

## THE NOTION OF ILLUMINATION IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GHAZALI'S MISHKĀT AL-ANWĀR

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### ABSTRACT

*Illumination or knowledge through light is a central theme of medieval philosophy, especially in the Islamic tradition. This special kind of knowledge finds its source in the Qur'anic Verse of Light. Light became a major theme of Sufism and Islamic philosophy, the former being more closely to the Qur'anic source and the latter standing in the field of philosophy. In his Mishkāt al-anwār, the Niche of Lights, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali attempts to expose the meaning of light and knowledge through light. The bridging figure of the "Proof of Islam" opens an original perspective on the matter: through combination of theory and through embedding the knowledge in Sufi practices. Ghazali's perspective centers on the character of knowledge accessible through illumination that ultimately leads to an awareness of transcendence.*

**Key Words:** Illumination, Ghazali, Knowledge, Light, Sufi

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### INTRODUCTION

Illumination, or knowledge bestowed by an experience of light – a central notion of the Islamic late medieval philosophy – is notoriously difficult to grasp. In a modern perspective, illumination is an idea rather than a concept and it is usually surrounded by a fog of mysticism. It is difficult to approach the substance of the concept without plunging into complex cosmological ideas and symbolic constructions of writers inhabiting the late Islamic Platonic landscape that was situated between Islamic mysticism and Greek philosophy. The most intriguing aspect of the topic of illumination consists in the alliance between rational and "experiential" thought.

One of the last works of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Mishkāt al-anwār*, the Niche of Lights, attempts to expose the meaning of light and knowledge through light. The bridging figure of the "Proof of Islam" opens an original perspective on the matter. Ghazali knew the rationalist tradition and Islamic law. He was, at the same time a practitioner of Sufism. Ghazali combines in an original and accessible way a theoretical and practical insight into what is knowledge by light.

After setting the general context of the notion of illumination in Islamic thought and after explaining the contents of *Mishkāt al-anwār*, I will try to elucidate which Ghazali's perspective on the theme of light is original.

### 1. LIGHT AND THE PROBLEM OF ILLUMINATION

Knowledge as it is usually understood has a form of a proposition that we consider true for two principal reasons: it follows logically from propositions that we have established as true or it is considered true by a reliable source or authority (i.e., a scientific textbook, a result established intersubjectively by a standardized

procedure, etc.). In his autobiography, Ghazali adds to “reason” and “tradition” a third source of knowledge, an inner certainty:

“Science is verification by proof; experience or savouring is the intimate knowledge of ecstasy; faith, founded on conjecture, is the acceptance of oral testimony and the evidence of those who have experienced.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Munqidh* does not elaborate on the source of certainty in any other way than saying that it is a light of God and that it comes from the practice of piety and Sufi ways of **asceticism** and worship. Light “cast” in his bosom is clearly more than a way of speaking as it ends his profound and troubling doubts in man’s rational faculty. His proto-Cartesian methodical doubt does not find solution in a principle of reason but in his “heart” illuminated. Light as a way to knowledge by illumination or tasting becomes a full-fledged epistemic notion in Ghazali’s other texts, mainly in the *Ihyā* and the *Mishkāt*.

While Ghazali mentions light as the ultimate source of knowledge in a number of works (*Mizān al-a’mal*, *Munqidh*, *Faysal al-tafrīqa* and others), he rarely explains in a circumscribed text what light stands for and what is the nature of the knowledge it brings. There is a good reason. As he explains in the preface of *Ihyā*, knowledge acquired by reason and from tradition, that is, the discursive sciences, may well be subject of a book. In contrast, knowledge acquired by this special insight, by some kind of direct experience, is a different matter that may not be disclosed or even put to words.

Such a setting lends to confusion. We can assume it refers to an inner experience with a mystical dimension to it. In modern words, it may be the Jamesian non-discursive and therefore unspeakable, fleeting experience of certainty. Ghazali himself calls it a “state” (*hāl*) in the *Munqidh* and explains that he has experienced it only a few times in his life, thanks to Sufi exercises and seclusion. So if this experience is a sort of sensation, why should it be called knowledge?

The answer Ghazali gives is grounded in a larger context of Islamic thought. Light refers sometimes to a cosmological principle or at least to something that has to do with our own being. Further, the nature of Ghazalian illuminative “knowledge” is also a qualified concept. Before an analysis, it is useful to give a brief description of the light topos, going from more general to more specific. Light first (a), stands for more than a metaphor of understanding, it is a topic shared by theoretical, philosophical disciplines and religious, mostly Sufi thought. Its anchor in Islamic thought is (b) the Qur’anic verse of Light. Ghazali has most directly elaborated this material in his *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (c).

### a. LIGHT AND ENLIGHTENMENT

The theme of light, while being characteristic of the Islamic intellectual tradition, remains relatively unexplored. The main difficulty is the fact that it shares a number of assumptions with Sufism. Mystical texts do not limit themselves, when it comes

<sup>1</sup> My translation from: Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, ed. Dr. Abā al-'Ala 'Afifī (Kāhira, Dar al-qawmīja lil-taba wa'n-našr, 1964).

to means of expression, to arguments, but also use images, symbols and models of behavior. They accompany descriptions with an emphasis on imagination and on ascetic praxis, that is, on those aspects of thinking that cannot be fully expressed through a written text. Along comes the fact that the topos of enlightenment operates with a specific conception of knowledge, which goes beyond the usage of reason, and enters the uncertain ground of symbols and analogies, internal experience and "spiritual" reality. These are the main reasons why "enlightenment" in principle is not easily accessible to historians of thought.

Light is a frequent motif in Sufi and philosophical texts. It essentially combines the motive of creation and the motive of knowledge. It is a subject of both religious and philosophical thought. Starting with the description of creation in Genesis, light is a leading theme in biblical monotheism. A central notion in Islamic Neo-Platonism, light is a principle of both epistemic and cosmological order. It is also a major Qur'anic theme. Light and enlightenment lead to a special, a "higher" form of divine knowledge, religious instruction and guidance. In Sufism, light stands for a certain type of knowledge. The essential feature of Islamic mystical epistemology is that light and enlightenment are not just metaphors, but a principle and a synonym of knowledge. Knowledge through light, or, more precisely, "disclosure", is a name for a specific psychological process, mental condition, as well as moral and religious status.

Since the modern era, Europeans mean by "enlightenment" something else entirely: a project of critical exploration and rational reconstruction of the assumptions of the theoretical and practical sciences, especially in the field of religious and cosmological dogmas. In this historical period, the "light" of reason is a metaphor in which intellectual reflection lifts the "darkness" of medieval prejudices.

