

## CHAPTER 4



# “LIVING IN NEGLIGENT EASE”: EVIDENCE FOR AL-GHAZĀLĪ’S CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE IN HIS *IQTİŞĀD FĪ AL-I‘TIQĀD*

*D. Morgan Davis*

I wish to express my regard for S. Kent Brown, whose example of faith, scholarship, and goodwill have inspired and blessed me in myriad ways.

Abū Hamīd Muḥammad al-Ghazālī is by all accounts a pivotal figure in the history of Islamic thought. Born in 1058 and educated in northern Persia, he proved to be a precocious student. Eventually he was attracted to Baghdad, capital of the ‘Abbasid empire and the intellectual center of gravity of his time. There, in 1091, he was appointed by the Caliph’s minister, Niẓām al-Mulk, to head the foremost legal school in the realm. But al-Ghazālī was more than a brilliant legal mind. He mastered a number of intellectual disciplines, making his mark on all of them through the numerous treatises he generated over a lifetime.<sup>1</sup> These cover a broad range of subjects—including

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I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for comments that helped me to clarify a number of points in this essay.

1. For a succinct catalogue of al-Ghazālī’s works, see George F. Hourani, “A Revised Chronology of Ghazali’s Writings,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (1984): 289–302. For a more recent and very thorough treatment of al-Ghazālī’s oeuvre and his significance to Islamic intellectual history, see Frank Griffell, *al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

philosophy, theology, and mysticism, in addition to law—and his autobiography is one of the most intimate and compelling portraits of an intellectual’s search for truth and authentic faith to be found anywhere in world literature. From our vantage today, al-Ghazālī’s most lasting and therefore significant contributions were not his legal teachings but those that pointed out the fallacies of thinkers who, according to al-Ghazālī, had gone too far in accommodating pure Islamic ideals and Qur’anic teachings to the philosophies of the Greeks. His later writings that argued for the union of mind, heart, and body in matters of faith—the Islamic concept of *niyya*, or right intention—challenged and deepened understandings of what it meant to live their faith. His writings in this vein still carry much weight, I believe, because al-Ghazālī famously lived what he taught. Forsaking the worldly fame and prosperity that he had achieved, he departed Baghdad in order to pursue an intensely personal and spiritual path. The focus of this essay is to point out how one of al-Ghazālī’s lesser-known works, *al-Iqtisād fī al-‘itiqād* (Moderation in Belief),<sup>2</sup> connects to his momentous decision to renounce his post at the law school in Baghdad and how it yields tantalizing clues about his state of mind as he contemplated a radical change of life. In order to appreciate this connection, however, it will be useful first to briefly summarize a few key points of his biography and situate the writing of *al-Iqtisād* within that history.

### Epistemological Crisis

In his autobiography, *al-Munquidh min al-dalāl* (Deliverance from Error),<sup>3</sup> al-Ghazālī writes about an important formative experience—an epistemological crisis—that took place while he was still a student. He tells of an early, God-given “thirst for grasping the real meaning of things,” so that when he was “still quite

2. Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī al-‘itiqād*, ed. A. Çubukçü and H. Atay (Ankara, 1962).

3. The English translation of *al-Munquidh* cited in this essay is Richard J. McCarthy, ed. and trans., *al-Ghazali: Deliverance from Error* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998). All quotations from the *Iqtisād* in this essay are my translation from the Arabic.

young” he became unwilling to blindly accept inherited beliefs simply on the basis of authority. “For,” he says, “I saw 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.”<sup>4</sup> It became al-Ghazālī’s goal to critically separate out the true from the false or dubious of the received beliefs that people held from their parents or religious leaders. To do this, he determined that he would not accept any belief on the basis of authority or surmise but would rather rely only upon “sense-data and the self-evident truths.” But then he began to question whether even these seemingly certain sources of knowledge were as unassailable as they at first appeared. “With great earnestness,” he writes, “I began to reflect on my sense-data to see if I could make myself doubt them.”<sup>5</sup>

