

REASON AND MYSTICISM IN *AL-MUNQIDH MIN AL-DALAL* AND *HAYY IBN YAQZAN*

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Al-Ghazali's *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* re-evaluates the role of reason in relation to mystical knowledge. His intellectual crisis is resolved by the "light of God" and confirms the limits of reason in certain domains. For al-Ghazali, beatific *dhawq*, or mystical experience acts as a judge of the rational sciences like metaphysics, cosmology, and the natural sciences. Ibn Tufayl's novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* also evaluates the role of reason through the story of a lone boy that is born and grows up on an island. Similarly, reason is under the tutelage of mystical truths. However, the intellectual journey of the protagonist in the novel, from brute sciences to metaphysics to direct knowledge of God suggests a slightly different picture. I argue that the progression in the novel highlights the necessity of the rational sciences, such as theology and philosophy, for mystical experience. This raises a problem: how can reason be required for mystical truths if mystical truths are what judges reason? I suggest two possible responses for Ibn Tufayl and assess their viability.

I. INTRODUCTION

In his autobiographical *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, or, *Deliverance From Error*, al-Ghazali sketches out his intellectual and spiritual journey. Through this process, he discusses the merits and shortcomings of reason as a source of knowledge and outlines his journey to sufism — mystical Islamic belief which emphasizes direct experience of God. Ibn Tufayl, while not a direct student of al-Ghazali, refers to him in his writings. In his novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, the titular character Hayy undergoes his own unique path and arrives at a mystical end like al-Ghazali's. However, Ibn Tufayl parts from him in critical areas, primarily concerning the relationship between reason and mysticism. In this paper, I offer a comparative analysis of the two texts and argue that al-Ghazali and Ibn Tufayl similarly preserve reason's role as a valid source of knowledge. Furthermore, the mystical path both authors describe and praise as the ideal end goal of every seeker of truth is mostly similar. I will first overview al-Ghazali's treatment of reason and mysticism in his *Munqidh*. Then, I will analyze *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* and argue that it is largely Ghazalian in nature. Finally, I will address some points of difference between both authors, primarily the way in

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which Ibn Tufayl rationalizes mystical experience, restraining the sense in which it judges over reason as it does for al-Ghazali.

Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) marks a turning point in Islamic philosophy. His engagement with the foremost philosophers in the Islamic world, particularly Ibn Sina (d. 1037) through works like his *Tahafut al-falasifah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers) and the *Munqidh min al-Dalal* spawned generations of thinkers who engaged with the central question of the role of reason in theology. Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185) is one such thinker with clear Ghazalian elements in his work. He engages with al-Ghazali directly and criticizes him explicitly at times, claiming that he contradicts himself, practices a multiplicity of approaches depending on who he is writing for, and speaks in riddles and “hints.”² Nevertheless, he acknowledges the debt he owes al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina, writing, “I myself would not have garnered what truth I have attained . . . without pursuing the arguments of Ghazali and Avicenna.”³ As Hawi notes, despite his criticisms, he incorporates key themes and elements from al-Ghazali.⁴ Consequently, Ibn Tufayl sees himself as a corrector of sorts to al-Ghazali’s project, primarily by making clear and systematizing those truths al-Ghazali expressed by way of hints.

II. MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AS A “JUDGE” OF REASON IN AL-GHAZALI

In his *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (henceforth referred to as *Munqidh*), al-Ghazali systematically addresses the major schools of thought during his time. In the introduction, he promises to explain how he went from “second-hand belief (*taqlid*) to the peak of direct vision.”⁵ The text follows a clear organization: the merits of theology (*kalam*); the faults of the Ismailis and their adherence to an *Imam*; the shortcomings of philosophy; and the ways of the Sufis. For the purposes of this paper, I will mostly focus on his criticisms of philosophy and reason in support of the mystical way of life he finds in the Sufis. However, it is important to note that al-Ghazali does not begin by intending to demerit philosophy or reason as useless — rather, he is clear in pointing out the ways in which philosophy is limited in the pursuit of truth. As Watson notes, “He scrupulously examined and judged his experiences in the light of reason, and he was, therefore, an empiricist as well as a man of faith.”⁶ This caveat about al-Ghazali’s general attitude towards reason should repel any misunderstandings of him as an anti-rationalist dogmatist.

