

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Al Ghazali and The Pursuit of Perfecting the Soul

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RLS 380: Islamic Classics
Philosophical Psychology

The primary goal of philosophy in general, is to achieve true wisdom. Philosophers have attempted to attain this wisdom of the truth of the world through various intellectual means. Muslim Philosophers have particularly understood this intellectual struggle predominantly through the faculty of the soul. These philosophers have divided the soul and its encompassing sub-faculties in various ways¹. They generally all came to the consensus that the soul was the innermost essential human faculty and in it lied the connection to the truth and wisdom. The soul due to its very nature had the potential to become actualized and turn into the intellect; the highest actualized potential and closest to the perfect or divine state. This can be better explained with the common philosophical dichotomy of form vs. matter. The soul is the matter of the intellect as the intellect is the form of the soul.

Although Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), was highly critical of the philosophers' means of investigating the soul (he wrote كتاب تهافت الفلاسفة - *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in an attempt to refute many approaches and conclusions made by his preceding philosophers), he himself was highly knowledgeable and learned in their methods. He also shared with them the principle of the soul's potential, and its faculties. And al-Ghazali agreed with all of these interpretations of the faculties and their relation to the soul in terms of his own religious belief and doctrine as "there is nothing in what they have mentioned that must be denied in terms of the religious law"². Al-Ghazali also agreed with the philosophers' view of the grand attainable reward from actualizing the soul, or in his terms the success from purifying the heart³. His criticisms lie particularly to their claim that reason alone is sufficient for attaining wisdom. Nonetheless, Al-Ghazali held firm to his beliefs that through purifying and disciplining the greater soul could one perfect the soul and ultimately attain the prospective connection with the divine.

Before we can attempt to understand what is to be gained by studying the soul, we must first define 'soul', which in the English language can be interpreted quite ambiguously.

¹ Winter, LI-LVI

² Marmura, 185

³ Winter, 5

According to al-Ghazzali, the soul can be understood by its three closely related synonyms⁴, that of the *nafs* (نفس), or soul; *qalb* (قلب), or heart; *ruh* (روح), or spirit; and *'aql* (عقل), or intellect.

The *nafs* (نفس), or soul, is the most general in definition. Al-Ghazali divides the *nafs* to refer to two different meanings. It refers to the immaterial entity, commonly referred to as the ego, or lower self, in “which are the animal faculties which oppose the rational faculties”⁵. This is the *nafs* referred to in the famous prophetic hadith of the ‘greater *jihad* (struggle)’ being that against the enemy in your own breast, or the *nafs*⁶. The second and more crucial meaning is also of the immaterial entity, that of man’s real nature and essence⁷. This is the soul capable of being pulled up towards the heavenly world from which it has initially arisen and been created. Therefore the *nafs* refers to the general soul which has both the animal faculties that often pull oneself down, as well as the higher faculties that can ascend oneself towards the divine.

The *qalb* (قلب), or heart, refers to the contemplative aspect of the soul – contemplating on The Divine, or God, of course. Like *nafs*, al-Ghazali divides *qalb* into two meanings as well. The first meaning, is from the literal word itself, that of the physical heart, or “a piece of flesh in the left breast ... the center for circulation of blood”⁸. By this sense of the word, the *qalb* is common to all animals⁹. Moreover, the role of the heart was central to the body according to al-Ghazali. Whereas the heart is central to the physical body for it serves as the pump allowing blood to circulate throughout the body, it also serves as the spiritual center of the body. This is where the second and more vital meaning of the *qalb* takes precedence – for it refers to the soul. It the immaterial element which ‘bears the trust of God’. It receives and connects the person with the knowledge of God and all in the spiritual realm. By this sense of the word, the *qalb* distinguishes humans from all other nonhuman beings¹⁰. It is this *qalb* that uniquely defines the human state and is naturally primordially disposed to receive all human and divine knowledge. The Holy Quran refers to the *qalb* by this second definition, for “Verily in the remembrance of Allah do

⁴ Shammas, 22

⁵ Shammas, 22

⁶ Murata, 21

⁷ Shammas, 23

⁸ Karim, 8

⁹ Shammas, 25

¹⁰ Murata, 38

hearts find satisfaction”¹¹. Just as the *nafs* has the potential to ascend to the divine, as well as get caught up with worldly desires; the *qalb* too has the potential to remain healthy and vibrant with the contemplation of the Divine, or become sick and rusted. “... They are not aware. In their hearts is a sickness”.¹²

The *ruh* (روح), or spirit is the vehicle of life¹³. Again, al-Ghazali gives *ruh* two meanings. The first is the physical material thing in the heart that “vibrates the whole body like the current of electricity”¹⁴. The soul circulates blood through the body just as the light from a lamp spreads across a room¹⁵. The second meaning which refers to the soul is immaterial which emanates from the creative command. This refers to the *ruh* God has blown into each embryo during the fourth month of pregnancy¹⁶. According to the prophetic tradition, before this blowing, the human being is not human yet. He is only made of clay, and it is only after the divine breath being instilled into the person, that makes the human living. Al-Ghazali clearly distinguishes the *ruh* as not being life, but soul; so as to not confuse the two¹⁷. However, *ruh* can generally be interpreted for anything that has life, such as the angels¹⁸. Furthermore, *ruh* inherently has all the knowledge and perceives everything for it is directly from God.

