

PHILOSOPHY OF AL-GHAZZALI AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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Abstract:

This article provides that the indebtedness of early modern European scholars and theologians to Al-Ghazzali (d.1111 A.D) and his unique philosophical credentials. He has left a vast volume of original works for a long chain of future men for which he is considered “A testimony and ornament for future Islam.” During his life time, he wrote hundreds of original works by dint of sheer labour and studiousness. Al-Ghazzali’s influence was not limited to the Islamic world, for he also had an impact on Christian European thoughts. In the late 11th century A.D and especially in the 12th century, almost all works of Al-Ghazzali had an ever deeper influence on Jewish and Christian theology. Many Jewish and Christian scholars in the modern Europe knew Arabic well, and several of Al-Ghazzali’s works were widely read by them. Thus the impact of Al-Ghazzali is clearly perceptible in the works and thoughts of numerous philosophers and scholars of the early modern Europe.

Key Words:Al-Ghazzali, European Renaissance, University of Naples, St Thomas Aquinas, Al-Munqidh, Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Raymond Martin.

Introduction: Philosophical thought and knowledge theories propounded by Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111 A.D) constituted immense impact in the early Modern West. Whatever the outcome of this struggle, Al-Ghazzali remains one of the most influential philosophers and thinkers in the East as well as the West. His influence was not only confined to Muslims but it extended to Jews and Christians of the West, who found in Al-Ghazzali’s philosophy valuable points and benefited from it. Al-Ghazzali had a profound impact on the subsequent Western scholars.They have laid more emphasize on Ghazzali’s philosophical or mystical dimensions. In modern Europe, unless Ghazzali’s philosophy is presented in the content of contemporary philosophers no fruitful work can be produced. He is, in this respect, not only a philosopher par excellence but fore-runner and anticipatory to different subsequent Western philosophers

Al-Ghazzali and Early Modern Europe

The spirit of investigation, experimentation and research which characterized Arab learning became the hall-mark of Fredrick's court and this marks the beginning of the Italian Renaissance. But his greatest contribution was the founding of the University of Naples" (1224), "the first in Europe to be established by a Royal Charter." In it he deposited a large collection of Arabic manuscripts which included Aristotle, Al-Ghazzali and Ibn Rushd etc., were translated and used in its curriculum; copies of the translations were sent to the universities of Paris and Bologna. Later, these three Universities became the centres of translation works especially on Arabic manuscripts into Latin and other European languages. After that there were a number of Christian luminaries began to taught Arabic language, culture, theology, logic, philosophy, mysticism etc. Imam Al-Ghazzali's, most of the notable works also translated in these Universities and by which the Europeans, Christians and Jews elaborately dealt with the thoughts of Al-Ghazzali. This paved the way for Ghazzalian impact in the west. The University of Naples counted St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 — 1274) among its pupils. Influence of Al-Ghazzali is not only widely acknowledged but admitted by him "*Summa Theologica*" as mentioned earlier.¹

Al-Ghazzali's books were available everywhere in the Muslim East and West during Middle Ages. So far as the Chrisians and Jews of the Medieval Ages were concerned, they too were quite familiar with Al-Ghazzali' books were translated into Latin as earlier as in 12th Century A.D. It was under this influence that Al-Ghazzali's theory of doubt was fully carried in the works of some eminent Jews and christian writers. These events clearly point out that Al-Ghazzali's books on philosophy and sciences were translated in 12th Century A.D onwards in Medieval Europe.

Al-Ghazzali and Modern Philosophers in the West

Imam Al-Ghazzali's impact was not only confined to Medieval European Philosophers and scholars but also extended to the Modern Philosophers, Scholars and Thinkers as well. Descartes has accepted overall impact of Al-Ghazzali in almost all aspects of epistemology and ontology, Pascal seems influenced by Al-Ghazzali's eschatological views, David Hume got influenced by Al-Ghazzali's skepticism of causal laws, while as Auguste Comte has recognized Ghazzalian impact to positivism and classifications of various sciences.

Moses Ibn Habib of Lisbon

Another renound Jewish philosopher was Moses Ibn Habib of Lisbon. He himself was a well-known poet, philosopher and translator of Arabic treatises.² *Mishkat al Anwar* of Imam Al-Ghazzali translated to Latin by him and extensively quoted by the 16th Century writer, Moses ibn Habib of Lisbon. He was greatly influenced by the thoughts of Ghazzali in philosophy, theology, logic and mysticism through the Latin and Hebrew versions of Al-Ghazzali's works.

