

Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Approach to the Verses of the Qur'an

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Introduction

Ta'wīl and *tafsīr* had been the tools to understand the contents of the Qur'ān. The difference between them is the ways they operate. Although some may perceive the former as synonymous to the latter, this paper highlights the word *ta'wīl* to mean “returning something to its desirable aim, by knowledge or by action”² or technically, “inflection of a term from a preponderant probability (*al-iḥtimāl al-rājiḥ*) to a less dominant probability (*al-iḥtimāl al-marjūḥ*) because there is evidence that connects it.”³ This was the process adopted by al-Ghazzālī in some places to approach the Qur'ān. This paper will present two main topics; i.e. first, concept and significance of *ta'wīl* as perceived by al-Ghazzālī and second, the scholar's features and limits of *ta'wīl*.

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² Al-Aṣḥāhānī, *Mu'jam Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur'ān*, Dār al-Fikr, Bayrūt n.d., p 27.

³ Ibn Taymiyyah mentioned this definition of *ta'wīl* when he explained this concepts as used in different meanings. He mentioned that this is the definition employed by majority of contemporary people who speak on *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and its principles. He did not use the terms *al-'ulamā' fī al-fiqh wa uṣūlih*, but instead he used *al-mutakallimūn fī al-fiqh wa uṣūlihi*, which indicates that he was not in favour of using *ta'wīl*. (See Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū'at al-Fatāwā*, Dār al-Wafā' li al-Ṭabā'ah wa al-Tawzī', Al-Manṣūrah, 1998, v3, p 40.)

CONCEPT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF *TA'WĪL* ACCORDING TO AL-GHAZZĀLĪ

The central issue by which *ta'wīl* revolves is the understanding and perception of two terms related to the nature of the verses of the Qur'an that are known as *muḥkam* and *mutashābih*. In the case of al-Ghazzālī's view, the understanding and perception of both terms shall determine his understanding of the concept of *ta'wīl*. Consequently, his concept of *ta'wīl* contributes to the extent by which he perceived *ta'wīl* as significant. This topic will deal with the concept and significance of *ta'wīl* as perceived by al-Ghazzālī. Illustration of both points: concept and significance, is grounded upon the understanding of two verses of the Qur'an, i.e. *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 7 as for concept, and *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16: 125 as for significance. The discussion of his ideas in those aspects shall be followed by some analysis of the outcomes of his stance on *ta'wīl* to this extent. This may lead us to forecast the features and limits of *ta'wīl* that will be brought up in the following topic.

The Concept of *Ta'wīl* According to al-Ghazzālī

Al-Ghazzālī had explained the contents of the Qur'an, i.e. *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* verses,¹ by saying that the *muḥkamāt* has two meanings: "First, which its meanings are open and are not permeable by ambiguities and probabilities.... Second, what has been systematized and arranged sequentially to impart meaning, either based on what is evident or interpreted, as long as there are neither contradictions nor variance in it. This is opposite to the obscure or corrupt, but not an opposite of the allegorical."²

On the other hand, the *mutashābihāt* verses, according to al-Ghazzālī, are the verses in which probabilities are contradictory, whereby there are ambiguous terms stated,³ which in some cases

¹ Al-Qur'an, *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:7.

² Al-Ghazzālī, *Al-Mustaṣfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl*, Maṭba'ah al-Amiriyah bi Būlāq, Egypt, 1322H, v. 1, p 106. (Hereafter cited as al-Ghazzālī, *Al-Mustaṣfā*) (Ḥammād, Aḥmad Zakī Maṣṣūr. *Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazzālī's Juristic Doctrine in Al-Mustaṣfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl with a translation of volume one of Al-Mustaṣfā*. UMI Dissertation Services, A Bell & Howell Company, Chicago, 1998. pp 470-471.) (Hereafter cited as Ḥammād)

³ Such as the terms *quru'*, *biyadihī 'uqdat al-nikāḥ* and *lams*. All these bring along many possible meanings.

pertain to the attributes of Allāh in which its apparent meaning suggests anthropomorphism.¹

In dealing with *mutashābihāt*, al-Ghazzālī commented on the place by which the reading of *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 7 is portioned. There are two ways of doing it, first is to stop after the word Allah in, "...but no one knows its true meaning except Allāh", as in the knowledge of the time for the occurrence of the final day. Second is to conjoin after the word Allāh with "and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge...", thus the reading will be "...but no one knows its true meaning except Allāh and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge..." Al-Ghazzālī affirmed that either of the readings is tolerated.² The latter version of reading the verse obviously indicates that the knowledge of *mutashābihāt*, which is the subject matter for the verse, is not exclusively in the knowledge of Allāh, but there are among men who are with the ability to know the verses of such kind. He justified this stance for the acceptability of the second reading by asserting that there is nothing in the Qur'an that Arabs do not understand. By that, in dealing with verses that seem anthropomorphic, he claimed that they are actually metonymical (*kināyāt*) and metaphorical (*isti'ārāt*) terms by which the believers among the Arabs may understand that nothing resembles Allāh and that those verses are subject to *ta'wīl*.³ This reading style is opted in his *Al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm* whereby he explained the correct gauge by which forms of logical arguments are weighed.⁴

Al-Ghazzālī's perception towards *mutashābihāt*, which generally pertains to the description of Allāh and thus may be categorized under theological discussion, is in tune with his notion of *ta'wīl* when this concept is related to jurisprudence. In *Al-Mustaṣfā min 'Ilm al-Uṣūl*, it is identified that his concept of *ta'wīl* is based upon his perception that there are three kinds of meaningful utterance (*al-laḥẓ al-mufīd*):⁵

¹ Al-Ghazzālī, *Al-Mustaṣfā*, v1, p 106. (Ḥammād, p 471)

² Ibid.

³ Al-Ghazzālī, *al-Mustaṣfā*, v 1, p 107. (Ḥammād, p 473.)