While al-Ghazali seeks to blend theology and philosophy, he seeks a similar synthesis between philosophy and mysticism. Al-Ghazali begins by analyzing the

2. Muhammad Ibn ‘abd Al-Malik Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 101–102.

3. Ibn Tufayl, 102.

4. Sami S. Hawi, “Ibn Tufayl’s Appraisal of His Predecessors and Their Influence on His Thought,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 1 (1976): 107.

5. Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, “Al-Munqidh min ad-Dalal,” in *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (George Allen / Unwin Ltd, 1953), 19.

6. John H. Watson, “The Religious Beliefs of al-Ghazali,” *The Expository Times* 86, no. 200 (1975): 202.

sources of his knowledge — sense perception and reason. In anticipation of similar Cartesian ideas, he argues that sense perception can often be mistaken on its own. One of the examples he uses is that of a shadow that appears to be still at any one moment, but after sustained observation and with the use of reason, the shadow is seen to move in infinitely small distances.⁷ Thus, reason acts as a ‘corrector’ of sorts that qualifies sense perception. Consequently, al-Ghazali questions reason as well. Just as sense perception has a judge that corrects it, what rules out the possibility that reason is not similarly inferior to another, higher judge? He compares the supposed certainty of intellectual premises to a dream. Just as a dream feels real and certain until it is corrected by awakening, al-Ghazali thinks it may be the case that there is a higher state which would render our current waking state to be like a dream.⁸ This process of radical doubt brings al-Ghazali to lose faith in logical axioms that he had otherwise taken for granted — by his own admission, he describes this as a state of sickness that lasted two months.

Al-Ghazali’s cure for his sickness is not a rational demonstration of reason’s effectiveness. Such a thing would be impossible because it is reason itself that is being doubted — the principles of logic, for example, cannot be used to conclusively show their own truth. Instead, he describes a light that is cast into his heart by God as the “key to the greater part of knowledge.”⁹ Due to this light, al-Ghazali is once again made certain of the truths of the intellect — logical inferences and seemingly indubitable facts like 10 being greater than 3 are affirmed. However, one must note some ambiguity in this part of the *Munqidh*. On the one hand, al-Ghazali states that the light which God cast into his heart provided him with the “greater part of knowledge” and “knowledge of things Divine.”¹⁰ These, presumably, go beyond the first principles and intellectual truths. On the other hand, al-Ghazali also states that it is this light which reaffirmed his certainty in the first principles and matters of the intellect! It is unclear if the light described by al-Ghazali — divine guidance — plays the role of affirming reason itself, truths greater than reason, or both.

A possible solution to the interpretive question is provided later in the passage. Herein al-Ghazali argues that first principles, or intellectual truths, are immediately present and should not be sought. The process of trying to ground the first principles of logic and the intellect, as he did by doubting the judge presiding over reason much like reason presides over the senses, is what befuddles the mind. Thus, it seems as if for al-Ghazali, reason can proceed with certainty to a certain extent in its demonstrations and proofs. However, when it attempts to either ground itself or seek Divine truths, it is inadequate. Read as such, al-Ghazali preserves reason as a valid discovery tool albeit limited to what it can determine.