The antiquity and the Middle Ages, however, had a completely different concept of enlightenment and reserved it a firm place in the field of philosophical and religious knowledge. The topos of knowledge by divine enlightenment begins in Greek antiquity, then develops itself the tradition of Platonic commentators and Neo-Platonism and later in medieval Arab, Jewish and Latin philosophy.

Ancient foundations of the theory of enlightenment are found in the warnings of Socrates' demon. For Plato, truth and goodness illuminate the soul by knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The Aristotelian idea of separate, unmoving intelligence guides the activities of the human mind. St. Augustine, the greatest supporter of the Christian theory of enlightenment, understands divine light as a source of knowledge of its own: The light of the Lord kindles the lamp of man and enlightens him with the truth. Platonic and neo-Platonic influences are evident in his Confessions. Light is a source of existential orientation which comes to dispel the confusions of a "previous life in the dark." It is also a source of grace through which the "constant light" brings power and salvation.<sup>3</sup> Augustine's light is therefore a spiritual principle rather than an epistemic concept.

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Platon, *Republic*, 508–509

<sup>3</sup> cf. Augustín, *Vyznání*, kap. 15

In the Latin Middle Ages, knowledge by enlightenment drew either on the Augustinian theory of intuitive cognition divine enlightenment (*Illuminatio*) or was modified and incorporated to a theology of Aristotelian tradition. The first approach was advocated by the Franciscans Grosseteste (c. 1168-1253) and Bonaventure (c. 1217-1274). For them, illumination is a process of sharing intangible truths between the divine and the human intellects. Based on a neo-Platonic emanation cosmology, such knowledge is embedded in a cosmological, divine principle. The second approach was worked out by Thomas Aquinas. He rid "illumination" of its cosmological dimension and considered human participation in knowledge a natural human activity. The Dominican epistemology thus deprived knowledge of its extraordinary – that is of its divine – dimension. Since Aquinas, "illumination" no longer referred necessarily to a special grace or a cosmological but moved to a metaphorical realm.

In contrast, the symbolism of light and "light of knowledge" was a major part of Islamic thought and Eastern *topoi* in general. The concept of light in Islamic thought had two main sources, Hellenism and the Qur'an. Light took on two forms, cosmological and mystical, that combined in different ways over time.

Metaphysics of lights developed in parallel among Eastern Christians and the mystics of the early Muslim empire. In particular, the Iraqi bishop and mystic Isaac of Nineveh (c. 640-700) and the Syrian polymath John of Damascus (c. 676-749) identified light with knowledge. Later, Neo-Platonic philosophy became the breeding ground of Islamic thought in which light figured both as a cosmological as well as an epistemic principle. First Neo-Platonic Islamic philosophers associated light with the cosmological principle of active intellect more or less metaphorically, encouraged by Greek syncretic Neo-Platonic commentaries of Aristotle. Aristotle's analogy of light and intellect has added significance to this link between knowledge and light far beyond the meaning in the original Aristotelian text in his *Book of the Soul*. This short but famous passage has developed into a major theme and trope of Islamic Neo-Platonism. Textual basis for this tendency in Islamic philosophy was the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, a paraphrase of Plotin's *Enneads* that equate the first cause, Plotin's One, with light.<sup>4</sup>

Enlightenment has also become an integral part of the influential philosophising heterodox doctrines. A form of popular Neo-Platonism spread widely especially among groups of Ismaili Shiites. This rich and varied tradition of thought created its own way of harmonizing philosophy and Islam, based on Neo-Platonic esoteric cosmology and Shiite doctrine. Fatimid theologians considered the first intellect a source of all light, a light being a spiritual principle of the soul and that which initiated neophytes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lenn E. Goodman, *Knowledge and Reality in Islamic Philosophy*, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Companion of Asian philosophy, (Routledge 2000), s. 881; Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect; Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect*, (Oxford 1992), 18–2.

<sup>5</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, (Cambridge, 1992), 241–296.

The first theorists of mystical knowledge were Sufis. Basing themselves on Qur'anic verses, Hallāj Mansour al-Hakim and al-Tirmidhi linked light and knowledge. Later in, the tradition of Wisdom (*hikma*) and Shiite theosophy, light was equated with the active intellect.

Finally, philosophically minded religious thinkers, from Avicenna (980-1037) to Mulla Sadra Shirazi (1571-1641), had taken the enlightenment topos out of Sufi compendia and made it a subject of philosophy or wisdom (*hikma*) par excellence. This synthetic tradition developed mainly among the Persians within the school of "enlightenment" (*ishrāq*). Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi al-Maqtul (1155-1191) is considered its founder, and Mulla Sadra its main author. For *ishrāq* theoreticians light is a principle of all being and knowledge. It is an ontological given, individually accessible to all those who are subjected to a practice of thinking and acting.

Some date the beginnings of this eastern enlightenment in Avicenna's lost text called Eastern science or logic (*al-mantiq al-mašriqijīn*),<sup>6</sup> others only from Suhrawardi's enlightenment Wisdom (*hikmat al-ishrāq*). Yet in between those two works there is yet another text, al-Ghazali's commentary on Light Verse (*Mishkāt al-anwār*).

### b. THE VERSE OF LIGHT

Ghazali's Niche is a long commentary on the famous Verse of Light (*āyat al-nūr*) from the Qur'anic Sura of Light (*Sūrat an-nūr*, Q 24:35), which makes a parallel between the light of God and knowledge:

*"Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star lit from a blessed olive tree, neither Eastern nor Western, whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it. Light upon light. Allah guides to His Light whomever He wishes. Allah draws parables for mankind and Allah has knowledge of all things."*

The commentary of the Verse is followed by a commentary of a thematically close *Hadith*.

The Verse of Light is located in the first third of the Sura of Light from the later, Medina period. The theme of light occurs frequently in the Quran.<sup>7</sup> The Sura of Light differs, however, from other references to light by its abstract content. It is the only passage in the Qur'anic text that explicitly and directly compares God to light. The Qur'anic text combines otherwise light and God only through adjectival

<sup>6</sup> Avicenna's lost text on Eastern wisdom did, according to the conviction of some of his followers, include an esoteric doctrine. The idea that Ibn Sina had an "*ishraqi*" esoteric oriental philosophy was advanced recently for instance by Henry Corbin, *The History of Islamic Philosophy*, 206, and Parviz Morewedge in *The Mystical Philosophy of Avicenna*, (Global Publications, 2001). The idea that the lost text did probably not contain any esoteric doctrine, but rather ideas from the Muslim East, was defended by Prof. Dimitri Gutas.

