

AL-GHAZALI AND DESCARTES FROM DOUBT TO CERTAINTY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: This paper clarifies the philosophical connection between Al-Ghazali and Descartes, with the goal to articulate similarities and differences in their famous journeys from doubt to certainty. As such, its primary focus is on the chain of their reasoning, starting from their conceptions of truth and doubt arguments, until their arrival at truth. Both philosophers agreed on the ambiguous character of ordinary everyday knowledge and decided to set forth in undermining its foundations. As such, most scholars tend to agree that the doubt arguments used by Descartes and Al-Ghazali are similar, but identify their departures from doubt as radically different: while Descartes found his way out of doubt through the cogito and so reason, Al-Ghazali ended his philosophical journey as a Sufi in a sheer state of passivity, waiting for the truth to be revealed to him by God. This paper proves this is not the case. Under close textual scrutiny and through the use of basic Husserlian-phenomenological concepts, I show that Al-Ghazali's position was misunderstood, thus disclosing his true philosophic nature.

I. Introduction

This paper clarifies the philosophical relation between Al-Ghazali, a Muslim philosopher (1058--1111), and the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596--1650), with the objective of articulating the similarities and differences in their famous journeys from doubt to certainty. Historical evidence on whether Descartes did in fact read or had knowledge of Al-Ghazali's work will not be discussed in this paper. Instead, this paper focuses primarily on the chain of their reasoning, starting from their conceptions of truth and the arguments used by each to destroy or deconstruct the pillars of our knowledge and thus reach truth. Both philosophers agreed on the ambiguous character of ordinary everyday knowledge

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and decided to set forth towards undermining its foundation. Their projects are significantly similar: to undermine the foundation of this doubtful knowledge, we need to begin with a model through which this knowledge is compared. Most scholars, as demonstrated in the subsequent section, tend to agree that the doubt arguments used by Descartes and Al-Ghazali are similar. However, they agree in that their ways out of doubt are radically different as well: while Descartes found his way out of doubt through the *cogito* and so reason, Al-Ghazali ended his philosophical journey as a Sufi in a sheer state of passivity, waiting for the truth to be revealed to him by God. This paper demonstrates this is not the case: Al-Ghazali's belief in reason was never diminished nor questioned, although his writings were overwhelmed to a certain extent by the effects of godly light. Under close textual scrutiny, I show that Al-Ghazali's position was misunderstood, thus revealing his true philosophic nature, not only the Sufi influence.

As for the use of the "phenomenological approach," I define it negatively: it is a-historical, a-theological and anti-reductive. Such a methodological stance will help reconsider an abundance of possibilities that the texts of both philosophers are pregnant with. The Husserlian tradition has allowed us, through various concepts, to uncover some implicit aspects in the writings of both philosophers, such as the natural and the philosophical attitude of the mind, epochè, eidetic vision. The underlying assumption of this approach is that, while the writings of both Descartes and Al-Ghazali are different from that of Husserl, the Husserlian tradition still holds a certain importance in discovering the fabric of their writings and assessing the value of the phenomena they research. As discussed later, these phenomenological concepts help in explicating the relation between consciousness and its objects, as described by both philosophers. Moreover, they also clarify the content of the obscure domain of consciousness.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. I first focus on the movement along the concept of doubt for both philosophers from the beginning until the end (i.e., the final stage of doubt—the stage at which certainty is reached). My argumentations begins by identifying how they define or conceive truth, and then continues by discussing how this conception of truth motivated both, unsurprisingly, to move in the same direction of thinking. While doing so, I deal with doubt on two planes: preliminary and primary. Then, I also outline some conditions for the success of their doubt arguments. Finally, I provide a critical conclusion concerning the reading of both philosophers.

II. The Concept of Certainty

Al-Ghazali and Descartes' conception of truth is strikingly similar. Al-Ghazali's says: "What I seek is knowledge of the 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 sure and certain knowledge is that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor can the mind suppose such a possibility." (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 63) Moreover, Descartes seems to have a similar meaning regarding his conception of truth in the first rule of the method: "Never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its *truth*: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it." (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 120; emphasis added) It is important to notice that both philosophers emphasize in their understanding of truth a basic dichotomy: the object of knowledge, on one hand, and the act of knowing on the other. If we were to pay attention to the terms used to describe such knowledge, then we would identify terms such as evidence, clearness, certainty, assurance, meaning of things, and indubitability. Indeed, these terms imply the understanding of what truth is to these philosophers, making it important to notice that, in this understanding of truth, a special emphasis is placed on the manner in which these objects of knowledge are given to consciousness, described by terms such as, "made so manifest," "presented itself to the mind." Such terms clarify their concern with truth as if it were some form of a *disclosure*, where knowledge becomes certain when the known object discloses its meaning or truth to the *knowing* mind. Without further emphasis, it is clear that their accent is on the nature of the object known rather than the act of knowing, in the sense that the emergence of such an object and its standing before consciousness would not be mistaken as anything else but the truth.