⁴ Al-Ghazzālī, *Al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm*. trans. McCarthy, R.J. *Annotated translation of Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl and other relevant works of Al-Ghazālī*, Fons Vitae, U.S.A., n.d., p 276. (Hereafter cited as *Qistās*)

⁵ Al-Ghazzālī, *al-Mustaṣfā*, v. 1, pp 336-337 and pp 384-386.

1. *Al-Naṣṣ*. This is a precise and unambiguous utterance, which allows no conflict of alternative possible meanings.¹ Thus, we can understand that this kind is a clear utterance which meaning is direct and need no other interpretation.
2. *Al-Mujmal* (general) and *al-Mubham* (ambiguous). These are utterance that convey a broad meaning thus allow more than one possible meaning, none of which, however, has a preponderance (*tarjīh*) over the other.² In other words, *al-mujmal* and *al-mubham* are both of the same capability. None of them can explain another, but perhaps they both need to be explained by any of the other two kinds of utterances, or at least by the first kind only, *al-naṣṣ*.
3. *Al-Zāhir* (apparent, which refers to a preponderant meaning) and *al-Mu'awwal* (the one which meaning is interpreted by the preponderant). This group is the utterance which has more than one meaning, but there is, at the first sight, preponderance of one meaning (in *al-zāhir*) over the others (*al-mu'awwal*).³

According to al-Ghazzālī, there are cases whereby a less apparent possible meaning is chosen instead of the apparent one when there is evidential proof that gives the former preponderance over the latter. *Ta'wīl* takes place when the process of choosing a less evident but possible meaning over a more evident one and in most cases, over another possible but less evident meanings, occur.⁴

In the explanation given, it is vivid that al-Ghazzālī allows the use of *ta'wīl* over certain verses of the Qur'an since he accepted the second reading of *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān* 3: 7 as stated in or discussion. Besides, he also perceived that the employment of *ta'wīl* takes place not only in theology when discussion is done over the seemingly anthropomorphic verses that describe Allāh, but also in jurisprudence since there are also verses that speak about the actions of humankind which seem to need further understanding especially when the outward meaning conveyed is considered weaker than the inward

¹ Ibid., pp 336 and 384.

² Ibid., pp 336 and 385.

³ Ibid., pp 337 and 386.

⁴ Al-Ghazzālī, *al-Mustasfā*, v 1, p 387.

meaning with strong evidence. But why do we need *ta'wīl*? This is discussed in the next sub-topic.

Significance of *Ta'wīl* According to Al-Ghazzālī

The tendency of al-Ghazzālī to opt for *ta'wīl* in approaching the Qur'an is also related to his understanding of *Sūrah al-Nahl* 16: 125, whereby Allah mentioned, "*Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and argue with them in the ways that are best and most gracious.*"¹

Al-Ghazzālī had understood the verse to mean that there are three ways of approaching the mass to call them to truth. The ways are firstly, wisdom (*ḥikmah*), which he understood as philosophy, second, good admonition (*al-maw'izah al-ḥasanah*) and third, the best dialectic style (*al-mujādalah bi al-latī hiya aḥsan*). The three styles, in his view, denote the three groups of people to whom a preacher addresses, i.e. firstly, the people of higher level of intellect; secondly, the common men who are dull witted; and thirdly the contentious wranglers whose tendency is to argue and to create disputes.² In preaching them to truth, a preacher should be able to use the correct method that suits them. This is because an error in adopting a method may cause the people to drive away from a guided path.

For al-Ghazzālī, there is rationality behind the different use of styles. The rationality is that the different natures and tendencies of mankind will be satisfied only with the style that is suitable for them. To illustrate this intellectual satisfaction, he gave an analogy of preparing a meal for people of different ages and lifestyles. An infant needs to be nourished by breast milk but adults whose taste for food had developed prefer food which is rich in flavour. But among these men are the townsmen who are used only to wheat bread while the desert Arab to dates. If we were to give breast milk for the adult, he will be nauseated, and conversely, if the baby is fed with meat, it will harm him. Similar will it be inappropriate for us to give dates for the townsmen and wheat bread for the desert Arabs.³

¹ Trans. 'Abd al-Allāh Yūsuf 'Alī, p 669.

² Al-Ghazzālī, *Qistās*, trans. McCarthy p 272.

³ Al-Ghazzālī, *Qistās*, trans. McCarthy, p 246.

Al-Ghazzālī had given this analogy in light of his discussion on the correct balance to discover apodictic proof. Based on the analogy given, he later explained that some men among mankind, i.e. people with high level of intellect, may need philosophical method to gratify their intellectual satisfaction. However, this method cannot be employed to give explanation for the other two groups of people, i.e. common men who are dull witted and the contentious wranglers. In other words, the use of *ta'wīl* is exclusively to be utilized for and by the people of high level of intellect.

Although al-Ghazzālī made the above explanation to justify the need for philosophy in determining an apodictic proof, it is related closely to *ta'wīl* since determining an apodictic proof is also part and parcel of his rules of *ta'wīl*. Therefore, his opinion on significance of *ta'wīl* is closely related with this significance of philosophy in determining an apodictic proof.

Now, let us evaluate the outcomes of al-Ghazzālī's stance on *ta'wīl* to this extent of our discussion. The first outcome is that he had classified mankind into three classes according to their levels of intellect. Positively, this classification indicates that he acknowledged the difference in the levels of human comprehension and intellectual ability; some of them may need *ta'wīl*, while some of them may suffice with the literal explanation. Thus, he gave the opportunity for those with a high level of intellect to endeavour deeper in their quest of truth and consequently gratify their intellectual satisfaction. Not only that, this classification also indicates that the task of *ijtihād* which to some extent involves *ta'wīl* needs to be done only by the expert in the field. Considering all the explanations of al-Ghazzālī, there is a possibility that what he meant by the expert in the field is a philosopher. If that was so, in this regard, the researcher differ with him because she perceives that the expert here should not be a philosopher, but a jurist who has a good command in logic, which is a yardstick of philosophy. Thus, if this was the case, in this classification, al-Ghazzālī had defined the different roles of men in general, and in particular, he had highlighted some of the roles of a *mujtahid*.