John of the Cross (1542 — 1591)

John of the Cross was a Christian Reformer, was a major figure of the counter-reformation, Spanish mystic, a Roman Catholic Saint. He is also known for his writings of poetry and mystic literature. He was impacted by the translation works of Imam Al-Ghazzali in Toledo. It is reported to have said it is impossible to read the poems of the Spanish mystic of the St. John of the cross without concluding that his entire process of thinking and imaginative apparatus owed much to Muslim mystics of Spain" and those mystics owed so much to Al-Ghazzali.³ Miguel Asin Palacios has been most recently disclosed that and arguing that John of the Cross was greatly influenced by Islamic sources through the Latin translations on the peninsula. John widely used Islamic Sources and it resulted interplay between Islamic culture and Christian Culture in Spain by the late 16th Century. These statements show more light towards the influence of Ghazzalian theories.

Rene Descartes (1596 — 1650 A.D.)

The most important of all the parallel and one which is most remarkable of them all is that between Al-Ghazzali and Descartes and deals not only with this or that view or theory of our author but with his very method. In particular there is a remarkable similarity between Al-Ghazzali's method of doubt as given in his *Al-Munqidh* and the one expounded by Descartes in his *Discours de la method* which appeared in 1636 A.D. In what follows we shall bring out a close parallel between these two works.⁴

Skepticism in a general sense is the philosophical attitude which maintains that some knowledge of how things really are, may be sought, but cannot be found. The Greek word '*Skepis*' and '*Sceptic*' is contrasted with dogmatic.⁵ Rene Descartes was a French philosopher, Mathematician and writer who spent most of his life in the Dutch Republic. He has been dubbed the Father of Modern Philosophy, and much subsequent Western Philosophy is a response of his writings, which are studied closely to this day. Descartes's influence in Mathematics is equally apparent. He refused to accept the authority of previous philosophers, and refused to trust his own senses. He frequently set his views apart from those of his predecessors.

Both Al-Ghazzali and Descartes rejected beliefs resting merely upon authority tradition or custom. Both aimed at discovering the original disposition of man unaffected by all such beliefs i.e. in its native purity a formidable task indeed. Both aspired to rebuild the entire edifice of knowledge from the very foundations. Descartes like Al-Ghazzali doubted the testimony of the senses in granting certainty of knowledge and precisely for the same reasons, the language and the examples of the defects of sense experience give by both were almost identical. Descartes as Al-Ghazzali realized that there was no absolute way to distinguish waking experiences from those in dream and so both decided to feign that everything that had entered their minds till then was no more than a dream, merely the appearances of things and not things

in themselves. Al-Ghazzali and Descartes devised a new method of discovering the truth and that method was almost the same for both, formulated exactly in the same terms. It consisted in taking nothing as true which did not present itself to the mind clearly and distinctly so much so that there was no occasion to doubt it. Descartes like Al-Ghazzali refrained from dogmatizing what they found and suggested modestly that others might as well come to find some other method in their search for truth.

Similarities Between Al-Ghazzali's *Munqidh* and Descartes's *Discours*

The similarities and resemblances between Al-Ghazzali's *Munqidh min al Dalal* and Descartes's *Discours de la methode* is so overwhelmingly close with regard to their entire plan, the treatment of the subjects discussed therein the details of arguments and the examples and sometimes even the very language itself, that it is impossible to attribute all this to sheer happy coincidence. It was really with reference to Al-Ghazzali's *Munqidh* rather than to his *Ihya* that G.H Lewes (1817-78) was led to exclaim that had any translation of it existed in the day of Descartes, everybody would have cried against the plagiarism."⁶

The internal evidence, however, in the two works is so strong that it leaves no doubt as to Al-Ghazzali's influence on Descartes. But the external evidence is not altogether missing. Descartes himself acknowledges the indebtedness of the general plan of his work to 'the example of many fine intellects that had previously had this plan.'⁷ He does not mention any one of the fine intellect by name but certainly no one among his predecessors had followed exactly the same plan as Al-Ghazzali in his *Munqidh*. Whether or not there existed a translation of *Munqidh* in Latin, the language in which Descartes himself wrote two of his most important works, it is for the Latin scholars to tell.

