**Does al-Ghazālī Have a Theory of Virtue?**

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**Introduction**

Writing in 1975, the distinguished scholar George F. Hourani proposed a scheme for classifying the varieties of ethical writing in classical Islam that might serve as a compass for study of the subject. Hourani’s interest was to provide a study tool that would appeal to one constituency in particular, modern philosophers. In some of his key works, notably those dedicated to the study of Muʿtazilite ethics, Hourani staked the claim that the ethical ideas developed by practitioners of *kalām* had strong affinities, and entered into an important dialogue, with questions discussed by modern moral philosophers. This was reflected in his 1975 scheme, which drew on two key distinctions— “normative” versus “analytical” and “religious” versus “secular”—to then identify *kalām* discussions as the prime exemplar of analytical ethics. Notably excluded from the category of “analytical” ethics were philosophical works on the virtues or character (*akhlāq*), such as those written by Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī and Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī. In explaining this decision, Hourani appealed to two kinds of considerations. On the one hand, the philosophical framework of these works “offers little of general philosophical interest that is new.” At the same time, they “do not enter into the controversy of *kalām* about the concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, so that these *akhlāq* books are not the place to look for ethical philosophy in any analytical style.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Hourani’s scheme still retains some of its heuristic utility. Yet much has changed since he wrote those lines. To a large extent, his scheme reflected the intellectual priorities of philosophers in his day. As the last statement betrays, Hourani was operating with a very specific conception of what it means to do philosophy in the “analytical style,” one that mirrors the engrossing interest taken by philosophers in the first few decades of the twentieth century in questions about the definition of moral terms. Since that time, the focus of moral philosophy has shifted in more ways than one. And one of the most seismic shifts has been the rehabilitation of questions about character and the virtues as a respectable subject of philosophical inquiry. This shift has slowly begun to percolate through the study of ethics in other intellectual and cultural traditions, sparking a new interest in the resources they can contribute to this investigation. Albeit more hesitantly, it has finally begun to filter into Islamic scholarship as well, with a number of recent studies focusing on ethical writings on the virtues, and self-consciously locating themselves against the horizon of the philosophical renaissance of virtue ethics.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 This self-conscious placement, as Cyrus Ali Zargar points out in the most notable recent contribution of this kind, is not without challenge. One challenge already arises when one seeks to identify the discourse that forms the relevant interlocutor. The frameworks in which virtue was examined in the Islamic world were after all highly diverse, ranging from philosophical ethics, to etiquette or literature (*adab*), works of Sufism, and many other twilight genres in between. Hence, “defining ‘virtue ethics’”—in the Islamic tradition, that is—“is more difficult than defining jurispru­dence and positive law, in part because a number of genres of writing and ethical methods in classical Islamic thought might qualify.” For his part, Zargar draws the boundary around his subject using a minimalist chalk. Focusing on Sufi and philosophical texts, he takes their unifying concern to be a “concern with the niceties of human character and with the perfection of the human soul by acquir­ing good character traits through habit.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

 There are other potential challenges in the offing, which partly depend on the precise type of rapprochement one wishes to effect between Islamic writings on the virtues and philosophical perspectives past and present. One might, for example, think of one’s aim chiefly in historical terms, as helping to enlarge the intellectual (more broadly) or the philosophical (more narrowly) history of the virtues by creating a place for neglected Islamic approaches. This was partly Hourani’s aim in his work on the Muʿtazilites.[[4]](#footnote-4) At a minimum, this would require staking the claim that there is a reasonable degree of continuity in concepts and concerns that makes these approaches eligible for inclusion in such a history. Yet one might also think of one’s aim in more openly normative terms, focusing on the potential of these works to yield new insights, tools of thinking, or generally ways of actively pursuing a philosophical concern with the virtues. Their special interest, from this regard, would lie not in their recognisability or similarity but their difference—because they say something distinctive which might take contemporary reflection on the virtues forward, albeit with a measure of reconstruction, and thus “help us, moderns, lead better lives,” in Kristján Kristjánsson’s words (apropos the choice between exegesis and reconstruction in Aristotle’s virtue ethics).[[5]](#footnote-5)