Further, such characteristics of the sought truth can be exemplified by the science of mathematics. Mathematics, according to these philosophers, is the science that contains neither doubt nor deception. Thus, Descartes says: "Above all I delighted in mathematics, because of the certainty and self-evidence of its reasonings" (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 114). Al-Ghazali, agrees:

For if I know that ten is more than three, and then someone were to say: "No,

on the contrary, three is more than ten, as is proved by my turning this stick into a snake”—and if he were to do just that and I were to see him do it, I would not doubt my knowledge because of his feat. The only effect it would have on me would be to make me wonder how he could do such a thing. But there would be no doubt at all about what I knew! (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 63, 64)

Now, it is true that both philosophers value mathematics, but the ground from which they do so is different. For instance, Al-Ghazali's values mathematics in the sense that it provides him a good model for truth, that is to say, if he were to assume an indubitable proposition in any respected field of knowledge, it would be like that of mathematics. Descartes shares this opinion, but emphasizes this point more, in the sense that mathematics became for him the basic concept in his famous project *mathesis universalis*.

III. Removing Preconceptions as a Necessary Step toward Truth

Here, the link between the model of truth, the object of knowledge that discloses itself to the mind, and the acts of knowing which pave the way for pursuing that model are analyzed. A model defined as such plays a very important role, as subsequently demonstrated, in determining the value of any form of directedness the knowing subject has towards the object. The objective to be analyzed here is regarding the definition of truth and how it might lead to the destruction of our ordinary knowledge and preconceived opinions. Let us consider Descartes' example first:

... from my childhood I have been nourished upon letters, and because I was persuaded that by their means one could acquire a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life, I was extremely eager to learn them. But as soon as I had completed the course of study at the end of which one is normally admitted to the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I have gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance. (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 112, 113)

Al-Ghazali went through the same experience:

In the bloom of my youth and the prime of my life, from the time I reached puberty before I was twenty until now, when I am over fifty, I have constantly been diving daringly into the depths of this profound sea [learning] and wading into its deep water like a bold man not like a cautious coward. I would penetrate far into every murky mystery, pounce upon every problem, and dash into every mazy difficulty... the thirst for grasping the real meaning of things was indeed my habit and wont from my early years and in the prime of my life. It was an instinctive, natural disposition placed in my make up by the hands of God Most High...as a result, the fetters of servile conformism fell away from me and inherited beliefs lost their hold on me. (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 62, 63)

It seems that the experience of both philosophers is strikingly similar, and none is without a dramatic content. Descartes, after years of studying, came to realize that he did not gain anything but increased the recognition of his ignorance. Al-Ghazali, too, went through the same experience. As such, the result of going through these experiences, which seems to be natural to any true learning process, is that they felt the need of getting rid of the burden of conformism. Therefore, Al-Ghazali reminds us that the fetters of conformism fell away, and Descartes explains: "I thought that I could do not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at one go" (Descartes 1999, vol.1, 117). By virtue of being involved in the process of acquiring knowledge, with the perpetual aim of reaching the truth, these two philosophers headed in the right direction, freeing themselves from all fetters of conformism. In other words, they understood the aim of eliminating conformism, as well as the means to this aim. However, the question of what does conformism mean is important, for the answer would provide us with an insight into the meaning of the moment when one decides to eliminate conformism.

The meaning of conformism¹ is clearly defined by Al-Ghazali, in that imitation or conformism is conditioned by the ignorance that you are an imitator. As such, at the *moment* you *know* that you are an imitator you are no longer one, as a result of a logical consequence:

¹ Conformism is translated by McCarthy from the Arabic "*taqlid*," which simply means imitation. Therefore, we can say that the follower is "imitating" the Imam, following his words and actions. In the following discussion of "getting rid of imitation or conformism," Al-Ghazali appears radical rather than an orthodox, in fact he surpasses Descartes in his conception of liberation from religious dogmas.

For 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-Ghazali, 2006: 67)

Al-Ghazali believes that it is only through knowledge that we come to abandon knowledge. When we search for wisdom, we encounter numerous obstacles on the way and, strangely enough, these obstacles are called knowledge too by others. As such, it is this latter knowledge that one needs to purge. In other words, we have to eliminate this so-called preconceived knowledge to arrive at the true knowledge. The moment you know this is the moment you start your own unique way to finding truth, not by following other's *doxa*. Therefore, if knowledge is to be the opposite of something, then it must be imitating blindly the others, not simply ignorance. Now, when the awareness of imitation is present, no return to these others' *doxai* is possible. Moreover, as previously implies, it appears that Al-Ghazali is implicitly claiming that knowledge is conditioned by prior knowledge, for we are humans not divinities. As such, the search for knowledge must be triggered by the mode in which we naturally live and learn, for it is impossible for us to assume we were born equipped with self-sufficient intellect. Indeed, we cannot understand Al-Ghazali as completely uprooting all preconceived *doxa*, simply because they are preconceived; rather, I believe he gave this *doxa* some role, namely, an epistemic role: although it hinders us from attaining true knowledge, it provides the principle of removing it, thus the seeming paradox.