By noticing such phenomena as the sundial’s shadow that appears to stand still and yet over time proves to be in constant motion, or a star that appears tiny yet can be proven geometrically to be very distant and great in size, al-Ghazālī came to the point where he admitted:

My reliance on sense-data has also become untenable. Perhaps, therefore, I can rely only on those rational data which belong to the category of primary truths, such as our asserting that “Ten is more than three,” and “One and the same thing cannot be simultaneously affirmed and denied,” and “One and the same thing cannot be incipient and eternal, existent and nonexistent, necessary and impossible.”<sup>6</sup>

Al-Ghazālī’s epistemological doubts reached a crisis when he came to question whether even this last pillar of knowledge—self-evident truths—could survive the thought experiment that pitted one’s

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4. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 54-55.

5. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 56.

6. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 56.

confidence in the “reality” of dreams against that of one’s waking hours:

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. So while 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.<sup>7</sup>

At this point, al-Ghazālī says he lost confidence even in logic and the power of the so-called self-evident truths to impart knowledge that was secure against all doubt. He tried, he says, to construct a proof for the efficacy of a priori truths in the waking state, but he had to admit that “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 the proof.” He seemed stuck, and for nearly two months he continued to write and speak as though he were as certain as he had always been of his beliefs, but inwardly, he writes, “I was a skeptic.”<sup>8</sup> His faith in his ability to know *anything* with certainty had been shaken.

According to al-Ghazālī, the resolution to this crisis of faith came—and could only have come—through divine intervention. Al-Ghazālī reports that, in the end, no proof or other argument

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7. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 57.

8. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 57.

resolved the issue, but “a light which God Most High cast into [his] breast.”<sup>9</sup> This was not a rational resolution to his crisis, but a spiritual one. Al-Ghazālī affirms that the return of his confidence in the relevance of sense-data and of logical reasoning to the quest for knowledge came because of a divine assurance that they were valid—a divine assurance which he then took to constitute an additional source of certain knowledge. Some truths were available through sense perception, others through logical reasoning, and others through spiritual means—the revelations of God to prophets and divine light cast into the hearts of sincere seekers of truth generally. This addition by al-Ghazālī of revelation/inspiration to sense perception and intellectual reason as a valid epistemic mode was a serious matter for him. He did not see it as merely auxiliary to other forms of gaining knowledge, but as affording access to a certain domain of truth that reason and sense perception by themselves simply could not reach. Unaided, reason and sense perception could not reliably intuit metaphysical truths in the first place. The most that could be expected of them was that they might confirm and flesh out the logical ramifications of certain metaphysical truths *after* these were made known by revelation/inspiration. This position set the stage for al-Ghazālī's famous attack on the thinking of the Muslim philosophers—the *falāsifah*—who subscribed to many Aristotelian doctrines about God and his relationship to the world that, in al-Ghazālī's view, patently contradicted the plain teaching of the revelations of Muḥammad.

Early in his career at Baghdad, al-Ghazālī set about familiarizing himself with the teachings and methods of the philosophers. He wrote a book, *Maqāṣid al-falāsifah* (The Aims of the Philosophers), summarizing their teachings in order to be sure he understood their positions and arguments in their strongest forms. Having laid this groundwork, he then set out to show where the philosophers' inordinate admiration for Greek thought had led them to privilege

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9. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 57.

reason over revelation and had blinded them to the logical problems inherent in some of their conclusions. Al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifah* (Incoherence of the Philosophers)<sup>10</sup> was a devastating critique of Hellenistic-style philosophizing within Islam. It was also a warning to others about the dangers of following reason and sense perception—which were invaluable in their proper place—into the metaphysical realm, to which those tools simply did not have adequate access. Using their own methods against them, al-Ghazālī showed where the *falāsifah* had arrived at positions that were logically problematic and blatantly at odds with the prophetic teachings of the Qur'ān. The *falāsifah* followed Aristotle in his doctrine of an uncreated, eternal world; of a Creator so wholly other than his creation that he could have no direct awareness or knowledge of any particular aspect of it; and of the fundamental baseness of the body that dissolves at death, not to be resurrected, freeing the mind at last to contemplate pure being. The Qur'ān, on the other hand, affirmed a God who created the heavens and the earth, who knew his creatures and their doings, and who would judge them in the day of bodily resurrection.