Looking at the negative side of this outcome, this classification had somehow discriminated men. The people in the highest class with the highest level of intellect – the philosophers, according to al-Ghazzālī - may feel that they are superior to the others and that they are granted a privilege by Islām that the other men who are not from their class may not have the chance to share. This is absolutely different from the true spirit of Islām since the people who deserve a privilege are not intelligent people but knowledgeable *mu'min*. These people, as stated in *Sūrah al-Mujādalah* 58:11 are first all, believe and secondly, granted knowledge and those two elements make them more knowledgeable than the others and hence their status are elevated to a higher rank.¹

The second outcome is the use of three different means of conveying message to three different groups of people separately. This outcome is considered a negative one. In al-Ghazzālī's ideas, he did not promote any process of combining the three means together or combining any of the means with any other two. In a way, al-Ghazzālī had simplified the art of preaching, which, in reality, is a complicated process. In many cases, the preacher has to use more than one single method to the same person since the nature of man it self is unique from one another and complicated.

To conclude, al-Ghazzālī had allowed *ta'wīl*, nevertheless he did not allow its use for and by simply any people especially for whom who do not have the capability to comprehend it and by whom who do not have the qualification to exercise it. We will further discover how Al-Ghazzālī had presented some samples of *ta'wīl* and how he had drawn out some guidelines for *ta'wīl* in the coming chapter on rules of *ta'wīl*.

FEATURES AND LIMITS OF TA'WĪL BY AL-GHAZZĀLĪ

In the previous topic, we have analyzed al-Ghazzālī's stance on *ta'wīl* and realized how the way he conceptualized it had influenced his opinions on its significance. This topic will further

¹ Al-Qur'ān, *Sūrah al-Mujādalah* 58:11: "...Allāh will raise up to (suitable) ranks and degrees, those of you who believe and who have been granted knowledge." Trans. 'Abd al-Allāh Yūsuf 'Alī, p 1436.

expose his features of *ta'wīl*. The illustration of these features is grounded upon representative samples of his hermeneutical principles and methodology. It will help us define the levels of *ta'wīl* applied to holy Qur'an and *ḥadīth* and elaborate the conditions and limits in applying *ta'wīl* as he had outlined.

Features of Al-Ghazzālī's *Ta'wīl*

This subtopic shall present the samples of al-Ghazzālī's *ta'wīl* derived from two of his books, namely *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and *Al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm*. Based on the researcher's analysis of the books, points discussed in this subtopic shall be divided into two: Epistemological-Ontological¹ and Linguistic-Logical² forms of *ta'wīl*.

a) Al-Ghazzālī's Epistemological-Ontological *Ta'wīl* of *Mishkāt al-Anwār*

Although some may deny that *Mishkāt al-Anwār* was authored by Al-Ghazzālī, none had successfully proven that the book was not authored by the scholar. Considering this fact, this research shall depend on *Mishkāt* in order to demonstrate the sample of *ta'wīl* made by al-Ghazzālī and to further identify the features of his *ta'wīl*.

Mishkāt al-Anwār had discussed in depth a verse of *Sūrah Al-Nūr* 24: 35:

“Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: The Lamp enclosed in Glass; the Glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce

¹ This is the description of al-Ghazzālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. Literally, epistemology means “the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between the justified belief and opinion.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2003, p 584.) On the other hand, ontology refers to “the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2003, p 1230.) Thus, the term ‘epistemological-ontological’ is used here to denote the relationship between the knowledge in mind (mental understanding), which is based on the tangible existence, and the metaphysical existence as demonstrated in the Science of Symbolism, the main idea delivered in *Mishkāt*.

² Al-Ghazzālī believed that language of the Qur'an and logic are interrelated. In fact, logical ideas and argumentation are manifested in the language of some, if not all verses in the Qur'an. His *al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm* had successfully described this idea.

touched it: Light upon Light! Allāh doth guide whom He will to His light: Allāh doth set forth Parables for men: and Allāh doth know all things."¹

The exposition of al-Ghazzālī in *Mishkāt* is unlike the approach done by Al-Zamakhsharī in his Mu'tazilah's *ta'wīl* and it is unlike the prominent *tafsīr* of Sunni as Ibn Kathīr's or al-Qurṭubī's. His style is neither analytical nor thematic, but rather mystic-philosophical in nature.

The first part of the book focuses on the keyword in the verse, i.e. the word "light" or *nūr*. In this part, al-Ghazzālī filled his book with speculations in some places, and with demonstrations in some other places as to logically prove that the real light which is also the ultimate source of lights is Allāh.² There, he tried to define what "light" is,³ what the source of light is and what the roles of insights are to our senses.⁴

The second part of the book is the gist of his *ta'wīl*. There he had highlighted the Science of Symbolism in the verse. In this part, we can detect how al-Ghazzālī had related epistemology and ontology via the means of sensual world (Inferior World) and intelligential world (World of Realm Supernal). Al-Ghazzālī perceived that that these two worlds are interrelated and interconnected. By that he meant that there is a correspondence between the Visible World and the Unseen World and in fact all single thing in this world is a symbol of the Supernal World as he asserted, "...and for this reason there is not a single thing

¹ Trans. 'Abd al-Allāh Yūsuf 'Alī, p 876.

