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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Al-Ghazali's Integral Epistemology:
A Critical Analysis of *The Jewels of the Quran***

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Arab and Islamic Civilization

in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

by

Amani Elshimi

000-88-0001

under the supervision of

Dr. Mohamed Serag

Professor of Islamic Studies

Thesis readers:

Dr. Steffen Stelzer

Professor of Philosophy, The American University in Cairo

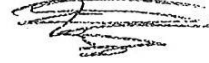
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May 2017

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Department: Arabic and Islamic Civilizations

Advisor: Dr. Mohamed Serag

Date Received: May 15, 2017

Title of Thesis: Al-Ghazali's Integral Epistemology: A Critical Analysis of The Jewels of Quran

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The American University in Cairo

Al-Ghazali's Integral Epistemology: A Critical Analysis of The Jewels of the Quran

A Thesis Submitted by

Amani Elshimi

To Arab and Islamic Civilizations Department

May / 2017

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The degree of Master of Arts

Has been approved by

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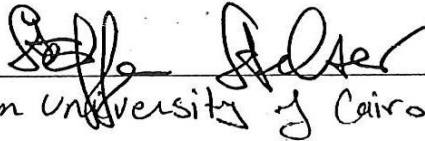
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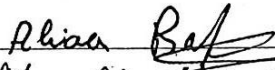
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Sincere appreciation and love goes to my family - my dear husband and children, whose unswerving support all these years has helped me grow in ways I yearned for, and never dreamed possible; and my siblings who constantly engaged me in discussion and critical analysis. Our lives and intellectual interests, though widely different, intertwine in incredible, unexpected ways.

Finally, my mentor, colleague, friend and spiritual guide, Abdul Hayy (Lammert) Holdijk has been and will always be my source of inspiration and role model.

To all of you, I owe a debt of gratitude and appreciation.

Dedication

*To my parents
who taught me the joy and love of learning.*

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Background and statement of purpose
- 1.2 Biography of al-Ghazali
- 1.3 Review of the literature
- 1.4 Scope and organization of the study

2. The Theory of Knowledge Derived from the Quran

- 2.1 The ocean analogy
- 2.2 Red sulphur and the alchemy of the spirit
- 2.3 The aims of the Quran
- 2.4 The sciences of the shell
- 2.5 The sciences of the core
- 2.6 The sciences of the ancients and the moderns

3. The Quran as the Core of Spiritual Wisdom

- 3.1 Exoteric/visible, Esoteric/invisible dimensions of reality
- 3.2 Debate on the principle and strategy of ta'wil
- 3.3 The hierarchy of Quranic interpretive strategies
- 3.4 Hermeneutical strategies and the wisdom of thematic exegesis

4. The Quran as a Practical Curriculum for the Straight Path

- 4.1 The structure and theological focus
- 4.2 Related theological debates
- 4.3 Connection to the theory of knowledge

5. Conclusion: Al-Ghazali's Integral Epistemology

Timeline of Life Events

- 450/1058: Born in Tus, Iran
- 465/1073: Begins studying in Tus under al-Radhkani
- 468-70/1073-78: Travels to Jurjan for two years
- 470/1077-78: Eye-opening encounter with thief on way back to Tus
- 473/1080: Begins study with al-Juwaini in Nisapur
- 478-84/1085-91: Works in the court of Nizam al-Mulk
- 484/1091: Becomes professor in the Nizamiya in Baghdad
- 488/1095: Experiences spiritual crisis and leaves on pilgrimage
- 488/1095: Travels to various Muslim countries
- 493/1100: Returns to Tus and teaches selected students
- 499/1106: Begins teaching in Nizamiya again, invited by Fakhr al-Mulk
- 503/1109-10: Returns to Tus
- 505/1111: Dies in Tus

* Timeline based on *Chronology* by:
Moosa, Ebrahim. *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*. US: University of North Carolina, 2005.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and statement of purpose

One of the greatest intellectuals of Islamic thought, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (450/1058 - 505/1111), has been the subject of research for almost a millennium. His contributions have enriched studies in Philosophy, Law, Sufism and Theology, to name just a few disciplines. Often perceived as a theologian-turned-mystic, al-Ghazali recounts his life-long search for certainty, in his autobiographical account, *The Deliverer from Error (Al-Munqidh min al-dala)*, shedding light on his subsequent spiritual crisis, and resultant enlightenment. Having mastered the traditional sciences of theology, explored and critiqued the arguments of philosophers, condemned the way of the esoterics (*al-batiniyya*), and taught and published on jurisprudence, he confesses that none of those paths gave him the gratification of certainty that he yearned for. During the mature stages of his life, al-Ghazali secluded himself and engaged in deep reflection and worship. He emerged having recognized the inherent value in the mystical ways of the Sufis. This recognition, however, contrary to the interpretation of many, did not cause him to reject the other paths of knowledge. Instead, a newly-acquired spiritual wisdom assured him that all paths and methodologies form necessary threads in the integral search for truth.

The Jewels and Pearls of the Quran, usually shortened to *The Jewels of the Quran (Jawahir al-Quran wa duraruh)*, one of al-Ghazali's later works, possibly written

in 499/1106¹, reveals the depth and scope of his spiritual awakening. *The Jewels* presents an allegorical representation of the Quran that looks beyond the traditional methods of exegesis, and employs al-Ghazali's own deeper reading of selected verses. Al-Ghazali does not stop at the inspired interpretation, but uses a deliberately integrative reasoning to categorize the Quranic verses, and develop his epistemology.

The Jewels has been published, both in Arabic and English, with the initial section comprising al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge, followed by a classification of Quranic verses, the basis from which he derives the hierarchy of sciences he proposes. However, in his introduction to *The Jewels*², al-Ghazali refers to a third section of the book which offers a curriculum outlining the application of religious principles for the worshipper on the straight path towards the Divine (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*). He suggests that it is an autonomous manual for the practice of the principles of the religion and asserts that it may, in fact, be taught alone. As a result, most contemporary publications publish this section as a separate publication, known as *The Book of Forty Religious Principles* (*Kitab al-arba'een fi usul el din*), often described as a summary of al-Ghazali's larger work - *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihya' 'ulum al-din*). Yet, while al-Ghazali offered *The Book of Forty Religious Principles* as an independent manual, he never suggested that *The Jewels* be published without its third section.

¹ George F. Hourani, "A Revised Chronology of al-Ghazali's Writings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 2 (2004): 299 accessed December 5 2016 <http://www.ghazali.org/articles/gfh-gz.pdf>

² Khadiga M. Kamel (Ed.), *Jawahir al-Quran wa Durraruh by Hujjat al-Islam Abu Hamed Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali*. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub wal Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya, 2011), 65-67.

A new edition of *The Jewels*, published in 2011³, re-integrates the three sections in their original form, as intended by al-Ghazali, and as presented in his own indexed list of topics for the book. The text is compiled and edited based on four manuscripts in the library of *Dar al-Kutub wal Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya* in Cairo. Seeing the work as a whole offers a new perspective on al-Ghazali as a profound integral thinker, as well as offers a comprehensive epistemology, laying the foundation for an integrative methodology for the Islamic pursuit and practice of informed, moral and felicitous living.

This study proposes a thorough critical analysis of *The Jewels of the Quran* in its new complete form. While multiple researchers have scrutinized al-Ghazali's major works on philosophy, law, theology and mysticism, including the third section of *The Jewels*, *The Book of Forty Religious Principles*, no extended study seems to have focused on *The Jewels* in its entirety. This is an opportunity, therefore, to approach such a gem of work to extract and shed light on al-Ghazali's contribution to knowledge, and to position a number of controversial issues that arise within his overarching vision. Specifically, the study analyzes al-Ghazali's epistemology in *The Jewels* as portrayed by three main areas - his interpretation and thematic classification of Quranic verse, his division and hierarchy of sciences, and his applied curriculum for deepened worship. All areas are shaped and guided by his belief in the unity of knowledge, stemming from the Quranic core, itself an embodiment of the unity of God. This awareness of unity or *Tawhid* is the core of the Islamic creed⁴ - the heart of all knowledge. *The Jewels of the*

³ Khadiga M. Kamel (Ed.), *Jawahir al-Quran wa Durraruh by Hujjat al-Islam Abu Hamed Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali*. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub wal Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya, 2011).

⁴ Sayyid W. Akhtar, "The Islamic Concept of Knowledge," *Al-Tawhid Islamic Journal*, accessed December 2016, <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/22999>

Quran is, thus, structured in such a way that the Quranic verses identified by al-Ghazali as the jewels descriptive of the ultimate Essence of God's unity are placed in the center of the book. They form the heart of the oyster, the pearl at the core. His theory of knowledge and his curriculum of practice are the first and third sections of the book, respectively, forming the upper shell and the lower shell of the pearl-bearing oyster.

1.2 Biography⁵ of al-Ghazali

Imam Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (450/1058-505/1111) was born in Tus, Khorasan, North Eastern Iran, to a modest sheepskin weaver (thus, the Arabic word al-ghazzali, meaning 'the weaver'). At a young age, his father, a man of strong faith and love for religious knowledge, died, leaving al-Ghazali and his brother Ahmad in the custody of a friend, who sought to give them a religious education at the hands of Shaykh Ahmad ibn Muhammad Radhakani. Thus, they learnt the foundations of the Quran, prophetic traditions (*hadith*), and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Muhammad al-Ghazali at once stood out as a distinguished critical learner, quick to memorize detail, question ambiguity, and eloquently articulate sound arguments.

An interesting tale is narrated in *Tabaqat al-Shaafi'iyya* (6/195), where al-Ghazali leaves to Jurjan for some time to study with Imam Abi Nasr al-Isma'ili. On his way back to Tus, his caravan is attacked by a group of raiders, who strip the travelers of their

⁵ Al-Ghazali's biography is described in numerous sources in the literature with little variation, if any. Most sources use as a basis the historical narrative outlined in Tajeddin al-Subki, *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya Al-Kubra*, reviewed by A. Al-Helw, and M. Al-Tanaahi, (Faisal Eisa Al-Baabi Al-Halabi Publishers, 1964), Part 6 accessed October 2016 <https://ia802505.us.archive.org/21/items/WAQ5093/tshk06.pdf>

valuables. Imam al-Ghazali's books are taken from him and he pleads for their return. The head bandit, then, ridicules al-Ghazali, expressing disgust at how taking away his books would take away his learning. This incident had a transformative effect on al-Ghazali, teaching him to internalize his learning and to commit the knowledge to heart. For the next three years, al-Ghazali studied his extensive notes and memorized all the detail, so that never again would he be stripped of his knowledge.

Between 473/1080-478/1085, al-Ghazali studied under Dhia' ul-Din Abd al-Malik ibn Yusuf al-Juwayni, the leading theologian and religious scholar of the time, known as Imam al-Haramayn or the 'Master of the Two Holy Mosques' of Makka and Madina. During this period in Nishapur, al-Ghazali became well-versed and well-practiced in Shafi'i law, logic, philosophy, argument, and theology in the Ash'arite tradition. It was during this period that he began writing his first books on law and jurisprudence. The best-documented and verified of his writings, then, is *The Summary of the Principles of Jurisprudence (al-mankhul fi 'usul il fiqh)*⁶, a concise work on matters of law. This is also the time when al-Ghazali started teaching.

After the death of al-Juwayni, al-Ghazali moved to the court of Nidham al-Mulk, a powerful minister (*vizier*) in the Seljuk State under Abbasid rule, given that the court hosted the best circles of learning and intellectual debates. Al-Ghazali became the most prominent intellectual, engaging in complex theological debates, and delivering eloquent lectures in many a field. Eventually, he was given a teaching post at the

⁶ Hourani, *A Revised Chronology*, 291.

Nidhamiyya School, equivalent to the best modern day university, in Baghdad in 484/1091. As a teacher and guide, he was highly regarded and revered by students and fellow scholars, alike. This was the highest peak of his academic career.

Eventually, though, al-Ghazali became disenchanted with his success. He began seeking a higher truth, one where he would attain a higher degree of certainty in the sciences he teaches, experience a spiritual proximity to God, and acquire a 'knowing' of Him. His brother, Ahmad al-Ghazali, had long been a seeker on the spiritual path, and was known for his piety and purity. Al-Ghazali began to question his teaching and his role as an intellectual in the courts of ministers. He experienced a period of withdrawal and spiritual torment to the effect that he, finally, lost his voice and was unable to continue in his post as instructor and lecturer at the Nidhamiyya School.

Al-Ghazali's anguish was a result of a deep concern for truth and a yearning for certainty. As he explored his rational arguments and 'evidence,' he came to see that little knowledge could be infallible. He had a passion for mathematics because that was an area where very little was 'uncertain.' Al-Ghazali began to seek a different kind of 'knowledge' of God, an immediate and personal knowledge that would take him to a different level of certitude. In the year 488/1095, he left Baghdad and travelled to Makka for Haj, a trip that would form the start of his spiritual journey. From Makka, he went to Damascus briefly, then to Jerusalem to visit Beit al-Maqdis, then back to Damascus, where he resided in seclusion, in the minaret of the Omawi Mosque for a number of years, before, once again, traveling throughout the region, teaching and seeking spiritual gratification. It was during these latter years in seclusion that al-Ghazali experienced a 'knowing.' He phrases this evolutionary transformation as follows:

At length God cured me of the malady; my being was restored to health and an even balance; the necessary truths of the intellect became once more accepted, as I regained confidence in their certain and trustworthy character. This did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast. That light is the key to the greater part of knowledge⁷.

حتى شفى الله من ذلك المرض ، وعادت النفس إلى الصحة والاعتدال ، ورجعت الضروريات تعالىً بها على أمن و يقين ؛ ولم يكن ذلك بنظم دليل وترتيب كلام ، بل العقلية مقبولة موثوقا بنور قذفه الله تعالى في الصدر وذلك النور هو مفتاح أكثر المعارف ، فمن ظن أن الكشف موقوف على الأدلة الواسعة ؛ قد ضيق رحمة الله الواسعة⁸

Al-Ghazali's growth in consciousness and awareness also developed in an integral fashion. Initially focusing on the traditional study of religion through the Quran, hadith and books of law, he develops into a razor-sharp rational thinker who easily manoeuvres through philosophical argument and logical proofs, taking a tough stand on controversial issues, and articulating his position in unapologetic, strictly defining language (see *tahafut al-falasifa*, *faysal al-tafriqa*, and *fada'ih al-batiniyya*). From there, he works to cleanse his heart and intentions, acquiring the less judgmental and more inclusive practice of the Sufis. His 'awakening' takes him up a further step to see the significance and interconnectedness of all levels of interpretation - the traditional, the rational, the figurative, and the intuitive.

Al-Ghazali's final abode was back in his hometown, Tus, where he set up a school and a Sufi circle, before his death in 505/1111. He died a truly renowned Islamic thinker - a theologian, jurist, philosopher and mystic.

⁷ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Ghazali*, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), 25-26, accessed November 2016, <https://archive.org/stream/AlMunqidhMinAldalalByImamGhazzaliInEnglish/Al%20munqidh%20min%20Aldalal%20by%20Imam%20Ghazzali%20in%20English#page/n0/mode/1up>

⁸ Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Al munqidh min al-dalal*, 6. Accessed May 2017 <file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/6676685.pdf>

1.3 Review of the Literature

1.3.1 Views on al-Ghazali

Two views have historically shaped perception of al-Ghazali. The first describes him as having wrestled successfully with the Greek philosophical tradition to preserve orthodox Islamic theology. The second describes his later transformation as rejecting rational thought in favor of mystical intuition in his pursuit of certainty.

The first of these perceptions is best demonstrated in the words of W. Montgomery Watt, who describes al-Ghazali's greatness as partially ascribed to his being "the leader in Islam's supreme encounter with Greek Philosophy - that encounter from which Islamic theology emerged victorious and enriched, and in which Arabic Neoplatonism received a blow from which it did not recover"⁹. The claim that Ghazali 'killed' or 'destroyed' philosophy is quite prevalent in the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with scholars such as Ernest Renan¹⁰ and Ignaz Goldziher¹¹, in addition to Montgomery Watt, asserting his condemnation of philosophy. This understanding came as an interpretation of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-falasifa*) - al-Ghazali's critique of twenty philosophical issues posed by Aristotle-influenced Islamic thinkers al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Yet, the claim is based on a common misunderstanding of Ghazali. His debate against philosophers who expressed certainty on issues that were largely metaphysical in nature set him in a light that was opposed to 'philosophy' in general. These issues include such questions as the pre-

⁹ Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁰ Ernest Renan, *Averroes et L'averroïsme*. Essai Historique, 22-24, and 133-136. In Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

¹¹ Ignaz Goldziher, *Die islamische und die jüdische Philosophie des Mittelalters*, 321. In Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

eternity vs. the createdness of the world, the nature and omnipotence of Allah, the resurrection of the body, God's knowledge of particulars, the nature of causality, God's knowledge of Himself, the nature of Divine Attributes, amongst others. Ghazali intentionally limits his analysis specifically to those areas which dispute a main principle of religion, only three of which he decides are completely heretic. In his introduction to *Tahafut*, he specifies his target focus in the following way:

*"..the dispute pertains to one of the principles of religion, such as upholding the doctrine of the world's origination and of the positive attributes of the Creator, or demonstrating the resurrection of bodies, all of which [the philosophers] have denied. It is in this topic and its likes, **not any other**, that one must show the falsity of their doctrine.¹²"*

ما يتعلق النزاع فيه باصل من اصول الدين كالقول في حدوث العالم وصفات الصانع وبيان حشر الاجساد والابدان وقد انكروا جميع ذلك. فهذا الفن ونظائره هو الذي ينبغي ان يظهر فساد مذاهبهم فيه دون ما عداه.¹³

This statement, thus, confines his refutation not to all philosophy, but to only those areas that appear to him as opposing the main principles of religion. His aim is further to show the 'incoherence' of these specific arguments, showing the fallibility of their logical sequencing and demonstrative proof, not the 'incoherence' of the philosophers themselves. The word *tahafut* in Arabic is not quite synonymous with the word 'incoherence.' Instead, it refers to a rash action, where there is 'rushing without adequate thought.' In this sense, al-Ghazali accuses Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina of rushing into imitation of Aristotelian doctrines, without adequate thought to align them to Islamic religious principles. Even though al-Ghazali condemned these three claims in severe terms, his argument was not quite against all philosophy but against describing in

¹² The Incoherence of the Philosophers, accessed May 10 2017, <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic888446.files/al-Ghazali-The%20Incoherence%20of%20Philosophers.pdf>

¹³ Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, Sulaiman Dunia (Ed.), (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1966), 81, accessed May 2017 <https://archive.org/stream/FP134971/134971#page/n2/mode/2up>

absolute 'certain' terms what was not certain. Questions pertaining to the metaphysical realm were not accessible through demonstrative logic, and one could, therefore, not be certain about them.

