



SOUL'S COMMUNICATION WITH THE AFTERLIFE: A REVIEW AFTER AL- GHAZĀLĪ

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Abstract: Curious mind always wants to know the unknown things, facts, events and metaphysical entities for ages. The article studies the philosopher like al-Ghazālī's intriguing and engaging thoughts who pays attention in later time to know the metaphysical entities such as - nature of things, soul, God, physical world, and most importantly beyond the physical realm or unknown world - after receiving knowledge of certainty. In early time, he was busy to acquire certain knowledge (it must be infallible). Then seeking the knowledge of truth about metaphysical things got priority. Now the research employs how al-Ghazālī reaches at the point that there is a future world where the soul rests after the death of physical life and also how the soul communicates with the Supreme soul. In his philosophy, he never doubts the Supreme Being who is basically a will which is the cause of creation. All creation is of two kinds – world of command (*amr*) and world of existence (temporary). The soul in this temporary world exists as long as God wants to and after death it enters into another realm which is *amr* (beyond the physical world).

Key Words: Afterlife, Al-Ghazālī, Death, Future world, Soul.

Introduction: Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), one of the known Islāmic philosophers, combines the fundamentalism and spiritualization in his discipline which bears newness in the history of Western philosophy. This combination has clearly a marked stamp of his strong personality and people continue to accept it since his time. His way of thinking about philosophy is very original, but it focuses more on criticizing ideas than on building new ones. Regarding this, the most comprehensive representation of al-Ghazālī's mature thought is found in his autobiographical work *Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min ad-dalāl)* that he adopts the method of doubt and employs skepticism to investigate every sects and schools prevailing then. The reason behind is that they did not underline any boundary and condition for certain knowledge and also could not distinguish truth from error and purity from heresy. Besides his Persian book entitled *Kimīyā-yi sa'ādat (Alchemy of happiness)* has four sections, dealing with accordingly i) knowledge of self, ii) knowledge of God, iii) knowledge of the physical world, and iv) knowledge of the future world as it really is. Both the books show his journey from fundamentalism to spiritualization. However, the recent study mainly highlights the knowledge of next world or world of command, eternal.

Communicating with the Material World:

According to al-Ghazālī, the human soul (*nafs*) is subject to the command of God. It represents a person's unique essence and originates from the realm of divine decrees.¹ Basically, human possesses two kinds of souls: the animal soul and the spiritual soul.² The spiritual soul is of angelic origin and is destined to return and unite with its divine source. Its true purpose is to contemplate the beauty of God. In contrast, the animal soul resides in the heart and flows outward like a subtle vapor, permeating the entire body. It

animates the organs, granting them the power to perform their natural functions. Al-Ghazālī likens this soul to a lamp whose light spreads to every corner of a room, bringing vitality and motion to the body. The spiritual soul, however, is indivisible and immaterial. It is through this soul that a human being comes to know God. Al-Ghazālī describes it as the rider (*rakeb*) of the animal soul (*markab*). In this relationship, the spiritual soul governs and directs the animal soul, guiding the human being on the path toward knowledge and divine realization. Death, he argues, happens only the animal soul, while the spiritual soul still endures. For the believer, as conveyed by the Prophets, “death is a welcome gift of God.”³ It is through death that they come to uncover the mysteries of divine decrees and enter into the intelligible world.

Al-Ghazālī says that there are mainly two kinds of realms – physical or material and beyond physical or non-material. The state previous to death is called the material world, and the state after death is called the future or non-material world. In this temporary world, man sees his life is like a journey, in which the stages are represented by years, the leagues by months, the miles by days, and the steps by moments. People live in this physical world using their senses like seeing, hearing, etc. and when they die and lose their senses, they live in the next world with their essential attributes. But the poor one plans for the future, even though he knows there is a chance he might not be alive in a few days. The Holy Qur’ān warns: “He who is blind in this life will be blind in the next or after life, and astray from the path.”⁴

Hence, both the worlds were created by God, and for the physical world, the purpose is mainly to afford an opportunity to make provision for the future, to achieve knowledge, and to worship God. Actually, it provides us knowledge about God’s actions and the things He has created. In this context, al-Ghazālī quotes a verse from the Holy Qur’ān, which is “He is the creator of the heavens and the earth when He decrees a matter, He said to it: “Be” and it is.”⁵ Therefore, the Qur’ān teaches that God created the world *ex nihilo* by His Divine Will and retains full power to end it whenever He wills.

In *Alchemy of happiness*, al-Ghazālī acknowledges that there are good things in the material world such as marriage, food, clothing, etc., but a wise man uses them only to the extent that they help him attaining knowledge of the next world.⁶ The unwise, on the other hand, indulges in these things purely for personal pleasure, disregarding their true purpose. This unwise group includes so-called “learned” men who blindly follow the opinions of others and lack certainty in their beliefs about the afterlife, heaven, hell, and divine judgment.