² His speculation was made in length when he assumed who or which object would that light possibly be, beginning from the sun, then the eyes, then the intelligence, then the spirit or human soul, then the Qur'ān and finally the source from where the Qur'ān is revealed, Allāh. [See Al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, ed. Badī' Al-Sayyid al-Laḥḥām, n.p., Dimashq, 1990, pp 21-53.- hereafter cited as *Mishkāt*- (W.H.T. Gairdner, *The Niche for Lights: a Translation and Introduction*, Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi, 1981, pp 81- 101 – hereafter cited as Gairdner-)

³ "...light is an expression for that by which things are revealed; or, higher still, that by and for which they are revealed; yea, and higher still, that by, for, and from which they are revealed...." (*Mishkāt* p 58, Gairdner, p 109)

⁴ Al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt*, p 59. (Gairdner, p 109.)

in this world of sense that is not a symbol of something in yonder one.”¹

Other than light, there are five other terms in the verse that al-Ghazzālī considered as symbols; they are *niche*, *lamp*, *glass*, *tree* and *oil*. He did not show what do these symbols indicate in this part of the book, but he firstly left the reader to remove their doubt on the practice and importance of the Science of Symbolism. He did that by bringing forth some proofs from the story of Prophet Ibrāhīm (p.b.u.h.) who had experimented with the sun, the moon and the stars to be his hypothetical Lord. According to al-Ghazzālī, the objects mentioned are symbols of the invisible world but because none is perfect to symbolize and be comparable with the Real Lord, Who is beyond comparison, Prophet Ibrāhīm (p.b.u.h.) turned to Allāh and attested his belief to the Creator.² Al-Ghazzālī had also explained that Prophet Mūsā (p.b.u.h.) responded to Allāh’s command: “*Put thy shoes....*”³ by not only putting off his physical shoes but also spiritually putting off the two worlds. Then, he mentioned some experiences of Prophet Muḥammad (p.b.u.h.) and his people in interpretation of visions. Besides, he also highlighted various verses of the Qur’ān which stated words like Hands of Allāh and His Pen, and he also brought forth a *ḥadīth*:

للقُرْآنِ ظَاهِرٌ وَبَاطِنٌ وَحَدٌّ وَمَطْلَعٌ

“The Qur’ān has an outward and inward, an ending and a beginning.”⁴

Al-Ghazzālī mentioned the points stated in order to justify that Science of Symbolism is important and it had been practiced by our previous people who were our models and therefore it is reliable.

The perfect manner to cross over the outward term and the inner idea in symbolism, according to al-Ghazzālī, is by combining

¹ Ibid, p 77. (Gairdner, p 125.)

² Al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt*, p 79. (Gairdner, p 127.)

³ Al-Qur’ān, *Sūrah Tāhā*, 20:12. (‘Abd al-Allāh Yūsuf ‘Alī, p 767.)

⁴ Badī‘ al-Sayyid al-Laḥḥām stated that Al-‘Iraqī mentioned in his *Takhrīj* that Ibn Ḥibbān in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* that this is among *aḥādīth* narrated by Ibn Mas‘ūd together with its grammatical analysis. (*Mishkāt*, p 88.)

the two requirements. For example, when the Prophet said: "The angels of Allāh enter not a house wherein is a dog or a picture", one should avoid keeping dog and picture in his house and at the same time eliminate ferocity and ravenousness from one's soul because these are inner idea of the word dog. A wrong position in dealing with this inner-outward content, al-Ghazzālī maintained, is only to take into account the inner idea, or in this example, only leaving the doggishness habit while keeping dog in one's home.¹

For al-Ghazzālī, "every real thing has its correspondence to real truth."² Therefore, we are keen to know, then, how to interpret the symbols? Al-Ghazzālī indicated that the ability for interpretation is gained by purification of one's soul.³ He described the process that undergoes in one's mind while he deals with this interpretation as: "Most frequently, the idea is presented to the direct inward vision first, and then looks down from thence on to the imaginative spirit and receives the imprint of some concrete object, analogous to the idea."⁴

Al-Ghazzālī further elaborated the five grades of human spirits which are considered the faculties to understand the relationship between type and antitype in symbolism. They are:

1. The sensory spirit (*al-rūḥ al ḥassās*)
– This is the recipient of the information brought in by the senses.⁵
2. The imaginative spirit (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*)
– This is the recorder of the information conveyed by the senses. It keeps information in a way that it is ready to be retrieved by the intelligential spirit.⁶
3. The intelligential spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ʿaqlī*)
– This captures the ideas beyond the spheres of sense and imagination. "This faculty is specifically for human. It is not found in the lower animal, nor yet in children."⁷
4. The discursive or ratiocinative spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*)

¹ Al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt* p 89. (Gairdner, pp 138-139.)

² Ibid., p 91. (Gairdner, p 140.)

³ Ibid., p 92. (Gairdner, p 142.)

⁴ Ibid., p 94. (Gairdner, p 143.)

⁵ Al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt*, p 95. (Gairdner, p 144.)

⁶ Ibid., pp 95-96. (Gairdner, p 145.)

⁷ Ibid., p 97. (Gairdner, p 145.)

- This takes the data of pure reason and combines them, arranges them as premises, and deduces from them a conclusion or new knowledge combines the conclusion gained with other information and produces another new conclusion.¹

5. The transcendental spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*)

- This is possessed by the Prophets (p.b.u.t.) and some saints. By it, knowledge of the unseen including those pertaining to theology is revealed from the other world.²

In the final part of the book, Al-Ghazzālī finally explained the relationship of those five grades of faculties with the five terms mentioned in the verse. The *niche* signifies the sensory spirit because as the sensory spirit which allows light to enter through several apertures, the eyes, ears etc, and niche does the same as well.³ The *glass* signifies the imaginative spirit since they share three characteristics. The characteristics al-Ghazzālī discussed cover their function, their transparent nature and their importance to the remaining spirits.⁴ The *lamp* signifies the intelligential spirit and as explained throughout the notion of light, the Prophets (p.b.u.t.) are “Light-giving Lamp”.⁵ The *tree* signifies the ratiocinative spirit because they both operate in a similar way, i.e. from the root then to the branch and the following ramifications. In the verse, the tree meant is the olive tree which oil illuminates and feeds the lamp, and this function resembles the function of ratiocinative spirit to the intellect.⁶ Lastly, the *oil* which illuminates though fire does not touch it signifies the transcendental prophetic spirit which belongs to the saints and the prophets and which is independent from any outward instruction and advice.⁷ The book ends with the explanation of the tradition on veils whereby al-Ghazzālī elaborated the antonym to the notion of *light*.

