa, ta’alluq*) to the physical heart and governs the body through it” (Treiger, 17). However, unlike the physical heart, it is immortal and immaterial, thus belonging to the supersensible world, the world of dominion (*‘ālam al-malakūt*).

Ghazali uses an analogy of the heart being a mirror made of metal, like medieval times, and the polishing of this mirror, according to him, consists of ascetic praxis. He argues that “the locus of knowledge (*mahall al-‘ilm*) is the heart; it relates to the realities of knowable concepts (*ḥaqā’iq al-ma’lūmāt*) as a mirror does to the forms of colored objects (*ṣuwar al-mutalawwināt*);

just as [every] colored object has a form (*ṣūra*) whose image (*mithāl*) is impressed upon and appears in the mirror, so every knowable concept has a reality (*ḥaqīqa*) whose form is impressed upon and becomes manifest in the mirror of the heart” (Ghazali, 11). He further notes that there are three things that should be distinguished from one another, the knower, which refers to the person in whose heart the *images* of the realities of things are impressed, the knowable, which refers to these realities, and the knowledge itself, which is the *mere appearance* of these images in the mirror of the heart.

It is here worthy to note that Ghazali is very careful to emphasize the distinction between the objects of knowledge and the subject. As Treiger remarks, “according to al-Ghazali, the object of knowledge does not become united or identical with the heart, nor can it be said to indwell (*ḥulūl*) it; it is merely reflected in it, which means that only an ‘image’ of its ‘reality’ is impressed upon the heart” (Treiger, 32). Ghazali believes that even though the entirety of all existent things, the divine presence (*al-ḥaḍra al-ilahiya*)² can be impressed in the heart and the heart can “become as if it were the entire world,” this does not mean that the “[the world] indwells (*ḥulūl*) [the heart]” (Ghazali, 69). Only “a person who lacks understanding”, he continues, might fall into the error of “[thinking] that a form indwells (*ḥālla*) the mirror, but this is erroneous for [the form] is not in the mirror but only [seems] as if it is the mirror” (Ghazali, 69). The radical inability for the object of knowledge to unite or indwell the heart is of huge importance when the object of knowledge is God, for such is emphasized to refute claims of pantheism that were suggested by the controversial claims of Hallaj³ and Bistami⁴. As W.H.T. Gairdner remarks, Ghazali attributed huge significance “to this conception of the reflector, ... [precisely] as a defence against the assaults of pantheistic ideas consequent on ecstasy” (Gairdner, 139). Ghazali believes that these mystics were so intoxicated by their states to the extent that they misinterpreted their experiences, mistakenly thinking that God indwelt, or was united with, them, whereas he was only reflected and revealed to their hearts.

Another concept which is of great importance when exploring the possibility of mystical cognition according to Ghazali is the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, Q. 85:22). Before the Preserved Tablet was created, there was the Pen (*al-qalam*, Q. 68:1, 96:4), which “is one of Ghazali’s terms for the Active Intellect”, which is “the first the First Originated Being (*al-mubda’ al-awwal*) and the mover of the Outermost Sphere” (Treiger, 105). The Pen is equivalently referred to as Spirit, Fire, Supernal Divine Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ilāhīya al-’ulwīya*), Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-qudus*), and Israfil, among others. According to Ghazali, the Preserved Tablet is “the blueprint of the world, drafted by God with the Pen before the creation”, in accordance to which God created the world as we know it from the beginning of time till its end⁵. The Preserved Tablet contains all possible knowledge and the forms of all beings and, just like the heart, it is conceived of as a mirror. In reality, “the human heart and the Preserved Tablet are two immaterial mirrors facing one another” (Treiger, 106).

In the *Niche of Lights*, Ghazali argues that the Preserved Tablet is the first receptive creation on which knowledge can be inscribed and from which knowledge can be transmitted to others. In Neoplatonic noetic, the Preserved Tablet is the Universal Soul whereas the Pen is the

² According to Ghazali, the term divine presence refers to all things that are in existence since God is their ontological source.

³ Hallaj is notorious for uttering that ‘I am the Real’.

⁴ Bistami is known to have said ‘Glory be to me’.

⁵ Of course, such inscription by the Pen on the Preserved Tablet should not be conceived of in any literal or material fashion.