In case of Descartes himself the influence of Al-Ghazzali's method can be traced as far back 1628 A.D., i.e., when he composed his Rules for the Guidance of Mind, for some of the rules laid down therein are just those rules which he later expounded in the Ghazzalian manner in the *Discours*. But, then, it may be claimed, in the light of what has been said above, that wherever it went it took the influence of Al-Ghazzali along with it.⁸

Descartes, being the father of Modern Philosophy, by trying to explain the position of Descartes regarding religion, it will be very easy for the readers to compare the Muslim Philosopher Al-Ghazzali with Descartes. This study may also help us in future to show that Descartes seems to be influenced by Ghazzalian "method of doubt" and other similar views, regarding which we find some sporadic references in his different books."⁹ Rene Descartes's *Method of Doubt* and his views regarding the sources of knowledge are to a great extent very similar to the views of a "theologian" like Al-Ghazzali. Descartes aspires and prays to God for enabling him to experience it. While in Holland, he is reported to have vowed a pilgrimage to Shrine of Loretto (saint) in case his prayer for divine illumination is answered.¹⁰

In *Discours on Methode*, Descartes admits that sense perception is not a valid source of knowledge. So Descartes proceeds to intellect like Al-Ghazzali. He concludes that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into his mind while awake had in them no more truth than the illusions of his dreams. Descartes writes: "But immediately upon this he observed while he could thus think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that he, who thus thought, must exist. Doubting implies thinking which necessitates the existence of a thinker. If I think, I must exist, *cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am."¹¹

Al-Ghazzali's starting point of self-examinations starts with the formula "I will, therefore, I am." Descartes also begins with a study of his self and has the formula, "I think, therefore, I am." Like Al-Ghazzali he begins describing how he studied, with a questioning mind, every school, every creed for a solution to the problems that disturbed him and finally resolved to discard all authority. Descartes seems to be very familiar with *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*." He also followed Al-Ghazzali's derivation of the negative and the positive attributes of God from the concept of necessary existence.¹²

There is so much remarkable internal evidence of similarity between Al-Ghazzali's *Al Munqidh*" and Descartes "*Discours de la Methode*" that it has led some scholar to say that "had any translation of (*Al-Munqidh*) existed in the days of Descartes, everyone would have cried out against the Plagiarism."¹³

It is very evident that Descartes affirms the Christian faith about the "soul-body" relation. In Cartesian Philosophy, a dualism between body and soul can be attributed to this belief. Descartes has claimed higher status to intuition contrary to other sources of knowledge as it is related to soul like Al-Ghazzali. We see that on the subject of revelation Descartes position is very similar with Al-Ghazzali's. Descartes having adopted the status of "methodological doubt" as the guiding principle in his philosophical pursuit.¹⁴ But it is more than that, it is convincing to say that the skepticism of Al-Ghazzali was not only of a "methodological nature," but was having existential doubt also, which rendered Al-Ghazzali restless and alienated him at least for two months.¹⁵ At the most, we can say that Al-Ghazzali was the 'philosophical opponent of philosophy.'¹⁶

Al-Ghazzali and Descartes are the two giant philosophers who revolutionized the patterns of thought current in their respective times. Descartes's position in Western History of ideas is akin to that of Al-Ghazzali in Islamic History. He is called the father of Modern Western Philosophy. The proof of Descartes borrowing from Al-Ghazzali however, goes beyond these circumstantial evidence. Thus on the basis of circumstantial evidence alone it can be safely claimed that Descartes must at some stage have come into contact with Al-Ghazzali's works either through some translations or some commentaries upon them.¹⁷

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662 A.D)

Blaise Pascal was a French Mathematician, Physicist, Scientist and Theologian who was greatly influenced by Imam Al-Ghazzali. His knowledge of Al-Ghazzali came to him through his study of Raymund Martin's *Pugio Fidel* in a French edition. Pascal is known to the modern student of philosophy of religion of his famous wager for and against belief in God.¹⁸ This French philosopher contended that belief in God, if God exists, would bring infinite gain, and if He does not exist it means no loss: on the other hand, unbelief in God, if God exists, means infinite loss and if he does not exist it brings no gain. Now this line of argument of Pascal can be already found in a number of Al-Ghazzali's works, viz. *Ihya Kimiya-i-Saadat Kitab al-Arbain*. In the last named work it is presented even in the forms of words.¹⁹

More interesting to note, however, is the fact that there is a considerable closeness between Pascal's theory of knowledge as enunciated in his *Pensus Sur la religion* and that given by Al-Ghazzali in his autobiography, *Al-Munqidh*. Like Al-Ghazzali, Pascal acknowledges the validity of the first Principles of reason but, like him, he adds that first principles by themselves do to give its any knowledge of the ultimate reality. According to Pascal, reason cannot demonstrate the existence of God, nor the immortality of the soul. Reason, therefore ends in doubt and leaves unanswered the questions with which we are deeply concerned. Pascal further clarified that, but if reason cannot prove the existence of God, the heart can have a direct encounter with him. The heart has its reason which reason does not know. Thus Pascal's mysticism like Al-Ghazzali's is combined with partial skepticism: both reject pure rationalism and express the conviction that heart. i.e. mystic experience, the ultimate means to discover God.²⁰

In philosophy, Al-Ghazzali's direct influence on Pascal has been established and he adopted Al-Ghazzali's concept of faith in²¹ superiority to reason, "which moves slowly and does go astray, but intuition acts in a flash and is always ready to act and therefore, men should put their trust in it for it mean assurance".

