Among professional historians of philosophy it is by now common knowledge that Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 CE) in his works anticipates both Descartes’ and Hume’s sceptical arguments with a closeness that at times borders on the eerie. Like Descartes in the *Discourse on Method*, Ghazālī in his autobiography expresses dissatisfaction with the teachings of the established schools of the time. Also like Descartes (this time in the *Meditations*), Ghazālī describes in remarkably personal terms a quest for certain knowledge that could act as a secure foundation in his search for truth. As in Descartes’s case, Ghazālī’s casting around for certitude leads him to a series of sceptical doubts ranging from the very trivial to the very grave. It results in an impasse from which only the recognition of God as the ultimate guarantor of all truth will deliver the inquiring mind.¹

The parallels with Hume, meanwhile, are found in Ghazālī’s efforts to expose the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* in a treatise of the same name.² Ghazālī argues that our everyday reliance on notions of cause and effect (sabab/musabbab) is, in the end, epistemologically unfounded: all we ever observe are things happening in conjunction with (ʿinda) or after (baʿd), never because of (bi-) one another.³ According to al-Ghazālī the whole notion of secondary causality could just as well be a psychologically useful fiction: without the conviction that certain

1. *Al-munqidh min al-dalāl* (*Deliverance from Error* = Ghazālī 1969): this work will henceforth be referred to as *Deliverance* in the main text. All translations from the *Deliverance* are my own, although I have consulted R.J. McCarthy’s translation and notes to the Arabic text in McCarthy (1980).

2. *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers* = Ghazālī 2000), henceforth *Incoherence*; the translations will be Marmura’s, sometimes with modifications, and the discussion concerning the causal nexus is found in the Seventeenth Discussion, which is the first concerning natural philosophy.

3. Ghazālī’s favoured example is the cotton that burns in the proximity of fire: “What proof is there that <the fire> is the agent? They have no proof other than observing the occurrence of the burning at the <juncture> of contact with the fire. Observation, however, <only> shows the occurrence <of burning> at <the time of the contact with fire> but does not show the occurrence <of burning> by <the fire>, nor that there is no other cause for it.” Ghazālī (2000), 167.9–11, tr. Marmura.
things always occur in sequence, human life as we know it would be inconceivable. But despite its psychological inevitability, this conviction cannot be grounded in any metaphysical framework concerning the natural order of things that would have the force of necessity.

What to make of these fascinating parallels? There are stories, fanciful in my opinion, which claim to trace a path through which Descartes could have ended up being directly influenced by Ghazālī. More conventional studies have attempted to trace lines of influence through medieval occasionalism, and perhaps Malebranche, to Hume. But is such a genealogical reckoning really helpful? After all, the philosophical rewards of precursorism are soon reaped and often prove thin. Pace Lovejoy, ideas are not units that would or indeed could be passed on from one thinker and culture to the next without a need for creative appropriation and transformation at the very core.

A related worry about the current state of scholarship is that the few studies which do treat Ghazālī’s sceptical arguments together (and these are in the minority—most play up either the Descartes parallels exclusively, or those related to Hume) appear behold to a declarative, apologetic framework. The fact that certain parallels exist, it seems, is enough to declare Ghazālī a man ahead of his times, a solitary genius whose ideas appeared out of nowhere and disappeared from view just as quickly, requiring the efforts of contemporary scholars to uncover and to appreciate. In a research environment where the significance of one’s own work constantly needs to be played up this tendency is understandable, though still regrettable: for as long as genuine philosophical innovations and touchstones are thought to exist, it will remain desirable to claim that one’s own object of study (whether culture, person, or time-period) was ultimately responsible for them. In the present case, it has often seemed enough to note that the afore-mentioned parallels to Descartes’s or Hume’s arguments exist, without much effort going into situating them in their milieu. This does little to further our understanding of Ghazālī, however, or his motivations, or his potential as a major thinker in the Western tradition.

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4 For these see Zakzuk (1983).
6 For ‘unit ideas’ see Lovejoy (1936); for criticism, e.g., Hintikka (1981).
7 For one thing, a lopsided emphasis on the purported ownership of certain enshrined ideas or notions blinds us to the possibility that Ghazālī might have had something different to say, but no less interesting for it.