

***Munqidh Min Al Dalal* and the Question of “Prophecy” – A Comparative Analysis of the Position of Muslim Philosophers and Al-Ghazali**

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Abstract

This essay explores Al-Ghazali’s response to the position of the *falasafa* (philosophers) on the nature of prophecy in the *Munqidh min al dalal* (Deliverance from Error). *Munqidh* is an autobiographical account of Al-Ghazali’s journey as a seeker of truth who explores different schools of Islamic thought to attain the true path. In this work he defends the orthodox conception of the prophet as a man endowed with a spiritual authority among the faithful, a divine scripture and a mission to invite the transgressors towards the right path. The *falasafa* distorted this view to rationalize prophecy as an intellectual experience of the prophet. The article underlines the position of Al-Farabi and Avicenna to present a case for the philosophers, and explores the implications of Al-Ghazali’s criticism of their views. While doing so, this article also delves into the fundamental idea of the nature of prophecy, and transcendental attributes associated with it.

keywords: Prophecy; Intellect; Empiricism; Materialism; Transcendentalism; Revelation; Platonic

Articulated in a conversational style, and yet strikingly critical and authoritative, *Munqidh min al-dalal* — Deliverance from Error — marks the apex of Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali's (1058-1111) theological and philosophical evolution. It's an autobiographical account pen that it traces his progression as a seeker of divine truth.

Al-Ghazali narrates his exploration to a 'brother in faith', recalling his own intellectual crisis that left him perplexed for years. After years of wandering by engaging in the processes of self-reflection by collecting and exploring empirical evidence of universal existence, Al-Ghazali concludes that the mere fact of the nonappearance of something does not prove the impossibility of its existence.¹

Thus, in his quest to know the unknowable, Al-Ghazali engages with the knowledge of 'those seeking the truth'. He categorizes them into four groups: (1) *Mutakallimun*, who allege that they are men of independent judgment and reasoning; (2) The *Batinites*, who claim to be the unique possessors of al-talim, and the privileged recipients of knowledge acquired from the Infallible Imam; (3) The Philosophers, who maintain that they are the men of logic and apodeictic demonstration; and (4) The Sufis, who claim to be the familiars of the Divine Presence and [are] the men of mystic vision and illumination.²

His treatise ends with an appreciation of transcendental ascetic practices and convictions of Sufism as the 'true' path — a path akin to the path of apostles and prophets, as Al-Ghazali underlines, and a path defined by God himself through the holy scripture. While he embraces the path of Sufism, Al-Ghazali also criticizes the believes of the other three groups.

His criticism of the doctrines of philosophers in the *Munqidh* is fairly vehement and comprehensive. Much like his magnum opus, *Tahafut Al-falasafa*, the account critically dissects philosopher's views on different topics. He defends, what we generally call, the orthodox position. One such defense presented is on Islamic conception of 'prophecy'.

A prophet, or an apostle of God, is generally perceived as a man who possesses spiritual authority among the faithful; endowed with a spiritual message, or a special scripture, with a mission to invite the transgressors towards the right path. He is endowed with transcendental knowledge, exceptional intellect, miracles gifted by God, and divine leadership.

Thus, to be counted among the faithful, one has to embrace his message and accept and submit to his guidance as a staunch devotee, both innate and explicitly. It is an article of faith, it is observed, as important as accepting the oneness of God. However, the progressive neo-platonic philosophers distorted this view by their heretical claims. A prophet, or an apostle, they claimed, is a prophet because of his intellect and intuition, and not because he possesses supernatural and mystic attributes. Their position on prophecy is countered with scathing criticism by Al-Ghazali in the *Munqidh*. The latter underlined the incoherence in the philosopher's arguments.

Therefore, by analyzing philosopher's arguments and Al-Ghazali's response in the *Munqidh*, this essay presents a comparative analysis over a central philosophical conundrum: why and how are these two positions irreconcilable? While doing so, the paper delves into the fundamental idea of the nature of prophecy, and transcendental attributes associated with it.