<sup>7</sup> The word light (*nur*) occurs 43 times, the adjective illuminating (*munir*) 4 times.

binding.<sup>8</sup> Another word for light (*diya*) is used as the light of the sun, the revelation, the Day of Resurrection, fire, lamps. If it is possible to interpret these expressions metaphorically, it is not the case for the Light verse. For this uniqueness the passage gave rise to a number of Sufi metaphysical commentaries.<sup>9</sup>

The comparison of God's light to an illuminating lamp figured as an influential image in Islamic history. The comparison was primarily understood as an analogy to two attributes of God, namely Knowing (*al-ʿālim*) and Guiding (*al-hādī*). According to classical theologians the Verse refers to God's instruction and guidance. The classical commentator Tabari understood the Verse, as summarized Böwering, roughly as follows: "God leads as a light the inhabitants of earth and heavens. He rules the world, which he illuminates during the day, and likewise enlightens the hearts of believers. Niche in the wall is the chest of man; the blessed tree stands in the centre of the world, in Jerusalem, like the righteous believer, the oil is Muhammad's revelation and the "light upon light" is a Muhammad's revelation, following on Abraham's revelations."<sup>10</sup>

With the development of Islamic thought, the Verse of Light was dealt with by leading figures of the Islamic intellectual tradition: commentators, philosophers of various schools (Avicenna and Mulla Sadra) theologians (al-Ghazali and Fakhri ud-Din Razi) and mystics (Ibn ʿArabi and Jalal ud-Din Rumi). The theoreticians did not stop at the simple interpretation of light as guidance, but explored the analogy with light, the essence of light and of human knowledge.

For the first Sufi theorists in Baghdad and for later systematic Sufi writers, the light of knowledge and the light of God figured as a central theme: for some, light was a source of spiritual guidance, others saw in the light the principle of creation. The Sufi theorist of reason Al-Muhasibi (d. 857) called human reason (*ʿaql*) light.<sup>11</sup> For Junayd (d. 910), knowledge of God was possible by a special way of knowing (*maʿrifā*) through divine enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> The Sufis elaborated greatly on the famous phrase from Verses of Light: "light upon light". For Abu'l Husseïn al-Nuri (d. 907-8), "light upon light" expressed the intimate knowledge of God through the work of His light in the human heart. According to Hakim al-Tirmidhi (d. 905/10), God illuminates human heart by the light of higher spheres and bestows upon it knowledge of God (*maʿrifā*). Hallāj turned to God as to the source of light and called God "the light of lights." In his commentary to the verse of light Qushayri (d. 1074) described mystical experience in the terms "light of disclosure" and "light of knowing".<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The light of the Lord (Q 39:22, 69), the light of God (Q 9:32, 61:8) and light from God (Q 5:15). Light from God, as well as the entire Qur'an, provide the right religious knowledge [31:20-19], and faith [66:8].

<sup>9</sup> Even if the term "light of lights" (*nur al-anwār*), often used in the literature and widely used in *ishraq*, does not occur in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Böwering, "The Light Verse. Text and Sūfī Interpretation", *Festschrift fuer Franz Rosenthal, Oriens* 36 (2001): 116–117.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2007), 155.

<sup>12</sup> A.H. Abdel-Kader: *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd*, (London 1962), 101.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism The Formative Period*, (Edinburgh University Press 2007), 15.

The first systematic meditation of the comparison of God to light is ascribed to the early Islamic Qur'an commentator and Sufi, Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896). Sahl al-Tustari devoted part of his Qur'anic commentaries (*Tafsir al-Tustari*) to the topic of light, especially to the great Sufi theme, the Muhammadan light (*nur muhammadi*). This concept of light makes it precede creation and prophecy. Tustari further connects the spiritual part of the human soul with light. The soul receives "light of delicate substance" through remembrance (*dhikr*) of God.<sup>14</sup>

More sober religious theorists, influenced by Greek logic and analysis of language, later rejected literal readings of the verse and any direct comparison of God to light, and insisted on the necessity to interpret the verse. The Khorassanian commentator and theologian Zamakhshari (d. 1144) refused to ascribe any physical attribute of God. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149-1210) also objected the light metaphysics and limited himself to the interpretation of the verse in the sense of God's guidance. In his commentary on the Qur'an Keys to hidden (*al-mafatih al-ghaib*), Razi mentioned Ghazali's *Mishkāt* and elaborated the first and third chapters.<sup>15</sup> In the 14th century, eventually the influential traditionalist theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) rejected any interpretation of the verse as such. The meaning of the verse was, according to him, received by the first Muslims directly and without interpretation, and so it should remain.<sup>16</sup>

Metaphysical commentary on the Verse of Light received its main impetus from Neo-Platonic speculation. The image of a lamp in a niche with fire glowing behind glass and burning with wood and oil was seen as a metaphor for human soul and its tool of knowledge. The human psyche contained a special substance that kindles an external stimulus, illuminates the world around and forwards the original light on. The Qur'anic verse then served as evidence that man can know and should know through divine light, and that some people, especially the prophets, are capable of supreme knowledge. The extraordinary allegory of the Light Verse is further remarkable by the fact that it describes itself as a metaphor and directly calls for a closer interpretation of its elements, that is, to the explanation of human capacity for knowledge and of its modalities. It invites also to explore the very nature of the Qur'anic parables, the role of analogies and images as guides for learning.

A philosophical interpretation of this allegory was taken up by Avicenna in the Book of Directions and Warnings (*Kitab al-isharat wa t-tanbihat*). In accordance with the reception of the Aristotelian psychology in al-Kindi and al-Farabi, Avicenna distinguishes different types and levels of intellects, those natural abilities of the human spirit seen as malleable by the cosmological principle of active intellect. He puts the philosophical scheme of the psychological process of knowledge into a direct correspondence with the symbols of the Light Verse (niche, olive, oil, glass). Hence, he creates a direct parallel between the Qur'anic text,

<sup>14</sup> G. Böwering, *The Light Verse: Qur'anic Text and Sufi Interpretation*, *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, art. Nūr, p. 995.

<sup>15</sup> Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, 160; Razi's mention of this last part of *Mishkāt* later became one of the proofs of its authenticity.

<sup>16</sup> Kristin Zahra Sand (2006), 113.



philosophical psychology and cosmology; the Qur'anic text being a symbolic exemplification of the truth known and intelligible above all to philosophers.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. GHAZALI'S NICHE OF LIGHT

The first separate treatise on the Verse of Light comes from Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. His *Niche of Light*<sup>18</sup> is conceived as a free commentary of the Qur'anic passage. Ghazali based himself on the brief passage to present a comprehensive study on ontology and metaphysics and to develop a theory of knowledge based on the central theme of light and illumination. His *Mishkāt* is also the only theoretical Sufi text in which Ghazali pronounces himself directly on the higher way of knowing. Ghazali views the Qur'anic theme in both a Sufi and a philosophical perspective on what is knowledge and religion. It is written as an introduction to Islamic spirituality and as an approach to the idea of transcendence of God, intended for an asking student.