 My discussion in this paper does not presuppose a choice between these approaches. It assumes that both are legitimate enterprises, and that a minimal degree of continuity in concepts and concerns is requisite for either of them to be possible. Against this backdrop, my focus will fall on the ethical thought of the eleventh-century theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). To anyone interested in engaging with Islamic writings on the virtues, al-Ghazālī must appear as one of the most promising ports of call. His voluminous intellectual output ranges over a variety of disciplines and fields, but one of his central contributions to Islamic thought lies in the account of the moral and spiritual life he enunciated across a number of works. The two that stand out are the *Scale of Action* and, head over shoulders above the rest, his 40-volume magnum opus, the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. In the latter work, al-Ghazālī drew on both philosophical and Sufi resources to unfold a comprehensive picture of a life lived *sub specie aeternitatis*. Divided into four parts, the book begins by detailing how to approach the two elements that make up our “external” life (*ẓāhir*), namely ritual actions (*ʿibādāt*) and social customs or practices (*ʿādāt*). Then it turns to what many readers consider to be the heart of the book, the one concerned with the domain of the inner (*bāṭin*), or what al-Ghazālī terms “the science of the states of the heart” (*ʿilm aḥwāl al-qulūb*), which he organises through a distinction between what is blameworthy and praiseworthy. The third part of the book dissects the blameworthy or “destructive” states (*muhlikāt*) while the fourth dissects the praiseworthy or “salvific” states (*munjiyāt*).[[6]](#footnote-6)

 In this part of the discussion, al-Ghazālī’s philosophical-Sufi synthesis (barely adumbrated in the earlier *Scale*) comes into full fruition, with many of the spiritual qualities that earlier Sufi handbooks had dwelled upon—such as gratitude, fear, hope, trust, or love—taking their seat alongside virtues more familiar from philosophical works, such as temperance, courage, justice, wisdom, and their retinue of subordinate virtues. And it is in this part of the discussion that many readers have located an ethics they have assumed can be straightforwardly identified as an ethics *of* virtue, as full-blooded as any that merit the name. One of the last books to be written on al-Ghazālī’s ethics over 35 years ago, by Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, was explicit: “the core of Ghazālī’s mystical doctrine can be considered not only an ethical theory but also a theory of virtue.” He has been followed in this characterisation by a number of other writers since.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 On the face of it, the claim of al-Ghazālī’s ethics to constitute an ethics of virtue seems intuitive. There certainly appears to be more than enough continuity in concepts and concerns to support it. Al-Ghazālī uses concepts that can be directly mapped onto the core categorial terms “virtue” (*faḍīla*) and “character trait” (*khuluq*). He defines virtue in readily recognisable terms: it is “a stable disposition (*hayʾa rāsikha*) of the soul which causes actions to issue with facility and ease.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The specific virtues and vices he places on his list overlap to an important extent with familiar philosophical lists. And the theoretical framework in which he analyses the virtues and vices has much in common with familiar philosophical approaches. The value of virtue is grounded in the contribution it makes to happiness (hence “destructive” and “salvific”), reprising a time-honoured eudaimonistic model. These affinities, and the ease with which they allow us to locate al-Ghazālī’s ethics as an ethics of virtue, reflect the philosophical influences that condition al-Ghazālī’s thinking, most obviously in the *Scale* but equally evidently in the *Revival*. The precise balance of Sufi and philosophical influences in the latter work has attracted debate, with one commentator writing that “al-Ghazālī’s ethical theory may be characterized as primarily mystical in nature” and another highlighting that “the *Revival* is not a work of Sufism” and suggesting that the determination of its character is a kind of Rorschach test, with the decision “depending on the reader and each reader’s inclinations.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

 The claim that al-Ghazālī’s ethics is an ethics of virtue certainly seems intuitive. Yet my aim in this paper is to raise a doubt about it. It is a doubt that arises for a variety of reasons when considering the body of al-Ghazālī’s writing on ethics. It arises most specifically in connection with the expression he gives of his ethical viewpoint in the *Revival* rather than *Scale*.[[10]](#footnote-10) And it arises with special force in connection with one part of the *Revival* in particular, which in many ways can be regarded as its centrepiece: the treatment of the “salvific” states, which have sometimes been designated “mystical virtues,” and which I will instead refer to more openly as “spiritual virtues” (with the term “virtues” bracketed for investigation). As both of these circumscriptions indicate, the doubt arises precisely in relation to the part of al-Ghazālī’s ethical oeuvre that bears the strongest traces of Sufi influence. The unpicking of this doubt will therefore have something to say to discussions about the balance of intellectual influences in al-Ghazālī’s ethics.