Al-Ghazali's effort to refute these arguments did not render "a blow from which [philosophy] did not recover."¹⁴ Instead, it highlighted the logical arguments and explained them in a language that was accessible to the majority of readers. In addition, his thinking process of evaluating and deeming inadequate the philosophers' demonstrative proofs, illustrated the philosophical methodology of employing logical reasoning at its best. The thread of argument enriched philosophy rather than destroyed it.

The second view that has commonly shaped al-Ghazali's reputation takes as its base al-Ghazali's own account of his transformation in *The Deliverer from Error (al-Munqidh)*. Al-Ghazali writes:

*When these thoughts had occurred to me and penetrated my being, I tried to find some way of treating my unhealthy condition; but it was not easy. Such ideas can only be repelled by demonstration; but a demonstration requires a knowledge of first principles; since this is not admitted, however, it is impossible to make the demonstration. The disease was baffling, and lasted almost two months, during which I was a sceptic in fact though not in theory nor in outward expression. At length God cured me of the malady; my being was restored to health and an even balance; **the necessary truths of the intellect became once more accepted, as I regained confidence in their certain and trustworthy character.** This did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast. That light is the key to the greater part of knowledge. Whoever thinks that the*

¹⁴ Watt, *The Faith and Practice*, 14-15.

*understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy.*¹⁵

فلما خطرت لي هذه الخواطر وانقضت في النفس، حاولت لذلك علاجاً فلم يتيسر إذ لم يكن دفعه إلا بالدليل، ولم يمكن نصب دليل إلا من تركيب العلوم الأولية، فإذا لم تكن مسلمة لم يمكن تركيب الدليل فأعزل هذا الداء ودام قريباً من شهرين أنا، فيهما على مذهب السفسطة بحكم الحال، لا بحكم النطق والمقال، حتى شفى الله تعالى من ذلك المرض، وعادت النفس إلى الصحة والاعتدال، ورجعت الضروريات العقلية مقبولة موثوقاً بها على أمن ويقين؛ ولم يكن ذلك بنظم دليل وترتيب كلام، بل بنور قذفه الله تعالى في الصدر وذلك النور هو مفتاح أكثر المعارف، فمن ظن أن الكشف موقوف على الأدلة المحررة، فقد ضيق رحمة الله تعالى الواسعة¹⁶

The last two sentences in this excerpt, underlining the importance of Divine 'light' in attaining certainty, have long influenced interpretations that claim al-Ghazali's shift away from logical reasoning and towards intuitive insight or revelation. Yet, the certainty attained refers to the certainty of "the necessary truths of the intellect." So, while al-Ghazali regained certainty through a moment of spiritual inspiration, his certainty restored his trust in the intellect and rational thinking.

Neither of these two views justly portrays al-Ghazali's integral growth and evolution of method. The more recent literature of a number of scholars recognizes and re-examines al-Ghazali's complex and continuously-evolving character and stance, rejecting his superficial depiction as a philosopher-turned-mystic. Richard Frank, for example, offers an analysis of al-Ghazali's relationship with the Ash'arite school of

¹⁵ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁶ Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Al munqith min al-dalal* , Accessed May 2017
<file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/6676685.pdf>

theology, and asserts that al-Ghazali remained committed to the principles of philosophy he was so often accused of destroying. In fact, he makes the claim that al-Ghazali's theology does not demonstrate a fundamental change of position before and after his spiritual crisis. Frank underlines al-Ghazali's insistence in his *On Divine Essence* (al-iqtisad fil i'tiqad) that "there is no conflict between the revelation that is handed down in the Muslim community and the truth that is given to reason.¹⁷" This non-separation between the two modes of knowledge are further elaborated upon by Frank, as he offers an overview of al-Ghazali's different purposes and approaches in two books written at the later stage of his life - *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Ihya' ulum el-din), and *On Legal Theory in Muslim Jurisprudence*¹⁸ (Al-mustasfa min 'ilm al-usul). The former focuses on cultivating spiritual purification and wisdom, while the latter focuses on the cultivation of reasoned evidence in legal matters.

In his masterpiece publication, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, Frank Griffel also provides an overview of western attitude towards al-Ghazali, referencing Shlomo Pines, Alessandro Bausani, and Abdelhamid I. Sabra as proponents in defense of Ghazali's phenomenal contribution to the sustainability of philosophy in the Muslim world¹⁹. Griffel explains that al-Ghazali, having critiqued only twenty issues in *The Incoherence*, actually sanctioned philosophical inquiry in all other areas of study. He celebrates al-Ghazali as:

indeed the first Muslim theologian who actively promotes the naturalization of the philosophical tradition into Islamic theology. His works document an attempt to integrate Aristotelian logics into the tradition of kalam, of rationalist Islamic

¹⁷ Richard Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

theology. Al-Ghazali tirelessly stresses the merits of syllogistic logics and urges his peers in Islamic theology to adopt this rational technique²⁰.

Using evidence from sources other than al-Ghazali's *The Deliverer*, Griffel uses collections of letters and reports from his students to draw this more accurate picture of al-Ghazali's integration of philosophy into mainstream religious thought, even after his spiritual crisis, and his articulated appreciation of intuitive knowing.

Ebrahim Moosa, a contemporary scholar of al-Ghazali, describes him, not as a convert to mysticism, but as a 'dihliz²¹' - a metaphor designating a space forming a threshold. Extending this metaphor, Moosa describes al-Ghazali as:

Far from being a middle-of-the-road kind of thinker, Ghazali actually straddled, agonized over, and negotiated antinomies. In other words, he entered the force field of ideas, where antithetical currents are powerful, providing equally binding mandates for the ethical subject²².

Holding, this threshold position, al-Ghazali is seen as one who explored and adopted different "narratives of religion"²³, keeping in balance the rational and the imaginative, the cognitive and the intuitive. Moosa asserts that al-Ghazali did not resort to mysticism at the expense of the rational, nor did he 'synthesize' a viewpoint that mixed between the rational and the mystic. Instead, he reached the comfortable 'threshold' position where he was able to appreciate different vantage points for different purposes. He

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹This is a word used by al-Ghazali himself in *The Revival* to describe how hearing and seeing are the passageway (dihliz) to the heart (see *The Revival, Book on The Practice of the Soul, Purification of Virtuous Behavior, and the Healing of the Maladies of the Heart* - كتاب رياضة النفس وتهذيب الأخلاق ومعالجة أمراض القلب)

²² Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 29.

²³ Ibid., 27.

adopted the lens suitable for the purpose and audience of his message, demonstrating that the two approaches could “coherently coexist”²⁴ within the same epistemology.

Moosa likens al-Ghazali’s journey to certainty to that of the Prophet Abraham²⁵. Abraham becomes infatuated first by the moon and then by the sun, only to discover that neither heavenly body is divine, but that there is a Greater Divinity that encompasses all. Similarly, al-Ghazali is infatuated by theology and law and philosophy and mysticism, only to discover that none alone provides certainty nor offers closer proximity to God. Instead, he came to understand, through an instance of illumination, that it is the variety of ways and methods that serve together to unveil truths on the path of happiness.

A more recent publication by Kenneth Garden, presents al-Ghazali as a *reviver*. Borrowing the adjectival from al-Ghazali’s own title for *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya’ ‘ulum el din)*, Garden analyzes the character of al-Ghazali against the backdrop of historical development during his time. Living at a time of extreme political turmoil, al-Ghazali struggled to revive religious thought amidst competing polarities - the traditional theologians and the sufis, the Seljuks in power and the Isma’ili threat. As a reviver, he was described by Garden as “not a solitary and otherworldly seeker, but ... an engaged scholar, rooted in his age, connected to some of its most powerful men, and using every tool at his disposal to promote a revivalist agenda²⁶”. Garden promotes

²⁴ Ibid., 272.

²⁵ Ibid., 134.

²⁶ Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

al-Ghazali's *Revival of the Sciences* as his life project - the outcome of his primary role as a *mujaddid* or reviver of the religion.

1.3.2 Reviews of al-Ghazali's Epistemology

Epistemology is based on the two Greek words "episteme" or *knowledge*, and "logos" or *science*. It literally means, therefore, *the science of knowledge*. In other words, it is the area concerned with how we know and how we develop certitude of our knowledge. Having an epistemic stance shapes the kind of knowledge we create and accept, and how we talk about it²⁷. An analysis of knowledge, therefore - its classifications, definitions, methods and language that describes it - gives an understanding of the underlying assumptions reflected in the methodology of classification, and of the epistemology that has shaped its theory. The Islamic historical context offers abundant examples of the genre of knowledge classification and definition.

A number of scholars have reviewed al-Ghazali's hierarchy of sciences and categories of knowledge - the focus of the first section of *Jawahir al-Quran*. Osman Bakar uses *The Book of Knowledge of Ihya' 'Ulum El-Din*, and *al-Risala al-Laduniyah* to identify al-Ghazali's systems of classification. He also makes use (to a lesser extent) of

²⁷ Joseph T. Tennis, "Epistemology, Theory, and Methodology in Knowledge Organization: Toward a Classification, Metatheory, and Research Framework," *Knowledge Organization*. 35 no. 2/3 (200): 102-112. http://faculty.washington.edu/jtennis/Publications_files/Tennis2008KOE pist.pdf

Jawahir al Quran, and *Mizan al-'Amal* for a comprehensive review. Bakar²⁸ identifies four systems of classification:

1. The theoretical and practical sciences
2. Presential (*huduri*) and attained knowledge (*husuli*)
3. Religious (*shar'iyah*) and intellectual (*'aqliya*) sciences
4. Obligatory at the individual level (*fard 'ayn*) vs. on the societal level (*fard kifaya*)

Bakar analyzes the basis of al-Ghazali's systems of categorization, makes a list of the sciences in their hierarchical classification, and discusses the nature and characteristics of each of the divisions. Bakar's analysis is thorough, but non-critical. His aim is to offer an exposition of al-Ghazali's thinking, juxtaposed alongside the theories of al-Farabi and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi. Little reference is made to *Jawahir al-Quran*.

Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi²⁹ zooms in on the particular aspect of knowledge by *presence* (*'ilm huduri*). He focuses on al-Ghazali's treatise on light in *Mishkat al-Anwar*, where he conducts a semantic analysis of the word 'light' and its implication when applied to God as the source of all light from which the universe emanates. While the theory of emanation is not a central point in *Jawahir al-Quran*, Yazdi presents it as a key aspect within al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge and certitude.

²⁸ Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2006), 203-222.

²⁹ Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy*, (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1992).

Analyzing al-Ghazali's methods of Quranic analysis and classification, Mohamed El-Rihani spans all of al-Ghazali's writings for instances of interpretation. He lists in index form each instance of Quranic reference with al-Ghazali's meanings and extrapolations. The book is organized in line with the sequence of chapters in the Quran. While al-Rihani extracts al-Ghazali's Quranic interpretations, he does not engage in an in-depth critical analysis of methods or categorization systems. *The Jewels* is used merely as a source for a collection of referenced verses from the Quran.

In *Al-Ghazzaliyy: A Study in Islamic Epistemology*, Mustafa Abu Sway refers to *The Jewels* in his analysis of knowledge gained through a metaphorical interpretation of dreams, or by insight or 'basirah'³⁰. He mentions al-Ghazali's description of the power of basirah to access 'latent' sciences, or those areas of knowledge that have yet to be discovered. Abu Sway's book is organized chronologically, following al-Ghazali through his journey of knowledge-seeking and seclusion. Reference to *Jawahir* is brief and incidental.

1.3.3 Reviews of the Jewels of the Quran

Full reviews of *The Jewels of the Quran* are rare. Most commentaries are offered as an introduction to the book, both in the Arabic and English publications. Following is an overview of those volumes and manuscripts that are currently accessible to the writer.

³⁰ Mustafa Abu Sway, *Al-Ghazzaliyy: A Study in Islamic Epistemology*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1996), 124-125.

In his detailed exposition of al-Ghazali's works, Abdelrahman Badawy³¹ lists 29 manuscripts for *The Jewels*, available in various museums and libraries around the world - in Leiden, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Cairo, Mosul, Madrid, Paris, Baghdad, Tehran, and Tashkent, amongst others. He traces the main purpose and outline of *The Jewels*, critiquing references to its chronology as documented in Ibn Rushd's *Faith and Reason in Islam (Al Kashf 'an Manahij al-Adilla fi 'Aqa'id al-Milla)*. Analysis of its content and significance does not feature in this reference.

A 1977 compilation, edited by Adel Nuweihid³², begins with a brief narrative of the historical/political context within which al-Ghazali was born, a categorization of his major writings, and summary that emphasizes the importance of *The Deliverer from Error (Al Munqith min al-dalal)*, as al-Ghazali's most important work. A second essay follows by Jameel Saliba which compares the philosophy of al-Ghazali to that of Descartes where it concerns the doubting of sense-perception and the trusting of intuitive certainty.

Published in 1984, Mohamed Rashid Reda al Qabbani's introduction to an edited and annotated edition offers a brief biography of al-Ghazali, followed by a selection of his most beautifully worded quotes. Qabbani³³ does not offer an analysis or interpretation of the work.

³¹ Abdelrahman Badawy, *Mu'allafat al-Ghazali*, (Kuwait: Wikalat al-Matbu'at, 1977), 143-9. <http://ghazali.org/biblio/badawi/Ano37.pdf>

³² Muhammad al-Ghazali. *The Jewels of the Quran*, reviewed by Adel Nuweihid, (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al Gadida, 1977).

³³ Mohamed Rashid Reda Al-Qabbani, *The Jewels of the Quran* (Beirut: AlMaktab al-Shamila, 1984) accessed December 2016 <http://shamela.ws/browse.php/book-9883#page-2>

A 1964 Arabic publication of *The Jewels*, with a foreword by Mohamed Mustafa Abu el-'Ela³⁴, presents a brief biography of al-Ghazali, followed by a summary of the main purposes of the publication.

In *Al-Ghazali and the Quran: One Book, Many Meanings*³⁵, Martin Wittingham analyzes al-Ghazali's hermeneutical theory and practice. He divides al-Ghazali's works into theories focusing on the activities of this world, and the activities of the hereafter. He derives al-Ghazali's hermeneutical framework from *Faysal al-tafriqa bayna al-Islam wal zandaqa, Al Mustasfa min 'ilm al-usul, Kitab adab tilawat al-Quran, Mishkat al-anwar, Kitab qawa'id al-'aqa'id, Al-qistas al-mustaqim, and Jawahir al-qur'an*.

Other publications of *The Jewels* are referenced in various works, but are accessible neither online, nor in the AUC library. Two such works are Mahmoud Bijou's 2007 publication, and Laleh Bakhtiar's 2009 edition, published by Kazi Publications, Lahore.

1.4 Scope and organization of the study

Given some of the traits recognized in the preliminary review of al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge above, an analysis of *The Jewels of the Quran* seems called for.

³⁴ Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Jawahir al-Quran*, Muhammad Mustafa Abu el-Ela (trans.), (Cairo: Elgindi Publishers, 1964).

³⁵ Martin Wittingham, *Al-Ghazali and the Quran: One book, Many Meanings*, (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007)

In its newly-published form, *The Jewels* places the focus on Quranic analysis and spiritual interpretation in the middle of the book, preceded by al-Ghazali's articulation of his own scheme of the sciences, and followed by a curriculum for the virtuous practice of religion. Thus, a careful analysis of this work may contribute substantially to the understanding of al-Ghazali's theories of knowledge, spiritual wisdom, and practical education. The study asks the question:

How can a critical analysis of al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge, spiritual wisdom, and practical curriculum in the Jewels of the Quran, in its complete three parts, contribute to an understanding of his integral stance both in terms of epistemology and application?

Some of the key (arguable) issues within this analysis revolve around:

- The hierarchy of the sciences and conceptualizing metaphors
- Knowledge of God (essence, attributes and works)
- Esoteric/invisible, exoteric/visible dimensions of reality
- Ways of knowing - rational thinking and experiential feeling
- Stages of growth and practices of transformation (faith and action)

To answer the above question, a selected bibliography on Islamic epistemology and a number of primary sources are consulted in addition to the core focus of the analysis *The Jewels of the Quran*. The organization of the study will follow the 3 main sections of *The Jewels*, as it critically analyzes the issues discussed.