Asin Palacios draws comparisons between Pascal and Al-Ghazzali. Pascal like Al-Ghazzali, is of the opinion that our sense may deceive us, and compares the text of *Al-Munqidh* with that of Pascal's *Pensees*,²² and both say the same thing, i.e., God is felt not in the intellect but in the heart." Pascal followed the belief of Al-Ghazzali about the next world. Pascal was remarkably influenced by the mystical views of Muslim Saints apart from Ghazzali's views on eschatological themes. Asin Palacios wrote a book on the Islamic background of Pascal in 1920, showing Ghazzali's influence on him in explicit terms."²³ Pascal seems very much influenced by Al-Ghazzali's views that man should shun luxurious life on the hope of a better and prosperous life in the life Hereafter Ghazzali says: If delicious dishes are presented before a man, but at the same time he is informed that these food stuffs are coated with poison, the man, if prudent, will not even taste the food for apparently deliciousness of the food stuffs.²⁴

What is more conspicuous in regard to identify Ghazzali influence on Pascal can be found in the argument known in the west as "betting." The argument is again and again

elaborated by Pascal in his *Pensees*. Pascal starts by presenting our human predicament as a betting situation in which each one of us has to stake his destiny upon sonic world outlook. He then considers to his possible opponent that we are and cannot but remain cosmically ignorant. There is no positive natural theology, and we cannot rationally identify any putative system of religious revelation as the genuine article. "Reason can decide nothing here." "And so our contention is if infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game in which the chances of winning and losing are equal and there is the infinite to gain."²⁵

Ghazali's influence Pascal seems very clear on this matter. Pascal's Wager like Al-Ghazzali is unique among the famous arguments of natural theology in offering a motivation rather than an evidencing reason for belief. For Pascal in the manner of Al-Ghazzali is clearly trying to provide a prudential reason for self persuasion rather than any sort of evidence to show that the recommended conclusions are actually true. Al-Ghazzali's influence has extended to a Modern American Philosopher William James (1842 -1910) through Pascal. William James (1842-1910) through Pascal. William James in a famous essay on "The will to Believe, contended, following Pascal, that in contain limited but specially important causes or beliefs ought to be determined entirely by "our passionate nature."²⁶

The idea of betting or wager, look a long journey from Al-Ghazzali to Raymund Martini and then to Pascal. Let us see only the comparisons Palacios draws between Pascal and Ghazzali, basing them on well-founded studies of the text. Here Pascal, like Al-Ghazzali is of the opinion that our senses deceive us. Pascal as much as Al-Ghazzali strongly doubts that our dreams are the reality, our life is nothing but a dream and death waking up from the dream is significant. For example Al-Ghazzali says: "I reflected, that while asleep you assume your dreams to be indisputably real. Once awake, you recognize them for what they are baseless chimeras."²⁷

Al-Ghazzali and Pascal find the way to get rid of the state of doubt in mysticism. Both of them look for it in divine inspiration as a product of moral virtues and love of religion free from all logical judgements. This power of inspiration bestowed by God on the believers is the most dependable source for knowledge of the supernatural world, both in Al-Ghazzali and Pascal. Ghazzali says: "With the *Sufis*, repose and movement, exterior or interior, are illumined with the light which proceeds from the central radiance of inspiration. And what other light could shine on the face of the Earth."²⁸ It is evidently clear that the foundation of Pascal's theory about the "Logic of the heart." (Logique du coeur) was laid in Al-Ghazzali's idea about the "eye of the heart."²⁹

The very ideas of Al-Ghazzali and Pascal on faith and certitude are very similar. In terms of ideas, both say the same thing, i.e., "God is felt not in the intellect but in the heart." (*Dieuest sensible an cocur, non ala la raison*, i.e. God is sensible to heart, not through reason). Here Palacios compares Pascal's *Pencees* with certain chapters and passages in Al-Ghazzali's works,

eg., *Ihya*, *Mizan* and *Arbain* and shows how the arguments in them are repeated by Silhan and Pascal with very little change.³⁰