 To clarify the nature of this particular doubt, it is helpful to introduce a distinction sometimes drawn in philosophical circles, between “virtue ethics” and “virtue theory.” “Virtue ethics” is often taken to designate a type of ethical theory in which virtue carries evaluative primacy and represents the foundational moral concept. In this capacity, it is contrasted with other forms of ethical theory with a different foundational concept, such as duty (Kantianism/deontology) or utility (utilitarianism/consequentialism). Virtue ethics, as the philosopher Gary Watson has put it, gives “explanatory primacy” to virtue in the following sense: “how it is best or right or proper to conduct oneself is explained in terms of how it is best for a human being to be.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Yet philosophers whose ethical schemes are not species of “virtue ethics” on this criterion sometimes have interesting things to say about the nature and even the value of virtue; there are Kantian and utilitarian accounts of the virtues, for example. These schemes offer a “virtue theory” in this limited sense.[[12]](#footnote-12)

 Using this distinction, one could ask two different types of questions about al-Ghazālī’s ethics. (1) Does Ghazālī have a theory of virtue? And (2) is Ghazālī’s ethics a form of virtue ethics? The first question is evidently prior. To ask that question is to ask whether al-Ghazālī is talking about virtue at all. To ask the second is to ask whether Ghazālī makes out virtue to be the most important thing there is, morally speaking. The doubt I want to consider here concerns the first, and more elementary, question.[[13]](#footnote-13) Unless the answer is in the affirmative, the most basic continuity in concepts, let alone concerns, between al-Ghazālī’s ethics and modern virtue ethics will not have been established.

 It is a doubt that might at first sight appear outlandish, given the tell-tale continuities plotted earlier. Yet this doubt, in my view, arises for very real reasons upon closer investigation of al-Ghazālī’s ethics. Among other things, these reasons have to do with the categorial terms al-Ghazālī employs to talk about “virtue,”[[14]](#footnote-14) with central features of his specification of the nature of character and “virtue,” and with the substantive content he includes in his list of the “virtues,” most especially the “spiritual virtues.” In the following, I will first present the main considerations as pithily as I can (section 2). In the next stage of my argument (section 3), I will evaluate these considerations more critically and offer a more qualified approach to the issues they raise, before concluding with a holistic assessment of the question (section 4). The structure of my discussion, thus, has a dialectical character, yet this give-and-take should not be seen as a purely academic exercise. It offers a way of working honestly through a doubt that arises on good grounds, and that reflects real features of al-Ghazālī’s account. Working through this doubt therefore means shining a spotlight on these features, and is important because it helps bring some of the distinctive contours of al-Ghazālī’s ethics into clearer view.

**Articulating Doubt**

Al-Ghazālī uses the language of virtue, offers familiar definitions of virtue, and also focuses on substantive qualities that most wouldn’t think twice about calling virtues or vices. So how could it ever occur to anyone to doubt that al-Ghazālī has a theory of virtue? Here are some of the principal reasons.

