

Al-Ghazali and Epistemology



Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058 - 1111 CE), known as Algazel in Europe



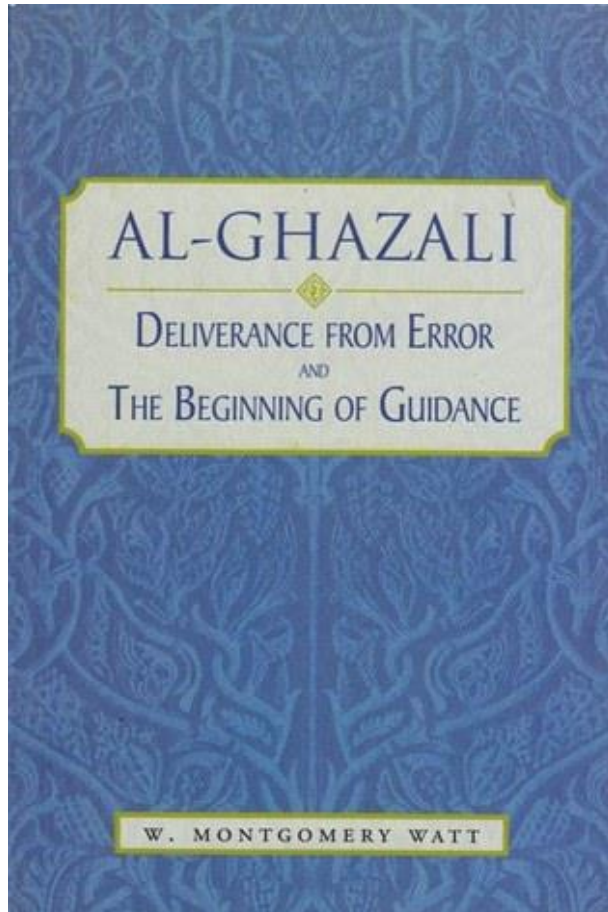
- Born in Tus in northeastern Persia, then part of the Seljuk empire
- Studied law and theology in Nishapur and Isfahan, then got married and had several daughters
- Became a professor of theology at the new and prestigious Nizamiyya madrasa (or university) in Baghdad when he was 33
- Four years later, he left his teaching post, became an ascetic and went on a pilgrimage to Mecca before returning to Tus
- During this time he associated with Sufis and then had a mystical experience which changed him dramatically
- Wrote over 70 books, including his best-known work, his spiritual autobiography, Deliverance from Error (*Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*)
- He tried to balance different aspects of Islamic thought (theology, philosophy, mysticism, and the law)
- He also wrote on astronomy and logic and was known as an occasionalist (i.e., he thought there were no natural laws; God causes everything to happen)

In his 20s and early 30s, Al-Ghazali was strongly influenced by the Mu'tazilite school of Islamic theology