For the scope of this paper, arguments of Avicenna and Al-Farabi are used to present a case for the philosophers. Lastly, through an analysis the paper underlines that Al-Ghazali's critique marks a paradigm shift in philosophical thought on prophecy, from rationalism towards empiricism and materialism. Similarly, it argues that this shift paved the way for an appreciation of mystic and transcendental knowledge in Islamic medieval philosophy.

Philosopher's position on the nature of prophecy

The preliminary understanding that formed the basis of philosopher's work on the nature of prophecy can be found in the oeuvres of Al-Farabi.³ The edifice of his arguments rest on his theory of intellect and cognition. According to Al-Farabi, knowledge that shapes human intellect emanates from the Active Intellect, which is the intellect of the divinity. Such knowledge, or *ilm*, is scientific and can be of two types: (1) knowledge of becoming certain of the existence and the reason of the existence of a thing; and (2) becoming certain of the existence of a thing and why it cannot be something else, but without considering the reason for its existence.⁴

When a man is born, such knowledge is innate within his existence, and shapes his cognitive abilities, or faculties, to understand the principal sciences— natural sciences of the physical and metaphysical world, and social sciences of ethics and reason. Such knowledge helps him to discern, to rationalize and to comprehend, both theoretically and practically, the engagement of humans with nature and with fellow beings.

Nonetheless, most of such knowledge is potential, and it is only through the rational faculty of the human soul one can actualize the knowledge endowed to him at the time of birth. As a man grows old, and engages in arduous philosophical tasks, his rational faculty evolves making him capable to grasp the 'true' understanding of material and immaterial reality through reason. Prophets, however, are different. It is their imaginative faculty that provides them knowledge ungraspable by an ordinary man through their divinely empowered imagination.⁵ This basically means that prophets receive knowledge in a state inconceivable by ordinary man, which is akin to illusions, as they experience what is implausible rationally.

As an adherent of Al-Farabi, and by building on his work, Avicenna developed his own theory of prophecy.⁶ In his quest to logically establish that prophecy is 'possible', Avicenna characterized the prophet as a man who is endowed with an angelic intellect to receive divine knowledge. Like Al-Farabi, Avicenna defines the reception of divine knowledge, which is special to the characteristic of a prophet, as a process experienced by the 'imaginative faculty' of soul.⁷ His work holds especial significance because it successfully established its position as a leading school of Islamic Philosophy particularly, due to reconciliation and bridging the gap between Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism along with Kalam⁸ – Islamic theology.

In the Avicennian doctrine of prophecy, a prophet differs from an ordinary man in a sense that he receives knowledge directly from the active intellect, while on the other hand a layman has to rigorously

train himself for such knowledge by engaging in philosophical discourse. As Marmura rightly notes, “[according to Avicenna] the prophet... differs from the rest of men capable of abstraction in that he receives the secondary intelligibles directly, without the intervening preparatory activities of the soul and the learning processes associated with them”⁹.

Though, it is imperative to underline that one difference between Al-Farabi and Avicenna here is that Al-Farabi affirms that every man is endowed with imaginative faculty of soul, but it’s only the prophet that actualizes its use as a superior faculty; however, Avicenna emphasizes that prophets are gifted with a special kind of faculty that receives revelation which he calls ‘holy intellect’.¹⁰ This means that a prophet is exceptional in his intellect not because of his intellectual capabilities, but because of the existence of a special faculty of rational soul.

While doing so, Avicenna also underlines that there are two types of prophecies, namely: (a) prophecy of insights, and (b) prophecy of imagination.¹¹ The category defined in the preceding passage is the superior form of prophecy, that is the prophecy of insights. A man in whom intuitions and insights determine his ideation, cognition, and intelligence, therefore, is above the man who attains knowledge through imagination – imagination over here specifically refers to the imaginative faculty, coherent with the idea of imagination in the work of Al-Farabi defined in the earlier passages. This is the central point of contention between him and, as in the words of Avicenna, ‘advocates of prophecy’.