Al-Ghazali’s attitude towards reason as a source of knowledge can be gleaned from his discussion of the various “classes of seekers.” In describing the theologians (*mutakallimun*), al-Ghazali explains that they are largely committed to preserving orthodoxy and they accept the Qur’an, prophetic traditions, and other theological

7. Al-Ghazali, “Al-Munqidh,” 23.

8. Al-Ghazali, 24.

9. Al-Ghazali, 25.

10. Al-Ghazali, 25.

foundations based on *taqlid*. *Taqlid* describes naive belief and uncritical acceptance — often in the context of following experts in some given matter. For example, I may take certain mathematical theorems to be true based on their widespread acceptance in the mathematical community, without ever understanding the specific proof of the theorem. Al-Ghazali accepts that for a lot of people, this will suffice in matters of theology. However, for someone who only accepts logically necessary truths, such as the state he found himself in after his radical doubt, theology “was unable to cure the malady.”¹¹ Thus, it is actually the case that the theologians do not use enough reason for al-Ghazali! By uncritically following their sources, without giving reasons for this uncritical acceptance, the theologians are unable to convince anyone who has not already bought into their picture. Recall that in al-Ghazali’s radical doubt, everything but logically necessary truths is questioned. Consequently, without any sort of grounding of the theologians’ sources or methods by reason, presumably as an extension of the logically necessary truths, they are incapable of curing radical doubt. There is a similar criticism of *taqlid* with regards to the Ismailis who follow an *Imam* uncritically for they have failed to rationally ground this *taqlid*. Thus, from both his criticisms of the theologians and the Ismailis, al-Ghazali thinks an uncritical reliance on *taqlid* alone is insufficient for true knowledge.

In his treatment of the philosophers’ methods, al-Ghazali argues that reason is limited. Al-Ghazali divides philosophy into various disciplines. Some of these, like logic and mathematics, do produce certainty, and denial of these sciences is tantamount to anti-intellectualism. He argues that a rejection of these disciplines by some Islamic theologians weary of reason actually pushes people away from Islam.¹² Other sciences, like natural sciences, politics, and ethics, are largely neutral or drawn from prophetic sources. Finally, and most problematically, al-Ghazali identifies metaphysics as the discipline of philosophy that is most guilty of misappropriating reason. He argues that unlike their certain methods of demonstration in mathematics and logic, philosophers do not meet this very standard on issues of metaphysics. Thus, weak metaphysical arguments are dressed in the garb of certitude and it is where reason is limited most for al-Ghazali. This interpretation is also supported by al-Ghazali’s statement in his *Mishkat al-Anwar*, wherein he describes the intellect as “Allah’s balance-scale upon earth.”¹³ Consequently, the use of reason in the intellectual sciences or the vast majority of human endeavours is not only useful but necessary. However, once the matters of inquiry are no longer of an earthly nature, reason is seemingly limited in its power. It is key to note that just like in his criticisms of the theologians and the Ismailis, al-Ghazali is not endorsing a *tout court* rejection of reason. Rather, his qualms are with specific applications of reason by the philosophers.

Having outlined the limits of reason, al-Ghazali begins his treatment of mysticism and the ways of the Sufis. He argues that the truths which mysticism reveals cannot be achieved through the intellect and instead require “an immediate experi-

11. Al-Ghazali, 28.

12. Al-Ghazali, 34–35.

13. Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *The Mishkat Al-Anwar: The Niche for Lights*, trans. W.H.T. Gairdner (Cosimo Classics, 2010), 60.

ence by ecstasy.”¹⁴ This immediate experience is called *dhawq* which translates as “tasting.” To establish this higher level of acquaintance with something, al-Ghazali compares it to knowing what it is like to be drunk (light-headedness, slurring of words, poor coordination) and being in a state of drunkenness. Mysticism is therefore a state of actually “tasting” truths directly — these are explained to be of a divine nature. Without delving into the intricacies of what it means to taste the Divine and become absorbed in God, al-Ghazali places mysticism in an esteemed position and the mystics as epistemically privileged. Al-Ghazali defends the existence of the mystical experience by comparing the gulf between *dhawq* and intellectual understanding to that between intellectual understanding and sense perception.¹⁵ Just as a child who only experiences the world through the senses is unable to comprehend concepts like necessity and possibility, the philosopher is unable to fully appreciate the mystic’s access to truth. It has therefore turned out that there is a higher judge over reason.