The *‘aql* (عقل), or intellect has many meanings according to al-Ghazali. The philosophical definition shared with his predecessors refers to *‘aql* as the intellect with the true nature all known things¹⁹. However he gives *‘aql* several usages, but most importantly that of The First Intelligence. The first intelligence refers to the divine inherent knowledge God first created man with. However in this sense *‘aql* isn’t automatically present and fully functional in humans, as humans must potentialize their soul to attain their true *‘aql* – and then make use of it. The Quran repeatedly urges people to utilize their *‘aql* and criticizes those who do not. “Surely the vilest of animals, in Allah's sight ... are those who have no *‘aql*”²⁰.

¹¹ Quran 13:28

¹² Quran 2:10

¹³ Shammas, 27

¹⁴ Karim, 8

¹⁵ Winter 233

¹⁶ Murata, 96

¹⁷ Karim, 8

¹⁸ Shammas, 28

¹⁹ Karim, 8

²⁰ Quran 8:22

Nafs, *Qalb*, *Ruh*, and *'Aql* all refer to the soul and are used interchangeably in al-Ghazali's works. The different words are used to stress different aspects of the soul in its relation to the divine. Generally *nafs* is used, while *qalb* stresses the necessary remembrance and contemplation of God, *ruh* regards the spirit of God, and *'aql* relates to the comprehension of the knowledge of all the intelligibles, worldly and spiritual. However, essentially, they are all the same; they all represent the soul.

The soul is what differentiates humans from all other animals, and for all Islamic philosophers it is the highest rational faculty. However by the very definition of the word, a faculty, or power, is useless unless it is used. Just as the faculty of sight is only beneficial when one uses his eyes, the faculty of the soul must also be employed to attain its possible benefit. According to al-Ghazali, the highest function of the soul is to perceive the truth²¹. Only upon perceiving the truth lays true happiness.

Human beings are comprised of a soul and a body. God molds the body from clay and then infuses it with his own spirit, creating the soul. The soul exists independent from the body; the body is temporary while the soul is eternal. Moreover, the soul was created for the body, not vice versa. Furthermore, the soul does not have the same qualities that the body has in terms of its limitation and divisions²². Al-Ghazali stresses that caring for the soul should take priority over one's body. Just how it is important to eat healthy and exercise to maintain a healthy body, the soul should be cared for much more extensively. While other philosophers refer to the concept of working to actualize the potential of the soul, al-Ghazali refers to this as purifying or discipline the heart, or soul. After purifying and disciplining the soul, and then through profound soul searching can one truly reach the ultimate goal; happiness via the knowledge of God

Again, the soul only potentially has the ability to be actualized. It actually can do much more than just that. Al-Ghazali mentions four qualities of the soul: predatory, animal, satanic, and divine²³. The predatory quality refers to that of

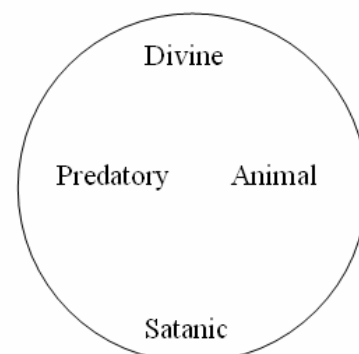


Figure 1: The Soul

²¹ Field, Chapter 1

²² Rahman, Chapter 1

²³ Winter, 236

fury or rage; animal refers to the desire for food and sex; satanic refers to the ability to commit evil; and divine the upmost quality that requires the greatest investigation and insight to attain. Man's goal is to overcome the Satanic quality and forbid evil, and likewise enjoin what is good; overcome the predatory quality, and therefore develop patience, self-control, and generosity; and overcome the animal quality and become modest, chaste, and humble²⁴. Only after controlling these other qualities of the heart can one expect to take benefit from the divine quality of the heart – through which the goal lies.

Through the revision of ones character by controlling and disciplining some of the soul's qualities, free from blemishes can the pure desired soul's potential be attained. It is in this sense that the rusted *qalb* can become cleaned and polished by struggling against the traits of lower *nafs*. Al-Ghazali has compared the purified soul to a mirror: "intelligibles are forms reflected in it, while the intelligence is its actual reflection in the mirror"²⁵.

The pure soul, free from blemishes, is then able to be properly facilitated. Only this soul can reach its potential, to gain the knowledge of the Divine, God, and his attributes. Moreover, from this knowledge of God, and understanding his names, and Reality, in general, one can reach the ultimate goal: proximity to God.²⁶

2 more lines here...??

According to the Islamic myth of creation, God created man by molding a body out of clay and then divinely furnishing it with a soul- to create man. From there, with God, man is reduced to the lowest of low on earth, and throughout his life, his goal is to re-ascend to Him²⁷. The divinely prescribed soul is the only means from which one can attempt this path. The soul, although inherently pure and learned, becomes caught up with its lower qualities and desires. After purifying and cleaning the soul, it can reach its proper state. And only in this pure state of the soul can one perfect their ascent; they can become fully aware and knowledgeable of God and then ultimately gain nearness to Him.

²⁴ Winter, 236

²⁵ Winter, 237

²⁶ Karim, 7

²⁷ Buckman, 12

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