Even though, in his work, Avicenna does not regard the prophets anywhere inferior, or equal in the intellectual hierarchy to those who possess ‘insights’; his attribution of inferiority to the imaginative features makes his claims questionable. This is mainly because, just like the rational faculty, perfected imaginative faculty is a central feature of prophecy. In this regard, his claims lead to a conviction that those who champion insights and intuitions, are ultimately the best of man, and therefore, prophecy is ‘achieved’ by them¹² — the Islamic conception is contrary, i.e., it is gifted to a select few. This basically means that prophets are not born as prophets but receive prophecy as they mature to become finest among the rest.

Similarly, while he claims that the prophetic faculty of insight and imagination are exceptional, he also underlines that when a prophet undergoes the process of revelation, he hears sound that is otherwise inaudible and non-existent.¹³

Reflecting to some kind of hallucination, inconceivable in rational terms.

Al-Ghazali’s criticism of the philosopher’s position and his own conception of prophecy

Al-Ghazali subsequently counters these views in the *Munqidh*. To do so, he first lays out his own framework for understanding the true nature of Islamic prophecy, which alludes to a divine authority granted to a prophet by God for inviting people to the true path. Such authority is in form of a divine message communicated by Gabriel – an archangel who acts as an intermediary between God and the prophet.

Al-Ghazali argues that when a man is born out of substance, he knows nothing, and as he grows old, his cognitive faculties evolve to acquire the knowledge of the world and beyond¹⁴. The first step towards his cognitive evolution is his acquaintance with the material reality through perception: sight, sense of taste, smell, ability to hear and so on. The second step is his ability to discern and distinguish between different materials of the perceptible and physical world, such is also his first step towards rationalization. The last, and the most sophisticated evolutionary step, is the acquisition of intellect or *aql*, which provides us the ability to think.¹⁵ Note that Al-Ghazali's basic theoretical understanding of human nature, as defined here, is empiricist and materialist — i.e., the process of cognitive evolution is closely linked, or is rather driven by, man's interaction to the material reality. This serves the basic departure from philosopher's rationalist notion of intellect.

In Al-Ghazali's model, man is endowed with such faculties by God, but his material and empirical experiences refine these faculties making him capable of understanding complex universal notions, which were obscure to him when he was born. His cognition, therefore, is like an empty canvas that acquires colors when an artist paints over it, gradually bringing it to life. However, prophets are different. They are endowed and gifted with special faculties that are perfected, refined, and their intellect is better than any ordinary man even at the time of their birth. And their faculties are beyond the scope of the intellect of an

ordinary human, or even an intellectual, as they transcend the physical and metaphysical world. This means that their cognition goes beyond *aql* which implies that they can even acquire knowledge that is incomprehensible by others. Their knowledge, therefore, is divine, as they are in direct contact with God. As Al-Ghazali notes:

Beyond the stage of intellect there is another stage. In this another eye is opened, by which man sees the hidden, and what will take place in the future, and other things, from which the intellect is as far removed as the power of discernment is from the perception of intelligibles and the power of sensation is from things perceived by discernment. And just as one able only to discern, if presented with the things perceptible to the intellect, would reject them and consider them outlandish, so some men endowed with intellect have rejected the things perceptible to the prophetic power and considered them wildly improbable. That is the very essence of ignorance! For such a man has no supporting reason except it is a stage he himself has not attained and for him it does not exist so, he supposes that it does not exist in itself.¹⁶

Furthermore, his argument in the *Munqidh* underlines that philosopher adopt a reductionist, and subsequently, a rejectionist position on prophecy when they claim that prophetic revelation is merely an intellectual experience. Al-Ghazali writes, “doubt about the prophetic revelation is either (a) doubt of its possibility in general, or (b) doubt of its actual occurrence, or (c) doubt of the attainment of it by a specific individual”.¹⁷ Work of Al-Farabi and Avicenna rules out criticism on (a), as they themselves accepted, wholly, the idea of prophecy and established rational grounds for the possibility of its existence. Thus, it’s (b) and (c) where their arguments create doubts, and ultimately, as Al-Ghazali highlights, leads to erroneous convictions.