We learn from the contents of *Mishkāt* that al-Ghazzālī did not only explain the keywords in the verse. Yet, he speculated, demonstrated

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., p 97. (Gairdner, p 146.)

³ Ibid., pp 101-102. (Gairdner, p 150.)

⁴ Ibid., pp 102-103. (Gairdner, pp 150-151.)

⁵ Al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt*, p 103. (Gairdner, p 152.)

⁶ Ibid., p 104. (Gairdner, p 152.)

⁷ Ibid., p 105. (Gairdner, pp 153-154.)

and moved the minds of the readers to and fro to finally reach a conclusion that it is not a mere *light* that matters, but the way to understand the *light* and employ the faculties that lead to it. Hence, al-Ghazzālī did not only perform *ta'wīl* in his *ta'wīl*, but he explained *ta'wīl* in his *ta'wīl*, therefore it is *ta'wīl* upon *ta'wīl* as the verse is concern with light upon light. He approached the Qur'ān just like the *ṣūfī* does, but this tendency is also equipped with some substance of philosophy, as in Platonic ideas, objects on earth symbolize the unseen spiritual world. Thus, his approach can be described as mystic-philosophical in nature.

To conclude, *Mishkāt* had been presented in the form that interpretation of the Qur'ān was done in relation between epistemology and ontology. The parallelism between the cognitive faculties (perception and intellect) and their cognition (sensible and intelligential) and the parallelism between the physical world and the metaphysical world are promoted in this work. From the parallelism demonstrated, two levels of interpretation are possible:

1. From the knowledge of the physical faculties and the physical world one can proceed to the knowledge of the intellectual faculties and the intelligential world by interpretation of the sensible as signifier of the intelligential.
2. The first level will give us the possible second level of interpretation: the Holy text will be understood in the light of the first interpretation. In practice, hence, the mystic (of the Psyche) and the philosophical knowledge (of the World) are the source of the meanings that we have to understand in our metaphorical interpretation of the Holy text. All these are illustrated in *Mishkāt*.

b) Al-Ghazzālī's Linguistic-Logical *Ta'wīl* of *Al-Qiṣṭās al-Mustaqīm*

The core idea of *al-Qiṣṭās al-Mustaqīm* was the manifestation of two verses: First, *Sūrah al-Isrā'* 17:35:

*“Give full measure when ye measure, and weigh with a balance that is straight: That is the most fitting and the most advantageous in the final determination (aḥsanu ta'wīlā)”*¹

Second, *Sūrah al-Ḥadīd* 57:25:

¹ Trans. 'Abd al-Allāh Yūsuf 'Alī, pp 683-684.

“We sent aforetime our Messengers with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance, that men may stand forth in justice; and We sent down Iron, in which is (material for) mighty war, as well as benefits for mankind....”¹

Al-Ghazzālī understood the “balance that is straight” mentioned in the verse as syllogism. The “balance” mentioned is the main concern in his exposition of *al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm*. In explaining the balance, he selected some other verses in the Qur’ān that are argumentative in nature,² extracted the points contained in them and put them in new sentences to form premises or “principles”, as he called them. He also made a conclusion from the extracted points and all together, those principles and the conclusion form a set of statements which he called “balance”. This is the balance that al-Ghazzālī believed should be used in order to determine an apodictic proof which determines whether the use of *ta’wīl* is needed in certain place to forsake the literal meaning uttered. In other words, syllogism is a mechanism to determine the need for *ta’wīl*.

The verses al-Ghazzālī selected in *Qistās* had formed five types of balances which he named “The Greater Balance of Equivalence”, “The Middle Balance of Equivalence”, “The Lesser Balance of Equivalence,”³ “The Balance of Concomitance” and “The

¹ Ibid., p 1428.

² The verses he dealt with were *Sūrah al-Baqarah* 2: 258 (Greater Balance of Equivalence), *Sūrah al-An’ām* 6:76-78 (Middle Balance of Equivalence), *Sūrah al-An’ām* 6:91 (Lesser Balance of Equivalence), *Sūrah Al-Anbiyā’* 21:22 (Balance of Concomitance) and *Sūrah Saba’* 34:24 (Balance of Opposition).

³ It is based on *Sūrah al-An’ām* 6:91. The full translation of the verse is: “No just estimate of Allah do they make when they say: ‘Nothing doth Allāh send down to man (by way of revelation)’. Say: ‘Who then sent down the book which Moses brought? – A light and guidance to man; but ye make it into (separate) sheets for show, while conceal much (of its contents) therein. Were ye taught that which ye knew not – neither ye nor your fathers.’ Say: ‘Allāh (sent it down).’ Then leave them to plunge in vain discourse and trifling.” (Trans. ‘Abd al-Allāh Yūsuf Alī, p 318.) Al-Ghazzālī had extracted the points from the verse to form a set of syllogism as the following:

Principle 1: Moses is a man. [known by sensation]

Principle 2: Moses is one upon which the Scripture is revealed. [known by the adversary’s own admission]

Conclusion 1: Some man has had sent down upon him the Scripture. [proposition necessitated by the two principles]

Conclusion 2: Your claim that God does not reveal any book to any man is wrong. (*Qistās*, trans. McCarthy, p 257)

Balance of Opposition.” The first three balances are simple since the points extracted from the verses concerned are simple. They constitute three different types of categorical syllogism as introduced by Aristotle. The other two balances look rather complicated and they are similar to Aristotle's conjunctive conditional syllogism and disjunctive conditional syllogism.