Al-Ghazzali's argument consists in putting the problem of life hereafter in the same way as the possibility of success in present life in terms of the game of chance and fate. The game of fate comprises of actions and events depended on chance, like hunting, taking a sea-trip, wars surgical operations, drugs for therapy commercial transactions, professional education, new industrial enterprises, etc. The person who takes measures in all these activities calculates that the game which is expected to be obtained in the future would be more beneficial than the one that is risked. In this case also, Palacios points out that in his *Ihya* and *Mizan*, Al-Ghazzali used the examples of hunting, commerce, potential occupation taking a sea-trip, drugs and industry, and that as a matter of fact Pascal repeated many of them.³¹ Palacios gives examples from Al-Ghazzali's books e.g., *Ihya*, *Mizan* and *Mustazhiri*, the contents comprised in them with those in the works of Pascal and others.³²

Al-Ghazzali's belief on eternity of next life, i.e., its infinity limitless, unique timelessness which cannot be compared with millions of years and centuries is weighed. For this two Palacios makes detailed comparisons between Al-Ghazzali's and Pascal's texts. Finally, it is accounted that, Pascal was deeply influenced by the thoughts of Al-Ghazzali in general and particularly in his views about day of resurrection. We have mentioned further areas of influence as well. Their views about dreams, life hereafter, mystical knowledge etc., apart from auxiliary importance of reason to prove validity of divine truths has also been highlighted though briefly.

Notes and References

¹ Masarrat Husain Zuber, *Aristotle and Al Ghazzali*, p. 140.

² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁵ Saced, M. Sheikh, *op.cit.*, p. 125.

⁶ *Tahafat al Tahafut* (Tr.) Van Der Bergh, Introduction, p. XXIV.

⁷ G.H. Lewes, *The Biographical History of Philosophy*, London, 1845-6, Vol. III, p. 50.

⁸ M. Saeed Sluidh, *op.cit.* p. 149.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁰ Lewish, *History of Philosophy*, Vol, II, p. 50. "It (Al-Ghazzali's work on the *Revivification of the sciences of religion*) has so remarkable a resemblance to the *Discours de la method of Descartes*, that had any translation of it existed in the days of Descartes, everyone would have cried against the Plagiarism" (Quoted by Sir Muhammad Iqbal, in his "*The Development of Metaphysics, in Persia*" We find anticipations in him of many modern philosophers, eg: Descartes, *Method of Doubt*, Hume; *Laws of Causation*, Kant, *Antinomies*, P. VII

¹¹ Kenny Anthony, *Descartes, A study of His Philosophy*, (Rendom House, New York, 1968), p. 15.

¹² Kenny Anthony, *Letter of Descartes*, (1970), p. 11.

¹³ Masarrat Husain Zuberi, *Aristotle and Al Ghazzali*, p. 144.

¹⁴ Henry Lewis, *Biographical History of Philosophy*, Vol, p. 50, M.M. Sharif, *History of Muslim philosophy*, Vol II, pp. 1382-1384.

¹⁵ Hamid Nascem Rafiabadi, *Al Ghazzali and Western Thought* p. 119.

¹⁶ Betrand Russell, *The limits of Philosophical Knowledge, Treasury of Philosophy*, p. 1027.

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- ¹⁷ Syed Hossein Nasir, *Iran Namah Ghazzali of Tus*, Special issue, 1986, pp. 19-20.
- ¹⁸ Ram Landau, *Islam and the Arabs*, 1958, p. 145, M.M. Sharif, *A history of Muslim Philosophy*, pp. 583-89 Mohd Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 147
- ¹⁹ M Saeed Sheikh, *op.cit* p. 145.
- ²⁰ See *Kitab al Arbain* Cairo, 1328-1910, p. 185
- ²¹ M. Saeed Shaikh, *op.cit*, p. 146.
- ²² Margaret Smith, *Al Ghazzali, The Mystic*, p. 225.
- ²³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, 1911
- ²⁴ Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, *Emerging from Darkness*, p. 323.
- ²⁵ *Ihya Ulum* III p. 43
- ²⁶ *Op.cit*, p. 324
- ²⁷ Antony Flew, *A dictionary of Philosophy*, London, 1979, p. 264.
- ²⁸ Al-Ghazzali, *Munqidh min al Dalal*, Tr. Claud Field, *The confession of Al Ghazzali*, p. 18.
- ²⁹ Compare this Statement with Mansur's Saying: I saw God through the eye of my heart, I asked, who thou are?"
He replied Thou (*Kitab al Tawasin*)
- ³⁰ MM. Sharif, *op.cit* Vol II, p. 1364
- ³¹ *Ibid*, p. 1365
- ³² *Ibid*, p. 1365