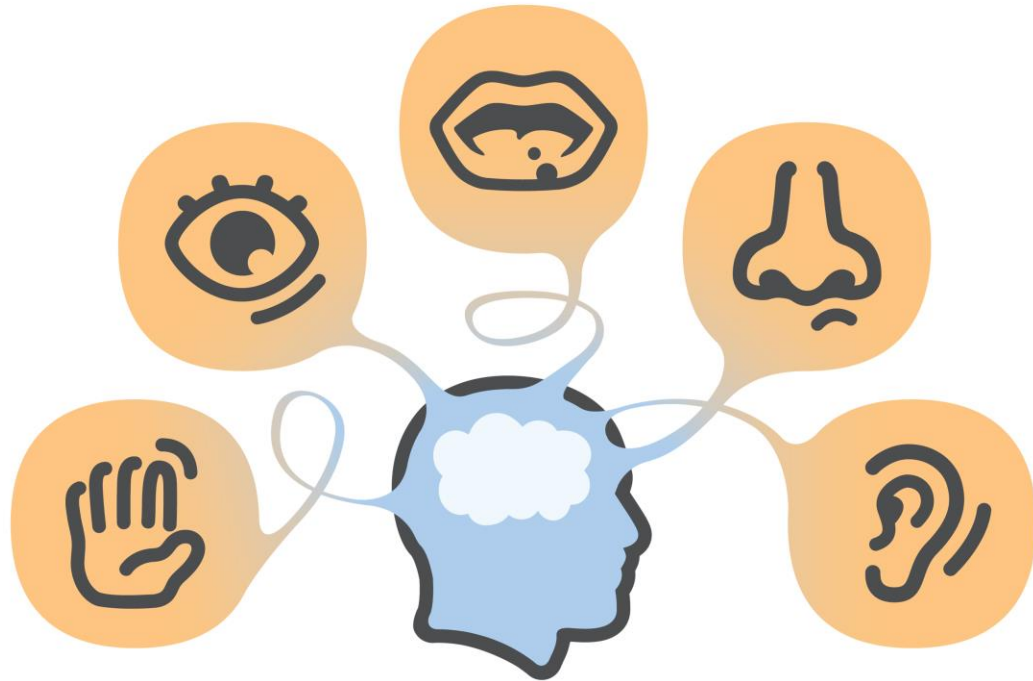
- Captivated by Greek thought, the Mu'tazilites were rationalists
- The Mu'tazilites had several core beliefs; first, they conceived of God (Allah) as a rational god; second, that reason tells us what is possible or impossible to believe; and third, they do not consider hadith reliable enough for doctrine
- Al-Ghazali will eventually reject these positions even as he sought to provide a rational basis for Islamic beliefs

The work Deliverance from Error focuses on al-Ghazali's quest for certitude



- Al-Ghazali wants to know what we can be certain about
- In other words, what is true knowledge and not just opinion?
- To accomplish this goal, he will first consider what kinds of things we can know. This involves a study of **epistemology**, the theory of knowledge

Al-Ghazali eventually identifies two kinds of knowledge that most people accept as self-evident



- The two types:

1. knowledge obtained through the senses; and

2. knowledge that involves necessary truths (such as the law of non-contradiction). The law of contradiction states that something cannot be both affirmed and denied at the same time.

Al-Ghazali will eventually conclude that these two kinds of knowledge are inadequate or lacking in some way

- He will use methodological doubt, or methodological skepticism, to question conventional views



Since the kind of knowledge generated by theologians and philosophers is inadequate, one must look elsewhere

- Al-Ghazali decides that Sufis are more likely to approach the kind of certitude he seeks
- By means of their practice (*dhawq* = “taste”), Sufis experience revelations and visions and achieve nearness to God
- Their experiences provide an analogy to prophecy
- Those who accompany them may gain certainty reached by demonstration from the Sufis’ experiences
- Dreams are also like prophecy
- Prophecy represents a stage of experience that transcends intellectual activity
- Once one knows prophecy, says al-Ghazali, one understands that Muhammad “is in the highest grades of prophetic calling”



The Spanish Muslim thinker Averroes (1126-1198), aka Ibn Rushd, will challenge al-Ghazali's rejection of rationalism



- Averroes wrote The Incoherence of the Incoherence (*Tahafut al-Tahafut*) in response to al-Ghazali's book The Incoherence of the Philosophers (*Tahafut al-Falasifa*)
- Averroes maintains that faith and reason are in harmony
- Averroes also says that, contrary to al-Ghazali's claim, there is nothing in the Quran that indicates that the world was created in time (Averroes will hold, instead, that the world is not created in time but is eternal)

Influence of al-Ghazali



- Had a great influence on subsequent Islamic thought
- Considered a stand-bearer of Islamic orthodoxy
- Had an influence on Jewish and Christian thinkers also, e.g. the thirteenth-century scholastic St. Thomas Aquinas
- He also anticipated some of Descartes' epistemological preoccupations

Not everyone thinks that al-Ghazali had a positive influence

- Neil deGrasse Tyson, an American astrophysicist, thinks that al-Ghazali's attacks on Islamic philosophers and theologians like Avicenna (aka Ibn Sina) crippled the development of science in the Islamic world
- Other modern-day critics like Richard Dawkins and Ayaan Hirsi Ali claim that he was the forefather of violent fanatics in contemporary Islam