To clarify this concept, al-Ghazālī offers a parable in the *Alchemy of Happiness*. He compares people to passengers on a ship that stops for a short period of time at an island. The captain warns them not to delay, as the ship won’t wait long. The wisest return quickly and secure the best places on board. Others linger, distracted by the island’s beauty, and end up with less comfortable places. Some gather colorful stones, only to realize later they are valuable, and are forced into the ship’s lower deck. The last group wanders too far, misses the ship entirely, and is left behind to perish.⁷

Now al-Ghazālī writes that belief in the afterlife is foundational: heaven and hell, as well as the rewards and punishments for one’s actions, are predicated upon it. God, he says, rewards pure intentions. If an individual performs a deed with sincere intention, without worldly motives, God supports him. While some serve God to attain Paradise, the most noble are those who act purely for the sake of pleasing Him.

According to al-Ghazālī, anyone who seeks to act solely for God’s sake must abandon some intentions such as:

- i) Fasting for health benefits, ii) freeing a slave for the sake of rest, iii) making pilgrimage (Ḥajj) to restore health, iv) fighting for purposes other than God’s pleasure, v) seeking fame or wealth through education, vi) writing books for profit, vii) performing ablution merely for physical cleanliness, viii) staying in the mosque (*I’tiqaf*) to avoid rent, ix) any act done to gain status or recognition in society and so on.⁸

Sincerity (*ikhlas*), for al-Ghazālī, is not only essential but also the sole quality God desires in human actions. He explains that detachment from worldly desires is the key to receiving God’s grace. In this context, al-Ghazālī shares his own spiritual crisis during his time at the prestigious Nizāmiyyah Academy in Baghdad. Upon examining his motivations for teaching, he realized that his purpose was not a pure desire for God, but it was a longing for status and public acclaim. This realization led him to conclude that

he stood at the edge of spiritual ruin, and unless he reformed, he risked damnation.⁹ However, if a person wants to gather true knowledge from this material world, his intention should be pure.

In the *Alchemy of happiness*, al-Ghazālī outlines the spiritual journey of the human being through the material world, asserting that man has the potential to ascend the chain of being toward God. He opens this discussion with a striking reflection on the soul's greatness and human potential:

Human in this visible world is extremely weak and contemptible; it is only in the after (life) that he will be of value, if by the means of the “alchemy of happiness” he rises from the rank of beasts to that of angels.¹⁰

To illustrate the soul's journey and the layered structure of reality, al-Ghazālī offers the parable of the pen and paper. In this metaphor, the paper credits the ink for its markings; the ink, in turn, credits the pen; the pen credits the hand and fingers; the hand credits the body's powers; the body's powers point to the will; the will attributes itself to knowledge and reason. Yet reason, upon reflection, reveals itself to be a blank slate, merely receiving inscriptions from a higher source. This chain of dependencies leads the true seeker to confusion over ascend from the sensible world to the intelligible world, via the ‘world of compulsion.’¹¹ Here naturally the question arises what is this ‘world of compulsion’? To answer the question, al-Ghazālī says that it is a middle-world where one loses touch with empirical knowledge: one has to ‘surpass one’s own power.’¹² Finally, he states that this state is equally important for humans in acquiring true knowledge of reality.

Communicating Beyond the Physical World:

According to al-Ghazālī, man can only enter into the future or unseen or non-material world when death happens. This world is also called the world of Dominion. But we the human being cannot know anything about the nature of this unseen world. So the very question is asked by men that how can we communicate with the future world? To answer the question al-Ghazālī says that man can achieve the knowledge about future world through this visible or material world if he knows properly his spirit or soul, and also by turning inward and contemplating the very act of knowing. In the words of him, the world of Dominion directly emanates from the Almighty, while the visible or material world exists as a secondary effect. He emphasizes upon the physical world more as it is a reflection of the unseen world of Dominion. To explain the nature of the future world, he presents the Parable of light, which illustrates the nature of the soul and its journey to illumination. God is seen as the Light of lights - even He is the light of heavens and earth; and our journey toward the Divine can only unfold through the illumination of the several aspects of the soul. When people begin their journey toward illumination, they get nearness to God and the essence of knowledge. God alone knows the nature of both the open and secret worlds.¹³

Philosophers like al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina, and others make here a distinction between the God's knowledge and our knowledge. Their claim for God's knowledge is: “God Most High knows everything in universe, but not particulars.”¹⁴ Although, al-Ghazālī strongly opposes their views, using examples such as the other claim that God does not know individual men like Zaid, Amar or Khalid. For al-Ghazālī, Allāh's knowledge is not limited to universals, He knows man both the general and the individual. He argues by criticizing them that such a view may bring total destruction of religious belief, as it implies one obeys or disobeys; God remains unaware about this.