Ghazali's *Niche of Lights* is divided into three chapters. The first two chapters elaborate themes of the Light Verse, while the third, the shortest chapter, deals with the Hadith on veil: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness, and if it is picked up, the glory of his face would have burned all of whom caught his look."

### a. First Chapter: The Metaphor of Light and the Duality of Worlds

The first and longest chapter develops the theme at the beginning of the verse: "God is the light of the heavens and the earth" and is dedicated to explaining gradually higher and more real meanings of the word light.

Ghazali defines light as what is seen and reveals other things. According to Ghazali, there are three kinds of things in relation to the light: dark matter, which does not reveal itself; lights that are visible and shining, and lights that make appear and reveal other things. Throughout the chapter, the text argues for a reversal of the conventional metaphor of light: physical light should not be taken as its basis and the abstract light as a transferred meaning, but it is rather that light fundamentally "that which reveals". This definition should be foundational to the meaning of light and consequently the tokens of that which it reveals should be regarded as dependent upon it. Also, the faculty to see (the sense of sight) seems more fundamental than the necessary, but not sufficient condition of physical seeing (physical light). Regarding sensory faculties in this logic, the senses generally (the sight especially) reveal little and in an unreliable way, while the more potent faculty of intellect reveals much more perfectly and reliably. The first chapter argues in detail for the superiority of intellectual knowledge over sensory knowledge. Intellectual ability is namely more penetrating than sight and leads to knowledge more general and stable.

The difference between those two ways of knowing is then used as an analogy to expose another, a third way of knowing. Even more than through reason, knowledge

<sup>17</sup> Mehdi Hairi Yazdi quotes Avicenna's text in: *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: The Knowledge by Presence*, (SUNY Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Hereafter quoted from: *The Niche for Lights*, tr. By David Buchman, (Brigham Young University Press 1998)



of grander realities is accessible through revelations of the Qur'an. It contains light, that is, illuminating analogies that are available to all who are able to rise, through them, above the material world and learn to perceive their inner meaning. The two kinds of vision, eye and intellect, external and internal, correspond to two worlds: the visible, physical on one side, and the immaterial, spiritual on the other. The first one is perceptible to the senses, while the second contains intangible and hidden meanings. Gaining (real) knowledge corresponds to rising above the lower, material sphere to attain the world of meanings. The visible world, the world in which meanings are symbolically reflected, then serves as a stepping stone on the rise to the higher world for those who know about the analogies of both worlds.

The end of the first chapter is devoted to the description of hierarchies within that higher world. There is a hierarchy of lights, light being shed from on high to lower beings and reflected by them to yet others. Their source is one, the first light which is with God. Through the ascension, one learns not only that the true light is spiritual, but also that true meaning of the word is God, nothing else. Light and being in this higher meaning are synonyms.

The highest knowledge to be attained through light consists in grasping God's unity (*tawhīd*) and dissolving one's self in it (*fanā*). This does not imply, however, any connection with the Divine, only the fading of a cognitive subjectivity in contemplation of the true nature of the world and of one's dependence on God. The first chapter concludes with a summary of the duality of worlds and religious destiny of man to rise to the spiritual perspective.

### **b. Second Chapter: Qur'anic Symbolism and Ascent to Knowledge**

The second chapter deals with the symbolic expression of the duality of worlds and the path to knowledge. It begins with general considerations about images and symbolism (*mīthāl, tamthīl*). Symbols, metaphors or images express the analogy between both worlds, visible and invisible. The intangible world is the real one of the two and it is possible to bring it into the world of senses only through hints. Analogies between the two worlds are ubiquitous, it is just necessary to be able to read them. Exploring the analogies in the visible world can lead one to rise up into the hidden world, just learning to read the hints helps navigate in the lower world.

Qur'an is the main source of images and analogies. Its symbolisms help to approach the hidden world, but also to understand the physical world, such as humanity and its destination in the world. As an example, the biblical topos of the creation of man in God's image means, according to Ghazali, that man is the image from the sum of all created forms, situated in the world, in God's handwriting. In short, humans take clue from the purposeful organization of their own being to understand the rest of creation (its purposefulness).

The aim of the study of symbolism is to ascend on the path from the images to their meanings. "*The visible world is a ladder to the world of heaven.*" The visible world reflects the higher world of light and knowing it helps to fulfil the human destiny. Man is destined to rise and dive into that higher world otherwise he remains a mere

animal. "From here rise the knowing ones (*'ārifūn*) from the lowlands to the heights of truth."

Ghazali discusses several examples of Qur'anic symbolism of bestowing prophetic knowledge (river bed, *qalam* - the pen, hand, sandals, crawling on knees). He insists on the need to separate the outer, literal meaning of images from what they refer to, and to reject both extremes of esoteric and literal reading.

An explanation of the symbolism of the Verse of Light comes only in the second part of the chapter, that is, after an introduction to symbolism in general. At first Ghazali describes a hierarchy of human psychological abilities (senses, imagination, intellect, prophetic spirit). The highest of those, prophetic spirit, is the sense allowing the knowledge by "tasting" (*dhawq*)<sup>19</sup>. Ghazali explains the meaning of tasting using several examples. Afterwards, he compares the images contained in the Verses to the aforementioned abilities and establishes a correspondence between them. In conclusion he stresses that the metaphor is fully comprehensible only to those who have reached a certain level of insight, and mentions various barriers to knowledge.

### c. Third Chapter: Hierarchy of Veils of Darkness and Light

The last and shortest chapter is an interpretation of the veil Hadith: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness, and if it is picked up, the glory of his face would have burned all of whom caught by his gaze."<sup>20</sup> The text deals with the concept of veil, that is, with barriers to knowledge. It defines the veil (*hijāb*) as that which impedes light and thus obscures knowledge by "darkness" of the senses, by ideas of a sensory content and by bad analogies of reason. According to the type of veils of darkness and also of light, Ghazali distinguishes forms of religious worship and divides them into three main groups and ten sub-groups.

People of obscurity who live in complete ignorance believe neither in God nor in the Last Judgement. They live only in the moment, deal only with bodily experiences, seek no higher purpose in life and certainly do not seek to understand the causes of things. So Ghazali describes them as people without any religion. In short, they are people with no morality and no higher goal in life. They include atheists and materialists, ignorants, seekers of pleasure, money, power and fame, as well as hypocrites who profess Islam in public, but do not believe in it.