The first section deals with the Quran as the source of all knowledge. The analogy of the ocean is employed to describe the depth and richness of Quranic

knowledge, comprised of diverse jewels and pearls. Al-Ghazali divides the aims of the Quran to six main principles, followed by four subsidiary ones. This section presents each, showing the significance, hierarchy and relationships between the sciences. Each of the layers of knowledge is explored from the outer shell to the innermost core of depth - the unitive core of Divine knowledge. The analysis of this section focuses on al-Ghazali's discussion of Quranic authority, the hierarchy of the sciences, and the conceptual metaphors of the sea, light and darkness, jewels and pearls, red sulphur, the greatest antidote, musk and aloewood.

The second section presents the main goals (Maqasid) of the Quranic verses. Al-Ghazali classifies a selection of verses into two categories - those that focus on the essence of God (783 verses), and those that focus on the righteous path (768 verses). The analysis of this section explores al-Ghazali's methods and principles of classification. Questions relating to the essence and attributes of God, the secrets of selected verses of the Quran, as well as received and revealed knowledge are explored.

The third and final section of *Jawahir* is that component of the book that has been customarily published in isolation as *Kitab al arba'een fi 'usul el-din*. As an integral part of the *Jewels of the Quran*, this section connects the various ranks of knowledge with their practical expectations. A critical evaluation is undertaken of al-Ghazali's arguments on the connection between faith and action as a means to happiness, the stations and states of the seeker, and experiential practice.

The term “integral” has been often used to describe philosophers who sought to see ‘unity’ amongst parts. Henri Bergson³⁶ (1859–1941), a twentieth century French philosopher is often described as an “integral” thinker, given his philosophy of *intuition*, which places the focus on interior experience as the path to ‘absolute knowledge’ rather than analytic, divisive intelligence. Another philosopher described as “integral”, Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), finds unification between subjective vs. objective human experiences, process and subject, mind and matter, and permanence and change³⁷. He exclaims, “We must avoid vicious bifurcation.”³⁸ In more contemporary literature, the term “integral framework” is often associated with the American thinker Ken Wilber (b.1949). Wilber presents what he calls a “(meta)-theory for everything.”³⁹ He organizes knowledge along two axes of interior/exterior and individual/collective, and describes the different lines, types, levels and states of knowledge.

Defining ‘integral’ as ‘a system where all the parts fit together in a comprehensive whole,’ this study puts forward the thesis that, contrary to the arguments that al-Ghazali ‘destroyed’ philosophy and ‘emerged’ a mystic after his spiritual awakening, al-Ghazali, actually, spends his life struggling to make meaning across the different areas and

³⁶ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 175-176, in Leonard Lawlor, and Valentine Moulard Leonard, "Henri Bergson", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/bergson/>

³⁷ Andrew David Irvine "Alfred North Whitehead", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/whitehead/>

³⁸ Alfred N. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1920),185, in *ibid.*

³⁹ Ken Wilber, Introduction to the Integral Approach (and the AQAL Map), accessed May 2017 http://www.kenwilber.com/Writings/PDF/IntroductiontotheIntegralApproach_GENERAL_2005_NN.pdf

methods of knowledge, and eventually, at the point of Divine Light cast unto his breast, he is able to envision the comprehensive integral framework he had been yearning for. His skepticism, strife for certainty, and subsequent enlightenment were stages in his own integral growth and evolution. Once he attains a 'knowing', and regains confidence in the necessity of the intellect, he is able to pull all the threads together, to weaving an Integral Epistemology. This study traces his line of thought and abstracts his theory, best presented in the complete three-edition volume of *The Jewels of the Quran*.

Al-Ghazali's station as an integral thinker and holistic philosopher cannot be underestimated. He integrates methods of received/revealed knowledge, rational thinking, and experiential learning all into one unified approach to living and giving. The theoretical and practical, the innermost and outermost all conjoin in a harmonious framework that presents his worldview and practical curriculum - a framework that lends core principles to the search for gratification and felicity in knowledge-seeking, even in the modern day.

Chapter 2

The Theory of Knowledge Derived from the Quran

2.1 The Ocean Analogy

The Jewels of the Quran begins with a beautiful analogy, comparing the Quran to a deep ocean, rich with wonders and jewels of all types:

O you who recite the Quran to a great length, who take its study as an occupation, and who imbibe some of its outward meanings and sentences. How long will you ramble on the shore of the ocean, closing your eyes to the wonders of the meanings of the Quran? Was it not your duty to sail to the midst of the fathomless ocean of these meanings in order to see their wonders, to travel to their islands in order to gather their best produce, and to dive into their depths so that you might become rich by obtaining their jewels? Do you not feel ashamed of being deprived of their pearls and jewels by your persistence in looking at their shores and outward appearances? Has it not come to your knowledge that the Quran is an ocean and that it is from the Quran that the sciences of the ancients and the moderns branch off, just as rivers and brooks branch off from the shores of an ocean? Why do you not emulate those people who waded through their waves and thus gained red brimstones, dived into their depths and thus drew out red corundum, shining pearls and green chrysolite, travelled along their coasts and thus gathered grey ambergris and fresh blooming aloe-wood, and became attached to their islands and thus derived from their animals the greatest antidote and the strongest musk? Take notice that, fulfilling the duty of brotherhood and hoping the blessing of your prayer to God, I now wish to guide you to the manner of the journey of these people, of their diving and of their swimming⁴⁰.

فاني أنبهك على رقدتك أيها المسترسل في تلاوتك المتخذ دراسة القرآن عملا المتلقف من معانيه ظواهر وجملا الى
كم تطوف على ساحل البحر مغمضا عينيك عن غرائبها أو ما كان لك أن تركب متن لجتها لتبصر عجائبها وتسافر الى
جزائرها لاجتناء أطايبها وتغوص في عمقها فتستغني بنيل جواهرها أو ما تعير نفسك في الحرمان عن دررها وجواهرها
بادمان النظر الى سواحلها وظواهرها أو ما بلغك أن القرآن هو البحر المحيط ومنه يتشعب علم الأولين والآخرين كما يتشعب
عن سواحل البحر المحيط أنهارها وجداولها أو ما تغبط أقواما خاضوا في غمرة أمواجها فظفروا بالكيريت الأحمر وغاصوا

⁴⁰ Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Jewels of the Quran: Al-Ghazali's Theory*, (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1977), 19-20.

في أعماقها فاستخرجوا الياقوت الأحمر والدر الأزهر والزبرجد الأخضر وساحوا في سواحلها فالتقطوا العنبر الأشهب والعود
الرطب الأنضر وتعلقوا الى جزائرها واستدروا من حيواناتها الترياق الأكبر والمسك الأذفر وما أنا أرشدك قاضيا حق إخائك
ومرتجيا بركة دعائك الى كيفية سياحتهم وغوصهم وسباحتهم⁴¹

The analogy of the ocean is employed to describe the depth and richness of Quranic knowledge, comprised of diverse jewels and pearls. Al-Ghazali pictures to the readers - those who recite without real understanding (perhaps, the literalists, the traditionalists, and/or the Batiniyya) - a journey from the sandy shores of the ocean out across the sea in a sailboat, and then into the depths, and all the way to the bed of the ocean. The visual impact is stunning. The reader of the Quran who does not contemplate the inner meanings of the verses is like the beach dweller who merely loiters on the shore. He enjoys the sea at a distance, but does not discover its priceless gems at the deeper levels. He is like one "*closing [his] eyes to the wonders and meanings of the Quran*⁴²." With closed eyes, the reader loses the color, vastness, and variety of riches within the ocean of the Quran.

It is appropriate for al-Ghazali to select the image of the sea to describe God's 'fathomless' knowledge. It is a metaphor God Himself employs in the holy Quran:

Say, "If the sea were ink for [writing] the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like of it as a supplement" (18:109).

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لَكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا (سورة الكهف)

⁴¹ Kamel, 67-68.

⁴² Ibid., 19.

This verse from the chapter on The Cave (*al-kaḥf*) likens the ink of God's words - one manifestation of His infinite knowledge - to an endless sea, one which never exhausts God's Truth, even when infinitely multiplied. The volume, depth and mystery are just few attributes of the sea upon which the image is built.

Al-Ghazali focuses on a number of elements pertaining to the visual image of the sea - the shore or coastline, the waves, the sailing boat, an island, the depths, and the precious jewels on the seabed. The shore represents the outer periphery upon which the waves wash. The shore gives pleasure to the viewer, who feasts his/her senses on the sights, sounds, smells, touch and taste of the sea. This pleasure is likened to the 'outer appearances' of the Quran - the literal meanings, the sound of the recitation, the beauty of the written word.

Al-Ghazali calls the reader to sail out onto the vast stretches of the sea to experience the different 'islands' - the expanses of meaning, that are, just like an island, detached from the mainland, or the mainstream interpretations of the Quran that lie on the shore-like periphery. The islands offer abundant pleasures to those who 'waded through the waves,' "travelled along their coasts," and "became attached to their islands." Those who surfed the breadth of the sea gained "the produce" of the islands. Similarly, those who look at the message of the Quran from different perspectives, understanding contextual and historical cues, as well as different methodologies of interpretation, gain the fruit of their broad search for knowledge. On the distant islands there may be new, unexplored life - minerals, plants and animals. The grey ambergris

(*al-ambar al-ashhab*), the sweet-scented residue, created in the intestines of whales; the aromatic aloeswood (*al-oud al-rateb al-andar*); the curative antidote (*al-tiryak al-akbar*) and the musk perfumes (*al-misk al-athfar*), are all examples for the varieties of rare and sweet riches on the vast physical plains of the island, comprising all elements of life. Thus is the gratification of the Quran reader, cruising far and wide on the stretches of Quranic exegesis.

The depths of the ocean, however, carries far more precious gifts - red brimstone (*al-kibrit al-ahmar*), red corundum (*al-yaqut al-ahmar*), shining pearls (*al-durr al-azhar*), and green chrysolite (*al-zabarjad al-akhdar*). Deep down on the ocean bed, these are hard to find. For those who seek the hidden marvels and work their way to the uncharted depths, the gains are amazing and pleasurable. Similarly, a deep-sea reader of the Quran unearths stunning 'jewels' and explores mysteries, hidden from the loiterer on the outer beach. The jewels of the Quran are the deeper, inner meanings and secrets of the verses, words, and figurative images, the knowledge of which provides immense spiritual gratification. Like the diver, the Quranic explorer needs the initial practice and training to be able to navigate the terrain skillfully, and enjoy the bounty of spiritual pleasures. Al-Ghazali uses the metaphors to classify Quranic verse into varieties of riches, which he expounds upon in the middle chapter of *The Jewels*.

The use of jewel metaphors to explain the similitude of preciousness and rarity seems appropriate to the historical era⁴³. Al-Ghazali lived in a time of great prosperity

⁴³ Khadija M. Kamel (Ed.). *Jawahir al-Quran wa Durraruh by Hujjat al-Islam Abu Hamed Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali*, (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub wal Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya, 2011), 19.

and affluence. The eleventh century Islamic empire was still in the Golden Age. Hence, the treasures of the East and West, including jewels, perfumes, fine fabric, and aromatic incense were abundant and sought after. Al-Ghazali uses these material symbols to refer to higher spiritual pleasures to those with fine taste and a quest for the rare and precious. It is this spiritual transmutation that al-Ghazali seeks to learn and teach.

Hence, the allegory of the ocean employs a figurative tool to attract those readers that focus on the outer appearance. It makes its appeal using those same attractions that bedazzle, but it proposes the promise “I now wish to guide you to the manner of the journey⁴⁴.” Al-Ghazali alludes to the work to be done, before mystery is revealed. Thorough reading, and deeper analysis are the work of the mind. They will yield outcomes that gratify the mind - newer understanding and better assimilation, known in the sufi literature as *Kasb*⁴⁵. But with this mental work there may come a divine gift, known as *Wahb*⁴⁶, a revelation that gratifies the soul. This differentiation between knowledge that one acquires through one’s effort, and knowledge that is unveiled through revelation, is reiterated by al-Ghazali in several of his works. In *The Message from On High*⁴⁷ (*al-risala al-laduniyya*) al-Ghazali further classifies knowledge granted through divine-giving as Revelation (*wahy*) and Inspiration (*ilham*). The first is communicated to prophets, while the second is communicated to those whose soul (*nafs*) seeks purification. An integrated form of learning draws on both *kasb* through

⁴⁴ Abul Quasem, 20.

⁴⁵ Khalid al-Tuzani, “Inspiration in Sufi Writings”, *Mominoun without Borders for Research and Studies*, May 2015, accessed March 2017

<http://www.mominoun.com/articles/2752-الإلهام-في-الكتابات-الصوفية-روافد-وتجليات-وإشكالات>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The Message from On High*, Margaret Smith (trans.), (US: Islamic Book Trust, 2010).

intentional analysis and mental work, and *wahb* or *ilham* through spiritual refinement to attain the alchemy of the soul.

2.2 Red sulphur and the alchemy of the spirit

The reference to Red Brimstone or Red Sulphur is also appropriate. This is the time of Islamic alchemy and great experimentation. Red Sulphur (*al-kibrit al-ahmar*) was mentioned by the first Islamic alchemists Jabir Ibn Hayyan⁴⁸ in the eighth century and Dhul Nun al-Misri⁴⁹ in the ninth century, as the rare substance which could turn base metals into fine metals - lead into gold - and could achieve ultimate health and longevity. It was known as the elixir (*al-iksir*) of life. Al-Ghazali himself wrote *The Alchemy of Happiness*, also in the latter part of his life, using the symbols of alchemy to refer to a higher spiritual transmutation. In his introduction to *The Alchemy*, he states:

Know, O beloved, that man was not created in jest or at random, but marvelously made and for some great end. Although he is not from everlasting, yet he lives forever; and though his body is mean and earthly, yet his spirit is lofty and divine. When in the crucible of abstinence he is purged from carnal passions, he attains to the highest, and in place of being a slave to lust and anger becomes endued with angelic qualities. Attaining that state, he finds his heaven in the contemplation of Eternal Beauty, and no longer in fleshly delights. The spiritual alchemy which operates this change in him, like that which transmutes base metals into gold, is not easily discovered, nor to be found in the house of every old woman. It is to explain that alchemy and its methods of operation that the author has undertaken this work, which he has entitled, The Alchemy of Happiness. Now the treasuries of God, in which this alchemy is to be sought, are the hearts of the prophets, and he who seeks it elsewhere will be disappointed and bankrupt on the Day of Judgment when he hears the word, "We have lifted the veil from off thee, and thy sight today is keen"⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ Gary Edson, *Mysticism and Alchemy through the Ages: The Quest for Transformation*, (Jefferson: MacFarland and Company Publishers: 2012), 199.

⁴⁹ "Abstracts of Theses", *Journal of the University of Bombay*, July 1951, p. 125.

⁵⁰ Muhammad al-Ghazzali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, Claud Field (Trans.) (London: The Octagon Press, 1983), 15-16.

It is in “the hearts of prophets” - their message, their faith, and their manner of transmittal - that one finds the catalyst for alchemy and spiritual transformation. This is the Red Sulphur⁵¹ of the spiritual alchemist. It is the outcome of the deep-diving in the sacred message of the prophets, encapsulated in the Quran. He who attains the ultimate purpose of the Quran, which is Knowledge of God, attains the Red Sulphur and achieves spiritual purification.

2.3 The aims of the Quran

In the ocean analogy, al-Ghazali asks, “*Has it not come to your knowledge that the Quran is an ocean and that it is from the Quran that the sciences of the ancients and the moderns branch off, just as rivers and brooks branch off from the shores of an ocean?*”⁵² Having laid the basis that the Quran is the source of all knowledge, al-Ghazali, then, extracts the main purposes (*maqasid*) of Quranic knowledge. The overarching purpose of the Quran, as articulated by al-Ghazali is the Knowledge of God. Calling people to God is the ultimate goal and the heart of the Quran. Hence, al-Ghazali builds his theory of Quranic knowledge around this core concept. He divides the first section of *The Jewels* into 19 points, tracing the different levels of the theory from primary aims to tertiary aims, each with its various branches and tributaries, and commenting on the level of importance and interconnectedness of ideas.

⁵¹ The term Red Sulphur is customarily used to refer to another great Islamic thinker, Mohy El Din Ibn Arabi, who epitomises spiritual refinement and capacity to receive knowledge through inspiration or *ilham*. Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, integrates between knowledge of the mind and knowledge of the heart - both *kasb* and *wahb*.

⁵² Abul Quasem, 19.