*The Content of al-Ghazālī’s List of Spiritual “Virtues”*

In the fourth quarter of the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī reaches most deeply into the well of Sufi thinking to present the set of praiseworthy qualities or states that must be acquired by the individual hoping to “tread the road of the hereafter” and make her way to God. This spiritual journey starts with repentance and culminates in love. Bridging these two points is a sequence of intermediate stations (*maqāmāt*) which form prerequisites or preconditions (*muqaddimāt*) for love. Al-Ghazālī names these as patience, gratitude, fear, hope, poverty, renunciation, faith in God’s unity and trust in God. Another triad of states—longing, intimacy, contentment—are presented as corollaries (*thimār*) of love. A further four books discuss intention, sincerity, and truthfulness; vigilance and self-examination; meditation; and remembrance of death and the afterlife.[[15]](#footnote-15)

 For philosophers, this is the part of the book that will seem most unfamiliar. The previous quarter, concentrating on blameworthy qualities, showcased numerous features that philosophers would have no trouble recognising as traits of character that signify vices, such as pride, conceit, envy, miserliness, gluttony, or irascibility. Yet turning now to the content of the fourth quarter, how easy is it to locate its topics within this paradigm? The contents of this part of the book are classed as “salvific” elements (*munjiyāt*), and in the introduction to the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī refers to the “salvific” elements he will be discussing in Part 4 (and similarly the destructive elements discussed in Part 3) as “character traits” (*khuluq*).[[16]](#footnote-16) It may also be worth noting that Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), with whose work al-Ghazālī was well acquainted, drew a similar connection between the two terms in his *Refinement of Character*.[[17]](#footnote-17) Following this lead, some of the most prominent commentators unhesitatingly refer to all these elements as “virtues.”

 Yet scrutinising the topics of the books included in the fourth quarter, it will be clear that many of them stand in an awkward relationship to this conceptual category. “Self-examination” (*muḥāsaba*) and “meditation” (*tafakkur*), for example, represent activities rather than traits of character—by which I mean that this is the understanding that emerges from al-Ghazālī’s own discussion. “Poverty” (*faqr*) is clearly understood by al-Ghazālī to signify an objective state (a state of lacking worldly goods and resources) rather than a subjective state of an agent such as we intuitively take a virtue or a character trait to be. And to call “intention” a virtue would seem to be a pure case of category mistake. Yet the most important case is the class of “virtues” that includes hope, fear, and above all, love.

One of the first to pick up on this was Sherif in his book-length study of al-Ghazālī’s ethics, where he noted that “most of the mystical qualities (in particular fear, hope, and love), are basically passions.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Yet for philosophers (as Sherif noted), the passions are the “stuff of virtue,” and cannot be identified with virtue categorially. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II.5), Aristotle drew a clear distinction between affections or feelings (*pathe*) and virtues. Virtues are dispositions (*hexeis*), and these dispositions are expressed in certain patterns of acting, judging, and also feeling.[[19]](#footnote-19) As one commentator puts it, emotions are not *themselves* states of character; states of character are “ways of standing well or badly toward the emotions.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Standing well toward the emotions involves applying the principle of the mean. Virtues and actions admit of excess and deficiency. We can be angry too little or too much, feel pity too little or too much. But “having these feelings at the right time, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

 While al-Ghazālī observes this principle in his discussion of other traits, in the spiritual “virtues,” as Sherif observes, he jettisons it, in a similar way as he jettisons the theoretical framework of a tripartite faculty psychology that had informed his analysis of other virtues and vices elsewhere in the *Revival.* Following a familiar tradition, most of these virtues and vices had been associated with particular faculties—appetitive, irascible, and rational—and organised in trees of cardinal and subordinate traits. In this part of the *Revival*, this philosophical schema disappears.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Sherif, for his part, seems to accept that al-Ghazālī’s spiritual “virtues” are indeed passions. Yet he does not appear to consider this a problem, and indeed continues to refer to these passions as “virtues” and “states of character.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Yet is it not a problem? To my mind, the fact that some of the most important “virtues” in al-Ghazālī’s scheme, including the *Haupt-*“virtue” of love, cannot be readily located in the right conceptual category raises a serious question about its credentials as a theory of virtue.

 Some of the “spiritual virtues” enumerated by al-Ghazālī could take further discussion, and would require deeper analysis to determine whether they speak to the category of virtue even when they appear not to (repentance is a good example). I will have something more to say about some of these later. It is also clear that some of these “virtues” represent textbook cases of traits. Gratitude and patience are the most obvious examples. Yet the main point of this section can be summarised as follows: *Some of the substantive content of al-Ghazālī’s ethics seems to be of the wrong category*.