IV. Fable of Doubt and Exercising Doubt Arguments

From the preceding two steps, after defining the concept of truth for both philosophers, as well as their understanding the need to eliminate preconceived opinions, we can say that their aim is the true meaning of knowledge or the type of knowledge that is certain, self-evident and indubitable. This sought knowledge, insofar as its certainty is concerned, should be modeled after the science of mathematics. Moreover, as previously mentioned, this aim led both philosophers

to consider of the ways of attaining this goal, coined by both in the form of removing preconceived *doxa*. However, as we scrutinize this *preliminary* method, in which both felt the need of getting rid of *doxai*—which is to be distinguished from the *primary* method, where both philosophers used their famous doubt arguments—we see that this preliminary process is rather complicated. This method must satisfy one condition if it is to be successful in its application, namely, that one must go *through* a stream of ideas, as Heidegger puts it, for the running for shelter fearing the storm of thought is out of thinking. Deciding to eliminate preconceptions is conditioned by prior thought, as we have seen in the analysis of Al-Ghazali. We owe this analysis to Al-Ghazali, and to some extent to Descartes, for he shows us clearly that knowledge is conditioned by knowledge. In other words, it is natural to learn, but after reflecting on our ideas, as a result of such learning, by comparing types of knowledge, looking for their consistency, etc., we realize that something else must take place, namely, freeing one's self from preconceptions. Arriving at the truth is not literally an arrival, as if truth were something revealed to us by some abstract entity, but rather a destructive process through which other thoughts, accepted before as truths, are now eliminated since they do not fulfill the conditions that determine what the truth is.

The condition of eliminating preconceptions as a necessary step towards the truth can be called the *inner* condition, designating the *a priori* situation in which an act of pursuing knowledge is produced. Now, we can also provide an *outer* condition, which is derived from the basic principle or goal both philosophers described at the beginning of the journeys, namely, their conception of truth: eliminating preconceptions as a tool of examining knowledge, not merely for the sake of eliminating them (the essence of skepticism), must be applied successfully to its objectives. This conception is examined at the end of the subsequent section. Henceforth, we must turn our attention to the application of this destructive process or the actual removal of preconceived opinions. This destructive process is in fact encapsulated in the doubt arguments used by both philosophers. I thus consider these arguments on two levels: the first I call the *preliminary* stage of doubt, as distinguished from the *primary* doubts described in the subsequent section. By preliminary doubts I refer to the doubts closely related to the moment of eliminating preconceived *doxa*. They relate to it in that they constitute the moment of coming to an awareness after a state of ignorance, as Descartes would put it. These doubts are the first actual stages of the method. For instance, Al-Ghazali says:

For I saw that the children of Christians always grow 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... consequently, I felt an inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original *fitra* [natural disposition], and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through slavish aping. (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 63; emphasis added)

Moreover, Descartes opines:

So, too, I reflected that we were all children before being men and had to be governed for some time by our appetites and our teachers, which were often opposed to each other and neither of which, perhaps, always gave us the best advise; hence I thought it virtually impossible that our judgments should be as unclouded and firm as they would have been if we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth and if we had always been guided by it alone. (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 117)

Both arguments, of Al-Ghazali and Descartes, are based on the same grounds, for the aim of both is to demonstrate that we, through the natural attitude of the mind, as Husserl coins it, are occupied by many preconceived opinions we take for granted without real questioning. Now, since these arguments clearly show us that we cannot be certain regarding the truth of *doxa*, then it is not reasonable to accept them as indubitable truths. Therefore, we have to move beyond this stage, that is, deepen our doubts.

V. Doubt Arguments and Their Consequences

Doubt, in this stage, is different from the preceding one. For this doubt is more profound and aims to uproot every idea from the mind that bears the label "uncertain." Moving away from the natural attitude of the mind towards a more philosophic one, the demand for truth requires that one must "bracket," that is, suspend all judgments regarding all ideas until their certainty is revealed. The first doubt is the doubt of senses. However, we have to note that the many different doubt arguments provided by Al-Ghazali were given as if there were a dialogue between senses and reason, while this is not the case with Descartes. I consider

these doubts overall, without differentiating the aim they are directed to (i.e., senses or intellect), although I may refer to the aims. I begin with the argument of Al-Ghazali, since he is the true “father” of this method. After defining what truth should be like, he goes on to see whether there is any knowledge that might correspond to his description of truth. In this context, he mentions:

Now that despair has befallen me, the only hope I have of acquiring an insight into obscure matters is to start from things that perfectly clear, namely sense-data and the self-evident truths...with great earnestness, therefore, I began to reflect on my sense-data to see if I could make myself doubt them. This protracted effort to induce doubt finally brought me to the point where my soul would not allow me to admit safety from error even in the case of my sense-data.... whence comes your reliance on sense-data? The strongest of senses is the sense of sight...sight also looks at a star and sees it as something small; then geometrical proofs demonstrate that it surpasses the earth in size. (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 64)

Descartes offers the same argument in many of his works: “... the first reason for such doubts [senses] is that from time to time we have caught out the senses when they were in error, and it is prudent never to place too much trust in those who have deceived us even once. (Descartes 1999, vol. 1, 194) Now, if we were to speak of the very example given by Al-Ghazali, we would find it in the first *Meditation* “senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are *very small or in the distance*” (Descartes 1999, vol. 2, 17; emphasis added). Another argument given by Descartes to demonstrate that senses are deceivers is his famous argument on dreaming: “... in our sleep we regularly seem to have sensory perception of, or to imagine, countless things which do not exist anywhere; and if our doubts on the scale just outlined, there seem to be no marks by means of which we can with certainty distinguish being asleep from being awake.” (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 194) The very same argument, again, is given by Al-Ghazali in his doubting rational-data: “Don’t you see that when you are asleep you believe certain things and imagine certain circumstances and believe they are fixed and lasting and entertain no doubts about that being their status? Then you wake up and know that all your imaginings and beliefs were groundless and unsubstantial.” (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 64) The famous Cartesian argument of doubt, omnipotent god or malicious demon, in accordance with the different

translations of the *meditations* and *principles* is used to prove the same notion: “Now we do not know whether he [omnipotent God] may have wished to make us beings of the sort who are always deceived even in matters which seem to us supremely evident; for such constant deception seems no less a possibility than the occasional deception.” (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 194)

Such a god, devil, evil spirit, or malicious demon is, again, present in Al-Ghazali’s arguments. The doubt argument he offers is pictured, as previously mentioned, as if there were a dialogue between senses and reason, each of which is trying to refute the argument of the other, while the “I” is standing in the middle contemplating the debate:

Then the sense-data spoke up [to the “I”]: “what assurance have you that your reliance on rational-data is not like your reliance on sense-data?” Indeed, you used to have confidence in me. Then the reason-judge [reason] came along and gave me the lie. But 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, just as the reason—judge revealed itself and gave the lie to the judgments of sense. The mere fact of the nonappearance of that further perception does not prove the impossibility of its existence. (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 65; emphasis added).

It is that this judge, which is beyond the perception of reason and is also hidden, has the basic character and function of what Descartes called the malicious demon. This argument, in particular, refutes both sense- and rational-data because of the supposition of something that supersedes them altogether. The last argument provided by Descartes can hardly find any equivalent in Al-Ghazali, which concerns doubting mathematical proofs (although Al-Ghazali spoke of some dangers arising from the complete reliance on mathematical demonstrations). This Cartesian argument, I believe, is the most genuine in his written corpus, for it reveals to us Descartes the mathematician, at least before beginning his philosophical journey of doubt: “One reason for this [doubting mathematical demonstrations] is that we have sometimes seen people make mistakes in such matters and accept as most certain and self-evident things which seemed false to us” (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 194). After these textual considerations, we may return to the *successfulness* of the application of doubt to its objects. I believe that a good consideration of this issue should consider

historical circumstances, but this is not a primary concern of this paper.

No reader of Descartes would deny that Descartes was cautious in choosing almost every word in his works in fear of the religious authority; indeed, this was the case for most thinkers of his time. However, apart from this historical consideration, the question of how we can evaluate the successfulness of the methodic doubt in its application to its objects remains to be answered. In truth, the warnings that Descartes put forward regarding areas that cannot be reached by doubt make it difficult for us to believe that Descartes was in fact successful in applying his method. Precautions such as that one man performs the method that is *not* acceptable to be practiced by everyone (see Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 117), that the aim of the method being reforming his own thoughts only (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 118), and, most importantly, the provisional moral code given in the third section of the *discourse* are evident examples that doubt cannot extend to some object, such as the laws and customs of a country or the religion he was taught from his childhood. Descartes seems to have considered there are things open to doubt, while others are not. Hence, one can conclude that Descartes failed to realize the *radicalism inherent* to the very nature of doubt *qua* doubt. For as we saw above, doubt is *linked* by its nature to a moment in which one discovers he/she is not imitating. As such, at the moment you discover you are not imitating, you begin your radical movement toward *freedom* from the burden of *doxa* or preconceived opinions, which are open to countless doubts. As far as Al-Ghazali and Descartes are concerned, this moment of doubt, that is, radicalized awareness, can easily be found in their works. However, since doubt is an act of the consciousness, through which it expresses itself and reaches its objects, according to the phenomenological analysis of the moment of knowledge, a closer look must be given to the object upon which doubt is practiced. Moving away from the practice of doubt, or the directedness of doubt towards its objects necessarily means some kind of insufficiency regarding understanding what doubt is *meant* to be as an act of consciousness. As such, it relates by its intentional nature to its objects. Al-Ghazali, an orthodox as he was, an Imam of traditionalism, as we shall see, appears to be the opposite of Descartes. In the compressed text of Al-Ghazali we find the most radical lines in *Al-Munqidh*:

As a result [of doubt], the fitters of servile conformism fell away from me, and *inherited beliefs* lost their hold on me, when I was still quite young” (emphasis added) (Al-Ghazali 2006, 63). He says also “When these thoughts [doubts]

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 cognitions. So if, as in my case, these were inadmissible, it was impossible to construct a proof. (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 66)

The consistency of Al-Ghazali's thought is both unique and radical. The dramatic picture he offers was *natural* from its beginning and so it destroyed everything in his mind. Consequently, he was unable to remove his doubt, for to get out of doubt he needed a proof, which is a combination of thoughts already demolished, since these thoughts originate either from senses or reason. The development of Al-Ghazali's thoughts on doubt was not a series of events known beforehand or a "fable," as Descartes once labeled his doubt; rather, it was a real experience reflected in his spontaneous consistency. This point indeed has not been noticed by many of those who read Al-Ghazali, since they read him from a historical perspective, as a medieval thinker and an Imam of orthodoxy or a Sufi who would surrender to godly given truths. They forget to see Al-Ghazali in his proper context, namely, as a representative of the *human* mystery of knowledge in its turn from the natural attitude of the mind to the philosophical.

VI. The Way Out of Doubt

Doubt must come to an end or we fall into the trap of skepticism. Here, the topic under examination is how both philosophers reached an end concerning their doubts. Descartes' move towards his "first piece of truth," or *cogito ergo sum* (when I doubt, undoubtedly, there is no doubt that I doubt) is evident. The *cogito* is a clear and distinct idea that comes to the mind from the mind itself (i.e., from within). Therefore, he can claim that he has an indubitable knowledge of his thoughts. The term thought or soul is defined as "everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it. Hence, thinking is to be defined here not merely with understanding, willing and imagining, but also with sensory experience" (Descartes, 1999: vol. 1, 195).

Descartes subsequently makes his second famous metaphysical move: he tries to get out of the *cogito* or self-awareness by his idea of God as both. First, God is a perfect innate idea, the source of which is not the *ego* for it lacks such perfection. God himself must be the source of this idea and must exist since he is

perfect, and existence is counted among perfections. Second, since God is perfect, he cannot be a deceiver, and if one has a strong inclination to consider the surrounding world as existing, then it *is* and God is the grantor of this certainty. At this stage, Descartes reveals his own goals by claiming that, since the existence of the world is real, we can construct a science and knowledge of that world, provided we begin from clear and distinct ideas and, henceforth, deduce from these ideas their application, which enables us to be the masters of nature.²

As previously mentioned, removing doubt in the case of Al-Ghazali is not possible by virtue of proof, since any proof is a combination of thoughts already destroyed due to his destructive version of doubt arguments. Accordingly, the idea of a proof itself is inadmissible. Al-Ghazali's way out of doubt, contrary to Descartes', was found in the "*effect of godly light*":

This malady was mysterious and it lasted for nearly two months. During that time I was skeptic in fact, but not in utterance or doctrine. 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 this 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-Ghazali, 2006: 66)

Al-Ghazali's crisis was a subject of countless discussions, but the treatment of this subject would be beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I focus on what he meant by the effect of a godly light being put in his chest. A traditional reading of Al-Ghazali reminds us that he was in fact a Sufi toward the end of his life and, according to this reading, *Al-Munqidh* must be read as a document that refuted different sciences in their ways to the truth, except for sophism. As such, Moghniya (1973) argues that "the aim of Al-Ghazali through his fruitional experience and the divine light is to show the testimony of the kind heart to what it sees and feels; that what it sees and feels is truth" (261). Al-Najjar (1992) seems to agree on this traditional reading as well:

² We are reminded here of the tree of philosophy, as well as part four of the *discourse on the method*.

Thus, Al-Ghazali claimed in the end that his fruitional experience or inspiration is the most important source of knowledge after divine revelation. It is a god given gift to the heart of the Sufi, if he [the Sufi] is ready to receive such a great inspiration. Such knowledge, which is based in the heart, is accompanied by an internal feeling of certainty; and the light of certainty is to be found in the believers and those who are knowledgeable. When such light overwhelms the heart everything becomes clear and transparent (109).