Al-Ghazali uses jewels and valuables for sacred symbolism, aligning the importance of Quranic verse to the physical purity and finesse of the selected jewel. Deriving a total of six Quranic aims, al-Ghazali organizes them to form the basis of knowledge - three primary aims and three secondary, branching into tertiary sub-ideas. They are mapped below in order of superiority, then expounded upon, highlighting the controversial issues which result from al-Ghazali's exposition:

Jewel or Valuable	Quranic Aim
Red Sulphur (al-kibrit al-ahmar)	Knowledge of all Quranic aims, including the highest and most supreme
Red Corundum/Ruby	Knowledge of the Essence of God
Bluish-Grey Corundum/Sapphire	Knowledge of the Attributes of God
Yellow Corundum/Sapphire	Knowledge of the Actions of God
Pearl	Knowledge of the Divine Path
Green Chrysolite	Knowledge of the Hereafter
Grey Ambergris	Knowledge of the conditions or the seekers
Fresh Aloe-wood	Knowledge of the conditions of the deniers
Best Antidote	Knowledge of the arguments against the non-believers
Strongest Musk	Knowledge of the preparation for the divine journey

2.3.1 Knowledge of God (Grades of Corundum)

The most supreme aim of Quranic scripture is to guide man to the knowledge of God. The opening verses of Surat al-Baqara say,

“*Alif Lam Meem. This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah*” (2:1-2⁵³).

الم ذلك الكتاب لا ريب فيه هدي للمتقين (سورة البقرة)

Knowledge of the Essence of God is the highest form of knowledge and the most difficult to attain. It is available to only a select few, if any. Very few verses of the Quran refer to the essence or the quiddity of God - who He is, how He is defined. The few verses that refer to the essence of God do so with minimal detail, drawing no comparison or indicative definitions. Al-Ghazali quotes Quranic verses that determine God’s Absolute Oneness, Power, and Uniqueness: “Like Him there is Nothing” (42:11) (ليس كمثلته شيء), and “Glory be to Him. High be He exalted above that which they describe of Him” (6:100) (سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَىٰ عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ). Hence, al-Ghazali states, it is in attaining this knowledge that one would achieve the purest of spiritual alchemy, gaining *al-kibrit al-ahmar*.

Knowledge of God’s attributes is the second highest aim. More verses in the Quran are devoted to a description of God’s characterizations and attributes, best epitomized in the Most Beautiful Names of the Divine. Al-Ghazali mentions examples of the most important divine attributes as being Knowledge, Power, Life, Speech, Wisdom, Hearing and Seeing.

⁵³ Translation by Yusuf Ali

The third highest form of knowledge, which is much more pervasive in the verses of the Quran, is a description of God's actions. The Quran makes reference to the skies, the planets, the mountains, the seas, animals and plants, and so much more of God's visible creative actions. Al-Ghazali explains that even more telling than the physical signs, are God's hidden actions. He makes the distinction between the world of creation which is accessible to the senses ('*alam al-mulk*) and the world of invisible creation which is not accessible to the senses ('*alam al-malakut*), but some signs of which are only accessible to those few with heart knowledge. Later in *The Jewels*, al-Ghazali connects between the visible entities in the cosmos and the invisible entities, saying that each physical sign corresponds to a non-visible, spiritual entity:

In every sentence which has occurred, there are hints and indications of a hidden meaning understood by him who understands the relationship between the world of possession and perception and the world of the unseen and dominion, since everywhere in the former world is only a form of something spiritual in the unseen world, as if that thing which is in the world of possession and perception were the same as that which is in the world of the unseen and dominion, in respect to its spirit and meaning though not in respect to its shape and form. The physical form from the world of perceptions included in the spiritual meaning of that world. This is why this world constitutes one of the stages of the path to God - a stage indispensable for man - since just as it is impossible to reach the core except by way of the rind, so it is impossible to advance towards the world of spirits except through the form of the world of bodies⁵⁴.

فما من كلمة منها الا وتحتمها رمز واشارة الى معنى خفي يدركها من يدرك الموازنة والمناسبة بين عالم الملك والشهادة وبين عالم الغيب والملكوت فما من شيء في عالم الحس والشهادة الا وهو مثال لأمر روحاني من عالم الملكوت وكأنه هو في روحه ومعناه وليس هو في صورته وقالبه والمثال الجسماني من عالم الشهادة مرقاة الى المعنى الروحاني من ذلك العالم ولذلك كانت الدنيا مزرعة بل منزلا من منازل الطريق الى الله تعالى ضروريا في حق الانس اذ كما يستحيل الوصول الى اللب الا من طريق القشر فيستحيل الترفي الى عالم الأرواح الا من مثال عالم الأجسام⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Abul Quasem, 49.

⁵⁵ Kamel, 88.

Hence, contemplation of God's actions in the physical realm is a path to know of God's unseen, mystical action and doing. It is a necessary path to those who seek transcendence and spiritual transformation.

Much debate surrounds al-Ghazali's concept of knowing God⁵⁶. While he promotes a deep-dive in the massive depths of the Quran in order to know God - His actions, attributes, and essence - he also determines that knowledge of God's essence is impossible to attain. God is like no other. He cannot be described, and cannot be likened to any other created being. Yet, many of His attributes, though not all, also seem to pertain to human beings. Whilst some attributes apply only to God, such as *al-Qayyum* (which may translate into the Self-Existing One who oversees all other), other descriptors may apply to humans, such as "seeing" and "hearing", "compassionate" and "powerful." In fact, one of the Prophet's sayings (*hadith*), narrated on the authority of Abu Huraira, describes man as being created in the image of God:

*When any one of you fights with his brother, he should avoid his face for Allah created Adam in His own image*⁵⁷

حَدَّثَنَا نَصْرُ بْنُ عَلِيٍّ الْجَهْضَمِيُّ، حَدَّثَنِي أَبِي، حَدَّثَنَا الْمُتَنِّي، ح وَحَدَّثَنِي مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ حَاتِمٍ حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنُ مَهْدِيٍّ، عَنِ الْمُتَنِّي بْنِ سَعِيدٍ، عَنْ قَتَادَةَ، عَنْ أَبِي أَيُّوبَ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ وَفِي حَدِيثِ ابْنِ حَاتِمٍ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ " إِذَا قَاتَلَ أَحَدُكُمْ أَخَاهُ فَلْيَجْتَنِبِ الْوَجْهَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ خَلَقَ آدَمَ عَلَى صُورَتِهِ " .

⁵⁶ Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God: A Philosophical Critical Analysis of Some of the Problems Raised by Ghazali's View of God as Utterly Unique and Unknowable*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), accessed March 2017 <http://www.ghazali.org/books/fad-quuG.pdf>

⁵⁷ Sahih Muslim, The Book of Virtue, Enjoining Good Manners, and Joining of the Ties of Kinship, Book 32: The Prohibition of Striking the Face, Hadith 6325. <https://sunnah.com/muslim/45/152>

Hence, there seems to be a contradiction. How can God be unlike any being, when His attributes characterize Him in ways similar to human beings? Al-Ghazali's answer to this confusion appears in *On the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God (al-maqsad al-asnaa fi sharh ma'ani asmaa illah al-husna)*, where he says:

[God is] above their (men's) attributes of perfection just as He is above their attributes of imperfection, nay of every attribute conceivable by man, as well as of what is like it (the attribute) or similar to it⁵⁸.

Thus, al-Ghazali's position is that God is above (*munazzah 'an*) all that is created. The *hadith* above does not literally refer to a physical resemblance, given that God's uniqueness is ultimate. Although the essence, attributes and actions of God are ultimately and *utterly*⁵⁹ dis-similar to anything that man can apprehend or mentally represent, even if the verbal description employs the same wording, one should strive to know God through what one *can* conceive of, namely the signs apparent to the senses and the heart.

2.3.2 Knowledge of the Divine Path (*Pearl*)

The believer on the path to God (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*) is like a traveler to a particular destination. He has to prepare for the journey. Al-Ghazali specifies two forms of preparation - perseverance in the way of God, and purification of diversions from God. Perseverance through prayer and worship is called for by the Quran, as God instructs the Prophet "And remember the name of your Lord, and devote yourself to Him with [complete] devotion" (73:8) (وَأذْكُرِ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلًا). Hence, it is holding on fast to the practices of religion, as do the prophets and saints, which leads to advancement on

⁵⁸ Translated in Shehadi, 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 20.

the path of God. Purification of the soul and protecting oneself against all falsehoods, evils and distractions is also a challenging but necessary practice to remain steadfast on the *sirat*. It is interesting that the word ‘mustaqim’ in Arabic, usually translated into ‘straight path,’ has the root q - y - m, which also form the derivative ‘*qiyam*’ - the Arabic word for values. *Al-sirat al-mustaqim*, or the straight path, therefore, is also the path of virtue. The straight path is the shortest route. The shortest route to the Divine is the tenacious upholding of values.

Al-Ghazali describes the journey to God (*al safar ila Allah*⁶⁰) as being a stationary journey. Neither the traveller nor He who is travelled to engages in physical movement, for God is already a close companion. God, in fact, says of man,

“We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein” (50:16)

ونحن اقرب اليه من حبل الوريد (سورة ق)

The journey is, therefore, symbolic of the strife towards the Divine.

Al-Ghazali uses the image of a mirror⁶¹ to represent how God is reflected onto the heart of the seeker. He describes how one may not ‘see’ a reflection in the mirror if the mirror is covered in rust. Once the mirror is polished, the reflection becomes clear. Similarly, once the believer works to polish and purify his heart from all distractions, the light of God is reflected onto the mirror of his heart, as though a veil has been removed. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that it is only a ‘reflection’ of the Divine light, lest one should

⁶⁰ Kamel, *Jawahir*, 72.

⁶¹ Kamel, 73.

think that God Himself has appeared in the mirror. Such is the predicament of some gnostics, al-Ghazali explains, who, ecstatic with the experience of the spiritual light, falsely thought that God had melded with their own being. The mirror serves to clarify that the reflection is not the reality.

The concept of the heart as a receptacle for spiritual 'light' is a figurative image that al-Ghazali employs in a number of his works - it appears in *The Alchemy of Happiness*, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, and *The Ascent to the Divine through the Path of Self-knowledge (Maarij al-quds fi madarij marifat al-nafs)*, to name just a few works. In *The Alchemy*, he explains why we are unable to see God, in our earthly, bodily form:

Our imprisonment in bodies of clay and water, and entanglement in the things of sense constitute a veil which hides the Vision of God from us, although it does not prevent our attaining to some knowledge of Him. For this reason God said to Moses on Mount Sinai, "Thou shalt not see Me." The truth of the matter is this that, just as the seed of man becomes a man, and a buried date stone becomes a palm tree, so the knowledge of God acquired on Earth will in the Next World change into the Vision of God, and he who has never learnt the knowledge will never have the Vision. This Vision will not be shared alike by all who know, but their discernment of it will vary exactly as their knowledge. God is one, but He will be seen in many different ways, just as one object is reflected in different ways by different mirrors, some showing it straight, and some distorted, some clearly and some dimly. A mirror may be so crooked as to make even a beautiful form appear misshapen, and a man may carry into the next world a heart so dark and distorted that the sight which will be a source of peace and joy to others will be to him a source of misery. He, in whose heart the love of God has prevailed over all else, will derive more joy from this vision than he in whose heart it has not so prevailed; just as in the case of two men with equally powerful eyesight, gazing on a beautiful face, he who already loves the possessor of that face will rejoice in beholding it more than he who does not. For perfect happiness mere knowledge is not enough, unaccompanied by love, and the love of God cannot take possession of a man's heart till it be purified from love of the world⁶².

⁶² Al-Ghazzali, *The Alchemy*, 112-113.

In this excerpt, al-Ghazali expands the image of the reflective mirror to determine that the degree of bliss in the hereafter corresponds to the degree of polish and purification you have engaged your heart in. Knowledge of the path, therefore, and conscious effort to prepare for and advance on the path, through constant remembrance, worship, and refusal of evil, ultimately leads to the highest pleasurable gain, which is the seeing of God, the All-Merciful (*al-nathar ila wajh Allah al-Karim*).

2.3.3 Knowledge of the Hereafter (*Green chrysolite*)

The third aim of the Quran is to teach about the afterlife. There are verses that describe the heavenly bliss, and verses that describe the agony of the hellfire, manifest and hidden. Heavens is described as the final abode for the believers, and it is where all forms of pleasure, peace and tranquility reside. There is the description of vast spaciousness, lush greenery, and abundance of blessings. Hellfire, on the other hand, is the place of extreme torment, punishment and suffering for those who have rejected the call to God. The literal and metaphorical meanings of these experiences, including other experiences of the afterlife, such as the day of resurrection, the balance meter of good and evil, and the bridge to the hereafter, all carry manifest and hidden meanings. Al-Ghazali does not delve into detail in this section of *The Jewels*, however, in other areas of his writing, including *The Alchemy* and *The Revival*, he debates various key critical issues related to the afterlife. The most important of these issues is the resurrection of the body vs. the soul.

In *The Alchemy*, Al-Ghazali takes a position on human resurrection in the afterlife (al-ba'th). He explains that every human being has two souls - an animal soul and a spiritual soul. The position of the animal soul is the heart, from which emanates the energies required for the physical faculties of the body. He uses the following allegory to illustrate the function of the animal soul:

It may be compared to a lamp carried about within a cottage, the light of which falls upon the walls wherever it goes. The heart is the wick of this lamp, and when the supply of oil is cut off for any reason, the lamp dies. Such is the death of the animal soul⁶³.

The animal soul, is, then, in al-Ghazali's interpretation, connected and particular to a body. When the body perishes, so does the animal soul.

On the other hand, the spiritual soul is whole and intact, not dependent on or connected to the body. It is the means through which a true believer attains a knowledge of God - a "window opening on the realities of the spiritual world⁶⁴". At the time of death, it is the spiritual soul that experiences the pleasures and pains of both the temporary abode in a *barzakh*, and the eternal life in the hereafter. Al-Ghazali also uses an allegory to illustrate the spiritual soul. He says:

It is indivisible, and by it man knows God. It is, so to speak, the rider of the animal soul, and when that perishes it still remains, but is like a horseman who has been dismounted, or like a hunter who has lost his weapons. That steed and those weapons were granted the human soul that by means of them it might pursue and capture the Phoenix of the love and knowledge of God. If it has effected that capture, it is not a grief but rather a relief to be able to lay those weapons aside, and to dismount from that weary steed. Therefore, the Prophet said, 'Death is a welcome gift of God to the believer.' But alas, for that soul

⁶³ Al-Ghazzali, *The Alchemy*, 53.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

which loses its steed and hunting weapons before it has captured the prize, its misery and regret will be indescribable⁶⁵.

The spiritual or human soul, therefore, does not perish. Everybody's spiritual soul originates from the divine sphere as pointed out in the Quranic verse,

He who perfected everything which He created and began the creation of man from clay. Then, He made his posterity out of the extract of a liquid disdained. Then He proportioned him and breathed into him from His soul and made for you hearing and vision and hearts; little are you grateful. (32: 7-9)

الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ وَبَدَأَ خَلْقَ الْإِنْسَانِ مِنْ طِينٍ (7) ثُمَّ جَعَلَ نَسْلَهُ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِّنْ مَّاءٍ مَّهِينٍ (8) ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِنْ رُّوحِهِ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ (سورة السجدة)

Al-Ghazali, therefore, believes that the human/spiritual soul survives the body. He is opposed to those who believe that the soul perishes at the time of death with the body, and then is restored in the grave for questioning by Al-Munkar and Al-Nakir - the two angels whose task is to interrogate the deceased on his/her various actions. Al-Ghazali explains the soul's suffering in the hereafter as being a result of its attachments to worldly, material possessions and pleasures. Those whose love and attachment for this world exceed their love of God, will necessarily suffer when they lose what they so attach to. Those whose love for God is higher and stronger than their love of the material world will welcome death and the proximity to the divine. He describes the ninety nine serpents described in Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb's warning below, as being the evil qualities in the hearts of men, existent during their lifetime:

O the servants of Allah! The state in the grave of a person whose sins are not forgiven is more horrifying than death itself. Fear its (grave's) narrowness, its squeezing, its imprisonment, and its loneliness, of terror and worms. The grave

⁶⁵ Ibid., 53-54.

is like a garden of Paradise for a good doer, while it is like a dungeon of hell for the evil doer. Allah tells His enemies that He will send ninety-nine serpents in their graves, who will tear their flesh and smash their bones, and this punishment will continue till the outbreak of Qiyamat. If one of the serpents exhales towards this earth, all plants and trees will be destroyed. O servants of Allah! Your souls are tender, and your bodies delicate, you cannot confront any ordinary serpent of this world, how then will you face them?⁶⁶

Al-Ghazali explains that the serpents are the symbols of negative emotions, such as “jealousy, hatred, hypocrisy, pride, deceit, etc., everyone of which springs, directly or remotely, from love of the world⁶⁷”.

Another cause of spiritual suffering is the horrific shame at one’s worldly vice and immoral actions. When, in the *barzakh*, people see their hidden actions in their crude manifest reality, it becomes a “spiritual hell.” The clarity of ‘seeing’ after death is described in the Quran in the following verse,

And the Horn will be blown. That is the Day of [carrying out] the threat. And every soul will come, with it a driver and a witness. [It will be said], "You were certainly in unmindfulness of this, and We have removed from you your cover, so your sight, this Day, is sharp." (50: 20-22)

وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمَ الْوَعْدِ. ۚ وَجَاءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّعَهَا سَائِقٌ وَشَهِيدٌ لَّقَدْ كُنْتَ فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هٰذَا فَكَشَفْنَا

عَنكَ غِطَاءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ الْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ (سورة ق)

Yet another type of ‘hell’, described by al-Ghazali, is that of the realization of and disappointment at one’s diversion from the ultimate goal of life - the knowledge and

⁶⁶ Aejaz Ali Turab Bhujwala (trans.), *The Last Journey, Translation of Manazil al- Akhirah* by Abbas Qummi, (Qum: Ansarian Publications, 2007), <https://www.al-islam.org/last-journey-translation-manazil-al-akhirah-shaykh-abbas-qummi/returning-maad#separation-spirit-body>

⁶⁷ Al-Ghazzali, *The Alchemy*, 57.

manifestation of the light of God. Al-Ghazali describes that if man arrives in the next world with a thick coating of rust on his heart's mirror, he will have completely failed his role in life and the reason for which he was made. This is a state, experienced as 'hell.'