III. IBN TUFAYL’S RATIONALIZATION OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Al-Ghazali is able to confirm that just as reason presides over the senses, the state of *dhawq* presides over reason. In *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (henceforth referred to as *HIY*), Ibn Tufayl argues for a similar Ghazalian conclusion. The hero of Ibn Tufayl’s novel, Hayy, lives on an island on his own. His life is broken down into seven-year stages whereby he develops new capacities and deals with challenges — physical at first and intellectual as he matures. *HIY* shares a lot in common with the *Munqidh* but departs from it in crucial ways.

For both al-Ghazali and Ibn Tufayl, mysticism plays a similar role in giving one direct access to the Divine. Ibn Tufayl describes the final goal of Hayy as a state in which “the self vanishes; it is extinguished...all that remains is the One.”¹⁶ This description of the mystical state of *dhawq* is the same as al-Ghazali’s when he describes the end goal of the mystical path as “complete absorption (*fan’ā*) in God.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Hayy proceeds systematically in large parts of the novel, progressing to different stages of his life. However, Ibn Tufayl stresses that God’s guidance still plays a role for Hayy. Whilst the progression from different seven-year stages is almost entirely natural in the earlier stages, God’s presence acts as a sort of corrector when needed. For example, when Hayy risks identifying himself with God after a mystical experience, Ibn Tufayl writes, “God in his mercy caught hold of him and guided him back to the truth.”¹⁸ Thus, despite the greater emphasis on the *natural* progression of philosophical discoveries in *HIY*, God can intervene if the process goes awry. The connection to al-Ghazali is clear insofar as he similarly expresses how it is only through God’s light that he cured his radical doubt of reason itself. In Hayy’s case, God intervenes to correct a false identification of the self with

14. Al-Ghazali, “Al-Munqidh,” 55.

15. Al-Ghazali, 64.

16. Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, 143.

17. Al-Ghazali, “Al-Munqidh,” 61.

18. Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, 150.

God. In al-Ghazali's case, God intervenes when doubt extends to reason as well. Thus, for both thinkers, divine providence has a role to play.

While both al-Ghazali and Ibn Tufayl accept that the mystical state is the highest in terms of proximity to the Divine, their views on the relationship between reason and mysticism are not wholly identical. Of primary concern is the path one takes to arrive at the mystical state. In the *Munqidh*, al-Ghazali describes his intellectual journey but does not suggest that his mastery of theology and philosophy was necessary to experience *dhawq*. Instead, if his description of his doubt which caused him to mistrust reason and even primary mathematical truths is to be considered, it would seem as if mysticism saved him from a fate brought about by reasoning about reason! In the case of Hayy, the picture painted by Ibn Tufayl is quite different. Hayy is shown to progressively advance in seven-year stages that culminate in his mystical experience. For example, he first adopts a very naturalist perspective of the world brought about as a result of his sensory experiences and dissections of animals. Later, he begins to abstract and engage with logical concepts like the Aristotelian categories. Further in his intellectual journey, he makes his first forays into metaphysics as he tries to understand concepts like being and necessity.¹⁹ It is the culmination of these intellectual masteries that brings Hayy to the doorstep of mysticism. Thus, while for al-Ghazali the intellectual pursuits do not seem to necessarily precede mysticism, Ibn Tufayl puts forth a gradual ascent to a mystical union with God.

The relationship between reason and mysticism is complicated further by both authors' views on cosmology and metaphysics. In the *Munqidh*, al-Ghazali writes that there are certain aspects of astronomy and medicine which cannot be discovered through reason.²⁰ He provides the example of astronomical phenomena that occur very rarely as requiring something beyond observation and reason to determine. According to al-Ghazali, these truths can only have been the result of Divine inspiration and *dhawq*. Similarly, Hayy is given knowledge of the cosmos through God and begins to understand the nature of the heavenly bodies.²¹ Thus, Ibn Tufayl similarly suggests that there are cosmological and metaphysical truths that require one to ascend to a mystical state to discover. Whereas for Ibn Tufayl this is not a major concern due to the sequential nature of intellectual sciences being capped by a mystical state, it does pose an interpretive question regarding al-Ghazali. How can mysticism engage with the intellectual sciences if it operates entirely separately? A possible solution is to refine our understanding of the relationship between reason and mysticism for both thinkers. For Ibn Tufayl, there exists a bi-directional relationship of sorts whereby reason necessarily precedes mysticism, and mystical truths can inspire understandings of cosmology and metaphysics. This is not to suggest that mysticism will help an individual with the specific details of zoology or cosmology, for example, but rather that it can provide a God's-eye view of the world to systematically approach those disciplines. For al-Ghazali, reason and mysticism are not as intimately related, but mysticism wields a unidirectional influence over

