Al-Ghazālī on Knowledge (*ʿilm*) and Certainty (*yaqīn*) in *al-Munqidh min aḍ-Ḍalāl* and in *al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm*

Luis Xavier López-Farjeat

In his well-known autobiographical treatise entitled *Deliverance from Error* (*al-Munqidh min aḍ-ḍalāl*),[1] al-Ghazālī relays the most important account of his personal encounter with skepticism and the intellectual itinerary that he traveled in order to attain the certainty of truth. While trying to find the correct method for the attainment of truth, al-Ghazālī deals with some epistemological difficulties that have bearing on contemporary discussions on the sources of knowledge and its connection with certainty, and, specifically, on the epistemic controversies related to skepticism, foundationalism, and fallibilism.

In the opening section of the *Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī states a problem[2] that is found in some epistemological discussions, namely, the connection between

---

1 I use the Arabic version *al-Munqidh min aḍ-ḍalāl*, ed. Jamīl Ṣalībā and Kāmil ʿAyyād, Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1981; and the English version *Deliverance from Error: An Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazali's al-Munqidh min al-Dalal including Five Key Texts*, trans. R. J. McCarthy, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980, 61–143. I quote McCarthy's translation (slightly modified when necessary) indicating the paragraph and the page, and the Arabic version of Ṣalībā and ʿAyyād indicating the page. There is a trivial discussion on al-Ghazālī's sincerity around these 'confessions'. In the introduction to his translation McCarthy (McCarthy 1980, 23–26) presents the different standpoints in this respect. Beyond this discussion I have no doubt of the historical value of the treatise. In my view it is a puzzling text that (a) presents critical arguments against the Bāṭinites; (b) makes important contributions in order to understand al-Ghazālī's sympathy with Sufism; and (c) suggests significant clues for understanding the relations between philosophy and theology in al-Ghazālī's thought.

2 "(…) I began by saying to myself: 'First I must seek for the knowledge of the true meaning of things, therefore, I must inquire into 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 is it accompanied by the possibility of error and deception, nor can the mind even suppose such a possibility. Furthermore, safety from error must accompany the certainty to such a degree that, if someone proposed to show it to be false – for example, a man who would turn a stone into gold and a stick into a snake – his feat would not induce any doubt or denial. 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

knowledge and certainty. In this direction, a well-known contemporary episte-mological principle with Cartesian roots is 'we should believe nothing that we do not know for certain.' Or, as al-Ghazālī suggests: 'we *know some proposition X* when we are sure that it is not possible to find an error in it.' Thus, if someone tries to show that a proposition such as "ten is more than three" is false and he or she proves it by means of something miraculous, that should not make us change our mind – some propositions are irrefutable. The *Munqidh*, however, shows al-Ghazālī's crisis when he finds that there is no certainty in knowledge. This distrust of knowledge drove al-Ghazālī to skepticism. After God cured him, however, he began to inquire into the different methods employed by the seekers of the truth. The *Munqidh* reveals a particular epistemic itinerary: from knowledge to skepticism and from skepticism to reasoned faith.

Here, I argue that al-Ghazālī is a foundationalist who adopts skepticism as a starting point in his epistemology, with the intention of showing that the only way to avoid skepticism is to argue that the first principles or primary truths on which knowledge is grounded are intuitively apprehended. This solution is directly connected to the knowledge of God. It is God who ultimately grounds all knowledge. But how can we know God? Al-Ghazālī's question on the nature of knowledge is, then, simultaneously the question of the correct way of know-ing God. In order to find an answer to the question on the knowledge of God, I moved to al-Ghazālī's logical-religious treatise called, *The Correct Balance* (*al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm*).[3] In this short work, al-Ghazālī connects philosophi-cal logic with revelation and conceives intellectual knowledge as the best way to know God. I argue, however, that this does not make al-Ghazālī a radical rationalist; rather, he is reforming traditional Islamic theology and is adopt-ing logical argumentation in order to provide an original (though problematic) understanding of the relationship between reason and revelation. Indeed, al-Ghazālī thinks that they are not contradictory, but entirely compatible. The

---

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 thing. But there would be no doubt at all about what I knew!'

I realized, then, that whatever I did not know in this way and was not certain of with this kind of certainty was unreliable and unsure knowledge, and that every knowledge unaccom-panied by safety from error is not sure and certain knowledge" (al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh* 7, 55, trans. McCarthy, slightly modified; Arabic 63–64).

3   I use the Arabic version *al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm*, ed. M. Bījū, Damascus: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿIlmiyya, 1993, and the English version included in al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh* trans. McCarthy, 287–332. I quote McCarthy's translation indicating the paragraph and the page, and the Arabic version of Bijū indicating the page.