The second group are people shrouded in darkness and in light, therefore obscured both by truth and mistakes, and mistakes of those are the biggest. They include human groups professing any religion, from the most primitive idolatry to Islamic theologians. Ghazali paints a picture of the rise of human perfection according to their particular concepts of divinity, from groups practising diverse forms of idolatry, through polytheism and dualism, up to various forms of monotheism. This progression directly refers to the Qur'anic episode in which Abraham gradually prayed to the moon, sun and stars. While he kept discovering that the perfection of one and than the other light sources was limited, he passed to a more stable one, and

<sup>19</sup> *Dhawq*, literally taste (one of the senses), it is a direct, personal, inner experience.

<sup>20</sup> The source of the hadith has not been established.

finally turned to worship the abstract cause of these lights. Similarly to the so-called Abrahamian ascent, Ghazali's first idolaters were limited by the type and excellence of their idols (things, people, fire, stars, sun, and then light itself). In the ranks of monotheists, many were still clouded (and dazzled) by anthropomorphic theological ideas about God (God's corporeality and other attributes).

The third and final section describes those who are wrapped only in light, those who are dazzled by the knowledge. Here Ghazali distinguishes three levels of *tawhīd*, depending on the extent to which the idea of Godhead is still material. The first are the followers of the concept of God as creator and mover of the world, second and third operate with more abstract cosmological concepts, which gradually reduce the concreteness of ideas about God's role in the ruling of the world. The top level is the last rank of those who have arrived (*al-wāsilūn*) and achieved knowledge devoid of any concepts, that is, the highest form, in which they themselves vanished.

### 3. GHAZALI BETWEEN PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL SCIENCES

Having briefly circumscribed the topic of knowledge by light in the context of medieval thought, in the Qur'anic text and in Ghazali's own commentary, we can now question the Ghazalian take on illumination and of its meaning and originality.

#### a. *Mishkāt's* Light Between Sufism and Philosophy

First, while reading a summary of the *Mishkāt*, it is striking to see that a book dedicated to the commentary of a Qur'anic verse treats very little of the Qur'an and exposes much more various theories, cosmological, psychological and symbolical. The *Mishkāt* is indeed a work in which a religious, a philosophical and a theological perspective on knowledge meet. Moreover, Ghazali undertakes a theoretical (philosophical) explanation of non-theoretical (experiential) knowledge.

Ghazali was a philosophically educated religious thinker, ascetic, a critic of philosophy and a reformer of Islam. According to his own rendition of his intellectual development he discovered Sufism well after his study of theology and philosophy. Even if it is probable that he was acquainted with Sufism in an early age and with philosophy later during his studies, he declared Sufism as the best way to attain knowledge at the end of his life. Beforehand, he had summarised philosophical thought (logic and metaphysics) as well as written a thorough theological defence of religion against a popular form of Neo-Platonism. By profession he was a teacher of Shafiite law and theology. Then, in his forties, he abandoned his high profile *madrassa* career and dedicated himself for at least two years to prayer, meditation and renunciation of anything worldly. In the description of his famous crisis that prompted him to change life, Ghazali uses the term of light as that which helped him heal. In the *Munqidh*, a sceptical crisis very similar to one later described by Descartes, is not resolved in an analytical or discursive way but by a healing light: "*At last, God the Almighty cured me of that disease and I recovered my health and mental equilibrium. Self-evident principles of reason again seemed acceptable; I trusted them and in them felt safe and certain. I reached this*

*point not by well-ordered or methodical argument, but by means of a light God the Almighty cast into my breast, which light is the key to most knowledge.*"<sup>21</sup>

Ghazali makes a clear distinction between discursive knowledge, based on proofs, and non-discursive effect of light that in a different way is also knowledge. "Anyone who believes that the "unveiling of truth is the fruit of well-ordered arguments belittles the immensity of divine mercy. God's messenger -- peace be upon him -- was asked about spiritual expansion and the sense in which this is found in the word of God; "Him who when God wishes to direct, He opens his breast to Islam," he said, "It is a light which God the Almighty throws upon the heart."<sup>22</sup>

Certitude (*yaqīn*) and knowledge (*ma'rifa*) are concepts associated with an experience called *mukāshafa* (disclosure) in which veils of all sorts are lifted; the "seeker" is exposed to light and experiences a direct insight into a religious theme that usually was the subject of prior meditation and exercises. The moment of disclosure occurs briefly and in a form of a state (*hāl*), a well known Sufi notion referring to an intense experience of certitude and recognition. Because disclosure occurs in states, it cannot be a matter of stable and exhausting description. The *Munqidh* says: "Nobody can attempt to express these states without failing miserably"<sup>23</sup>.

In most of his work, Ghazali generally refuses to explore the topic of light and disclosure in through more than hints. Certainly, light is a source of mystical rapture, yet in no dramatic or central way to the efforts to gain knowledge. In the *Munqidh*, Ghazali mentions that he has experienced disclosure a few times during his ascetic times, but later he was forced to return to his family and teaching and presumably lost the isolation and concentration required for it.

What exactly is the content of disclosure is impossible to express in words, therefore it is safer to describe the states in which it occurs. In Ghazali's texts, light is generally a name for that which quenches the thirst for knowledge, ends intellectual confusions, and brings certainty about orientation and spiritual bliss, even if it is not recurring rapture.

In the introduction to *Ihyā*, Ghazali distinguishes between *'ilm al-mukāshafa* (knowledge by disclosure) and *'ilm al-mu'āmala* (science of practical religion). According to him, only the latter can be made subject to discourse and teaching, as it describes practical ways and theoretical conditions to attain knowledge, its rationalisation, the know-how, and the practicalities of it. The fruit of this effort, the disclosure, remains unutterable, a matter of (experiential, individual) experience.

<sup>21</sup> Al Ghazali, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, translation of Muhammad Abulaylah, (Council for Research in Values & Philosophy, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The mystics keep vigils in which they even see angels and the spirits of the prophets. They hear their voices and have the benefit of their counselling. From these visions of images and symbols they ascend further to degrees of spirituality which cannot be described. Nobody can attempt to express these states of the soul without failing miserably. " *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, translation of Muhammad Abulaylah, (Council for Research in Values & Philosophy, 2002).