In contrast, those whose lives had been devoted to yearning and toil in the path of God, rejoice to find that their good deeds have indeed brought them closer to God. Al-Ghazali describes in *The Revival*⁶⁸ that those who have used their bodies as a microcosm of the divine - the heart analogous to the divine Throne (al-'Arsh), the head analogous to the divine Seat (al-Kursi), and the limbs and extremities analogous to the obedient angels - are those who truly manifest the attributes of God, as referred to in the hadith in Sahih Muslim, cited above: "Allah created Adam in His own image." This is the state of blissful heaven. Hence, the pleasure ensuing in paradise is that of the knowledge of infinite mercy, abundance, and connection to the Divine for those who have toiled on His path. The pain in the hellfire is that of the infinite separation and disconnect from God.

2.3.4 Knowledge of the Conditions of the Seekers and the Deniers (*grey ambergris and fresh aloe-wood*)

The Quran offers guidance through narrating stories of both prophets and saints, and deviants and devils. The former serves to entice mankind to follow their path, and the latter warns of the resultant suffering and perishing (*al-tarhib wa al-tarhib*). The

⁶⁸ Book 21, The Marvels of the Heart - sharh 'ajaib al-qalb

use of stories as a teaching strategy in the Quran is widely-acknowledged. The Quran itself describes this method in the verse:

We relate to you, [O Muhammad], the best of stories in what We have revealed to you of this Qur'an although you were, before it, among the unaware. (12:3)

نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ الْقَصَصِ بِمَا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ وَإِنْ كُنْتَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ لَمِنَ الْغَافِلِينَ (سورة يوسف)

The purpose of the narrative strategy is, therefore, to raise awareness as a form of guidance and teaching, both through enticement to learn from the virtuous, and warning of the fate of non-believers. Storytelling in the Quran, therefore, serves a clear purpose, helping to concretise the learning in a manner that is both cognitively and emotionally engaging. The choice of stories serve the dual purpose of teaching through love (*targhib*) and fear (*tarhib*). Stories used for *tarhib* urge people to revere God and to stand in awe of his majesty (*djalal*), and stories used for *targhib* urge people to love God is to seek the joy of His compassion and presence.

2.3.5 Knowledge of the Arguments against the Non-believers (the best antidote)

In this section, al-Ghazali explains the Quran as serving to persuade the non-believers through argument and debate. He classifies arguments against three types of falsehoods - falsehoods about God, the prophet and the hereafter. Falsehoods about God include such allegations as the angels being His daughters and that He has borne a son; falsehoods against the prophet include that he is a poet, an imposter, and that, as a human being, he cannot be sent by God; and falsehoods about the hereafter include denial of an afterlife, and denial of the existence of heaven and hell.

Below are examples of Quranic verses that argue against the above allegations:

Quranic argument against the Oneness of God -

Had there been within the heavens and earth gods besides Allah, they both would have been ruined. (21:22)

لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا آلِهَةٌ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا ۗ فَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ (سورة الانبياء)

Quranic argument against the prophethood of Muhammad:

And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down upon Our Servant [Muhammad], then produce a surah the like thereof. (2:23)

وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّن مِّثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ (سورة البقرة)

Quranic argument against the hereafter:

Say, "He will give them life who produced them the first time; and He is, of all creation, Knowing." (36:79)

قُلْ يُحْيِيهَا الَّذِي أَنشَأَهَا أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ ۖ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ خَلْقٍ عَلِيمٌ (سورة يس)

2.3.6 Knowledge of the Preparation for the Divine Journey (strongest musk)

The final aim of the Quran is to help prepare for the journey towards God. The Quran offers guidance on how to prepare the body, giving tips on food, drink, fasting, reproductive health, and other means to care for the physical vessel (the body) which carries one through the journey. It also gives guidance on social order and law, with details on marriage, divorce, inheritance, conflict, war, crime and punishment, and political order. It is necessary to attend to the bodily and earthly before one can ascend to the spiritual. Al-Ghazali devotes the entire third section of *The Jewels* to deriving the

lessons for virtuous living on the divine path, and develops a full curriculum in what is independently known as *The Book of Forty Religious Principles*.

The six main aims of the Quran, as outlined above, form the core knowledge areas within al-Ghazali's theoretical framework. He uses the symbols of rare jewels and valuables to demonstrate the worth and value of this learning.

2.4 The Hierarchy of Knowledge

Al-Ghazali further develops the analogy of the sea, describing the knowledge hierarchy not as a vertical axis of ascending superiority, but in the image of an oyster, with a multilayered shell, encapsulating a precious pearl. Although he shifts images from the seabed of precious jewels to a single pearl-bearing oyster, his figurative representation is clear, depicting an integral image of the levels of the sciences. Al-Ghazali uses the oyster image as an analogy for his knowledge theory. He classifies the areas of knowledge into - sciences of the core, and sciences of the shell.

2.4.1 The sciences of the shell

The shell is the physical external. It is of far less value than the precious core, but it is necessary to penetrate it in order to reach the core. The shell of the oyster is multi-layered, the outermost layer resembling the surrounding rock textures. The innermost layer, however, being closest to the pearl, acquires a richer, shinier surface - the mother of pearl - that is more beautiful and more valuable than the outer surface. Thus is the description of the hierarchy of the sciences of the shell. The outermost layers are superficial and less to do with meaning. Al-Ghazali ranks the outermost

sciences of the Quran in the order of farthest proximity to the core, and, therefore, the farthest from the most valuable essence of knowledge. First and farthest is the science of Quranic phonetics, followed by the science of Quranic vocabulary, then Quranic syntax, then the science of recitation, and, finally, the science of literal interpretation. The movement is from the simplest and particular, to the more complex conceptual semantic associations.

Al-Ghazali uses this hierarchy to defend his position in the debate concerning whether or not the Quran is created. The debate, initiated by the Mu'tazila in the eighth and ninth century, aimed to defend God's Oneness. They saw the attributes of God as mere descriptions that were part of the Essence. Any separation would mean a multiplicity rather than a unity of the Divine. They also claimed that the Words of God, including the Quran, having a beginning and an end in time, cannot be eternal, and are, therefore, not part of the eternal Essence of God. They are, therefore *created* by God, and revealed to Muhammad. Al-Ghazali makes a distinction between the 'meaning' of the Quran and the 'sounds' of the recited Quran or the 'letters' of the written Quran. His position is that the 'meaning' of the Quran is pre-eternal, but the expression of the Quran in written or recited form is only a representation of the eternal, a created manifestation of the origin. He states in *The Foundations of the Articles of Faith (qawa'id al 'aqa'id)*, describing the divine attribute of speech:

“And we attest that He speaks, commanding, forbidding, promising, and threatening, with a speech from eternity, ancient, and self-existing. Unlike the speech of created things, it is not a sound which is caused through the passage of air or the friction of bodies; nor is it a letter which is enunciated through the movement of the lips and tongue. We, also attest that the Qur'an, the Bible, the Gospel, and the Psalms are His books revealed to His apostles; that the Qur'an

is repeated by the tongue, written down in copies, and preserved in the heart, yet it is, nevertheless ancient, subsisting in the essence of Allah, not subject to division and separation through its transmission to the heart and (transcription) leaves.⁶⁹

Thus, in classifying the sciences of the shell, al-Ghazali explains that it is those who focus on the external, vocal material transmissions of the Quran who render it 'created.' However, it is the conceptual meaning, forming the core knowledge of the Quran, which is eternal, subsistent and integral to the Essence of God.

2.4.2 The sciences of the core

The sciences of the core are those that have been derived from the three main aims and the three subsidiary aims of the Quran, as described above. Once again, Al-Ghazali perceives the core of the oyster, the precious pearl, as multi-layered. The sciences of the inner layers are more supreme and more necessary than the sciences of the outer layers.

On the outside of the pearl, lie the sciences derived from the three subsidiary aims of the Quran. The science of storytelling, preaching, and perhaps some traditionalist knowledge is derived from the Quranic stories of prophets, saints, demons, and infidels. Following are the sciences of theology (kalam), derived from the Quranic aim of persuasion and argument with the non-believers, and employing the various tools of proof. And, finally, the third area of knowledge on the outer layer of the pearl is the science of legal judgment and the principles of jurisprudence. These derive from the

⁶⁹ Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *The Foundations of the Articles of Faith*, Nabih Amin Faris (Trans.) <http://ghazali.org/works/gz-itiqad.htm>

teachings of the Quran pertaining to the preparation for the journey to the Divine, maintaining individual and social order.

At the very core of the pearl, al-Ghazali places the sciences stemming from the three main teachings of the Quran - Knowledge of God, Knowledge of the Day of Judgement and Knowledge of the straight path (of virtue). The sciences of self-purification and refinement fall into this category, offering guidance on how to live a virtuous life and how to be an ethical citizen, in both visible and hidden ways. Knowledge of the Hereafter follows - the area that examines questions related to the relationship between the worshipper and the worshipped. Knowledge of God, the ultimate goal of life and the most precious attainment, is at the innermost center of the pearl. Knowledge of God - His essence, attributes and actions - is the supreme aim of life, whose outcome is eternal happiness and spiritual transformation (hence, further symbolised as *al-kibrit al-ahmar*). It is the most sacred form of knowledge, and is therefore, at the very core - the heart of all knowledge. These are areas that only the noblest can access mere glimpses of.

2.4.3 The sciences of the ancients and the moderns

While the sciences of the core pertain closely to the knowledge of God and the journey towards Him, the sciences of the shell include in their outermost layer those other worldly sciences, necessary for the advancement and survival of mankind, but secondary to the core knowledge of God. These include the various disciplines of medicine, astronomy, environment, and others. In fact, they include all areas of knowledge that the ancients knew and have died out. In addition, al-Ghazali confirms

that “through clear insight free from doubt, it has become apparent to us that in possibility and potentiality there are sciences which have not yet come into existence, although it is in man’s power to grasp them⁷⁰”. This is not something he has seen indications of, or something he has heard about. He has a ‘knowing,’ acquired through intuitive wisdom, that there are areas of knowledge that are yet to be discovered. It is a knowing, *free from doubt*. He also affirms that there are sciences “which are possessed [only] by some of the angels drawn near [to God]⁷¹.” These are sciences beyond the capacities of human beings. Hence, animals have knowledge that is within the scope of their capacities, humans have sciences within their scope of capabilities, and angels also have knowledge that is accessible to neither humans nor animals. Created beings have limited knowledge.

All such sciences, extinct, contemporary, and undiscovered, stem from the same wide sea of divine knowledge. All are core works of God. Al-Ghazali explains that while the outer shell of human sciences are limited by human competencies and capacities, and hence are defined by time, discipline and scope, they all emerge from the Divine ocean of knowledge, non-limited in time or space or capacity. God’s Knowledge is present, infinite, and all-encompassing. Al-Ghazali’s description of the all-human and non-human sciences stemming from divine knowledge is an example of his overarching theory of God’s agency and omniscience superseding all knowledge. Some reference to all fields of science, he insists, exists in the Quran. The image of the inner pearl, being the Core of the oyster in a wide endless ocean is a perfect symbol for al-Ghazali’s integral theory of knowledge.

⁷⁰ Abul Quasem, 45.

⁷¹ Ibid., 46.

Chapter 3

The Quran as the Core of Spiritual Wisdom

3.1 Exoteric/visible, Esoteric/invisible dimensions of reality

The Jewels of the Quran devotes its central chapter, in addition to a large section of its first chapter to a thorough contemplation of Quranic verse, developing a theory of quranic hermeneutics, derived from the earlier analysis of the aims of the Quran and the subsequent theory of knowledge. Al-Ghazali connects his symbolism for the sciences of the core and the sciences of the shell to the symbolic reading of the Quran, on both the outer apparent (*zahir*) level, and the inner invisible (*batin*) level. The symbols of red sulphur, ruby, antidote, musk and aloewood are employed to demonstrate the connection between the exoteric, material world of the 'now', and the esoteric, spiritual world of the 'infinite'.

Just as you have to penetrate the shell to reach the pearl in the oyster, al-Ghazali claims, you have to access the outer, apparent meaning of the text to reach the inner secrets of meaning. The figurative images make the point of connecting literal and symbolic meaning. Al-Ghazali states:

In every sentence which has occurred, there are hints and indications of a hidden meaning understood by him who understands the relationship between the world of possession and perception (عالم الملك والشهادة) and the world of the unseen and dominion (عالم الغيب والملكوت), since everything in the former world is only a form of something spiritual in the unseen world, as if that thing which is in the world of possession and perception were the same as that which is in the world of the unseen and dominion, in respect to its spirit and meaning though not in respect

to its shape and form. The physical form from the world of perception is included in the spiritual meaning of that world. This is why this world constitutes one of the stages of the path to God - a stage indispensable for man - since just as it is impossible to reach the core except by way of the rind, so it is impossible to advance towards the world of spirits except through the form of the world of bodies⁷².

Hence, each of the symbols employed to describe the different sciences in *The Jewels* shares an element of its essence with the type of knowledge it describes. The red sulphur describes an experience that turns base qualities into precious qualities. This is the quality that symbolises the transcendence of the soul from the crudest depth of vices to the most spiritual heights. Similarly, the highest grade of corundum (the red ruby) symbolises the highest grade of knowledge - the knowledge of God. The antidote, which heals from vicious toxins in the gut is likened to the Quranic arguments against the poison of heresies, vices, lures and temptations. The strong musk is the fragrant scent effused, even in hiding, just like the scent of good fame that accompanies the man of judicial knowledge and expertise. Finally, in the same manner that aloe wood gives off a pleasant smell only when it is burnt, hypocrites and sinners under the heat of adversary conditions may seek God and bow down in prayer. This is how the essence of the material symbols opens the door to a deeper, richer interpretation than the merely exoteric.

Al-Ghazali, therefore, makes a case for the inner, more pleasurable meanings of the Quran. He does not exclude the apparent meaning entirely, but integrates it within his methodology of exegesis by recognizing that it is through the outer shell of meaning

⁷² Abul Quasem, 49.

that the core is penetrated. One has to do the work to reach this higher level of insight. You gain access to the inner meanings with preparation and exercise. The spiritual secrets of the universe are veiled from those who are too engaged in the material world. It is through putting what you know into practice, living a virtuous God-conscious life, that more knowledge, of a deeper, more satisfying level, opens up to you. The oyster shells open up to reveal the luminous, precious pearl. Al-Ghazali cites a beautiful verse from the Quran to that effect,

“Most surely We will guide in Our ways those who strive hard after Us” (29:69).

"والذين جاهدوا فينا لنهدينهم سبلنا." (سورة العنكبوت)

The innermost core of the pearl, though, the Knowledge of God, can only be accessed as a gift from God to a select few. To support this observation, al-Ghazali cites the verse,

“Whatever mercy Allah grants to people - none can withhold it; and whatever He withholds - none can release it thereafter. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.” (35:2)

“ما يفتح الله للناس من رحمة فلا ممسك لها وما يمسك فلا مرسل له من بعده وهو العزيز الحكيم.” (سورة فاطر)

Al-Ghazali's theory for Quranic interpretation is integral, using a variety of exegetical strategies - references in the Hadith, contextual interpretation, analogy, contemplative intuitive interpretation, as well as receiving divine gifts of insight. The theory is significant because it is a reconciliation of the extreme positions of orthodox *hadith* theorists, and *sufi* advocates. He does not denounce the former, nor does he

exclusively adopt the latter. Instead, he incorporates both in an integral framework, where you have to access the first in order to penetrate the second. His framework does, however, position the intuitive interpretation of the inner meanings (ta'wil) at a far more valuable level than the outer apparent interpretation (tafsir).

3.2 Debate on the principle and strategy of ta'wil

The word *ta'wil* is often translated into metaphorical exegesis, but the Arabic word stems from the same root as *awwal*, which means 'the source.' The word ta'wil, therefore, means returning to the 'original' meaning, or seeking the inner secrets of meaning. Al-Ghazali does not engage in debate on the value of ta'wil in *The Jewels*, but his arguments elsewhere are worthy of mention in this analysis. In *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*⁷³ (*Faysal al-tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-zandaqa*), al-Ghazali builds a theory of ta'wil, based on five levels of existence. He categorizes 'existence' into five distinct categories. He defines each, explains it elaborately, then, offers exemplification. His method is consistent and systematic.

Ontological existence (الوجود الذاتي) is the first level. This is the level of concrete existence, independent of variations in individual perception. Examples of ontological existence include the sky, the greenery and the beasts. The second level is the sensory level (الوجود الحسي). This is the level of reality dependent on the senses - what is only in

⁷³ Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Faysal al Tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 93-96.

our perception and not in the external, objective reality. Examples include dreams as perceived by people, and images of non-sensory beings as perceived by prophets and highly spiritual awliyaa. The third level is the conceptual level (الوجود الخيالي). This is the realm of the imagination. It is not a reality that exists outside the person's mind. The fourth level of existence is the noetic level (الوجود العقلي). This is the perception of a concept such as pen or hand of God, not through the senses or imagination, but as a mental representation, symbolic of the action referred to. The final level of existence al-Ghazali describes is the analogous level (الوجود الشبهي). The example al-Ghazali uses to illustrate this level of perception is that of God's emotional attributes, described as anger or joy, but not, in fact, resembling human anger or joy. The words are merely used to describe by analogy.

