Al-Ghazālī and the Rationalization of Sufism

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By rationalization¹ I mean the cognitive process of making something consistent with or based on reason. In keeping with this definition, the mystic uses his reason to understand the nature of religion and its commandments, norms and secrets; to verify his way and experiences; and even to experience contact or unity with God. The opposite of rationalization is to think of existence or of religious matters in terms of sacred texts, traditions, sayings of the ancestors, mysteries, magic, etc. In al-Ghazālī, rationalization is not pure but mixed with elements of its opposite.

It seems to me that the use of the present title is preferable to “Philosophizing of Sufism,” because generally² the content of al-Ghazālī’s mystical stations and experiences is not philosophical and philosophy cannot account for them.³ In contrast, for al-Ghazālī, as we shall see, reason exists in the mystical process and even explains or judges it. The word “Intellectualization” could also be placed in the title, because it means to supply a rational structure or meaning for the themes with which we are dealing, however; it seems that in rationalization the element of logic is more prominent, and logic plays an important role in al-Ghazālī’s mystical writings.⁴

² Of course, there are exceptions, such as the love for God.
The word “Sufism” raises the question of whether al-Ghazālī regarded himself as a Sufi. In his writings he frequently refers to the Sufis as a group without affiliating himself with them; for example, in Kitāb at-Tawakkul he counts four groups, ascribing to each a different view with respect to God’s unity. The fourth group holds that to see only one entity in existence means to adhere to God’s unity: “this is the witness of the righteous and the Sufis call it annihilation in God’s unity” (wa-tusammīhi aṣ-ṣūfiyya al-fanāʾ fi t-tawḥīd).⁵ Had he considered himself a Sufi, al-Ghazālī would not have related to this group in the third person, but would have said, “we call it” instead. If this were the case, instead of Sufism, I would have used the term “Mysticism” in the title. Because there is no clear-cut proof that al-Ghazālī did not affiliate himself with the Sufis, however, and because he refers objectively to Sufis, Sufi conduct, and Sufi sayings, I prefer the present title.

In its early phases, Sufism did not incorporate reason and rational enquiry into its thought and practice.⁶ For example, the early mystic al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857/242) wrote a book entitled Kitāb Māhiyyat al-ʿaql (The Book on the Essence of the Intellect). Though this title seems to promise an investigation into rational discussions of mystical values, in fact, reason plays no role in his mysticism; al-Muḥāsibī’s main concern was the improvement of one’s morals through psychological considerations. His eloquence seems to stem from his knowledge of the vocabulary used by the Muʿtazila.⁷ Moreover, very probably following the Muʿtazila, he regards reason as a device to attain knowledge of God and to know benefit and damage in human acts. He even asserts that adults should accept rational arguments. The perfect knower of God is whoever carries out the commandments, fears God and believes firmly in God’s promise and threats.⁸ However, all these ideas had no impact on the mystical way as elaborated in his main work, Kitāb ar-Riʿāya li-ḥuqūq Allāh (The Book of Keeping What God Deserves).

An examination of the Sufi stations (maqāmāt) appearing in al-Kharrāz (d. 899 or 900/286–287), as-Sarrāj (d. 988/377), al-Kalābādhī (d. 990/380 or

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