From those two works – both the official, public and completed face of later Ghazali’s work – it would seem that knowledge by light is indeed a mystical notion, well apart theology and philosophy. Manfred Frank, the crucial Ghazalian scholar, who explored the forgotten philosophical underpinning of his thought, notes about Ghazali: “Unable to achieve complete confidence in the truth of his speculative theories, he turned to Sufi asceticism and there found the means of confirming his belief and filling in the gap through the achievement of non-rational states of mind whose validity as foundation and verification of conceptual and theoretical positions he rationalized on the basis of a Neo-Platonic paradigm.”<sup>24</sup>

And yet, in the *Mishkāt*, Ghazali gives a quite clear and strikingly philosophical account of what light and disclosure are. Firstly, explaining the ascent by light to higher planes of truth, Ghazali speaks of effusion of lights in a language not dissimilar to the hierarchical Neo-Platonic cosmology he has so vehemently criticised in the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* as incompatible with Islam. Moreover, he clearly states that Light and God are the only thing there is, further deepening allusions to Neo-Platonic monism. Finally, speaking of utter dependence of created beings on God, his words are also strikingly reminiscent of Avicenna’s metaphysical distinction between necessary and contingent being, as noticed A. Treiger.<sup>25</sup> The case was made several times by modern Orientalists: *Mishkāt* appears to be a Neo-Platonic work or at least strongly influenced by the philosophy of Avicenna and al-Farabi.<sup>26</sup> In this perspective, “light”, along with “God”, could be reduced to cosmological concepts.

Were *Mishkāt* a philosophical, the whole theoretical work, its unity and Ghazali’s personality would have to be put to doubt. He has namely worked out a detailed criticism of philosophy as a school of thought that is using naturalist arguments to supplant religious ethics and deprive religion of its morally binding force. Philosophy for him is a necessary, natural and important discipline as long as it limits itself to explanations of the natural world; yet as a metaphysical system, even based on premises similar to religion (creation, omnipotence of God, etc.), philosophy makes religious doctrines into mere concepts while robbing them of their moral implications (for example, the moral reality of the Judgement Day).

The contrast with the pious reformer who purportedly “dealt a mortal blow” to Aristotelian philosophy in Islam and devoted his life to Sufism was so disturbing already in Ghazali’s life that many have sought to explain *Mishkāt* away or even to accuse Ghazali of hypocrisy. In the Muslim West, Ghazali came to represent a rationalist approach to theology. His Shafite School and his Asharite rationalism

<sup>24</sup> Frank, R. M., *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, (1986), xi, Preface

<sup>25</sup> A. Treiger, Monism and Monotheism in Al-Ghazali’s *Mishkat al Anwar*, *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, vol.9 (1), (2007): 8-15.

<sup>26</sup> Nearly a hundred years ago the Anglican missionary and orientalist W. Gairdner remarked on the third chapter of Niche: "Here we find a sort of Ghazalian philosophy of religion in brief." Hermann Landolt later dedicated an article on the *Religionswissenschaft* in the *Mishkāt*. The German notion of *Religionswissenschaft* - theory of religion or religion - indicates modern discipline whose object is the description and comparison of religious phenomena and which perceives religion as a historical phenomenon. Landolt deliberately used the anachronistic designation because he wanted to point out the surprising dimension of Ghazali text.

contrasted with the conservative Malikism of al-Andalus. During the Almoravid rule his books were burned, yet under the more rationalist Almohad dynasty, Ghazali was rehabilitated and studied again. Ibn Rushd criticised him for changing discourses according to his public and Ibn Tufayl considered him a philosopher and proponent of intellectual mysticism. Even in the Muslim East his philosophical leanings caused him accusations of crypto-philosophy that he had to fend off at the Seljuk court as forgeries. Finally, modern Orientalism construed him quite in the opposite way as a conservative anti-philosophical theologian, to a point where his authorship of the third chapter of the *Mishkāt* was doubted. As it was established later, a near contemporary witness, Fakhruddin Razi, ascertained Ghazali's authorship of the whole *Mishkāt*. Later in recent turn in Ghazalian studies a series of scholars have shown that Ghazali has indeed incorporated major part of Avicennian psychology and metaphysics into his own religious works.<sup>27</sup>

### b. Illumination and Transcendence

*Mishkāt's* light as a way to knowledge is most easily construed either as a theory or as a mystic rapture. And yet, the text itself makes the case of ineffability of the highest kind of knowledge very strongly. Before trying to understand "light" and illumination it seems necessary to look at the type of knowledge Ghazali aims at. A closer scrutiny reveals that the disclosure implies a very unusual type of knowledge, or something than can hardly be called so, as it is not only without expression, but non-discursive and even non-conceptual, indefinable, and without a subject.

As already mentioned, knowledge by disclosure is understood as occurring in states (*ahwāl*) and as non-discursive or irreducible to a textual paraphrase. In a recurrent example, Ghazali explains that knowledge involved in the states is similar to that in tasting (using an ascendant set of examples: a physical taste, an experience of carnal pleasures, then pleasures of exercising power and finally, and most "sweetly", the delights of knowledge). Understandably, the "recognition effect" of a taste of a specific pleasure cannot be fully expressed in words without the appropriate experience.

Further, the highest knowing in the *Mishkāt* is strictly non-conceptual. One of the veils in the veil section of *Mishkāt* that obstructs knowledge is light itself. More precisely, even right, abstract enough ideas about the nature of divinity still veil from illumination as those ideas are still human concepts. On a lower plane, theological concepts even when not false remain veils that limit knowledge; in a higher rank of the "arrivers" concepts of all kinds still stand between the highest knowledge.

According to Reza Shah Kazemi, the paradox lies in the heart of Sufi epistemology: the highest knowledge transcends all knowledge to a point that it can be called ignorance; Light that illuminates and clarifies but "its very brilliance dazzles, blinds

<sup>27</sup> See e.g.: M. Marmura, Ghazali and Demonstrative Science," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, (1965); Jules Janssens: Al-Ghazali's Tahāfut: Is it Really a Rejection of Ibn Sina's Philosophy?"; in: *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12:1, (2001); Leaman, Oliver: "Ghazālī and the Ash'arites". In: *Asian Philosophy* 6, (1996).



and eventually extinguishes the one designated as the knower”.<sup>28</sup> Reza Shah Kazemi explains the paradox in the following way: reaching *ma'rifa* is seen as participating in the divine knowledge rather than possessing it.