The five levels of existence which al-Ghazali categorizes, describes, and elaborately exemplifies, are, in fact, levels of figurative interpretation. Al-Ghazali states, "Know that everyone who interprets a statement of the Lawgiver in accordance with one of the preceding levels has deemed such statements to be true⁷⁴". His purpose, therefore, is to restrict as much as possible the branding of 'non-belief.' Engaging in figurative interpretation at any level, in good faith, is an act of *belief* in its truth value, and has been practiced by proponents of every school of thought.

There are rules, though, for engaging in figurative interpretation at any of these levels, the first and foremost of which is to ensure that literal interpretation is "logically

⁷⁴ Ibid., 101.

impossible⁷⁵". Each level of interpretation may, then, be engaged *in descending order*. In other words, it is only when the first level is deemed impossible that the second is engaged, and it is only when the second level is deemed impossible that the third is engaged, and so on. Al-Ghazali's line of thinking is consistently coherent and systematic. He asserts that it is differences in acceptance or not of the justification of a logical proof that is the crux of disagreement and conflict amongst interpreters. When one party is dissatisfied with the validity of logical proof at one level, they resort to a further level of figurative interpretation, going against the interpretation of another party. Neither, however, are considered 'non-believers', though one party may be accused of engaging in 'unsanctioned innovation' (بدعة) if their doctrine "has not been handed down on the authority of the Ancestors⁷⁶". Al-Ghazali believes that if a religious tenet has been learned from the Prophet and handed down through "congruent channels⁷⁷" of communication, or *tawatur*, then it should be accepted, without seeking an alternative innovation. He articulates rules that limit unchecked engagement with religious texts and doctrines, and therefore, in turn, limits the unbounded designation of 'non-believer.'

Part of the reason al-Ghazali creates clear boundaries for interpretation has to do with the danger of influencing the masses (عوام الخلق), and opening a door for ambiguous or misguided interpretations of scripture. Another has to do with the danger that learned theologians disagree because they have no consensus on what constitutes logical

⁷⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 112.

proof. Ghazali calls upon them to establish criteria for logical proofs that they all agree upon:

وليكن للبرهان بينهم قانون متفق عليه يعترف كلهم به فإنهم اذا لم يتفقوا علي صحة الميزان لم يمكنهم رفع الخلاف بالوزن⁷⁸

Instead, let them establish amongst themselves a mutually agreed-upon criterion for determining the validity of logical proofs that enjoys the recognition of them all. For if they do not agree on the scale by which a thing is to be measured, they will not be able to terminate disputes over its weight⁷⁹.

Interpretation is acceptable at any level, provided that it is supported by agreed upon logical proof. Interpretation is not an act of speculation (ظن); it is an act of responsible engagement with scripture, within clearly recognized boundaries, and based on collective judgment. It is, therefore, those who overstep these boundaries, interpreting the text beyond the apparent meaning, without reason and without supporting their interpretation with recognizably acceptable logical proof, that are considered 'non-believers'.

Al-Ghazali, while outlining the principles and strategies of ta'wil in The Decisive Criterion, focuses on what constitutes acceptable figurative interpretation and what constitutes heresy. His purpose, here, as underlined by Wittingham, is

on the one hand to establish a definition of unbelief 'kufr', and second, to determine the extent and limits of acceptable 'ta'wil.' The issues of kufr and ta'wil are closely linked for al-Ghazali since unbelievers are defined in Faysal as those who go beyond acceptable limits of interpretation. A proper understanding of ta'wil, therefore, provides the safety barrier preventing someone straying into downright unbelief. Al-Ghazali's principle aim is to argue for liberty in

⁷⁸ Mahmud Bijou, Faysal al Tafriqa Bayn al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa for Hujjat al Islam Abi Hamed al ghazali, (Damascus: 1993), 49.

⁷⁹ Sherman A. Jackson, On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Faysal al Tafriqa bayna al -Islam wa al-Zandaqa, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 106.

*interpretation, and tolerance towards those who interpret, as long as the process follows a clearly defined procedure. Faysal seeks to outline this procedure*⁸⁰.

Al-Ghazali's aim in *The Jewels*, though, is different. It is not to define what is acceptable and what is heretical, but rather, it is to defend 'mystical,' intuitive interpretations, without rejecting interpretations based on hadith traditions. The contesting views on ta'wil and tafsir arose in Islamic history as a result of the prophetic hadith, narrated by al-Tirmithi, on the authority of Ibn Abbas, that states that the Prophet said,

"Beware of narrating from me except what I taught you, for whoever lies about me on purpose, then let him take his seat in the Fire. And whoever says (something) about the Qur'an according to his (own) opinion, then let him take his seat in the Fire."

حَدَّثَنَا سُفْيَانُ بْنُ وَكَيْعٍ، حَدَّثَنَا سُؤَيْدُ بْنُ عَمْرٍو الْكَلْبِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا أَبُو عَوَانَةَ، عَنْ عَبْدِ الْأَعْلَى، عَنْ سَعِيدِ بْنِ جُبَيْرٍ، عَنِ ابْنِ عَبَّاسٍ،
عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ " اتَّقُوا الْحَدِيثَ عَنِّي إِلَّا مَا عَلِمْتُمْ فَمَنْ كَذَبَ عَلَيَّ مُتَعَمِّدًا فَلْيَتَّبِعُوا مَقْعَدَهُ مِنَ النَّارِ وَمَنْ قَالَ
فِي الْقُرْآنِ بَرَأْيَهُ فَلْيَتَّبِعُوا مَقْعَدَهُ مِنَ النَّارِ " 81

This hadith, while classified by al-Tirmidhi as a weak (*da'if*) narration has caused a great deal of controversy and heated debate over how to interpret the verses of the Quran, with traditionalists preferring the safe literal interpretation, or tafsirs narrated in hadith, and the sufis preferring the other extreme, taking only the figurative, inner layers of meaning. In *The Jewels of the Quran*, within his ocean analogy and pearl-bearing

⁸⁰ Watt, 14-15.

⁸¹ Jami al-Tirmithi, Chapter on Tafsir al-Qur'an, Book 47, Hadith 3205

oyster image, al-Ghazali integrates both the *zahir*, outer *tafsir* and the *batin*, inner *ta'wil*, giving the latter a higher status and transcendental quality.

3.3 Interpretations of key Quranic verses

Connecting his theory of knowledge, as structured above, to the Quran, al-Ghazali makes the claim that some verses of the Quran are more distinguished than others. In defense of his claim, he argues:

Know that if the light of insight (nur al-basira) does not guide you to the difference between the Verse of the Throne and a verse concerning giving and receiving loans, and between sura of Sincerity and the Sura of Destruction, and your mind which is empty and wholly absorbed in blindly following the opinions of others (taqlid), lives in the comfort of mere belief in such differences, then follow the Messenger of God (may His blessing and greeting be upon him), who is the man to whom the Quran was revealed⁸².

Hence, al-Ghazali begins with the support of the prophet's hadith to highlight selected verses of higher excellence. These are the Opening verse (*al-Fatiha*), the verse of the Throne (*ayat al-Kursi*), the chapter of Ya-Sin (*surat Ya-Sin*), and the chapter of Sincerity (*surat al-Ikhlās*). Each of these he, then, expounds upon, using his own *basira* or intuitive knowledge.

The Opening sura of the Quran, al-Ghazali states, is recognized by the prophet as "the best sura of the Quran." Various hadith traditions point to that superiority. In *Riyad al Salihin*⁸³, it is narrated by Muslim on the authority of Ibn Abbas that,

While Jibril (Gabriel) was sitting with the Messenger of Allah, he heard a sound above him. He lifted his head, and said: "This is a gate which has been opened in heaven today. It was never opened before." Then an angel descended through it,

⁸² Abul Quasem, 64.

⁸³ *Riyad al Salihin*, The Book of Virtues (9), Hadith 1022.

he said: "This is an angel who has come down to earth. He never came down before." He sent greetings and said: "Rejoice with two lights given to you. Such lights were not given to any Prophet before you. These (lights) are: Fatihah-til-Kitab (Surat Al-Fatihah), and the concluding Ayat of Surat Al-Baqarah. You will never recite a word from them without being given the blessings it contains.

Al-Ghazali analyzes the Opening verses in light of the aims of the Quran identified previously. He identifies eight of the ten aims, explained as the secrets of *al-Fatiha*. In the first verse - In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Ever Merciful - both knowledge of the Essence of God (Allah), and knowledge of God's Attributes (Gracious and Merciful) are expressed. Al-Ghazali explains that the particular choice of these particular attributes pre-supposes all other attributes of power and knowledge, etc. He also finds these attributes to be invoking of positivity and good feeling, in contrast to, say, the attribute of divine anger, which invokes fear.

The second verse of *al-Fatiha* states "All types of perfect praise belong to God alone, the Lord of all the worlds." Al-Ghazali breaks the verse into two main points. The first defines praise to God in the form of gratitude (*al-hamd*). In the same manner as in the first verse, al-Ghazali contrasts gratitude to patience. While both lead on the path to God (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*), it is gratitude that is the superior form of practical faith (*al-iman al-'amali*). He states:

The superiority of gratitude to patience is like the superiority of mercy to anger, because gratitude proceeds from joy, whereas patience under God's decree proceeds from fear and awe, and is not free from distress and sorrow, To walk along the straight path to God by way of love and to perform actions of love are much better than to walk along the path of fear⁸⁴.

⁸⁴ Abul Quasem, 67

This highly accurate analysis sheds light on al-Ghazali's perception of human psychology. It also aligns the verse of gratitude with the Quranic aim of teaching about the straight path to the Divine. The second point of this verse focuses on the phrase "Lord of all the worlds." Here, it is God's *lordship* through his works that is emphasized. Hence, in the first two verses already there is mention of God's essence, attributes, works, and straight path.

The third verse re-expresses the attributes "the Most Gracious, Ever Merciful." Al-Ghazali is insistent in explaining that the phrase is not a repetition of the first, since the function is different. "There is no repetition in the Quran," he states, "for repetition is defined as that which does not contain any additional benefit⁸⁵". He analyzes the position of the phrase to conclude that the fact that the phrase follows "Lord of all the worlds" and precedes "Master of the Day of Judgment," is an indication that His mercy and compassion govern both the world of creation and the world of the hereafter. The next verse "Master of the Day of Judgment," hence, aligns with another of the key aims of the Quran.

The phrase "You alone we worship; and You alone we implore for help" is explained in light of the purification and beautification of the soul - two central themes of the Quran. Beautification comes in the expression of divine unity, and purification comes in the admission that our powers and abilities are subordinate to God, and that

⁸⁵ Ibid., 67.

God alone is worthy of worship. “Guide us along the straight path” is a sincere prayer - the “marrow of worship⁸⁶” - a verse that underlines the spiritual journey to the divine.

The last few verses - “The path of those on whom you have bestowed your favors; not those who have incurred your wrath or have gone astray” - align with the twin quranic aims of teaching about the prophets and saints (those whom God has bestowed His favors), and teaching about God’s enemies and non-believers (those who have incurred His wrath or gone astray). Al-Fatiha or the Opening of the Quran, therefore, is superior in status, given the multiple purposes it serves.

An interesting argument is referred to briefly by Martin Wittingham⁸⁷, as he outlines al-Ghazali’s analysis. When he refers to the second occurrence of “the Most Gracious, Ever Merciful,” al-Ghazali explains that God has mercy both in the here and the hereafter, and that one of the manifestations of His mercy is His perfect creation. He states that God “has created every one of these [creations] according to the most perfect and best of its kind and given it everything it needs⁸⁸”. Following this statement is a long exposition of the minute anatomy of various creatures - the gnat, the fly, the spider and the bee, as examples of God’s perfection in even in the lowliest of creatures. God’s obligation and non-obligation to create only the best was a theological argument between the Mu’tazilites, who thought God has an obligation to create only the best, and the Ash’arites who insisted that God has free will and may or

⁸⁶ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁷ Wittingham, 74.

⁸⁸ Abul Quasem, 67.

may not choose to do or create the best. Wittingham argues that al-Ghazali, here, intentionally pushes forward his theological position on this issue, which is more Mu'tazilite than Ash'ari, claiming that God creates only the best from the smallest creature up to the most complex. However, in *The Jewels*, al-Ghazali does not bring in the theme of divine obligation. His comments are merely descriptive rather than prescriptive. God chooses, through practice of His free will, to create in the best ways possible, and he does so for all creatures.

Al-Ghazali completes his analysis of al-Fatiha, implicitly building on the wording of the prophetic hadith referred to above, which states that with the revelation of al-Fatiha, "*a gate ... has been opened in heaven today. It was never opened before.*"⁸⁹

Building on the image of a heavenly gate opening, al-Ghazali states:

*At this point we [should like to] make you aware of a subtle matter. So we say that this sura is the opening of the Book [e.e. The Quran] and the key to Paradise. It is the key only because the doors of Paradise are eight, and the meanings of the Sura of Opening [too] amount to eight. So know with certainty that each of these is a key to one of the doors of Paradise. This is testified to by Tradition*⁹⁰.

He, therefore, connects his own *ta'wil* of the verses of the sura to the words of the Prophetic hadith, a clear example of reconciliatory effort between the two extreme methods of traditionalists and sufis.

Further, al-Ghazali argues that the blessings behind each door of Paradise need not be taken at the physical, literal level. For the gnostic, or the one who seeks the

⁸⁹ Riyad al Salihin, The Book of Virtues (9), Hadith 1022.

⁹⁰ Abul Quasem, 74.

secrets of knowledge, each door opens to a paradise of new knowledge in one of the areas al-Ghazali has outlined in his theory. This, he emphasizes, is a more heavenly pleasure than the material blessings sought after by the literalists. In other words, he places the figurative *ta'wil* of the verses at a higher level than the exoteric *tafsir*:

... each meaning [of the Sura of Opening] will open the door of one of the gardens of gnosis (ma'rifa), as we have indicated in [our discussion of] the signs of God's mercy (may He be exalted!), the wonders of His works, and so on. Do not imagine that the repose of a gnostic [which proceeds] from delight in the watery meadows of gnosis and its gardens is less than the repose of the one who will enter the Paradise which he knows and in which he will satisfy his desires for food, drink and sex. How can they be equal? On the contrary, it cannot be denied that among the gnostics there may be one whose desire for opening the door of gnosis in order to behold the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and the glory of their Creator and Disposer is more intense than his desire for women, food and clothing. How cannot the former be predominating in the discerning gnostic when it is shared with the angels in the highest Paradise, since they have no enjoyment in food, drink, women, and clothing? Perhaps the enjoyment of animals in food, drink and copulation exceeds the enjoyment of men...⁹¹

In this excerpt, al-Ghazali clearly elevates the status of *ma'rifa* (intuition or knowledge gained through insight) over the status of literal understanding of the descriptions of Paradise. Paradise is not (only) the material, observable blessings, but, more importantly, it is access to the vastness of revelation and boundless divine knowledge that is far more gratifying to the select few. The paradise of knowledge is equated to that of the angels, who are far more sublime than the beasts whose pleasures are bodily and physical.

Following the analysis of al-Fatiha, a brief section ensues on the verse of the Throne (ayat al-Kursi). Once again, al-Ghazali connects between the hadith tradition

⁹¹ Ibid., 74.

and his own interpretation. The verse of the Throne is referred to in a prophetic hadith (classified as weak) narrated by al-Tirmidhi, on the authority of Abu Hurairah, which says:

"For everything there is a hump (pinnacle) and the hump (pinnacle) of the Qur'an is Surat Al-Baqarah, in it there is an Ayah which is the master of the Ayat in the Qur'an; [it is] Ayat Al-Kursi.⁹²"

حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ غَيْلَانَ، حَدَّثَنَا حُسَيْنُ الْجُعْفِيُّ، عَنْ زَائِدَةَ، عَنْ حَكِيمِ بْنِ جُبَيْرٍ، عَنْ أَبِي صَالِحٍ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ سَنَامٌ وَإِنَّ سَنَامَ الْقُرْآنِ سُورَةُ الْبَقَرَةِ وَفِيهَا آيَةٌ هِيَ سَيِّدَةُ آيِ الْقُرْآنِ هِيَ آيَةُ الْكُرْسِيِّ " . قَالَ أَبُو عِيسَى هَذَا حَدِيثٌ غَرِيبٌ لَا نَعْرِفُهُ إِلَّا مِنْ حَدِيثِ حَكِيمِ بْنِ جُبَيْرٍ . وَقَدْ تَكَلَّمَ شُعْبَةُ فِي حَكِيمِ بْنِ جُبَيْرٍ وَضَعَفَهُ .

Al-Ghazali analyzes the difference between the classifications of both al-Fatiha and Ayat al-Kursi, comparing the use of the description “the best” (*afdal*), and “master/chief of the Quranic verses” (*sayidat ay al-Quran*). A linguistic analysis of the words reveals that al-Fatiha is *afdal* because it is near-comprehensive in its scope, making reference to eight areas of Quranic knowledge. It is also written in the form of a supplication to God, and it is, indeed the best prayer. Ayat al-Kursi, on the other hand, has ‘mastery’ because of its sublime focus on God’s Essence, Attributes and Works. It has no other purpose than to describe God’s Unity, Lordship, Sovereignty, Authority, Power and Omniscience - hence, the differentiation in descriptive word choice.