*The Terminology of al-Ghazālī’s Account of the Spiritual “Virtues”*

This provides a good way of segueing to a second point. The dual presence of philosophical and Sufi ideas in al-Ghazālī’s ethics, and the uncertain relation between them, were a subsidiary theme in the previous section. This second point takes us straight to the heart of this double influence and the questions it raises about the character of al-Ghazālī’s theoretical framework. I mentioned that al-Ghazālī refers to the destructive and salvific states as “character traits” (*khuluq, akhlāq*). This is a term that appears in a number of different genres of writing on the virtues—in philosophical treatises but also in texts closer to the scriptural tradition, such as the collections of prophetic reports about “noble traits of character” (*makārim al-akhlāq*). In philosophical texts, another key term for virtue is *faḍīla*, also used by al-Ghazālī in the *Scale* and parts of the *Revival*.[[24]](#footnote-24) Yet in this central part of the *Revival,* devoted to the spiritual “virtues,” both of these terms retreat into the background and another set of terms takes the stage. Al-Ghazālī’s terminological framework of choice pivots on the concept of “states” (*ḥāl, aḥwāl*) and “stations” (*maqām, maqāmāt*).

These are terms that betray al-Ghazālī’s debts to Sufism, where they had been long in use. In Sufi usage, as Louis Gardet noted in his EI2 entry on the topic, the distinction between a state and a station can be tracked along two axes, (a) the role of human effort and (b) temporal duration. States are passive (or “received”), and transient; stations are to a certain extent the fruit of personal effort, and enduring.[[25]](#footnote-25) This understanding is mirrored in the account al-Ghazālī gives of the terms in the appendix to the *Revival*, the *Dictation on the Difficulties of the* Revival, and also in a key passage in *On Hope and Fear.* “A characteristic (*waṣf*) is called a station (*maqām*) if it is firmly established and endures, while it is called a state (*ḥāl*) if it is adventitious and transient.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

 Now how do these terms relate to the concepts “character trait” and “virtue”? Surprisingly, al-Ghazālī does not, to my knowledge, offer to clarify their relationship as he seamlessly drops one set and reaches for the other in the *Revival*.[[27]](#footnote-27) Yet on the basis of these elementary definitions, one answer already recommends itself. If we wished to identify one of these two Sufi concepts as the correlate of the concept of virtue or character trait, “station” would be the most natural choice. States seem similar to Aristotle’s affections or feelings, taken as occurrent phenomenological states over which we have no voluntary control. In fact, in many contexts al-Ghazālī applies the term “state” where the reference is clearly to a phenomenological experience we would intuitively identify as an emotion, such as joy (in the context of gratitude) or the painful sense of remorse (in the context of repentance).[[28]](#footnote-28) This conceptual translation finds support in the triadic scheme that al-Ghazālī offers in this part of the *Revival* to explain the relation between the morally relevant elements. Stations, he tells us, consist of cognitions (*maʿārif*), states, and actions; cognitions provide the foundation, from which states flow, and from which actions in turn follow.[[29]](#footnote-29) Stations are thus the most inclusive concept. A natural way to read this scheme is as a re-articulation of the idea that dispositions are expressed in ways of judging, feeling, and acting, cementing the identification of stations with dispositions.

 Yet it then comes as a great surprise to find al-Ghazālī regularly identifying the spiritual “virtues” with *states* in the body of his discussion, even when his account formally opens (as it often does) by referring the virtue to the triadic complex. Discussing patience (*ṣabr*), for example, he cites the triadic scheme and then immediately goes on to state: patience “is only realised through a prior cognition, and through a subsisting state (*ḥāla qāʾima*), which is what ‘patience’ signifies properly speaking (*al-ṣabr ʿalā l-taḥqīq ʿibāra ʿanhā*).”[[30]](#footnote-30) Discussing renunciation (*zuhd*) and moving to qualify what constitutes the relevant state, he writes: “the state is what we call ‘renunciation’ (*ammā al-ḥāl fa-naʿnī bihā mā yusammā zuhdan*),” which involves the transfer of desire from something inferior to something superior.[[31]](#footnote-31) Hope (*rajāʾ*) is defined as the “pleasure and joy in the heart” when one expects something desirable to be realised. “Hope is this sense of joy (*irtiyāḥ*) in the heart,” which, as the context indicates, constitutes the relevant “state” more specifically.[[32]](#footnote-32)