In *Qistās*, similar with what he had done in *Mishkāt* to promote the importance of symbolism, al-Ghazzālī had once again emphasized that those balances as well, had been used by the Prophet Ibrāhīm (p.b.u.h.) in several situations. He suggested different places where the use of the different balances are deemed suitable and believed that those balances serve as a measure to determine apodictic proof, thus it is essential in *da'wah* or rhetorical religious call and in knowledge at large since it provides some rules for demonstrative discourse.

The explanation in *Qistas* clearly indicates to us that al-Ghazzālī had grasped the Qur'ānic message in a logical form. Thus, there is a possible relation between linguistic and logic. But al-Ghazzālī's notion of logic here is the logic of Aristotle or specifically Aristotelian syllogism which relevance and significance are still debatable. Do we really need to have two premises as suggested by Aristotle in order to reach a conclusion? To which extent is this syllogism applicable as a tool to determine an apodictic proof?

Limits of *Ta'wīl* according to Al-Ghazzālī

This subtopic shall investigate the limits outlined by al-Ghazzālī in applying *ta'wīl*. It will cover four points, i.e. first, the degrees of existence; second, rules of interpretation; third, rules of determining apodictic proof and fourth, factors of differences in employing *ta'wīl*. The first point shall help us understand the philosophical ideas of al-Ghazzālī concerning existence and where *ta'wīl* can and cannot be made. The second point comprises of two ideas. It firstly highlights to us what should, can and cannot be done in the process of *ta'wīl* and secondly states the ethics in facing the difference of opinions in understanding the verse. Next, the third point, which is the elaboration of the first ideas of the second point, will briefly state the balances or measure to determine sound evidence. Finally, the fourth point, which is related to the second idea

of the second point concerning ethics of disagreement, will list down what the causes of difference of opinions among interpreters of different sects are.

a) Degrees of existence

For al-Ghazzālī, existence can be categorized into five degrees:¹

1. Essential existence (*al-wujūd al-dhātī*)

This is existence outside the realm of our intellect and sensation, but sensation and intellect captured from it an image (*ṣūra*) as perception.² This existence should be taken according to its obvious meaning. In other words, it cannot be put to *ta'wīl*.³ Examples of this degree are heavens, earth, plants, and animals. The Throne and the Chair⁴ are also included in this degree of existence.

2. Sensible existence (*al-wujūd al-hissī*)

It is something which is imaged in the visual power of the eye (as an example of the senses) and which has no existence outside the eye. Example for this is what a dreamer or a waking sick man sees. This includes what Prophets (p.b.u.t.) and Saints see in dreams, provided that they were healthy men and to some extent they even have the visual power related to this degree when they are awake as for the case of appearance of the angel to the Prophet.⁵ The means of this image are *wahy* (revelation) and *ilhām* (inspiration), which are given to a man due to his purity state of heart. The saying of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) which can demonstrate this degree of existence is: "The Garden was shown to me in the breadth of this wall." This saying indicates the impossibility of the large to contain in the small.

¹ The following points and elaboration are summary made based on al-Ghazzālī's ideas in *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqah*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā, Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.p., 1961, pp 175-178. –hereafter cited as *Fayṣal-* (McCarthy, *Deliverance from Error: an Annotated Translation of Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl and other relevant works of Al-Ghazālī*, Fons Vitae, Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data, U.S.A., 1980s, pp 130-131.-hereafter cited as McCarthy-)

² Al-Ghazzālī, *Fayṣal*, p 176. (McCarthy, p 131.)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p 179.(McCarthy, p 133.)

⁵ Dr Sulaymān Dunyā commented that al-Ghazzālī may have made a mistake in giving such example since the angel's existence is real outside the eyes, although its image may differ from one time to another. (*Fayṣal*, pp 176-177.)

Therefore, it applies that the Garden itself did not move to the wall, but its image was represented to sensation on the wall, so that it was as though a person were seeing it.¹

3. Imaginative existence (*al-wujūd al-khayālī*)

It refers to the image of sensible objects which are actually absent from our senses at the time the objects are described.² Example for this is one can imagine the shape of an elephant although it is not present in front of his eyes or his eyes are shut. The saying of Prophet Muḥammad (p.b.u.h.) which exemplifies this degree is: "It was as though I were looking at Yūnus the son of Mattā, wearing two cotton cloaks, answering and the mountains replying to him, and God Most High saying to him: Here I am [at your service -*labbayka*] O Yūnus!" – This is only a representation of image in the Prophet's imagination, because the occurrence of this event took place before the life of Prophet Muḥammad and the event did not exist when Prophet Muḥammad was speaking.³

4. Mental existence (*al-wujūd al-ʿaqlī*)

It refers to a thing with spirit (*rūḥ*), a reality (*ḥaqīqah*: essence) and a meaning (*maʿnā*). The intellect requires its meaning without its image in the imagination, in the senses or in the real existence.⁴ For example, the word "hand" has a sensible and imaginable form, it also has a meaning, i.e. "the power to strike". This is the mental hand.⁵

Another example for the mental existence is the word "pen". It has an image, but its meaning is "that by which cognitions are written". This is what the mind receives without being associated with the material form (such as pen made of wood or cane).⁶

5. Analogical existence (*al-wujūd al-shibhī*)

It is when an object does not exist in its form, in its essential meaning, or externally, or in the sense, or in the imagination, or in the

¹ Al-Ghazzālī, *Fayṣal*, pp 179-180. (McCarthy, p 132.)

² Al-Ghazzālī, *Fayṣal*, p 177. (McCarthy, p 131)

³ Ibid., p 180. (McCarthy, p 131.)