The *Tahāfut* was a game-changing attack on the philosophers that could not be ignored by any who would come after, but al-Ghazālī seems to have recognized that it also was in danger of creating the impression that he was out to discredit the use of sense-data and logic altogether, which was not his intent. These did have their place, and so, in the *Tahāfut* he stated that his intention was next to write a constructive work of theology—one that would demonstrate the proper use of reason in tandem with revelation to flesh out a true understanding of God and the world. That work, as it turns out, would be *al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād*.<sup>11</sup>

10. Michael E. Marmura, ed. and trans., *Al-Ghazālī: The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

11. This point is not entirely uncontroversial, since *al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād* is not the title that al-Ghazālī originally said in the *Tahāfut* he would write, though he did eventually write a treatise by that title—*Qawā'id al-'aqā'id* (Principles of Belief).

The *Iqtisād* has been called al-Ghazālī's "chief work of dogmatics,"<sup>12</sup> but in addition to the chronological placement of the *Iqtisād* soon after the *Tahāfut* and its probable role in al-Ghazālī's program of scholarly writing, personal events in the life of al-Ghazālī also form a very important background to the *Iqtisād*.

### Crisis of Conscience

In July 1095, at the height of his academic prestige as the head lecturer in legal theory at the Niẓāmiyya school of jurisprudence in Baghdad, al-Ghazālī apparently had some kind of breakdown, which led him to conclude that he must leave his post. By his own account this was precipitated by convictions within his own heart that he was living a lie—that while outwardly he seemed to be the model of Muslim piety, in moments of pure honesty with himself he knew that much of what he did and had achieved was merely for the sake of public adulation and personal renown.

I attentively considered my circumstances, and I saw that I was immersed in attachments, which had encompassed me from all sides. I also considered my activities—the best of them being public and private instruction—and saw that in them I was applying myself to sciences unimportant and useless in the pilgrimage to the hereafter. Then I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was

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Nevertheless, Michael E. Marmura has convincingly argued, on the basis of George F. Hourani's revised chronology of al-Ghazālī's works, that the *Iqtisād*, rather than the *Qawā'id*, is really the work that best fulfills al-Ghazālī's commitment to write a work of theology. This is so, Marmura argues, because it follows closely after the *Tahāfut* chronologically and because al-Ghazālī actually states in his preface to the *Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād* that he is writing it to establish "principles of belief"—that is, "*qawā'id al-aqā'id*." As T. Gianotti has nicely put it, by using this phrase in opening his *Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād*, al-Ghazālī fulfills "the spirit of the promise" he made in the *Tahāfut*, if not "the letter." See Michael E. Marmura, "Ghazali's *al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād*: Its Relation to *Tahāfut al-Falasifa* and to *Qawā'id al-aqā'id*," *Aligarh Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 10 (2004): 1-12; Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazālī's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul: Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology of the Iḥyā'* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 68 n. 2.

12. W. Montgomery Watt, "al-Ghazālī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., 1040.

not directed purely to God, but rather was instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige. So I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire unless I set about mending my ways.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear from al-Ghazālī's concern with worldly "attachments" in this and other statements, that he had already begun to be versed in the discipline of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, while he was teaching in Baghdad. It seems that he found this path appealing though challenging, for he clearly found himself at odds with it in his professional lifestyle. In order to "mend his ways," al-Ghazālī became convinced that he would have to free himself of selfish attachments by actually renouncing them, including his academic position. For some time, however, he could not bring himself to do so. He vacillated between the allure of his prestigious seat and the pull of his conscience until, apparently, the conflict within him grew so intense that he became physically incapacitated, unable to speak, let alone to teach. As a result of this breakdown, he says, he finally made arrangements to leave. Under the guise of going on the hajj, he embarked on a spiritual quest that led him first to Damascus, where he studied under a Sufi master; then to Jerusalem, where he meditated in the cave under the Dome of the Rock; and eventually on to Mecca (twice) before returning to his home, now an adept of Sufi thought and practice. He would go on to write a number of mystical works as well as the *Iḥya' ulūm al-dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), a multivolume masterpiece that remains to this day one of the most influential treatises on Sufism and its proper place within the faith and practice of Muslims.