Al-Ghazali’s analysis of the Chapter on Sincerity (Surat al-Ikhlās) employs the same methods of reconciling *hadith* with *ta’wil*. Surat al-Ikhlās is four brief verses, but it

⁹² Jami al-Tirmidhi, Chapters on the Virtues of the Qur’an, Book 45, Hadith 3119
<https://sunnah.com/urn/731130>

is described in a hadith tradition as comprising a third of the Quran. In Sahih Muslim, it is narrated that:

Abu Darda' reported Allah's Apostle (ﷺ) as saying:
Is any one of you incapable of reciting a third of the Qur'an in a night? They (the Companions) asked: How could one recite a third of the Qur'an (in a night)? Upon this he (the Holy Prophet) said: "Say: He is Allah, One' (Qur'an. cxii) is equivalent to a third of the Qur'an"⁹³

وَحَدَّثَنِي زُهَيْرُ بْنُ حَرْبٍ، وَمُحَمَّدُ بْنُ بَشَّارٍ، قَالَ زُهَيْرٌ حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ سَعِيدٍ، عَنْ شُعْبَةَ، عَنْ قَتَادَةَ، عَنْ سَالِمِ بْنِ أَبِي الْجَعْدِ، عَنْ مَعْدَانَ بْنِ أَبِي طَلْحَةَ، عَنْ أَبِي الدَّرْدَاءِ، عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ " أَيْعِزُّكُمْ أَنْ يَقْرَأَ فِي لَيْلَةٍ ثُلُثَ الْقُرْآنِ " قَالُوا : وَكَيْفَ يَقْرَأُ ثُلُثَ الْقُرْآنِ ؟ قَالَ : " قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ تَعْدِلُ ثُلُثَ الْقُرْآنِ " .

Al-Ghazali explains the phrase “a third of the Quran” using, once again his theory of knowledge. He reminds the reader that there are three main aims of the Quran - knowledge of God, knowledge of the hereafter, and knowledge of the straight path - followed by three subordinate aims. Given that Surat al-Ikhlās focuses solely on one out of three of the main aims of the Quran, then it carries the weight of a third. It does not mean that if you read it three times, then it is equivalent to reading the entire Quran.

The final chapter al-Ghazali refers to is Surat Ya-Sin. He does not do the analysis himself, but urges the reader to use his same method to arrive at an interpretation. Surat Ya-Sin is described in the hadith as *the heart of the Quran*:

It is narrated by Anas (in a weak hadith) that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Indeed for everything there is a heart, and the Qur'an's heart is Ya Sin. Whoever recites Ya Sin, then for its recitation, Allah writes for him that he recited the Qur'an ten times."⁹⁴

⁹³ Sahih Muslim, the Book of Prayer - Travellers, 811 a, Book 6, Hadith 314, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/6/314>

⁹⁴ Jami' al-Tirmidhi, Chapters on the Virtues of the Quran, Book 45, Hadith 3129, <https://sunnah.com/urn/731230>

حَدَّثَنَا قُتَيْبَةُ، وَسُفْيَانُ بْنُ وَكَيْعٍ، قَالَ حَدَّثَنَا حُمَيْدُ بْنُ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّوَّاسِيُّ، عَنِ الْحَسَنِ بْنِ صَالِحٍ، عَنْ هَارُونَ أَبِي مُحَمَّدٍ، عَنْ مُعَاتِلِ بْنِ حَيَّانَ، عَنْ قَتَادَةَ، عَنْ أَنَسٍ، قَالَ قَالَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " إِنَّ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَلْبًا وَقَلْبُ الْقُرْآنِ يَسُ وَمَنْ قَرَأَ يَسَ كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَهُ بِقِرَاءَتِهَا قِرَاءَةَ الْقُرْآنِ عَشْرَ مَرَّاتٍ "

Given that the heart supplies life blood to the rest of the organs in the body, Surat Ya-Sin is the heart of the Quran in that it focuses on every principle of the religion - the Oneness of God, the Prophethood of Muhammad, the Holy Book of the Quran, the creation and the resurrection of the soul, stories of the prophets and the heretics, the conditions of the believers and the non-believers, and the straight path of the divine. It pumps life-blood into every theme, and its verses are brief and rhythmic like heartbeats.

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri⁹⁵ interprets the “heart of the Quran” in terms of life and death. He states,

Surat Ya Sin is the qalb al-Quran, the heart of the Quran. It is the surah which is read over the dead, so it is a surah of great importance to the living. If we want to know the meaning of life, we have to experience death, for we have come from non-life, and we are proceeding towards it again at a swift rate. If we want to know the meaning of health, we must have ill health. If we want to know the meaning of friendship, each of us might recall a time when we had no friends, or we kept company with people who wronged us in some way, so that, with this measuring rod, we value the friendship we may be enjoying now⁹⁶.

Hence, with Ya-Sin, as Haeri explains, we experience the meaning of life. It is the heart of the Quran because through its verses on the purpose of life, the nearness of death,

⁹⁵ See Heart of Quran and Perfect Mizan.

⁹⁶ Fadhlallah Haeri, Heart of the Quran and Perfect Mizan: Surat Ya Sin, (Texas: Zahra Publications, 1983), 25.

resurrection, (re)creation, and the conditions of the hereafter, we learn to appreciate the value of life.

Al-Ghazali, thus, uses multiple strategies for the interpretation of the Quran. He, initially cites hadith traditions to anchor his arguments, then builds detail using his own insights, creativity, and intimate knowledge of the verses. Though he has been critiqued for referencing weak hadith traditions, al-Ghazali's spiritual wisdom connects well with his previously outlined framework of Quranic knowledge.

3.4 Hermeneutical strategies and the wisdom of thematic exegesis

Al-Ghazali, then, devotes a full section of *The Jewels* to the classification of selected verses, according to the hierarchy of sciences he outlines. He returns to the metaphor of jewels and pearls, listing all verses that have to do with God's essence, attributes and actions together in a string of jewels (783 verses); and all verses that focus on the straight path and the preparations needed for the journey in a string of pearls (768 verses). This section employs no interpretive method except the above classification. It is two long lists that are, thus, thematically classified.

Thematic interpretation is/was not a common exegetical method. The Quran has been the subject of study and interpretation since its revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. However, unless God Himself revealed the meaning of the verses, an objective standalone interpretation has been near impossible. Different schools of thought have employed specific tools for interpretation, and were, in turn, influenced by

both personal and external factors such as political and sectarian inclinations. Consequently, the tafsir, or exegesis of the Quran reflects these different attitudes and offers a spectrum of meanings. The most common approach, such as in many examples above, depended on the traditions of the Prophet for the interpretation of the Quran - al-tafsir bil ma'thur (التفسير بالمأثور).

Another methodology depends on logical opinion (التفسير بالرأي والمنطق).

Mainstream traditional interpreters, using hadith as their basis, regard rational exegesis as being flawed and unacceptable. This is because it is based on personal opinion and cannot be verified using the Prophet's authority. It is considered hypothetical (using dalil dhanni دليل ظني), and, therefore, largely inaccurate. Nevertheless, rational exegetes have contributed in positive ways to the corpus of Quranic interpretation. According to Hussein Abdel-Raof, Professor of Quranic Linguistics and Rhetoric, University of Taibah, SA, rational interpreters employ the tools of deduction (al-istinbat), rejection of imitation, questioning the reliability of hadith, and finding multiple sources for the description of quranic verses⁹⁷. Abdel Raof offers an extensive analysis of the rational school of interpretation, and offers some evidence that in the earlier period of Islam, both in Makkah and Madinah, there was some practice of rational interpretation, especially related to issues of Shariah or Islamic law. This was practiced by renowned tafsir key figures, such as Ibn 'Abbas and Ibn Mas'ud.

⁹⁷ Hussein Abdel-Raof, *Theological Approaches to Quranic Exegesis: A Practical Comparative-Contrastive Analysis*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 28.

Tafsirs, however, that look for esoteric meaning and do not have verifiable evidence, were even harder to accept. Much of this kind of *tafsir* is allegorically-based, drawing on allegedly esoteric layers of Quranic interpretation. The evidence used in most 'unacceptable' forms of Quranic exegesis that uses 'hypothetical' interpretation includes the use of mythical and Judeo-Christian anecdotes (اسرائيليات) – a strategy that was not practiced by the Prophet and his companions. Also, sufi kinds of interpretation depended on intuitive ta'wil and intimate types of Quranic insights.

Analytic types of interpretation depended on grammar or linguistic analysis or contextual and scientific cues. Employing the different analytic strategies, interpreters using this method often approached the Quran a verse at a time, compiling a huge corpus of interpretation.

Thematic *tafsirs*, though, were uncommon. Al-Ghazali in *The Jewels of the Quran* introduces the first steps of this method through his thematic classification. He does not, though, expand upon the classification, identifying patterns or recurrent themes and relationships among verses. A thematic interpretation of his earlier analysis of Quranic verses would have resulted in a valuable innovation that extracts the larger picture from the compilation of verses.

Chapter 4

The Quran as a Practical Curriculum for the Straight Path

Al-Ghazali's twin strings of jewels and pearls represent the core of the creed (the belief in God's essence, attributes and works), and the practical behaviors that lead through His straight path. Al-Ghazali explains that verses pertaining to all other areas of knowledge - knowledge of the conditions of the hereafter, the stories of saints and prophets, enemies and non-believers, the arguments refuting heresy, and the various outer shell sciences in the different disciplines - may be extracted and thematically classified in the same manner, often with verses addressing multiple knowledge areas at once. The volume of such a study, though, would be too huge within the scope of *The Jewels*, claims al-Ghazali, and he encourages the reader to employ his same logic for an extended application of his theory.

The classification of verses which represent the faith and practical strategies is positioned in the center of *The Jewels of the Quran*. The first third of the book presents the theory of knowledge that constitutes the faith. The third third of the book constitutes the practicum. In the middle lies the Quranic core of verses which govern both the belief and the practice.

The third section of *The Jewels* has always been published separately as *The Book of Forty Principles of the Religion (kitab al-arba'een fi usul il din)*. A recent publication by Dar al Kutub brings the three sections together⁹⁸. In the new publication,

⁹⁸ Kamel.

the role of the *Book of Forty* appears more than to outline the principles of the religion - it is, rather, to offer a guidebook in the practices on the path of felicity. As it stands, the beliefs and works outlined in the *Book of Forty* complete al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge.

4.1 The structure and theological focus

The *Book of Forty* is presented as a summary of al-Ghazali's magnum corpus - *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. While the listing of verses in the second component of *The Jewels* did not engage in any interpretation or analysis, *The Book of Forty* in the third section serves that extending function, drawing principles and behaviors from the Quranic core. *The Book of Forty* consists of four parts, each focusing on a central realm of belief and practice, whose main objective is the pursuit of happiness on the divine path. Al-Ghazali opens this section with the following excerpt:

You may be asking yourself about the categorization of verses in the second section of this book, which includes a variety of sciences and practices. You may be asking whether it is possible to discern the differences in their objectives, and to interpret their detail in a manner which enables one to understand each area, and to reflect on the various means to happiness through faith and good works. Would a focused study and reflection help attain the keys to happiness? My answer would be 'yes.' It is possible. The main principles of these verses are divided into sciences and behaviors, both visible and hidden, which in turn are divided into purification and beautification. So, there are four sections: theory, apparent actions, blameworthy behaviours which need to be purified, and praiseworthy behaviors with which one should beautify himself. Each section, then, consists of ten principles. Such a book is called "The Book of Forty Principles." If you choose to offer it separately, feel free to do so, for it includes the cream of the sciences of the Quran⁹⁹.

⁹⁹ Kamel, 193.

Al-Ghazali, thus, offers this book as an addendum to the listing of Quranic verses, offering an elucidation of both the pillars of faith and the related practices.

The first section of *The Book of Forty* deals with matters of the creed. Its ten principles deal with God's Essence, Sacredness, Power, Knowledge, Will, Hearing and Seeing, Speech, Actions, the Day of Judgment, and Prophecy. The chapters are concise, the only aim of which is to define each concept and lay the foundations of the religion.

One of the key concepts that emerges is God's uniqueness, and His non-similarity to anything imaginable. Reference to the pleasure of seeing God's face (*al-nathar ila wajh Allah al-Karim*) may not be meant to be taken literally. Al-Ghazali's position on the description of God in anthropomorphic terms - using language that likens God to a human being - is non-literal. Descriptions of God sitting on the Throne, extending His Hands, and seeing His Face are metaphorical designations of God. Taken literally, they would limit God's spatial capacities and perceptive abilities¹⁰⁰. Two Quranic verses provide support for this position, describing the Face of God in terms that are not human-bound:

¹⁰⁰ Ali Hasan, *Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on Creation and the Divine Attributes*, 2013, 142. In J. Diller and A. Kasher (eds). *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*. DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-5219-1_13 Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht.

Whithersoever you turn; there is the Face of God; God is All-Embracing; All- Knowing.

(2:115)

فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَتَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ (سورة البقرة)

This verse describes the whole of existence as a reflection of God's Face. The next verse describes God as the only One whose existence is everlasting:

All that dwells upon the earth is perishing. Yet still abides the Face of thy Lord, Majestic Splendid. (55: 26-27)

كل من عليها فان ويبقى وجه ربك ذو الجلال والاکرام (سورة الرحمن)

Both verses indicate that the pleasure of seeing God's Face in the hereafter is not a physical encounter, but a blissful experience.

Section two of *The Book of Forty* revolves around the visible rituals of worship. These include prayer, charity and alms, fasting, pilgrimage, Quranic recitation, remembrance of God at every instant (*dhikr*), seeking blessings permitted by God (*talab al-hala*), upholding the rights of muslims and keeping good company, urging the right and warding the evil, following the ways of the Prophet (*ittiba' al-sunna*). This section has significantly longer chapters, with elaborate detail, exemplification, and comparative analysis.

Each of the practices of worship presented is analyzed in terms of its degrees and depth. Seekers at different levels or stations (*maqam*) may engage in rituals that are more demanding, but that help refine the worshipper and tame his/her passions and indulgences. The example of degrees of fasting best illustrates this point. The first degree of fasting is abstaining, merely, from food and drink. This is the lowest level of commitment, fit only for the common masses. The second degree involves abstaining from all evil that may be committed by one's body organs, such as evils of the tongue, evils of the hand, and evils of the eye. The third degree, and most engaged degree, is abstaining from diversions of the heart. At this level, the seeker is completely focused on God through recitation of remembrance. The gut, organs and heart are in a state of fasting.

Section three focuses on the purification of the heart from evil and discreditable behavior. The chapters include the topics of gluttony, evils related to speech, anger, envy, love of money, arrogance, pride, and ostentation. Once again, the deeper levels of practice are portrayed as a more desirable search for the secret, inner gratification, and for the avoidance of hidden non-desirable evils. Al-Ghazali narrates a common saying (for which he offers no source):

Some say that God has hidden three in three: He hid His satisfaction within His [seekers'] obedience, so beware of belittling any [practice of worship] lest God's satisfaction be hidden within; He hid His discontent within His [seekers'] disobedience, so beware of trivializing any small act lest God's discontent is hidden within; and He hid His friendship (*wilayatahu*) within his worshippers, so never belittle anyone lest he is God's friend (*walyu Allah*).¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Kamel, 321. Translation by thesis writer.

قال بعضهم: إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى خَبَأَ ثَلَاثًا فِي ثَلَاثٍ:
 خَبَأَ رِضَاهُ فِي طَاعَتِهِ.. فَلَا تُحَقَّرَنَّ مِنَ الطَّاعَاتِ شَيْئًا؛ فَلَعَلَّ أَنْ يَكُونَ فِيهِ رِضَى اللَّهِ. وَخَبَأَ سَخَطَهُ فِي مَعْصِيَتِهِ.. فَلَا تُحَقَّرَنَّ
 مِنَ الْمَعْصِيَةِ شَيْئًا.. فَلَعَلَّ أَنْ يَكُونَ فِيهِ سَخَطُ اللَّهِ. وَخَبَأَ أَوْلِيَاءَهُ فِي خَلْقِهِ.. فَلَا تُحَقَّرَنَّ مِنْ خَلْقِهِ أَحَدًا؛ فَلَعَلَّ أَنْ يَكُونَ وَلِيَّ اللَّهِ

The purification of the heart, therefore, is work the worshipper has to engage in to attain higher stations in proximity to the love of God.

The final section of *The Book of Forty Principles* provides an overview of praiseworthy traits which beautify the character, including repentance, fear of God, asceticism, patience, gratitude, sincerity, trust and reliance on God, love, contentment with fate, and being conscious of and prepared for death. Each of these is described as a 'station' or 'maqam,' classified in terms of its purpose. Those stations sought for their own sake, such as the contentment and the love of God, are higher than those sought as a means to reach others, such as the maqam of fear or patience or repentance, each of which is a stage on the journey to God's proximity and love.