Universal Intellect. The latter is thought to “function as a “teacher” of the sanctified soul”, as Ghazali “argues that revelation has its origin in an emanation from the Universal Intellect, not from the Universal Soul” (Treiger ,144). God’s speech “is seen as the emanation (*fayadān*) of knowledge from God onto the “tablet” of the heart of the prophet (*lawḥ qalb al-nabī*)” with the help of the “inscribing Pen” (*al-qalam al-naqqāsh*) (Ghazali, 27). This is the origin of revelation, where God uses the Universal Intellect as a pen and the human heart as a tablet. In the case of inspiration, however, it is originated from a certain intimation between the Preserved Tablet (Universal Soul) and the human heart, only occurring in the case of removing the veil that separates them.

Having stated that the Preserved Tablet and the heart are like two immaterial mirrors facing each other, Ghazali elaborates this connection with another analogy. He describes the heart like a pond that can be filled with water either from inside or from outside. Likewise, the heart can be filled with knowledge from the outside via senses and reflection on observations, and from inside via the Preserved Tablet. As he notes in the *Revival of Religious Sciences*, “the difference between the knowledge of saints and prophets and that of scholars and philosophers is this: the knowledge of the former comes from inside the heart, through the opening facing the world of dominion (*‘ālam al-malakūt*), whereas philosophical knowledge (*‘ilm al-ḥikma*) is obtained through the openings of the senses facing the world of possession (*‘ālam al-mulk*)” (Ghazali, 30). Needless to say, Ghazali deems the former knowledge to be superior than the latter, a perspective that will be further elaborated below.

There are, however, obstacles that veil the heart from the Preserved Tablet that act like a curtain (*ḥijāb*) separating the two. Ghazali “defines the veil (*ḥijāb*) as that which impedes light and thus obscures knowledge by “darkness” of the senses, by ideas of a sensory content and by bad analogies of reason” (Hesova, 74). When the veil is removed, some of the content of the Preserved Tablet can be reflected on the heart. This can explain how some people can possess knowledge of the future, since the Preserved Tablet indeed contains knowledge of everything from time immemorial till the Day of Judgment. Such a removal can occur during sleep (through dreams) or during wakefulness, although the latter rarely happens since one’s mind is often preoccupied with sensory information. Nevertheless, regardless when it happens, such moments of the veil’s removal usually occur very briefly “as a flash of lightning (*kal-barq al-khāṭif*)”, for the veil will only be completely suspended after death (Treiger, 69).

The veil separating the heart from the Preserved Tablet can be removed in two ways, either by divine grace, or by human efforts. Such efforts need preparations on both an intellectual and an ethical level, such that “one’s heart has to be cleansed from disobedience to God and excessive attachment to bodily desires, and at the same time one has to have knowledge of syllogistic reasoning and to be free from preconceived notions” (Treiger, 70). Furthermore, one has to reflect on God and on divine realities that are hidden, which “presupposes almost meditation-like stillness of mind in which the mind is to be fixed on God and the supernal world” (Treiger, 70). Indeed, Ghazali does propose a type of meditation characterized by the invocation (*dhikr*) of the supreme divine name Allah. He says that after one has emptied one’s heart from everything but God, one can sit in seclusion without distractions of any sort and “keep uttering with his tongue “God! God!” over and over again, with presence of heart. Eventually he reaches the stage when he ceases to move the tongue and yet sees the word, as it were, still reverberating upon it. He continues like that until it disappears from the tongue, yet he finds his heart still mentioning (*dhikr*) it. He continues like that until the form and letters of the utterance and the configuration of the word disappear, but its naked meaning remains present in the heart as if it were inseparable from it. At

this point, if his will is strong, intention pure, and perseverance stable, if bodily desires or internal speech do not distract him with ties of this world, then flashes of Truth will shine forth in his heart” (Ghazali, 27).

The Nature of Mystical Cognition

In the introduction of the *Revival of Religious Sciences*, Ghazali elucidates two areas of knowledge: the science of practical religion (*‘ilm al-mu‘āmalā*) and the science of unveiling (*‘ilm al-mukashafa*). As Treiger remarks, “*ma‘rifa* in al-Ghazālī is always somehow “deeper” and more “mystical” than ‘*ilm*’; for this reason, too, *ma‘rifa* is to be translated as “gnosis””, which is why it is appropriate to identify ‘*ma‘rifa*’ with the latter kind of science and ‘*ilm*’ with the former (Treiger, 33). The *Revival of the Religious Sciences* only deals with the science of practice. However, Ghazali remarks that this science is the means of the science of unveiling, and “the utmost goal of unveiling is the attainment of the cognition of God (*ma‘rifat Allāh*) in this world and of felicity (*sa‘āda*) in the afterlife”, which is “conditional upon the cognition of God in this life” (Treiger, 38). The science of practice polishes the mirror of the heart so that divine light can shine through it. Ghazali notes that the knower “is not someone who has memorized books but if he were to forget what he has memorized he would become ignorant, rather, the knower is someone who takes his knowledge from his Lord whenever he wishes, without memorization or study” (Ghazali, 34). He says that this is a type of divine knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-rabbānī*) that is referred to when God says “and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence” (Q. 18:65).