### **The Evidence from *al-Iqtīṣād***

But let us return to the moment of al-Ghazālī's crisis of conscience and the information that might be gleaned from the *Iqtīṣād*

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13. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 78-79.

about his state of mind at that time. Montgomery Watt, following Maurice Bouges, indicates that the *Iqtiṣād* was “probably composed shortly before or shortly after [al-Ghazālī’s] departure from Baghdad [c. 1095].”<sup>14</sup> George Hourani has argued that, along with one other work, the *Mizān al-ʿamal*, the *Iqtiṣād* must have been completed before or during al-Ghazālī’s famous crisis.<sup>15</sup> Hourani plausibly reasons that it was unlikely al-Ghazālī composed the *Iqtiṣād* after he began his journey, “for it is hard to believe that this prosaic piece of *kalām* [dogmatic Islamic theology] was one of the first products of his new life as a Ṣūfī.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, he argues, the likelihood was that *Mizān* was composed even after *Iqtiṣād* and still in the final year before al-Ghazālī left Baghdad. The seeming lack of coherence in *Mizān* might even be an indication of al-Ghazālī’s troubled state of mind at that time.<sup>17</sup> In any event, Hourani argues,

Now that both *Iqtiṣād* and *Mizān* have been placed with some confidence in the period when Ghazālī was approaching or actually immersed in the intense spiritual crisis of his life, the importance of these two works for understanding the evolution of his thought will readily be understood. Both of them therefore deserve more serious studies than they have hitherto received, and they should be read in the context of the author’s revealing account of his state of mind at the time, narrated in *Munqidh [mīn al-ḍalāl]*, 122–30.<sup>18</sup>

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14. Watt, “al-Ghazālī,” 1040.

15. Some scholars have sought to suggest that there were other motives for al-Ghazālī’s sudden departure. These are evaluated in Frank Griffel’s recent and important monograph on al-Ghazālī. He concludes: “There is no testimony for al-Ghazālī’s motivations other than the words we quoted from [his autobiography], and further conjecture disconnects itself from textual evidence. In the end, the reasons for al-Ghazālī’s ‘crisis’ in Baghdad are less interesting than the results.” See Griffel, *al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 43.

16. Hourani, “Revised Chronology,” 294.

17. Hourani, “Revised Chronology,” 295.

18. Hourani, “Revised Chronology,” 294.

Though a full treatment of what the *Iqtiṣād* reveals about its author's state of mind at the time he wrote it must be deferred to later studies, two observations beyond those offered by previous scholars can be offered here.

First, the *Iqtiṣād* is written with students in mind. Its organization and tone reflect both a pedagogical and a polemical concern. It is composed as a primer on how to conduct a debate with one's ideological rivals. It is intended not so much for the actual convincing of real opponents but for study by the qualified believer who will one day, ostensibly, present similar arguments in actual debates or contests of ideology. For an audience, al-Ghazālī presumably had in mind his students at the Niẓāmiyya. In the course of his exposition, al-Ghazālī takes positions on a number of basic theological issues, dialectically presenting and then answering challenges to each of his claims—challenges such as had been or might have been raised by an incredulous “opponent.” In most cases, al-Ghazālī is specifically envisioning an opponent either from among the extreme literalists (whom he identifies with the Hashwiyya and their reputation for anthropomorphism), the *falāsifah* (whom we have already mentioned), or the Muʿtazilites (an early school of rationalist theologians with doctrines to which al-Ghazālī's own school, the Ashʿarites, strongly objected). He offers his arguments and rebuttals, taking care to show at key moments that the soundness and superiority of his positions derive from striking a successful balance between reason and revelation. This is the “moderation in belief” for which the *Iqtiṣād* as a whole is named.