An interesting observation is made by Wittingham, whereby he attributes al-Ghazali's classifications and definitions to his cosmology. In other words, al-Ghazali's theory and practice are grounded in his understanding of the universe. He states:

The principle feature of al-Ghazali's thinking on cosmology which affects his Quranic hermeneutics is the distinction between two worlds. These are the visible, physical realm and the invisible, spiritual realm. Al-Ghazali uses a range of terms for these realms, apparently interchangeably. The visible world is variously termed 'alam al-mulk ('the world of power'), 'alam al-mulk wal-shahada ('the world of power and witness'), 'alam al-khalq ('the world of creation') and 'alam al-hiss wal-takhyil ('the world of the senses and imagination'). Likewise, the invisible, spiritual realm is termed 'alam al-malakut ('the world of dominion'), 'alam al-ghayb ('the world of what is hidden') or 'alam al-amr ('the world of

command'). These terms for the spiritual realm function as synonyms for each other, as do those for the visible world¹⁰².

Al-Ghazali's curriculum presupposes such a cosmological view. He presents righteous behavior both on the visible plane and the hidden, internal plane. Each of the visible rites of worship has an inner meaning. He continues to use the analogies of the multi-layered pearl-bearing oyster to present the different meanings of the acts of worship.

For example, in explaining the act of remembrance of God (*dhikr*), he states:

Know that it has been revealed to those with intuitive knowledge that remembrance is the best of works [of worship], but it also has, in addition to the core pearl, three layers of shell, some closer to the pearl than others. The shell is the way by which one can access the pearl. The outermost layer is the remembrance of merely the tongue; while the second layer is the remembrance of the heart, when the heart needs constant monitoring for it to remain engaged. Without such monitoring, the heart wanders off to other thoughts. At the third level, the heart is engrossed and needs no effort to focus. In fact, it may need effort to dis-orient it. The fourth stage is the aspired core level. This is when the Remembered [i.e. God] completely takes control of the heart. [Consciousness of] the act of remembrance fades, as a result of the worshiper paying attention neither to the tongue, nor to the heart. The Remembered is what completely takes over his awareness. Nothing digresses his attention, nor forms a veil over his consciousness. This is what the gnostics (al-'arifun) call annihilation (*al-fana'*). This is the condition where he has so self-effaced, that he loses feeling of his sense perceptions, of his actions and behavior, and of his internal works. Everything diminishes in focus, and he loses touch with all. He is on a transcendent journey to God, first and foremost¹⁰³.

Al-fana', for al-Ghazali¹⁰⁴, is, thus, the deepest layer of *dhikr*. It is the innermost experience of a moment of presence with the Divine, reached through the outer,

¹⁰² Wittingham 38.

¹⁰³ Translation by the thesis writer.

¹⁰⁴ Although al-Ghazali uses the phrase "Al-fana' through God" (الفناء في الله), it is clear from *The Revival (Dar al-Qalam, pg. 229)* and other works that he is not referring to union with God, as do al-Bistami, al-Hallaj, or Ibn Arabi. Instead he refers to (الفناء في التوحيد) which is about losing one's sense of ego, as one is completely focused on and engrossed in worship of the One God. There is a recognition of divine presence in every physical manifestation, but there is a clear differentiation between God and worshipper.

physical practices of remembrance. Al-Ghazali's cosmology, then, extends from his epistemic philosophy to his curriculum of practice.

Yet, al-Ghazali does not stop at this innermost level of *fana'*. In fact, he uses the same hierarchy of knowledge presented in part one of *The Jewels* to make a distinction between gnostic states and gnostic stations:

Now if you understand al-fana' into The Remembered, know that it is only the beginning of the journey to God. Spiritual guidance, though, begins after this step, just as Prophet Abraham said, "I am going to my Lord who will guide me." Hence, the first step is "going to [the] Lord" (May He be exalted!), then going through the Lord. This is full immersion in fana'. However, such immersion is initially only fleeting, rarely consistent. If this state does continue and becomes a constant and consistent habit, then [you] experience [spiritual] transcendence, and you witness the purest [form of] truthful existence¹⁰⁵.

A state (*haal*), then, is a temporary spiritual experience, whereas a station (*maqam*) is a consistent, more enduring condition. Al-fana' as an enduring condition is the highest, rarest, most excellent stage. It is a stage where the worshipper witnesses some manifestations from the spiritual world of *malakut*, and, hence, speaks and behaves only through the perspective of *al-haqiqa* - the perspective closest to the Knowledge of God, the Ultimate Truth. The worshipper's act of remembrance recitations (*dhikr*) becomes an annihilation of self and a complete involvement within *al-haqiqa*. This is, thus, an example where the practice of *dhikr*, is the physical entrance into the deeper/higher levels of knowledge and spiritual experience. The levels of *dhikr* align with the levels of knowledge from the outer shell to the innermost core knowledge.

¹⁰⁵ Translation (of Kamel 234) by thesis writer.

Most other examples of virtues presented by al-Ghazali are also classified into levels of purity and proximity to the divine.

The Book of Forty, while presenting guidelines for righteous, virtuous living to a diverse audience, also puts forward a framework of belief that navigates the positions of Ash'aris, philosophers, Sufis, and traditionalists to attain a meaningful, coherent, and comprehensive representation of the creed. It has been argued¹⁰⁶ that al-Ghazali pushes forward his Ash'ari ideas through the knowledge framework he presents. Yet, al-Ghazali's positions are a product of his deep, thorough and integrative vision. An example of such a stance is his position on Causality. The Ash'aris take an occasionalist stance on causality - the position that God is the first and *only* cause of all effects¹⁰⁷. The extreme occasionalist position is that, given that God is the only cause, then no element in nature can cause a consistent, predictable effect. This extreme position, which Ibn Rushd accuses al-Ghazali of in *The Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tahafut al-Tahafut)*, eliminates the possibility of a Scientific Method. Ibn Rushd claims that al-Ghazali believes that there is no inherent connection between a first event and a second event that seems to follow as an effect - that is, simultaneity does not mean causality. He, therefore, argues if all knowledge old and new stems from God, then no natural phenomena can be learnt. No observation or empirical method can measure consistency in the behavior of natural elements, and, therefore, no predictability and learning can be established.

¹⁰⁶ See Wittingham (2007) ; Frank (1994)

¹⁰⁷ Sukjae Lee, "Occasionalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/occasionalism/>

However, al-Ghazali's position may not, actually, be so extreme. Contemporary scholars such as Alon, and Adamson have strongly refuted this position. Alon¹⁰⁸ argues that al-Ghazali sought a compromise between philosophy and Ash'ari religion, an argument of which causality was a part. He explains that al-Ghazali confirms that natural elements have such a nature that may cause a particular effect, but that the main Agent, the One who has caused this relationship is God. Adamson¹⁰⁹ affirms this argument for al-Ghazali, showing that al-Ghazali's aim is to make sure that the theory accounts for God's Will and Omnipotence. It is God who wills a causal effect amongst particular elements, and it is He who ensures consistency. There are times, though, when God wills that the consistent cause-effect relationship ceases to function. Such is the case when the fire did not burn prophet Abraham. In such cases, it is said that a miracle happens. Both Alon and Adamson assert that al-Ghazali's less-than-extreme position on natural agency reconciles both positions of philosophers and theologians.

Al-Ghazali's practical curriculum in *The Book of Forty* is experiential in that it allows 'learning by doing'. It is the grounding practice of worship, self-purification, and ethical living through which one transcends to higher stations on the spiritual path (منازل الطريق), and attains deeper levels within the hierarchy of knowledge.

¹⁰⁸ Ilai Alon, "Al-Ghazālī on Causality". *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 100, no. 4, 1980, pp. 397–405., www.jstor.org/stable/602085.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Adamson, "Al-Ghazali, Causality and Knowledge". *Medieval Philosophy*. The Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Boston, Massachusetts: 1998
<https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Medi/MediAdam.htm>

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 A contemporary reading of al-Ghazali's 'mystical experience'

The Jewels of the Quran presents al-Ghazali's integral epistemology. It is the outcome of his search for truth and certainty. The problematic phrases in *The Deliverer from Error*, which branded him as a mystic-convert, point, in fact to a moment of intuition and expanded intellectual realization:

*When these thoughts had occurred to me and penetrated my being, I tried to find some way of treating my unhealthy condition; but it was not easy. **Such ideas can only be repelled by demonstration; but a demonstration requires a knowledge of first principles; since this is not admitted, however, it is impossible to make the demonstration.** The disease was baffling, and lasted almost two months, during which I was a sceptic, in fact, though not in theory nor in outward expression. At length God cured me of the malady; my being was restored to health and an even balance; **the necessary truths of the intellect became once more accepted, as I regained confidence in their certain and trustworthy character.** This did not come about by systematic demonstration or marshalled argument, but by a light which God most high cast into my breast. That light is the key to the greater part of knowledge. **Whoever thinks that the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy**¹¹⁰.*

In contemporary language, the phrase "by a light which God, most high, cast into my breast," may be replaced by the phrase "by inspiration." The word 'inspire' originates from the Latin word '*inspirare*' which means "to inhale," "to inflame" and "to blow into"¹¹¹. The origin of the word aligns perfectly with the Quranic verse addressing the angels and referring to the creation of Adam (and mankind):

¹¹⁰ Watt.

¹¹¹ Oxford Dictionary Online: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/inspire> and Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/inspire>

“So when I have proportioned him *and breathed into him of My [created] soul*, then fall down to him in prostration” (38:72).

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ (سورة ص)

The phrase “breathed into him of My [created] soul,” therefore, entails that *inspirations* or creative ideas may be, what used to be referred to as, *revelations*. Both terms refer to God as the origin of the ideas, but the contemporary usage of ‘inspiration’ does not carry connotations of mystical gnosticism. The modern denotation of “to inflame,” in fact, literally corresponds to “*a light which God most high cast into my breast.*”

Similarly, both critical and creative thinking, as defined today, are necessary for interpreting the Quran and abstracting a theory of knowledge and a science of practice. The left side and the right side of the brain generate equally valid knowledge, each within a different context. Al-Ghazali, therefore, postulates that only when tafsir of the outer meanings of the Quran *does not* correspond to logic do more creative, intuitive forms of ta’wil become acceptable. The mixed methods of exegesis fit together in complementary ways to form an integral framework.

5.2 Al-Ghazali’s growth as an integral thinker

Al-Ghazali came to a realization that different types of knowledge can be validated to attain certainty in different ways. The logical methods he had employed

earlier to attain certainty in knowledge were limited. As he delved in study and gained expertise in Theology, Law, Philosophy and Mysticism, he came to realize that you cannot attain certainty in each field, using the same types of thinking. To attempt to solve a mathematical problem through intuition or spiritual contemplation is absurd. Demonstrative logic, which requires the knowledge of first principles is non-valid when the first principles are not known, as in the case of the numerous metaphysical questions. Instead, theological dialectics, and figurative interpretations are, and should be, employed. Hence, al-Ghazali's statement in the *Deliverer from Error*, above, rings true: "*Whoever thinks that the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy.*" In questions pertaining to legal matters, a level of certainty is attained through consensus (*ijma'*), analogous thinking (*qiyas*), and measured preference (*istihsan*), while certainty of mystical states depends on getting a taste of the experience (*dhawq*).

One can understand al-Ghazali's earlier pain, anger, skepticism, depression, psychosomatic illness, and withdrawal. Al-Ghazali may not have been angry at the philosophers in the *Tahafut*, but rather at his own inability to offer an alternative, more suitable approach to metaphysical questions. Often, scholars and students have accused him of contradictory behavior and positions. Their confusion is understandable; but they were wrong to think that, as he matured and developed towards his later life, he discarded his earlier views. Montgomery Watt, for example, writes:

“since he became very critical of philosophical ethics (*Munqidh*, 99), it is possible that, as his enthusiasm waned, he rejected much of what he had written in this work¹¹²”

Al-Ghazali did not reject ‘much of what he had written’ in earlier works. He sought to integrate legal theory (*shari’a*) and metaphysical Truth (*haqiqah*); faith (*’ilm*) and good works (*’amal*); and higher mystical transcendence (*fana’*) with earthly religious engagement (*baqa’*). His divinely-bestowed clarity helped him place his thoughts where he saw appropriate, as he conceptualized his pearl-in-oyster integral theory.

The Jewels of the Quran explains the constant growth of both knowledge and the seeker of knowledge. It is through toil and engagement in the physical world that one is able to transcend to higher levels of certainty. In *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*¹¹³, al-Ghazali makes the distinction between the three levels of certainty: *’ilm al-yaqeen* (the knowledge of certainty), *’ain al-yaqeen* (the vision of certainty), and *haqq al-yaqeen* (the reality of certainty). Al-Ghazali’s earlier crisis may have been a yearning for a higher level of certainty. Where he was dependent on traditional texts and historical accounts, he sought a higher vision of certainty (*ain al-yaqeen*), rather than the knowledge of certainty (*’ilm al-yaqeen*) he acquired through his readings and teachings. The latter was no longer gratifying, and his doubt could not be smothered. The divine ‘light’ cast unto his breast may, in fact, have been a fleeting state (*haal*) of the highest level of certainty – the *reality* of certainty (*haqq al-yaqeen*). As a result of

¹¹² Watt, *al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad B. Muhammad al-Tusi*, <http://www.ghazali.org/articles/gz-ei>

¹¹³ *The Book of Explaining the Wonders of the Heart*

experiencing this state of certainty, he emerged more confident and transformed, and he returned to do the work of spreading the light.

The *Jewels of the Quran*, in its three-part edition, integrates practice within al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge. The knowledge seeker moves from the world of knowledge (al-shari'a) to the world of practice (al-tariqa or al-sirat al-mustaqim) to the world of higher spiritual truths (al-haqiqa), and back to engage in more work and worship. And it is only through the world of practice that a higher station is acquired. The Quran states:

And worship your Lord until there comes to you certainty (15:99)

وَأَعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ (سورة الحجر)

The verse is clearly a call from God to engage in practice as an entrance to higher certainty. Spiritual growth is, therefore, incremental, moving to higher stations only when the experience of the lower stations has been fulfilled¹¹⁴. The Prophetic traditions also point to this same integral sequence of growth. Below is an excerpt from a hadith narrated in Bukhari¹¹⁵, on the authority of Abu Huraira which says:

Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said, "Allah said, ' And the most beloved things with which My slave comes nearer to Me, is what I have enjoined upon him; and My slave keeps on coming closer to Me through performing Nawafil (praying or doing extra deeds besides what is obligatory) till I love him, so I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with which he walks..... "

¹¹⁴ Al-Qushairi, cited in Ibrahim 74.

¹¹⁵ Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of To Make the Heart Tender (al-Riqaq), Hadith 6502
<https://sunnah.com/bukhari/81/91>

حَدَّثَنِي مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَثْمَانَ، حَدَّثَنَا خَالِدُ بْنُ مَخْلَدٍ، حَدَّثَنَا سُلَيْمَانُ بْنُ بِلَالٍ، حَدَّثَنِي شَرِيكُ بْنُ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ أَبِي نَمِرٍ، عَنْ عَطَاءٍ، عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَالَ ... وَمَا تَقَرَّبَ إِلَيَّ عَبْدِي بِشَيْءٍ أَحَبَّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا افْتَرَضْتُ عَلَيْهِ، وَمَا يَزَالُ عَبْدِي يَتَقَرَّبُ إِلَيَّ بِالنَّوَافِلِ حَتَّى أُحِبَّهُ، فَإِذَا أَحْبَبْتُهُ كُنْتُ سَمْعَهُ الَّذِي يَسْمَعُ بِهِ، وَبَصَرَهُ الَّذِي يُبْصِرُ بِهِ، وَيَدَهُ الَّتِي يَبْتَاطُشُ بِهَا وَرِجْلَهُ الَّتِي يَمْشِي بِهَا، ... "

The hadith reveals that, again, it is through both the required and extra practices of worship that one gains proximity to the Divine. While a glimpse of Reality is a temporary state (*haal*), however, a transcendence in station (*maqam*) is the more enduring stage of growth and spiritual wisdom, and this is acquired through practice.

Al-Ghazali's theory moves from the external to the internal, from the shell to the core, from the practice to the spiritual, from the literal to the figurative, and from reason to revelation. Yet, al-Ghazali integrates a return from the higher states (*fana'*) to the earthly stations of perseverance (*baqa'*)¹¹⁶. Perseverance in worship and work in any of the various areas of the shell and core sciences is a necessary part of the process of growth. The cycle of integral growth moves from practice to acquired knowledge (*kasb*), to divine gifts of knowledge (*wahb*), to a higher experiential state (*fana'*), and back to worldly practice and worship (*baqa'*). Al-Ghazali's theory of practice resembles the rolling waves of the ocean.

Al-Ghazali's epistemology, therefore, integrates all knowledge and practice in a coherent, congruent framework. The analogy of the ocean extends to embrace both his

¹¹⁶ Magdi Ibrahim. Sunni Tasawwuf, 48.

integral framework of knowledge and practice. The unitive core at the heart of the epistemology is Knowledge of God - His works, His attributes, and, ultimately, His essence. Al-Ghazali adopts the image of a pearl within an oyster to represent his theory of knowledge. His masterpiece, *The Jewels of the Quran*, is organized into three sections corresponding to the upper shell of the oyster, the pearl within, and, then, the lower shell. The pearl at the heart of the oyster is the most valuable gem, a symbol of the knowledge of the God and the path towards Him. The upper shell of the oyster is al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge and classification of the sciences, and the lower shell is the practical curriculum, which presents an experiential cycle for learning and attaining ultimate happiness. While his ideas are almost a millennium old, much can still be learned and developed, today, from Al-Ghazali's purpose and unity, theory and method, clarity and rigor, mission and outcomes.

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