Firstly, using the analogy of dreams, he explains that it is possible to perceive and comprehend objects which are beyond the boundaries of the physical world, and which are not understandable by intellect alone. We dream, and often they are abstract, and do not ally with our physical and material interactions. Thus, our dreams are capable of apprehending objects that are irrational and not perceivable by worldly standards, but are there, true in some form or another.¹⁸ His analogy here sets the stage for his larger criticism. On the same pretext, he counters the philosopher’s notion, it should be true that a prophet can experience the world beyond the reality and cognitive capability of an ordinary man – because he is gifted with supernatural attributes to apprehend the realities of such a world. This is a state Al- Ghazali calls ‘immediate experience’ of the prophet, or *dhawq*.¹⁹

Secondly, by classifying it as an ‘immediate experience’ and not as an

‘immediate experience’ and not as an imaginative experience or hallucination, Al-Ghazali basically appreciates prophecy as a status that opens its recipient to realms of divine existence, unachievable by intellect. This means that a prophet is not only an intellectual, as deemed by the philosopher, but also someone who can perceptibly experience the mystic world of divinity. According to Al-Ghazali, revelation, therefore, is not just an experience of the prophet's imaginative faculty, as the philosophers stressed, but it’s a dynamic experience that involves all his faculties of soul. A prophet not just imagines receiving a message from an angel of God but experiences such incidents in accordance with material and empirical standards. However, he explains, just like it is not possible to comprehend the objects of imagination we observe in dreams, it is not humanly possible to define prophetic experience revelation. Thus, it is important to have a firm belief on it, as “believing presupposes understanding”.²⁰

Analysis on the implications of Al-Ghazali’s critique

The difference between Al-Ghazali and philosophers’ work lie in the paradigm they are addressing — material and empirical ideas of the former, and rationalism of the latter — making their positions largely irreconcilable. Moreover, it is important to mention that Al-Ghazali’s response is largely a defense against the ‘rationalization’ of mystic experience of prophecy. This basically means that philosophers tried to remold the basic conception of prophecy to align it with the emerging paradigm of

platonian and neo-platonian political philosophy in the Islamic world. While doing so, they undermined its transcendental nature, and reduced it to an exceptional intellectual experience undertaken by only a select few.

Doing so, they, intentionally or unintentionally, also reduced the status of a prophet to someone with an exceptional and divine intellect. Such reductionism, as Al-Ghazali points out, is the main problem as it contradicts with the Islamic belief of the prophet's exalted and divine nature. It implies that the processes of receiving divine knowledge between a prophet and an intellectual is not dissimilar i.e., prophetic knowledge is not transcendental, but stems from their intellectual experience. Such a view relegates prophetic position to that of an intellectual – making prophecy an epistemic rather than a spiritual experience.

Thus, if we accept, wholly, the arguments propounded by the philosopher, we will then have to reject, say for examples, miracles that are not rationally and intellectually conceivable:²¹ rod turning into a serpent, survival in fire, cleaving the moon into two hemispheres, and so on. A prophet cannot, just by the power of his intellect change the substance and atoms of an object, and thus, there should be some other spiritual and divine power that enables him to do so. Similarly, the broader consequence of the arguments of *falasafa* is that the instances mentioned in the holy Quran about prophetic endeavors — may they be about their miracles, or about the prophet's spiritual interaction with the divine and heavenly bodies — are simply allegorical and symbolic. Avicenna and Al-Farabi, for instance, argued that the revelation received by the prophet through his intuition and imagination is different from the interpretation of that revelation he

acquaints to people.²² This means that what prophets 'spoke' to people was a symbolic interpretation of the original revelation so that a layman could understand its context, because otherwise, a prophetic revelation is only interpretable by the prophet himself, or by the intellectuals who engage themselves in rigorous philosophical discourse. A prophet, therefore, to explain the message of God uses symbolic metaphors, like analogies and tales of magical miracles to express some deep intellectual phenomenon only known by him, or to God, or to a few intellectuals. Such position is in stark opposition to the Quranic references of the universality of scriptural revelations as encapsulated in the verse 54:17 of Al-Qamar. The verse reads, "And we have certainly made the Quran easy to understand and remember..." (Al-Quran, 54:17).

