Chapter 2

Al-Ghazālī’s Concept of Philosophy

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I

It is well known that al-Ghazālī’s attitude towards philosophy is rather conflicted and unclear. On the one hand, he composed Tahāfut al-falāsifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), considered by most of its readers the harshest refutation of Arabic philosophy ever written. On the other, he shares quite a number of positions with the philosophers and made ample use of their writings in order to express his own ideas.

This ambivalence is puzzling and has led to much debate. Numerous scholars have tried to find a key to understanding al-Ghazālī’s relationship with philosophy and an explanation as to why he reacted to philosophical reasoning in such a mystifying variety of ways. The explanations vary, but on the whole can be reduced to four interpretations, namely: (1) Al-Ghazālī’s comments on philosophy changed as his attitude towards philosophy evolved over his lifetime, so that his later works reflect a position different from the earlier. (2) Al-Ghazālī’s statements about philosophy depend on his audience, for he practised a kind of multi-level writing in order to speak to each audience in a way they understood and were willing to accept. (3) His comments depend on the subject, accepting philosophical concepts in some fields, but not in others, so that his approach to philosophy is selective, if not actually inconsistent. (4) He has a kind of master plan concerning philosophy, and all his comments, the critical as well as the affirmative, were parts of the same strategy and were meant to attain the same goal, though they may seem to diverge from one another upon first reading.1

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1 Some of these interpretations can be traced back to older publications such as Obermann, Subjektivismus, Wensinck, La pensée, Abd-El-Jalīl, “Autour de la sincérité,” Jabre, La notion de certitude, idem, La notion de la ma’rifā, and Watt, Muslim Intellectual, which are still worth reading. The state of discussion, however, has considerably shifted since Richard M. Frank published, in the early 1990s, his article “Al-Ghazālī’s Use of Avicenna’s Philosophy” and two monographs, Creation and the Cosmic System and Al-Ghazālī and the Ashʿarite School. Several
All these explanations are based on viable arguments and deserve further discussion. It may well be that al-Ghazālī’s attitude towards philosophy is complex and multifarious, and we need a complex set of interpretations to adequately describe it. Given this assumption, however, our considerations should not be confined to the level of individual philosophical doctrines and arguments. We should also take into account how al-Ghazālī argues on a deeper, conceptual level. Therefore, I plan to ask what philosophy really is, according to al-Ghazālī. How does he conceptualize and define philosophy, or at least, how does he describe its different parts and its place among the sciences?

While evaluating these problems, I will argue that al-Ghazālī’s concept of philosophy draws heavily on earlier models. This does not mean that his ideas about philosophy are not original, which goes without saying. It seems to me, however, that they rely at least partly on earlier ideas, the origin of which can still be discerned. In order to show this, my paper will be divided into three parts. In the first part, I will summarize three concepts of philosophy that were developed in the centuries before al-Ghazālī. Strictly speaking, I will outline (1) the concept developed by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and followed—with considerable modification—by Avicenna (Ibn Sinā, d. 428/1037); (2) the concept of the Islamic theologians (mutakallīmūn), and (3) the concept shared by authors who can be assigned to the philosophical tradition of Abū ʿĪsāq al-Kindī (d. 246/861–251/866), such as Abū ʿĪsāq al-ʿĀmirī (d. 381/992), Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), Abū Sulaymān as-Sijistānī (d. ca. 377/987), and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 422/1031). In the second part of this paper, I will connect these models with al-Ghazālī’s own idea of philosophy as he expressed it in the Tahāfut al-falāsifa and in particular in al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl (The Deliverer from Error). In this manner, I will try to evaluate in which sense and to what extent they may have influenced al-Ghazālī. This evaluation will eventually lead us to some general considerations about al-Ghazālī’s position in the intellectual history of Islam and about the way in which his position is viewed and analysed today. Far from exhaustive, these considerations will merely touch on scholars heavily criticized Frank’s suggestion to interpret al-Ghazālī along Avicennian lines, among them Marmura, “Ghazālian Causes and Intermediaries” (cf. idem, “Ghazali and Ash’arism Revisited”), Mayer in his review of Frank, Al-Ghazālī and the Ash’arite School, and Dallal, “Al-Ghazālī and the Perils of Interpretation.” Notwithstanding this criticism, however, Frank’s work led to a serious reconsideration of al-Ghazālī’s attitude towards philosophy that proved on the whole promising and is still dominating the research agenda nowadays. For a short account of the vicissitudes of research on al-Ghazālī see Treiger, Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought, 1–4, and Griffel, Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology, 179–82.