Back to the analogy of the heart and the pond, *‘ilm la-duniy* is a divine knowledge that comes from the inside, it “opens up in the innermost part of the heart (*fī sirr al-qalb*), without any [secondary] cause arranged from the outside” (Ghazali, 38). The science of unveiling is a means to this divine knowledge, in which as the name suggests, veils are removed “to the point that the plain truth (*jalīyat al-ḥaqq*) in these matters becomes apparent as [in the case of] eyewitnessing (*‘iyān*), which is never in doubt” (Ghazali, 17). The science of unveiling is, thus, associated with certitude (*yaqīn*), where “the seeker is exposed to light and experiences a direct insight into a religious theme that usually was the subject of prior meditation and exercises” (Hesova, 76). Ghazali emphasizes the significance of this science, such as “the science of unveiling, the science of the hidden (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*), is the apex of the [other] sciences (*ghāyat al-‘ulūm*)” (Ghazali, 38).

The disclosure of this knowledge through unveiling happens in states (*aḥwāl*) for a very brief moment in time. These states convey knowledge in a manner similar to tasting (*dhawq*), which is considered as the entelechy of knowledge in Book 2 of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. It is “the stage when knowledge has become so internalized as to be an integral part of one’s being, a psychological or cognitive state (*ḥāl*)”, and like any such states, it cannot be communicated (Treiger, 50). Ghazali distinguishes between belief (*īmān*), which he defines as the “acceptance of another’s testimony with trust and without suspicion”, knowledge (*‘ilm*), which he defines as analogy (*qiyās*), and tasting (*dhawq*), which he defines as witnessing (*mushāhada*) (Ghazali, 71). In the hierarchy, Ghazali puts knowledge above belief, and tasting above knowledge. Therefore, according to him, tasting is “a stage of cognition that is, in a sense, above philosophical knowledge” (Treiger, 51). Although the knowledge attained through tasting may not be necessarily different from some conclusions of philosophical discourse, Ghazali considers it to be its perfection (*istikmāl*), such as philosophical “knowledge is internalized, reaches the level of the inner state of certitude and assurance (*yaqīn*), becomes a psychological or cognitive state (*ḥāl*), and ceases being mediated and discursive” (Treiger, 51). In a sense, tasting is “a face-to-face encounter with, and

an intellectual vision or witnessing of, objects of intellection” (Treiger, 51). Taste “is essentially that degree of prophecy which is available to non-prophets” (Treiger, 55).

Ghazali emphasizes that the outcome of the experience of mystical cognition is an “intense pleasure that will be such that no description can adequately capture” (Ghazali, 63). According to him, “the only reason one does not strongly desire and long for this [pleasure] in this life is that one has not tasted it yet (*li-‘adam dhawqih*)” (Ghazali, 63). Such is the reason that descriptions of the afterlife involve sensory pleasure. According to Ghazali, “[bodily] pleasures [such as the pleasure of sexual intercourse] are base in comparison to spiritual, intellectual pleasures [to be experienced in the afterlife]; however, the latter can only be explained using [base] similitudes (*amthila*) drawn from what people have actually witnessed in this life” (Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 213–14). Such is like trying to explain the pleasure of sexual intercourse to a child or an impotent man, which can only be through comparing it to an experience of a pleasure that they have tasted, such as that of a game in the case of a child, or that of eating after hunger in the case of an impotent man. Such is done so that “they would first accept on faith (*yusaddiq*) the very fact of this pleasure’s existence, and then learn that what they have understood through a similitude does not give them a true [understanding] of the pleasure of sexual intercourse, for it can be grasped only through tasting (*bī al-dhawq*)” (Ghazali, 213). The bliss of the afterlife, whose apex is having vision (*ru’ya*) of God, is understood in terms of tasting, such as “the vision of God will be fixed in the heart” (Treiger, 60). According to Ghazali, “there shall be no difference between witnessing in the afterlife and [intellecting] the knowable object[s] in this world, except with respect to additional unveiling and clarity” (Ghazali, 433).