Al-Ghazali's critique on the other hand, as mentioned in the *Munqidh* and elsewhere in his work, resolves this problem.²³ Primarily, as we have discussed in the preceding section, Al-Ghazali's idea that it is not possible to understand some of the processes of prophetic revelation, just like we cannot interpret the objects of our dream, establishes that prophetic revelations transcend the boundaries of rationality. His position offers a clear explanation that intellectual perfection is one of the attributes of prophecy but is certainly not the only attribute prophecy should be associated with. He clearly does not reject the philosopher's view about perfected intellectuality of the prophets, and he also cautions others to not commit this mistake, as it will inherently lead to wrong convictions about the prophet's perfect soul. However, he deems their views to be 'reductionist', and incomplete, as they fail to

appreciate the prophet's attributes *beyond* the realm of intellectuality.

Similarly, Al-Ghazali's explanation of prophecy resolves another issue inherent in the philosopher's position. By stressing on the divine knowledge of prophets, and by making it the basic tenet of prophecy, philosophers redefined Islam as the religion of the literates. This basically means that for a Muslim, according to the implication of their convictions, striving to attain knowledge should be the primary goal in life. Likewise, it also implies that *knowledge* reigns above *practice*, which implies that one should engage in philosophical discourse more than the practices which constitute the pillars of the religion. Thus, it is the knowledge of the prophet that should be the defining objective of Islam, instead of his practices. Al-Ghazali's critique, contrarily, defends the orthodox narrative by exalting the status of prophet, both in innate sense and physical sense. Thus, while a Muslim should strive to achieve the intellect akin to the intellect of the prophet, it is also important to practice, what we call the Sunnah, to achieve the rank of true devotees of the prophets. And such, for Al-Ghazali is the path of Sufis or the mystics.

¹ Al-Ghazali. 1980. *Deliverance from Error*. Translated by R. Maccarthy. Beirut: American University of Beirut.

² Ibid.

³ Davidson, H. A. 1992. "Their cosmologies, theories of active intellect and theories of human intellect." In Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect, by H. A. Davidson. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ López-Farjeat, Luis Xavier. 2020, "al-Farabi's Psychology and Epistemology", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/al-farabi-psycho/>.

⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

Conclusively, Al-Ghazali's critique marked a paradigm shift in Islamic thought in the 12th century. By underlining the limits of the rational understanding of prophecy, Al-Ghazali reinstated the fading orthodox narrative through a much more dynamic and logical understanding. Similarly, his critique also established that 'reason' alone cannot be used as a tool to understand the complexities of prophecy. Divine phenomena like prophecy transcend reason and rationality, and thus, to understand them one has to embrace the trans-rational path of mysticism.

⁶ Najafov, R. 2019. "The problem of revelation in the Islamic Philosophy: Comparatively analysis between Avicenna and Farabi." ResearchGate n.p. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334848786>.

⁷ Davidson, H. A. 1992. "Their cosmologies, theories of active intellect and theories of human intellect." In Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect, by H. A. Davidson. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Shaheen, G. (2010). Critical Review of Avicenna's Theory of Prophecy. *Al-Hikmat*, 30, 29–36.

⁹ Marmura, M. E. 1963. "Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49-56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/543930>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Morris, M.E. 1992. "The philosopher-prophet in Avicenna's political philosophy." *Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy* 142-188.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Davidson, H. A. 1992. "Their cosmologies, theories of active intellect and theories of human intellect." In Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect, by H. Davidson. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Al-Ghazali. 1980. *Deliverance from Error*. Translated by R. Maccarthy. Beirut: American University of Beirut.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bahul, R., and G Giacaman. 2000. "Ghazali on Miracles and Necessary Connection." *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 39-50.

²² Griffel, F. 2004. "Al-Ghazali's concept of prophecy: The introduction of Avicennan psychology and Ash'arite theology." *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 101-114.

²³ Ibid.