The meaning of Al-Ghazali's use of the term "divine light" is the most difficult to approach or explain, essentially because explaining is a way of interpreting something that is given to our consciousness through its different acts. When such knowledge is expressed in language, it is called ordinary or a *thingly language*. Now we can, to some extent, understand why Al-Ghazali justified his claim negatively: that he regained his health after this sickness by *neither* a proof nor an argument, since this light being put in his chest by God is neither an object of senses nor intellect and, therefore, such light was difficult to be explained or, more appropriately, impossible to be communicated, simply because if we want to explain it, we have to do so through a language which is not "designed" to express this realm, the realm of *meta-things*. The divine light, by its very definition, transcends the natural attitude of the mind. The truth of sophism, as we might know it, is not the truth that can be affirmed or denied by proof or argument. One cannot criticize such truth from the viewpoint Sufis admittedly undermine, namely, theoretical reasoning. Truth, according to them, is knowledge that comes through *practice*, that is, fruitional experience. Similarly, their truth cannot be studied but only exercised.

I now reiterate the comparison between Descartes and Al-Ghazali in their point of departure from doubt. Descartes, as previously outlined, found the way out of doubt through his *cogito*, while Al-Ghazali found it in the godly light that was put in his chest. What we hitherto argued is that Descartes and Al-Ghazali are different in their departure from doubt. I believe that arriving at such a conclusion is insufficient and, thus, I offer an alternative reading of Al-Ghazali, different from the traditional one mentioned earlier. Let us begin by asking a few questions. Is it true that Al-Ghazali's doubt destroys, while being performed, the existence of the soul? Is it accurate to say that the soul, in Al-Ghazali's context, is *given* without the least doubt or is it beyond doubt? I argue that Al-Ghazali *presupposes*

the soul as an indubitable fact, while the entire process of doubt is performed by uprooting everything in the mind. I believe that his doubt arguments did, in fact, undermine all foundations of knowledge, save that given immediately, namely, reason or soul, and cannot be doubted. In this latter sense, the Cartesian *cogito* offers a picture that can hardly be distinguished from that of Al-Ghazali. One might remember the Cartesian assertion that the *cogito* was not a result of syllogism, but an *immediate intuition*. This was clear from Descartes' reply to Gassendi, but more importantly from his reply to Father Mersenne, who criticized him by claiming:

From the fact that we are thinking it does not seem to be entirely certain that we exist. For in order to be certain that you are thinking you must know what thought or thinking is, and what your existence is; but since you do not yet know what these things are, how can you know that you are thinking or that you exist? Thus, neither when you say "I am thinking" nor when you add "therefore, I exist" do you really know what you are saying. (Descartes, 1999: vol. 3, 278; emphasis added)

This was a harsh criticism of Descartes. Mersenne seems to be saying that, if Descartes is really committed to his method of doubt, why did he doubt not the concept of existence altogether, thought, or even the method itself. Mersenne's criticism must be understood within this context, his statement being concluded as follows: "Thus, neither when you say 'I am thinking' nor when you add 'therefore, I exist' do you really know what you are saying." When Descartes was confronted with this objection, his reply was:

It is true that no one can be certain that he is thinking or that he exists unless he knows what thought is and what existence is. But this does not require reflective knowledge or the kind of knowledge that is acquired by means of demonstrations; still less does it require knowledge of reflective knowledge... it is quite sufficient that we should know it by that internal awareness which always precedes reflective knowledge. This inner awareness of one's thought and existence is so innate in all men that, although we may pretend that we do not have it if we are overwhelmed by preconceived opinions and pay more attention to words than to their meanings, we cannot in fact fail to have it. (Descartes, 1999: vol. 3, 285; emphasis added)

Mersenne's objections are far stronger than Descartes' replies, which seem to appeal, wrongly, to commonsense, as if he assumes that this inner awareness is clear to all people—this, in fact, might raise questions. However, one must note that the difficulty arising in the Cartesian context is partly due to the destructive doubt arguments he used prior to his arrival to the *cogito*. Although the exploration of this difficulty is fruitful and takes us to the core of Descartes' thought, it is beyond the purpose of this study. This Cartesian picture of the nature of thought being discovered solely through an internal awareness—an internal awareness that will later become the seat of knowing God—is similar to Al-Ghazali's conceptions. In the following, I explain these two points of Al-Ghazali in details: the immanence of the soul and it being the principle of knowing God. A comprehensive theory of the soul in Al-Ghazali's writings are found in some of his other works, but since my aim is to study *Al-munqidh*, I confine myself to its account. In the most difficult and controversial passage in *Al-munqidh**, Al-Ghazali says:

The aim of this account [lit. Story] is to emphasize that one should be most diligent in seeking the truth until he finally comes to seeking the unseekable. For primary truths are unseekable, because they are present in the mind; and when what is present is sought, it is lost and hides itself. But one who seeks the unseekable cannot subsequently be accused of negligence in seeking what is seekable.³ (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 67)