19. Ibn Tufayl, 119–121.

20. Al-Ghazali, "Al-Munqidh," 65.

21. Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, 146–147.

the intellectual sciences and reason. For al-Ghazali, mystical truths can inspire specific knowledge in the intellectual sciences. Thus, while excellence in reason is not a necessary condition for mystical *dhawq*, mystical *dhawq* can inspire philosophical sciences.

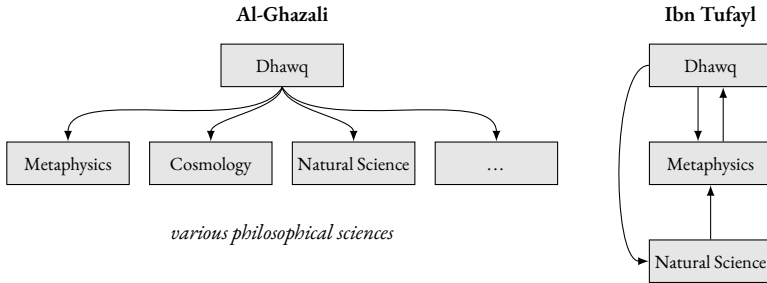


Figure: For al-Ghazali, mysticism can inspire and reveal truths in other sciences but is not dependent on those sciences. For Ibn Tufayl, mysticism can similarly influence other sciences, but mastery of other sciences is needed to arrive at the mystical state. Thus, in al-Ghazali's thought mysticism wields a unidirectional influence over reason whereas the relationship is bidirectional in Ibn Tufayl's thought.

IV. WHY IS REASON REQUIRED FOR MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE?

With the differences between both al-Ghazali and Ibn Tufayl in mind, it will be helpful to refer to al-Ghazali's goal at the beginning of the *Munqidh*. Brought to a crippling doubt of even seemingly certain truths, al-Ghazali sought a higher judge that qualifies and corrects reason much like reason corrects sense perception. For both Ibn Tufayl and al-Ghazali, this is the mystical state of *dhawq* which offers a kind of knowledge that cannot be put into the confines of language. Rather, mysticism provides an alternative type of knowledge altogether that is rooted in the experience of the Divine. However, if mysticism is a judge presiding over reason like reason over sense perception, it is unclear why reason is necessary for the mystical state according to Ibn Tufayl. By analogy, just as we can imagine someone blind being able to critically reason and excel in mathematics and logic, it seems possible that a person who has not mastered the philosophical sciences could experience mystical *dhawq*. Thus, al-Ghazali's unidirectional influence of mysticism on the philosophical sciences seems to better capture the nature of mysticism as a judge presiding over reason than Ibn Tufayl's system which makes reason necessary for mysticism.

Ibn Tufayl could respond to the problem in one of two ways. The first is to reject the relationship between *dhawq* and reason as one of judging. Instead, mystical truths may be supplements to reason and only act as correctors in very specific cases, such as the confusion of the self with God. However, this response

seems to arbitrarily select when mysticism interferes with reason, sidelining it for the most part. In this picture, mysticism is a judge of reason only when reason is confused about the nature of God or committing some heresy. It would also diverge from the systematic approach Ibn Tufayl's novel takes — if the mysticism is only used to correct a grave overstepping of reason, the successive progression of intellectual states does not follow naturally. Hayy would reach the limits of reason in expounding metaphysical truths, at which point mysticism would take over and break from the sequential approach to intellectual progress that underlies the rest of the novel. I argue that this reading falls outside the spirit of the rest of the text and should be resisted.