Second, early in the *Iqtiṣād*, al-Ghazālī spends a chapter arguing for the importance of the volume he is writing—that the study of God and his relation to his creation is deserving of serious attention, and that to waste time on pointless or frivolous topics while salvation hangs in the balance would be a grave error. It is here that al-Ghazālī makes what is perhaps the most direct allusion to his own state of mind as he composes the *Iqtiṣād*. He says that reports

of prophets coming with signs and wonders, showing evidence that there might indeed be a God who rewards and punishes people with heaven or hell, have the power

to tear peaceful security from the heart and to fill it with fear and trembling and to move it to study and pondering. [They can] snatch [the heart] from peace and stillness, and frighten it with the danger to which one is exposed while living in negligent ease.<sup>19</sup>

This passage bears a strong resonance with the personal account al-Ghazālī gives in the *Munqidh* of his six-month struggle to commit himself fully to the Sufi path of knowledge, a struggle that was underway, as best we can ascertain, when he wrote the passage just cited. Of this time, he writes in the *Munqidh*:

One day I would firmly resolve to leave Baghdad and disengage myself from those circumstances, and another day I would revoke my resolution. . . . Mundane desires began tugging me with their chains to remain as I was, while the herald of faith was crying out: "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 eye-service and fakery! *If you do not prepare now for the afterlife, when will you do so? And if you do not sever these attachments now, then when will you sever them?*

At such thoughts the call would reassert itself and I would make an irrevocable decision to run off and escape. Then Satan would return to the attack and say: "This is a passing state: beware, then, of yielding to it! For it will quickly vanish. Once you have given in to it and given up your present renown and splendid position free from vexation and renounced your secure situation untroubled by the contention

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19. Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtisād*, 6-7.

of your adversaries, your soul might again look longingly at all that—but it would not be easy to return to it!”<sup>20</sup>

In both passages, vexation of spirit while one’s standing before God remains in doubt is the theme. If read in this context, the passage from the *Iqtisād* may be seen as evidence of al-Ghazālī’s sense of spiritual malaise in connection with his growing Sufi convictions—that to *know about* the existence of God and of the punishment or reward of the afterlife was not enough; he was responsible to *do* something about this knowledge by renouncing the world, seeking purity, and obtaining a more direct knowledge of God. “Once all of this has become clear for us,” he continues, as though writing the *Iqtisād* to himself, “we would then undoubtedly be obliged—if we were prudent—to take our precautions and look to our souls and to despise this transitory world in comparison with that other, everlasting realm. Thus, the reasonable man sees to his destiny and is not deceived by his own works.”<sup>21</sup> Surely al-Ghazālī saw himself as this reasonable man. His concern was that he lacked the will to overcome the deception of his own works—his position at the top of the Nizāmiyya law school. But given the strength of his convictions, he must either do so or collapse in a state of cognitive paralysis. As he states in the *Iqtisād*, “There is no other course, once the impulse to find out [about these things] has occurred, than to instigate a quest for salvation.”<sup>22</sup> According to our best estimates, less than a year after writing those words, al-Ghazālī did as he said he must. He quit his academic position, made arrangements for the care of his family, disappeared from the life of renown he had known since he was young, and embarked upon the Sufi path.

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20. McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error*, 79, emphasis added.

21. Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtisād*, 8.

22. Al-Ghazālī, *Iqtisād*, 8.

### Conclusion

Al-Ghazālī is a complex and problematical figure. There is still considerable debate about a number of his positions with respect to the value of Greek-inherited ideas, formal dogmatic theology, theodicy, physical theory, and more. But these academic issues seem prosaic when compared to the compelling and very personal story of al-Ghazālī's own quest for truth and salvation. Written at the very meridian of his spiritual life, certain sections of the *Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād* appear to contain hints of what he was thinking as he neared that moment of crisis. They may be read as poignant meditations upon his own soul's predicament and as prologue to the life-changing decision that he ultimately made to renounce his worldly attainments and to devote himself to God.

*D. Morgan Davis is an assistant research fellow at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.*