To properly understand this text, we must realize that the reference in this passage is being made to *primary truths*—as opposed from minor truths given by the natural attitude of the mind—such as the soul or God, but with an emphasis on the former as the seat of knowing the latter. Now, Al-Ghazali urges everyone to do their best to reach the truth, meaning that one should go through the entire process of doubt to arrive at a distinction between what is relative in this contingent world and what is absolute in us. It is only when you suspend judgment, perform a phenomenological *epochè*, and put the entire natural world

³ This following passage was claimed to be “odd” by some translators, in addition to some of the commentators, save McCarthy, whose translation is being used here.

between brackets through doubting, that you come to realize that you stand on solid ground—the grounds of the unseekable, which can be discovered neither by senses nor the intellect in the natural mode of existence. Things unseekable by the intellect and senses are distinguished by their very nature from those perceived by these two faculties. Indeed, they are unseekable because they are in the sphere of immanence. Now, what is immanent can be attained neither by senses nor the intellect because, thanks to doubt, they are open to doubt. Therefore, one cannot approach this sphere of immanence as if approaching things out there in the world. If it happened that we approached this sphere of immanence as a thingly sphere, we are apt to be misled, for the sphere of immanence requires a specific method of approaching. Al-Ghazali's paragraph above is pregnant with a paradox: the soul is present, but although present, it tends to hide itself and become lost if it is to be approached as an ordinary thing in the natural attitude of the mind. This idea may be clarified by the metaphor of the sun: we see the sun, we are certain that it is there, it is present, but its very nature hides it from our eyes, namely, its strong shining light. Light, by virtue of which everything is known, is the very reason its nature is hidden. Similarly, the soul is present but hides itself when we look at it as an object of senses. The sphere of immanence is the sphere that we must be seeking and devoting our life to because of its worth, and not the sphere of contingency and relativity.

From the above quote, Al-Ghazali seems to believe the soul is present and is not seekable in the manner of seeking any other object: its mode of givenness is the reason it is distinguished from objects of the outer doubtful world. Indeed, the reading of the dialogue between senses and reason or the judges of senses and reason, as provided by Al-Ghazali, and the refutation of each of them to the other indicate clearly that the soul was not an object to be doubted. Instead, this given soul is the source from which all other forms of knowledge are judged and ordered. The overall picture looks as though the soul was standing amid this debate, longing for the truth, which cannot be seated save in the soul itself. Now, since the soul is present and is something cannot be doubted given its presence in the sphere of immanence, the question is: where does the idea of God come from? According to Al-Ghazali, our knowledge of God is based on the soul. He further tells us that it became clear to him “that man is formed of a body and a heart-and by the ‘heart’ I mean the essence of man’s spirit which is the *seat of the knowledge of God*, not the flesh which man has in common with corpse and beast” (Al-Ghazali 2006, 101; emphasis added).

Hitherto, Al-Ghazali's account seems to be similar to that of Descartes: Descartes began by doubting everything that can be doubted, arriving later at the immediate presence of the *cogito* as an indubitable proposition. Then, from this presence of the soul he deduced the existence of God; this discovery led him to believe in the idea of God as the most perfect being, and advanced the ontological argument through which existence becomes one of God's perfections. There is a similarity in the sequence of the method of both philosophers: Al-Ghazali believed in the immediate *givenness* of his soul and that this is the "seat of the knowledge of god" as did Descartes in the immediate awareness of his *Cogito* and, therefore, God. However, there is a difference in the role of the human reason itself. According to Descartes, the knowledge of reason can be justified even after doubting reason, while Al-Ghazali considers that Reason, once opened to doubt, can never become a reliable source of attaining true knowledge. Albertini (2005) agrees that this is an important difference between Descartes and Al-Ghazali: the "difference has to do with al-Ghazali never doubting his own self, in the sense of questioning his very existence in the way the Descartes did in his Meditations... These lines [of doubting one's self] could never have been written by al-Ghazali" (7). I do agree with Albertini's claim above, consider that the bigger problem lies in what she omitted, that is, one has to recall the difficulties with which Descartes was confronted as a result of such a choice of doubting one's self.

First, there is the difficulty discussed earlier, which was raised by Descartes' contemporaries, such as Father Mersenne and Gassendi. When Descartes embarked upon his project of doubting everything, including the self, he was faced with a harsh criticism from Mersenne and Gassendi: "since you do not yet know what these things are, how can you know that you are thinking or that you exist? Thus, neither when you say 'I am thinking' nor when you add 'therefore, I exist' do you really know what you are saying."

Second, another difficulty is related to what came to be known later as the "Cartesian Circle," which springs from Descartes' attempt to doubt the self and Descartes' proof of the reliability of clear and distinct ideas taking as premise God's existence as a non-deceiver. As such, Descartes' proof of God's existence presupposes the reliability of clear and distinct ideas.