The second possible recourse to Ibn Tufayl is to suggest that reason is required for mystical truths because mystical truths are closely tied up with the intellectual sciences. Unlike the case of the blind person who masters rational argumentation, for example, one cannot attain certain mystical truths without mastering the philosophical sciences. Philosophy is therefore the necessary preparation that makes the individual understand mystical truths more accurately. Referring back to the example of the mystic confusing herself for God, philosophical knowledge could have prevented this confusion due to providing her with a better understanding of human nature and the natural world. For example, having mastered the rational sciences, the mystic would be aware that she could not possibly be identical with God, even in her mystic state, because her knowledge of human nature is that we are at least partially material. Furthermore, philosophical knowledge would, for example, allow her to reason that God could not possibly be material, for material things are contingent. Setting aside the specific details, the point of the example is to illustrate that philosophical preparation is required to apprehend mystical truths and divine transcendence without errors. Thus, Ibn Tufayl may be able to preserve the role of mystical truths as a judge over reason with the caveat that reason prepares one to receive these mystical truths in an accurate manner. The bi-directional relationship between the natural sciences and *dhawq* explained earlier turns out to clarify the “judge” relationship between the two — Ibn Tufayl offers a sort of rationalization of mystical experience. Consequently, the judging of reason by mysticism is of a weaker sort for him than it is for al-Ghazali who sees *dhawq* as more distinctly judging over reason.

The passage from al-Ghazali's *Mishkat al-Anwar*, quoted earlier in this paper, is relevant in assessing the merits of the two thinkers' systems. For al-Ghazali, reason retains some role even in mystical experience, particularly in making sense of mystical union once it has abated. He criticizes al-Hallaj and Abu Yazid al-Bistami for not utilizing their intelligence and for claiming to have become identical *with* God as a result of mystical union. Instead, he writes, “When that drunkenness abated and they came under the sway of intelligence, which is Allah's balance scale upon the earth, they knew that that had not been actual identity.”²² Arguably, Ibn Tufayl's systematic approach to mystical experience, whereby mastery of the philosophical sciences comes prior to such experience, is a flourishing of Ghazalian principles

22. Al-Ghazali, *The Mishkat*, 60.

better suited to address the confused mystical experiences al-Ghazali describes. For Ibn Tufayl, one has not had mystical experience at all if they are claiming to have become one with God. The claim contravenes rational principles such as God's immateriality and would therefore be rejected. Al-Ghazali on the other hand must sift through genuine and faulty cases of *dhawq*, which is not to say it makes his system incoherent, but it does make it more cumbersome. Furthermore, if pressed on the method of how exactly cases of mystical experience can be determined to be real or fraudulent, the answer is likely to reserve some sort of role for reason. Consequently, Ibn Tufayl's more systematic approach may reflect a flourishing of Ghazalian thought which builds on al-Ghazali's ideas.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have outlined both al-Ghazali and Ibn Tufayl's philosophical views regarding mysticism. For both authors, mysticism provides a taste of the Divine and truths that are unattainable by reason. Furthermore, I have explored how reason and mysticism engage in the works of both authors. Whereas Ibn Tufayl rationalizes mystical experience and weakens the sense in which it judges over reason, it renders his epistemological system more systematic. For al-Ghazali, mysticism rules over the rest of the intellectual sciences and it is only by divine providence that one is given or not given access. Ibn Tufayl, contrastingly, can meaningfully speak of a sense of preparing the self to receive mystical truths by mastering the rational sciences. However, he does not say much more than this about mystical experience itself. It is due to the nature of the topic at hand that both al-Ghazali's and Ibn Tufayl's descriptions of mysticism are limited. Both thinkers agree that the bounds of language and its rules restrict a true expression of the direct experience of mysticism. Consequently, this paper has largely focused on interpretive questions around mysticism and how it engages with reason rather than a positive description of what the mystical state entails — after all, mysticism is better understood as what it is not for those who have yet to taste it.

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