The Holy Qur'ān affirms that God is fully aware of every state of affairs in the temporal world. In line with this, al-Ghazālī asserts that Allāh knows all that exists on the land and in the sea; not a single leaf falls without His permission. There is no a grain hidden in the darkness of the earth, nor anything green or withered, except that which is not recorded in a destined book.¹⁵

Hence, al-Ghazālī turns back to the idea that the pursuit of true knowledge depends ultimately on the illumination of the soul. In essence, it hinges on the soul's encounter with the world of Dominion, the realm of the Divine. In the words of him, this encounter is the direct apprehension of the future world, which emanates from God. Thus, the essence of knowledge and the key to understanding human nature are rooted in this visible world, as it reflects the unseen. The interpretation of the Qur'ānic parable emphasizes that human nature, in its deepest sense, originates from the world of Dominion.¹⁶ According to al-Ghazālī, man's nature is comprised of a soul with five distinct features, each of which must be refined in order to ascend into the world of Dominion.

Now al-Ghazālī agrees with the doctrine of bodily resurrection - whoever dies, his resurrection is taking place (at that time). This view stands in contrast to the position held by many philosophers, who accepted only the resurrection of the soul, not the body.

According to their theory,

For bodies there is no resurrection, it is bare spirits which are rewarded or punished; and the rewards and punishments are spiritual, not bodily. They certainly speak truth in affirming the spiritual ones, since these do exist as well; but they speak falsely in denying the bodily ones and in their pronouncements disbelieve the divine laws.¹⁷

Though, al-Ghazālī attacks those philosophers sharply, asserting that anyone who denies the possibility of resurrection of body is guilty of unbelief. He challenges their argument by asking why there should be any problem in accepting the notion of a physical afterlife, especially if it is logically conceivable. He argues that if something is logically possible, then it certainly lies within God's power to bring it into existence.¹⁸ Therefore, denying bodily resurrection is not only theologically dangerous but also philosophically unjustified.

Al-Ghazālī further stresses that the ultimate aim of the believer is the purification of the soul. He asserts that the "greater the soul's purification, the more one is capable for conceiving God's light and attaining true knowledge of things."¹⁹ This spiritual journey, however, is long and demanding, requiring immense patience and perseverance from the seeker or believer. Through a life of virtue and disciplined devotion, the believer gradually purifies the soul, making it receptive to divine knowledge and, ultimately, to divine love. This love of God, according to al-Ghazālī, is the *summum bonum* or the Highest Good in this universe. It can be rightly said that the notion of the love of God leads directly to the beatific vision in the hereafter, where the soul beholds the ultimate truth and beauty of God.

In this regard, al-Ghazālī writes that God possesses all the causes that stir love within the human heart. He underlines that a person cannot take even a single step without the help of God, the Most High - who alone is truly worthy of love. Those who attach themselves to material things, rather than to God, do so out of ignorance, for they lack true knowledge of Him. According to him, it is this real knowledge of God that gives rise to divine love. He further asserts that no one can attain anything – whether knowledge, virtue, or spiritual realization - without God's grace and blessing.

The human spirit, al-Ghazālī explains, naturally yearns to return to the upper world from which it originates. Because the soul was sent down into this lower realm against its will, to gain knowledge and experience, its true home remains the divine realm. Al-Ghazālī notes down the Qur'ānic verse: "Go down from hence, all of you; there will come to you instruction from Me, and they who obey the instruction need not fear, neither shall they be grieved."²⁰ In this context, he prescribes that while the soul resides in the visible world, it requires divine guidance; a clear path and determination to stay rightly guided.

Al-Ghazālī believed like many Sufis that true proximity to God is possible in the afterlife, and even in this life through the state of *fanā'* (self-annihilation). *Fanā'* is the mystical experience in which the self is effaced, and the soul becomes entirely absorbed in the Divine presence. It represents the highest stage of spiritual development and reflects the deep relationship between the soul, the body, and the divine world. Al-Ghazālī likely shared the Sufi belief that God is approachable to the point of literally 'tasting' the divine (*dhawq*, a Sufi word) in the present life. This spiritual tasting leads to ecstasy and moral transformation, typically achieved not through reason but through prayer, contemplation, and self-purification. Al-Ghazālī affirms: "The more a man purifies himself from fleshly lusts and concentrates his mind on God" the more able he is to have "prophetic inspiration"²¹ - a closer understanding of God that he describes as a literal ascent to the angels in his great work titled *Deliverance from Error*.

Now the seeker becomes aware of the infinite and unsearchable power of God, and also he gains the knowledge that 'He is not to be questioned as to what He does; it is they who are to be questioned.'²² Thus, the seeker fully recognizes the absolute supremacy of God's providence over all creation and lifts his voice in awe and praise.

Conclusion:

In concluding, we can come to the point that when a seeker starts his journey through the visible world to intelligible world, and also the intelligible world to the world of power; he experiences a true light, or in other word, Divine light (i.e. it is a realization of true faith in God and His Messenger). It makes understand that the very essence of certain knowledge resides in the perception of this Divine Light which is the key to attaining the highest and most certain form of knowledge that transcendent in nature and surpassing the capacity of human reason.

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