⁴ Ibid., p 178. (McCarthy, p 131.)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. (with alterations)

mind but the object resembles another in one of its properties and one of its qualities.¹ The examples for this degree are The Lord's attributes that are understood through their meanings (*ṣifāt ma' nawīyah*) like anger, yearning joy and pleasure.²

The degrees of existence outlined by al-Ghazzālī are the realm of *ta'wīl*. Obviously, the first degree of existence, when mentioned in the Qur'ān, cannot be put to *ta'wīl* and ought to be understood in its literal meaning.³

The degrees proposed by al-Ghazzālī are loose and sometimes overlapping. There is no specific guideline to determine whether an object belongs to a certain degree and not to the other. For instance, the examples stated in the fourth degree -mental existence (*al-wujūd al-'aqlī*)- can be categorized under the first degree of essential existence (*al-wujūd al-dhātī*) as well. This may happen because something with spirit, reality and meaning is also the one which exists outside our intellect and sensation. Besides, as for the second degree of existence, we do not know the real criteria of a saint, thus, anybody can simply claim that he is one and this may cause problematic result.

b) The rules of interpretation

Al-Ghazzālī had set some rules of interpretation as follow:

1. An interpreter who had decided that there is no apodictic proof that an utterance should be understood in its literal sense should follow the sequence of the degrees in ascending manner beginning from the sensible existence (*al-wujūd al-ḥissī*) to analogical existence (*al-wujūd al-shibhī*). Only if the lower degree does not match with the utterance that he is allowed to move to the next degree subsequently. He cannot skip in his attempt to suit the utterance with the desired meaning in each of the degrees.⁴
2. One cannot turn from one degree to the upper degree except because there is an apodictic demonstration.⁵

¹ Al-Ghazzālī, *Faysal*, 178. (McCarthy, p 131.)

² Ibid., p 183. (McCarthy, p 133.)

³ Ibid., pp 179 and 184. (McCarthy, p 134.)

⁴ Al-Ghazzālī, *Faysal*, p 187. (McCarthy, p 135.)

⁵ Ibid.

3. There is no need to burden one self in interpreting everything since he is not obliged to do so and the Most Perfect in knowledge is only the Creator.¹
4. There is supposed to be no contradiction between reason and revelation. Al-Ghazzālī emphasized the consistency between them when he asserted, “Originally, the evidence of reason does not lie. Verily reason does not lie. If it lies, it may possibly deny the affirmation of *sharaʿ*, since through it we know the *sharaʿ*.”
5. Do not determine which the best interpretation in the case is, where there are so many probabilities in the explanation. If determination is done, it may have possibly been based on mere conjecture, thus it is ignorance.²
6. One should be aware about two positions of people when he deals with the text:
 - i) Masses of men
To deal with them is like the way ‘Umar (r.a.) had dealt with a person who asked him about the conflicting verses of the Qurʾān, and the way al-Imām Mālik dealt about His seating on the Throne. Both of them had immediately shut the door to questioning. Al-Ghazzālī suggested that we should deal with them by entirely avoiding from changing the literal meanings, restraining from engaging in discussion and inquiry and following what is ambiguous in the Qurʾān and the Sunnah.
 - ii) Men of speculation, whose traditional beliefs have been troubled.
It is necessary to forsake the literal meaning because of the necessity imposed by decisive apodictic proof. Differences may arise in the making of *taʾwīl* for this group of people but there should be an agreed rule for apodictic proof acknowledged by them all.
7. Not to charge another with unbelief if two parties differ or one of them may have committed a mistake in determining an apodictic proof, but it is permissible to call him “one who astray” or “an innovator”.³

¹ Al-Ghazzālī, *Majmūʿat al-Rasāʾil: Qānūn al-Taʾwīl*, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, Bayrūt, 1994, pp 126-127. (Hereafter cited as *Qānūn*)

² Ibid., pp 127-128.

³ Al-Ghazzālī, *Qānūn*, pp 127-128.

c) The rules of determining an apodictic proof

While applying *ta'wīl*, in order to forsake a literal meaning of the term stated in the text (first meaning) and proceed for another meaning (second meaning) which opposes or differs with the literal meaning, one should be certain that there is a strong evidence that demonstrate the usage of the second meaning in the same context of the usage of the outward term.

In order to determine the strength of this evidence, al-Ghazzālī had suggested five balances or measures. As discussed in the sample of al-Ghazzālī's linguistic-logic *ta'wīl*, his book entitled *Al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm* had stated five balances. The balances are the rules which al-Ghazzālī believed should be used to determine an apodictic or sound proof. Those balances, as stated before, are similar to syllogism that had been introduced in *Analytica Priora* of Aristotle.

In other words, al-Ghazzālī had suggested us to use syllogism to determine that the proof that stated a second meaning, which will replace the first meaning, is sound.

d) Factors of disagreement in approaching *ta'wīl*

Although rules to determine apodictic proof had been outlined, disagreement still prevails especially among interpreters of different sects. Al-Ghazzālī had mentioned the causes of the disagreement and it can be summarized as follow:

1. The inability to grasp all the conditions mentioned in *Al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm* completely.
2. Abandonment and ignorance of the conditions stated in *Qisṭās*, therefore they simply resort to the use of common sense.
3. The difference in cognitions, which serve as the premises of the apodictic proofs. According to al-Ghazzālī, cognitions are some empirical, but some other are based on impeccable transmission and some are of other kinds. People also differ in determining impeccable transmissions.
4. Mixing up judgements of the imagination with those of reason.
5. Mistaking sayings, which are accepted and esteemed for analytical judgements and primary truths.¹

¹ *Fayṣal*, pp 188-189. (McCarthy pp 136-137.)