Indeed, together with the Sufis, Ghazali puts forward a “radically theocentric perspective – an orientation towards the divine as such”, using Shah-Kazemi's phrase. According to the last section of the *Mishkāt*, a state fully devoid of concepts, including the concept of light, is the highest station of knowers. Even perception of glory and majesty can be transcended by a more pure state still, the perception of oneness, that is, *tawhīd*. Ghazali writes, with a Qur'anic reference: “*The meaning of the words 'All perishes, except his face' they experienced by tasting and states (dhawqan wa hālan). This we mentioned in the first chapter and explained what we mean by 'union'. This is the highest point of all those who arrived (wāsīlūn)*”.<sup>29</sup>

*Tawhīd*, perceived under a full vanishing of the subjectivity of the perceiver, is the apex of knowledge. It is experienced in a state the Sufis call *fanā'*. In Chapter 36 of the *Ihyā*, Ghazali develops a theocentric perspective on the example of the four stages of *tawhīd* in the *shahāda* formula. There are namely four degrees of understanding involved in pronouncing the *shahāda*. The first stage denotes a simple linguistic understanding of the *shahāda*; the second stage demands intellectual assent with it. This is a stage of simple believers as well as of the theologians and theoreticians. The third stage is an insight into the oneness of God through light and tasting, that is, an advanced stage of the “seekers” who arrived to the heights of disclosure and *ma'rifa*. The fourth and the highest stage is the realisation of *tawhīd* through the state of utter abandonment of all concepts and subjectivity, the *fanā'*.<sup>30</sup>

Generally speaking, the contents of *tawhīd* are known, they contain the core of Islamic dogma. There is no new knowledge in the disclosure that would not be available in other words in the books of religion, no fundamental discovery about any surprising nature of reality. According to Fadlou Shehadi, “it is misleading to speak of mysticism as a source of content. It is more accurate to speak of mystical disclosures in Ghazālī's thought, as an immediate (non-inferential) mode of apprehending existing content.”<sup>31</sup> What makes higher degrees of *tawhīd* different from lower ones is the way of perception. It involves more than a theological argument or a concept, but rather a certain realisation of the fact that the *tawhīd* refers to something transcendent. There is a specific kind of relation to the subject who upholds the truth of *tawhīd*. Psychologically speaking, it involves a deep certainty Ghazali speaks about in the *Munqidh*, as well as various degrees of a reliance on God (*tawakkul*), exposed in Book 36 of the *Ihyā*.

<sup>28</sup> Reza Shah Kazemi, The Notion and Significance of *ma'rifa* in Sufism, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 13:2 (2002), p. 155

<sup>29</sup> *Mishkāt*, Chap. 3, par. 33

<sup>30</sup> *Ihja' ulum ud-din*, vol. 2. (Beirut: Matba'a al-'asarija), 327–328.

<sup>31</sup> Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God*, (Brill, 1964), 68.



In a similar attempt to hint to an experience of transcendence, Ghazali inscribes an ascendant structure into the *Allahu akbar* formula in the *Mishkāt* (chapter 1, par. 44). He explains that greater (*akbar*) is not a comparative but an expression of transcendence and incommensurability with anything from a human world. In chapter 2, Ghazali describes the conversation between the pharaoh and Moses from the Qur'an (112:4) in which Moses rightly refuses to give a definition of his God, as there can be none. In chapter 1, par. 44-45 a figure of *tanzīh* is evoked as another paragraph in *fanā'*: "*For 'God' is an expression for that to which the face turns through worship and through becoming godlike (ta'alluh). By this I mean the faces of the hearts (al-wudjūh al-qulūb), since they are lights. Indeed, just as there is no god but He, so there is also no he but "He" because "he" is an expression for whatever may be pointed to, and there is no pointing to anything but Him. Or rather, whenever you point to something, in fact you are pointing at Him. If you do not know this, that is because you are heedless of "reality of realities" (al-al-haq īqa haqā'iq).*"<sup>32</sup>

Ghazali's clear aim is to give an expression to complete incommensurability of the divine which is the object of *ma'rifa*. It is impossible through words, words remain mere analogies for the reality they refer to. Radical *tanzīh*, that is, freeing the experience of God from all relationships and all internal plurality, is accessible only to the accomplished "knowers", i.e., those who were able to savour the reality by "disclosure." This experience, as described in paragraph 55 and the end of the third chapter of *Mishkāt*, is not common knowledge, which would just be characterized by the worship of something bigger and more beautiful than ordinary things. It is a lived relation to what is not only defies all definition, but to what also throws the "knowers" into a world seen very differently.

### c. Illumination and the Practice of Knowledge

If we agree that transcendence is a major topic in *Mishkāt*, the knowledge through disclosure is getting more specific Ghazalian features. "Light" does not stand for a mystical rapture, but for that which reveals, speaking with Ghazali, a gripping perspective on higher degrees of reality. Using the example of *tawhīd*, understanding and believing that God is one is still less "real" than "knowing" its spiritual heights by disclosure and experiencing a complete dependency and vanishing in God's oneness.

The "realisation" of the duality of realities, speaking with Ghazali, is directly connected to the second major topic in the *Mishkāt*, that of ascension. The image of a ladder, of experiencing the hierarchy of lights/truths, of ascending from the analogies to the realisation of the reference, is spelled many times throughout the text. Ascension represents a practical, processual aspect of transcendence, namely in the *Mishkāt*, namely that of the Sufi path from one plane of reality to a higher one. In addition to its Sufi character, for Ghazali religion itself consists in the ascent and wayfaring.

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<sup>32</sup> *Mishkāt*, 20.

In the third chapter Ghazali mentions the difference between people living fully in the dark on the one hand and the lower rank worshipers on the other. The latter progressed at least that far to take an elementary "care of their own soul, to follow godly models (*ta'alluh*), and to have the desire for knowledge of their Lord". Their "progress" is measured according to how much they perceive of what "transcends the sensory world."<sup>33</sup> This difference represents the simplest definition of religion. Religion consists in rising over the sensory world, and looking at the world in terms of its spiritual meanings. Ghazali also defines religion (*din*) in the second chapter as a pilgrimage to this "spiritual" perspective: "The visible world is a ladder to the heavenly world. Travelling "straight path" consists of climbing the ladder. One may refer to this travelling as "religion" (*din*) and the way station of guidance (*manāzil al-hudā*)".<sup>34</sup>

The whole text of *Mishkāt* can be seen as a path to this other, higher, and thoroughly personal, direct and overwhelming experience of the well-known contents of religious knowledge that Ghazali offers to his contemporary Muslims in order to revivify their religion. The path is mentioned throughout *Mishkāt* yet the leader is referred to the *Ihyā* for the practicalities of it. Ghazali has indeed composed a comprehensive and exhaustive work on the practical side of religion in his *Ihyā*. Instead of focusing on the object of knowledge Ghazali concentrates on its subject, the human soul, the soul that together with the Sufis and the philosophers he considers the organ of knowledge. The philosophers call it *nafs*, the Quran *ruh*, and the Sufis *qalb*. Ghazali takes a functional perspective and defines all those concepts as an organ receptive to knowledge (or to the immaterial realities).