The third difficulty was put forward by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl: although Descartes came to be known as the founder of the sphere of immanence, of consciousness, he was at the same time the one to escape from it.

In Husserl's words: "In a certain sense, the historical significance of the Cartesian meditation no doubt lies in the discovery of this kind of evidence. But for Descartes, to discover and to abandon were the same" (1999, 66). Husserl points out Descartes' search for clear and distinct ideas, which he first found in the sphere of evidence or consciousness, and abandoned later when he attempted to find the proper guarantee for such ideas. Here, Descartes, according to Husserl, was ready for his departure from philosophy to transform the nature of his undertaking into a theological one.

It seems that Al-Ghazali could foresee the difficulties in the way of doubting the self as Descartes did. Therefore, he opened the door for another human faculty: the heart or the purity of heart. He himself cannot provide us with any positive description of this heart-experience without the danger of being misunderstood. At this juncture, he advances a poetry line:

There was what was of what I do not mention
So think well of it, and ask for no account! (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 57)

The Sufi fruitional experience is so individualistic and cannot represent the grounds on which science could be erected. However, it is important to note that Al-Ghazali's form of Sufism is unique, since it criticizes and reforms the nature of the Sufi experience itself:

The state of drunkenness which is similar to that of the Sufi can easily lead to individualistic immature states, and so it is the habit of Sufi to tell his own states alone—from hence it is immature. When the Sufi is led to irrationality during his state of ecstasy, it is his duty to return to the judge of reason...Al-Ghazali believes that God does not uncover any truth to the Sufi except that which the Sufi's reason can understand and recognize. (Alfalahi, 2003: 163).

Therefore, God, according to Al-Ghazali, *cannot* reveal something that is self-contradictory for instance. Al-Ghazali's Sufi experience was never illogical or contradictory to the laws of Reason. It is true that almost all Sufis admitted the limitations of reason and its inherent inability to reach the truth, but Al-Ghazali seems to be opening the door for an unfamiliar form of rationality—a rationality, similar to that of Kant, which admits the limitations of the mind itself. His

rationality is established on the basic laws of reason, but at the same time realizes its own limitations, and thus it paves the way to the neighboring fruitional experience that begins with establishing doubt, confusion, and uncertainty as a legitimate method to truth and *meaning*. Since the search for meaning is an experience open to an unlimited number of perspectives, it becomes unacceptable to adhere to one form/kind of truth that is being dictated by another. In this context, the search for meaning becomes the very sign of the dynamic human life.

However, Al-Ghazali's message after this tormenting experience was not read well by Descartes, as the message was never about sound arguments to prove the existence of the soul or God, or whether there is a *cogito* or not, but, simply, about the importance of a *genuine* experience: "How great the difference there is between your *knowing* the definitions and causes and conditions of health and satiety and your *being* healthy and sated"⁴ (Al-Ghazali, 2006: 90). It is easy to talk about truth but difficult to live it. Al-Ghazali was convinced until the end of his life that the Sufis are masters of practicing truth and, above all, he believed that they are the ones who deserve it.

VII. Conclusion

This paper emphasized the similarities of the doubt arguments used by both Descartes and Al-Ghazali, and also established their differences which can be found in their departure from doubt. A greater emphasis was put on Al-Ghazali's departure from doubt, as the traditional reading of the philosopher rendered him a Sufi, who through his fruitional experience and in sheer passivity, was waiting for God to cast knowledge in his chest. This paper provides an alternative reading to Al-Ghazali that would respect the high value he ascribed to reason throughout his entire corpus. On one hand, I argued that textual scrutiny does not really support this traditional reading of the philosopher. On the other hand, I posited that Al-Ghazali was aware of the limitations of reason and found himself compelled to look for another faculty that might help him reach his truth. In fact, it is this awareness itself that led him, possibly unintentionally, to avoid these difficulties with which Descartes later faced as a result of the criticism from his

⁴ Emphasis added in McCarthy's translation, and is nowhere to be found in the Arabic manuscript.

contemporaries. The reading presented here suggests that Al-Ghazali's form of Sufism is a unique one that values the laws of logic and reason, while also conditioning all divine revelations and rejecting them if they do not conform to such conditions. However, it is important to note that the way to truth as described by Al-Ghazali is *not*, in fact, a pure philosophical path since it is mingled with Sufism. Al-Ghazali's doctrine must end at the same point he started from: his ego. That is, all truths, being discovered by this ego after its fruitional experience, are discoverable in the sphere of immanence alone. As such, there are no objective means through which these truths can be communicated. Any criticism to Al-Ghazali that takes its line of thought from this quasi-solipsist view is one, I believe, he was probably aware of and to which he might have had no reply to.

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