Some Analysis on Al-Ghazzālī's Features and Limits of *Ta'wīl*

One may be amazed on the first sight with the seemingly genius thought of al-Ghazzālī when one reads his exposition to the Qur'ān and observes his logic ideas being extracted from it. Nevertheless, upon close examination of his ideas and exposure to Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, one may realize that al-Ghazzālī's ideas are but a careful revision of Western philosophy and an attempt of Islamicizing the elements of Western philosophy in the framework of philosophy.

We learn from the features of al-Ghazzālī's *ta'wīl* that his approach to the Qur'ān is based upon Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, or to put it in other words, he based his *ta'wīl* upon external knowledge, which is not founded within Islamic sciences, which later becomes the auxiliary science to understand the Qur'ān.

Analyzing the limits of *ta'wīl* set by al-Ghazzālī, his ideas promote a sense of tolerance to ideas alien to Islamic traditions and to various school of thoughts in Islām itself. He allows the penetration of Western philosophy and for him, there is no harm to consider knowledge and tools of thinking of others' cultures as long as we can benefit from them. He also acknowledged different versions of *ta'wīl* made by various Islamic sects. Generally, his ideas in this point are logical-philosophical. The degree of existence he proposed in order to identify the areas to exercise *ta'wīl* is somehow speculative, and redundancy can be traced in some places. The rules of interpretation that he outlined deserve credit since he recognized different styles to approach the Qur'ān by different Islamic sects, but simultaneously he managed to control and give a good guideline so that they do not exceed the limit of Islamic faith and conduct. In addition, while outlining the rules for interpretation, he did not ignore various levels of people in tendencies and intellectual capacity. Nevertheless, in discussing the rules to determine apodictic proof, he was not able to demonstrate the application of syllogism to *ta'wīl* in a concrete form, except to propose the idea separately by indulging in the explanation of syllogism. Finally, the factors of differences in employing *ta'wīl* that he stated show his good observation over the subject.

IMPLICATION OF AL-GHAZZĀLĪ'S VISION AND SOLUTIONS OF *TA'WĪL*

The concept of *ta'wīl* perceived by al-Ghazzālī conveyed to us that he had viewed *ta'wīl* in four different levels:

1. Linguistic
2. Logic
3. Epistemology
4. Ontology

The first two levels, i.e. linguistic and logic are related to the semantic dimension of *ta'wīl*. The last two levels are related to syntax dimension. In the semantic dimension of *ta'wīl*, al-Ghazzālī viewed that linguistic aspect of the Qur'ān conveys the meaning of the intended message to the reader and linguistic level should be taken simultaneously with logical level whereby critical thinking ought to be applied in understanding. This is because Qur'ānic verses are signs (*āyāt*) and the knowledge of signs is made out of the combination of linguistic and logic.

For al-Ghazzālī, understanding the Qur'ān should be done not in relation with other Qur'ānic verses but in light of the subject matter discussed itself. In other words, the Qur'ānic verses were not the main tool in the approach to explain other verse in focus. Although al-Ghazzālī did use some verses in his *ta'wīl*, they serve just as auxiliary to his philosophical and mystic approach. He had treated the traditions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) in the same manner as he treated the auxiliary verses in *ta'wīl*, i.e. they were never the main concern to understand a verse. The style of his *ta'wīl* was simply to focus on the subject matter of a verse and explain its major concern. He did not bother to explain word by word but he rather translated the meaning of the verse into the language of philosophy and mystics.¹

¹ This was clearly done in his *Mishkāt* like the following quote:

“No other attains so much as to the degree of co-existence, or of sequent existence, nay existence at all, except from the Aspect that accompanies Him. All existence is, exclusively, His Aspect. Now, it is impossible that He should be “greater” than His own Aspect. The meaning is rather that He is too absolutely Great to be called Greater, or Most Great.....”

“Nay, when the facts are realized, intelligence is revealed as transcending the very idea of “far” and “near”, which occur between material bodies; these compass not the precincts of its holiness, for it is a pattern or sample of the attributes of Allah. Now the sample must commensurate with the original, even though it does not rise to the degree of equality with it”.

Thus, al-Ghazzālī had treated the Qur'ān as a simple vehicle for other knowledge and sciences, in this case for philosophy and mystics. Hence, he treated revelation as a simple vehicle for reason.

The formulation that al-Ghazzālī had contributed to Islamic Thought is that religion which, among others, consists of theology (*kalām*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and which is considered the exterior (*zāhir*) form of knowledge is bridged by reason which, among others, consists of philosophy and mystics and which is considered the interior (*bāṭin*) form of knowledge. In religion, the underlying matter of theology (*kalām*) is perceived as a mere resemblance of reason, not the reason per say, while the underlying matter of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is a mere resemblance of intuition, not intuition per say. On the other hand, in reason, the underlying matter of philosophy is reason itself and the underlying matter for mystic is the intuition itself. These matters are needed as tools to bring about the understanding of the components in religion and the message of revelation. This is why the manifestation of religion should be bridged by reason through interpretation. Interpretation is thus, in al-Ghazzālī's approach, an enterprise for bridging the gaps between religion and reason.

Conclusion

Al-Ghazzālī allowed the employment of *ta'wīl* in his exposition of the verses in the Qur'ān. In fact, his *ta'wīl* is mystic-philosophical in nature whereby he had presented Platonic Symbolism on one hand and the Aristotelian Logic on the other. His perception that philosophy is a tool to approach the Qur'ān and that philosophy is only exclusively to be used for and by people of high level of intellect imply that some kind of understanding of the Qur'ān is exclusively for certain group of people. He thought that the relationship between the Qur'ān and ordinary language is synonymic. This implies that the language in the Qur'ān should be taken analogically, in contradistinction with the relationship between the scientific discourse and its object. Finally, the hidden implication of al-Ghazzālī's *ta'wīl* is revelation is only a vehicle for reason. The question is... to which extent this idea benefits the *ummah*? Let us together ponder.

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