 It is also worth recalling that it is the term “state” that figures in al-Ghazālī’s description of his concern in the last two quarters of the *Revival*, devoted tothe “science of the states of the heart” (*ʿilm aḥwāl al-qulūb*). This results in a sense of conceptual confusion that is well reflected in Jules Janssens’ observation that al-Ghazālī’s simultaneous use of “the technical vocabulary of multiple disciplines, in the present case especially *taṣawwuf* and *falsafa*,” is fraught with ambiguities stemming from his failure to clearly “indicate which meaning he prefers, or . . . is referring to.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Other commentators have puzzled over al-Ghazālī’s usage of these Sufi terms, and sometimes arrived at diametrically opposed solutions. Sherif, for example, takes al-Ghazālī’s usage to deviate from Sufi convention (a poorly substantiated claim in my view), but in any case concludes that “only stations can be regarded as virtues, since stability is an essential characteristic of virtue” and only stations are stable in the required sense.[[34]](#footnote-34) Muhammad Abul Quasem agrees that al-Ghazālī’s usage is sui generis, yet arrives at the exact opposite conclusion via a somewhat mind-bending piece of textual syllogistics:

(1) “many of the mystical qualities are . . . related to the element of *ḥāl*”

(2) “they are also called praiseworthy character-traits”

(3) “a character-trait has already been defined as an established quality of the soul”

(4) “the conclusion, therefore, is that *ḥāl* is an established quality”[[35]](#footnote-35)

This conclusion, of course, would place al-Ghazālī’s usage at clear loggerheads with Sufi convention. We saw the evidence for (1), (2) and (3) above. Yet the two possibilities that Abul Quasem doesn’t appear to contemplate are that some of this textual evidence may be weaker than others, and that al-Ghazālī’s work may contain genuine tensions and inconsistencies. For now, the point made in this section can be summed up as follows: *Some of the categories that al-Ghazālī applies to his material seem to be the wrong category*.

*Virtue in the Future Tense*

I suggested above that some of the content al-Ghazālī includes under “virtue” appears to be of the wrong category, and that some of the concepts he employs to talk about his subject have an awkward relation to the category of virtue. My next point takes up the concern with categorial fit from a different perspective. In certain places of his writing, al-Ghazālī discusses virtue in ways that suggest a radically different conception of what it means to possess a virtue from the one that shapes most philosophical writing on the virtues.

 While theorists of the virtues do not always speak in single voice, the conception of virtue that typifies writing on the subject is one that remains true to the kernel of Aristotle’s discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Virtue is a disposition (*hexis*), that is to say, a stable feature of our psychological reality that disposesus to respond in certain ways (through certain kinds of actions, feelings, etc). Such responses *manifest* the stable underlying structure of the personality.[[36]](#footnote-36) This view comes with a commitment to a robust kind of psychological realism. As Russell puts it, virtues are psychological attributes made up of beliefs, emotions, etc, and as such “real things”: they are “real ways that one’s character and psychological makeup are, or can become.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This psychological realism must ultimately cash out in the concrete physical structure of the mind as modern science reveals it, as Owen Flanagan notes: “Virtues and vices, if they exist, and they do, are instantiated in neural networks . . . [a virtue] has characteristic activating conditions, so that tokens of a situation type activate a neural network, which has been trained-up to be activated by situations of that kind.”[[38]](#footnote-38) An obvious corollary of this kind of realism is that it is possible at any given moment to make true statements about the content of a person’s character in the present tense. “X *is* generous,” “Y *is* an unregenerate egoist.”