The disclosure that happens through unveiling during states provides a ‘light of certainty’, “a particular type of divine illumination that allows it to occur”, such that there is no room for error or doubt (Treiger, 56). Witnessing (*mūshahada*) the object of intellection comes as a form of a non-discursive immediate intellectual vision (*ru’ya*) and “is defined as the perfection and entelechy (*istikmāl*) of intellection” (Treiger, 56). The clarity of vision and the lack of intermediary effort is what distinguishes witnessing from mere intellection, for in the case of witnessing, “witnessed concepts are simply present to the mind the way physical objects are present to the eye; however, just as the physical eye has to be open in order for vision to occur, similarly the eye of the mind has to be open to render witnessing possible” (Treiger, 58). The knowable objects that one may encounter in witnessing are, according to Ghazali, something that “transcends imagination” (Ghazali, 431).

Ghazali describes the prophetic spirit, the highest in “the hierarchy of human psychological abilities”, as characterized by instantaneous and effortless disclosures of most or all realities by divine inspiration and unveiling (*kashf ilāhī*) (Hesova, 74). In the context of prophetic revelation “the terms *kashf* and *mukāshafa* (unveiling) are used nearly synonymously with *ilhām* (inspiration)” (Treiger, 74). In Book 21 of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Ghazali distinguishes between the inspiration of saints and revelation of prophets in so far as the latter can perceive the source, “the angel who casts this knowledge into the heart” (Ghazali, 26). As Treiger notes, “Ghazālī virtually opens the door of prophecy to non-prophets”, who are called friends of God (*awliyā’*) or the ‘pure ones’ (*al-asfiyā’*) (Treiger, 65).

The highest knowledge one can attain through the mystical cognition of divine illumination lies “in grasping God’s unity (*tawhid*) and dissolving one’s self in it (*fanā’*)” (Hesova, 72). In the

last chapter of the *Niche of Light*, Ghazali comments on a Hadith⁶ of the prophet and outlines a hierarchy of people vis a vis veils of darkness and of light. The highest of those people are those “who are wrapped only in light, those who are dazzled by the knowledge”, who are in turn divided in terms of the concreteness of their concept of God (Hesova, 75). The highest of those, (*al-waṣīlūn*) those who have arrived, achieve a “knowledge devoid of any concepts, that is, the highest form, in which they themselves vanished” (Hesova, 75). Any concept of divinity veils one from illumination, at some point, “one of the veils in the veil section of *Mishkāṭ* that obstructs knowledge is light itself” (Hesova, 78). The goal is to have no concept of God, for God transcends all conceptual limitation and human knowledge. This posits a perplexing and truly awe-striking paradox at the heart of this mystical epistemology, as Reza Shah Kazemi interestingly remarks, “the highest knowledge transcends all knowledge to a point that it can be called ignorance” (Hesova, 78).

Conclusion

Having outlined the possibility and the nature of mystical cognition according to Ghazali, it is worth mentioning that divine light as a way of knowing through unveiling is an esoteric science, which Ghazali deemed as prohibited to commit in writing: “divulging the secret of Lordship is unbelief (*ifshā’ sirr al-rubūbīya kufr*)” (342). Since prophets only spoke about it symbolically in hints and allusions, one should follow their example and not divulge its contents. In fact, Ghazali only briefly alludes to the topic in his works and refuses to further elaborate. Rather, what Ghazali seems to be attempting to provide is a path to the attainment of this mystical cognition, a praxis aimed at unveiling the truths of realities that transcend imagination. Reaching gnosis (*ma’rifa*), “is seen as participating in the divine knowledge rather than possessing it”, the apex of which is a state devoid of concepts in which the subject annihilates in the oneness of God (*tawhīd*) (Hesova, 79). This perception of oneness presupposes a synthesis of the dualistic nature of the world, the material and the immaterial. As Hesova concludes, “illumination is therefore neither an epistemic concept, nor a mystic rapture, but a name for the fruits of efforts to grasp the world in its fundamental duality” (Hesova, 83).

Perhaps the stern and dry words of academic language do not pay proper due to the essential beauty and ineffable pleasure that is ascribed to these states of illumination. For mystics, the journey to the Divine is a journey from darkness to light, and the fuel to praxis is love. One may only glimpse the beauty of this divine illumination in the poetry of those mystics whose hearts have tasted the “wine”, as they so often call it, of proximity to their Beloved through unveiling.

⁶ The hadith reads: “God has seventy veils of light and darkness, and if it is picked up, the glory of his face would have burned all of whom caught his look”.

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