Unlike the philosophers, he insists that this reception is a fruit of an eminently practical activity and not just of an intellectual endeavour. The Sufi path mentioned in the *Munqidh* is defined followingly: "Their way consists of both knowledge and deeds as equally necessary" and adds "However, I found that knowledge came more easily to me than needs." Practice leading to knowledge aims to remove veils, obstacles to light. "The object of their works is to eliminate the obstacles created by one's own self and to eradicate the defects and vices in one's own character. In this way, in the end the heart will get rid of all that is not God the Almighty, and will adorn itself solely with praise of God."<sup>35</sup>

Basing himself on Avicenna, Ghazali regards the human soul as a cognitive organ capable of receiving the special kind of divine knowledge through enlightenment. "Removing the veils" is a corresponding phrase meaning making way for the reception of light in a soul. More concretely, it is a metaphor for a moral and religious reform of one's character. In accordance with the Sufi tradition, it consists in purifying all aspects of the personal *nafs*, starting with its ethical features (controlling base instincts, acquiring a fully rational behaviour, adopting ascetic practices), continuing with intellectual and meditative concentration on the tenets of Islam and ending in a series of perfections (virtues of character) enabling one to

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<sup>33</sup> *Mishkāt*, 3:14 and 15

<sup>34</sup> *Mishkāt*, 2:9, (1998), 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Munqidh min al-dalal*, my translation.

concentrate only on immaterial things and finally on God. In Sufi terms, the removing of the veils corresponds to a moral education of one's character (*tahdhīb al-nafs*), purification of the heart (*tathīr al-qalb*) and acquiring higher virtues (*ihsān al-akhlāq*).

Ghazalian ethics is characterized by extreme requirements of a demanding moral perfection and continuous spiritual exercise. Moral discipline necessarily precedes spiritual improvement. The "purification of soul" is not just a metaphor, but the very principle of spiritual psychology. Taking the reasonable and knowing soul away from its involvement with animal life and the world is a prerequisite for its ability to perceive and reflect forms of things and spiritual reality. The basis of Ghazali's psychology remains philosophical: it is the belief in the immateriality of the soul and confidence in its perfectionist nature. Specific instructions for improvement and perfection are Sufi elements, based on the practice and tradition of this Islamic school. Sufi perfectionism is very practical. Every instruction and knowledge (*'ilm*), if properly received, is hereby amended by concrete deeds or practice (*a'mal*) and it brings about states (*ahwāl*), in which special knowledge (*ma'rifa*) deepens and strengthens the soul's virtuous dynamics towards better conduct and other states.

To make a connexion with the previous topic of the *Mishkāt*, the Ghazalian ascension to a perspective including a transcendent element consists in taking the Sufi path, most of which is one's ethical education, as described in the *Ihyā's* four volumes. The basis is a strict religious observance, and acquisition of virtues, that is of a character leading to salvation (*munjiyāt*). The strict observance is accompanied by a close scrutiny of one's religious and ethical practice leading to elimination of harmful qualities (corresponding to the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of *Ihyā*) and change life of habits (corresponding to the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of *Ihyā*). The main concept here is the *tawba*, the conversion, and further fear, hope, gratefulness, renunciation, etc. To be able to operate such change, training is necessary (*riyādah*, *Ihyā* III) that includes practices of self-scrutiny, meditation, contemplation, systematically leading to realise prescribed qualities and duties. The core of these practices is a constant effort to lead a religious life, to remember God, the *dhikr*.

Hence, illumination (disclosure), like most of Ghazali's concepts, must be understood both in its ethical and practical dimension: those states and stations, as stated, are not accidental and exceptional mental events, but a disposition of a character gained by strenuous efforts, which allow to perceive the world around us differently: as structured, meaningful, miraculous, as one that points towards a whole. *Mishkāt* describes the beginning of path as a change in worldview, which becomes structured as the path progresses, with its hierarchy and lower and higher spheres: "As for man, the gates of the Kingdom will not open and he will not become of the Kingdom until the earth does not turn for him into another earth and until the heavens [do not turn from him into another heaven], and until everything that enters his senses and imagination becomes his earth, including the heaven, and as long as everything that goes beyond the senses does not become his heaven."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Mishkāt* 1.29.

One could say that through the change of man's character and of intellectual life, which Ghazali aims at, a change occurs in the perception of and interaction with the surrounding world: through practice man learns to be independent of the "world", free from its demands, lusts and distractions; he learns solitude, silence, temperance, concentration and self-understanding and gains control of internal events; the practice leads to introspection and reflection not only of death, of good and evil, but as well as the miracle of life and of all creation (e.g., by meditation following Book of Good in the *Ihyā*). So transformed, the "pilgrim" works through all his or her moral and meditation efforts to gain just that which the *Mishkāt* describes as the culmination of this journey. Disclosure and tasting do not refer to a mystical vision or some immediate psychological transformation. It is part of a life and of efforts oriented at one goal – focussing attention on the spiritual dimension of the experience of the world.

### CONCLUSION

A closer look at the text of *Mishkāt* and its context in Ghazali's work allows one to conclude that the originality of his interpretation consists in the combination of two main foci: first, he put a focus on explanation of the light theme through contemporary theory and secondly on its realization through practice. Ghazali explains the special, illuminative knowledge as an increased awareness of the world's dual nature – lower, visible, tangible, and higher, immaterial. In the relatively short text of the *Mishkāt* Ghazali points in a number of different ways to the transcendent dimension of reality that the Qur'anic text hints at. The theory he uses is borrowed from available philosophical theory, especially Avicennian psychology that Ghazali tailors to his needs. Using philosophical concepts, he tries to offer an accessible, theoretical explanation of non-theoretical, experiential knowledge that itself transcends any theory. A way to approach this knowledge, or to actualize this awareness, consists in a long-term and systematic moral reform and interiorizing the analogies by spiritual exercise. The crucial point is that this knowledge cannot be expressed in a text but only gained through taking the path. This simple explanation of *Mishkāt*'s otherwise condensed and cryptic text is supported by passages with similar content: either whole books in *Ihyā* or short passages as in *Faysal al-tafriqa*.

After putting the *Mishkāt* in this Sufi context, it is safe to conclude that the Ghazalian approach to illumination stands at the junction of cosmology and practical religion, while the theoretical concepts, psychological and cosmological, are subordinate to one effort, that of an approach to a transcendent message of the Qur'anic text which ultimately can only be achieved through personal realization. Illumination is therefore neither an epistemic concept, nor a mystic rapture, but a name for the fruits of efforts to grasp the world in its fundamental duality.

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