 Some of the positions that al-Ghazālī takes in his work suggest that he shares this conception of virtue and the corollary view that it is possible to make true statements concerning a person’s praiseworthy or blameworthy attributes in the present time. This is implicit, for example, in his definition of positive character traits as “stable dispositions” (*hayʾa rāsikha*), which are manifested when the relevant actions “issue with facility and ease.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Yet in other parts of al-Ghazālī’s work, a different and somewhat surprising view emerges. It emerges most distinctly in one specific context, namely where the ethics of self-esteem comes up for consideration. By “ethics of self-esteem” I simply mean the ethical questions that arise concerning the right attitude to the self and its merits. This is a field that is governed by a number of familiar virtues and vices including humility and pride.

 It is easy to see why the issue of what virtue or perfection is, and how perfections might be predicated of the self, would come up in this context. The main ethical defects in this department after all depend on a person’s belief that she possesses certain kinds of praiseworthy features. This is a belief that al-Ghazālī’s confronts as he sets out to tackle these defects, in the books of the *Revival* dealing with pride (*kibr*), conceit (*ʿujb*), the quest for status (*jāh*) and dissimulation (*riyāʾ*). His response to the question, “What is the appropriate way of relating to one’s praiseworthy features?” appears to come down to this: “You’re in fact mistaken in thinking you really possess them.” One of the key arguments he uses to dismantle the cognitive bases of pride and conceit centres on a theological trope that will come into view more fully below, the “conclusion” of life (*khātima*). The reason one should not take pride in one’s presumed perfections is the ever-real risk that one’s life will have a bad conclusion (*sūʾ al-khātima*). Nobody knows what the conclusion of their life will be, hence none of us should rejoice before the curtain falls.[[40]](#footnote-40) This implies that the point is an epistemic one: even though we may possess certain praiseworthy features now, we don’t know whether they will deliver their fruit in the future. Al-Ghazālī sometimes appears to support this interpretation.[[41]](#footnote-41) But elsewhere it becomes clear that the possession of a praiseworthy feature is in fact *reduced* to its “fruit” or future outcome. The clearest evidence is provided in the context of a discussion of why pride or a sense of superiority (*takabbur*) is inappropriate for humans but appropriate for God. Pride, al-Ghazālī explains, must have a proper foundation; and human beings can never be certain of that foundation, since it depends on a future eventuality. “Were a person to judge that he possesses [an] attribute (*ṣifa*) with a definiteness admitting no doubt,” then pride “*would* be appropriate for him and would be a virtue (*faḍīla*) with respect to him. Yet he has no way of knowing this, for this depends on the conclusion, and he does not know what the conclusion will be.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

 From a philosophical perspective, the idea that whether we possess an attribute now depends on something that will occur in the future will seem deeply paradoxical, and at odds with the intuitive type of psychological realism to which the view of virtues as dispositions commits us. Whether we *ascribe* a particular trait to a person of course depends on our observation of how they act and react, and future actions (an act of gross cowardice, say, from someone presumed to be a paragon of courage) may lead us to revise our judgement about the attributes we thought he possessed in the past. Perhaps the moral performance at the conclusion of life should be understood in this light: as *revealing* character, leading us to backdate our revised judgement. Yet on the one hand, there is a question (which I will not try to answer here) whether this final performance *in extremis* is the type of event that would, in ordinary judgements of character, lead us to amend a character assessment. More relevantly, however, this point reflects the fallibility of character judgements as made by human observers. Realism, on the other hand, commits us to the view that there is a fact of the matter as to whether a person possesses a virtue even if we are ignorant of it or err in our judgements.[[43]](#footnote-43) And it is this kind of realism that al-Ghazālī would here appear to flout in making true statements about a person’s present attributes contingent on an unknown future event.

 Summing up the main point: *Traits are not theorised as real psychological features*.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The first three points focused on issues of categorial fit—on ways in which the *substantive qualities* included in the ideals promoted, the *categorial concepts and terminology* used to speak about these qualities, and the *specification* of key concepts (such as that of a virtuous trait), appear orthogonal or at least uncertainly related to the category of virtue as widely understood. My next two points belong to a different class. The general concern they share is that the ways in which al-Ghazālī specifies, or speaks about, character, yield an understanding of character and virtue that seems unusually bare or indeed negative. Character, for all its apparent importance—al-Ghazālī describes the virtues as “gateways to heaven” and the vices as “gateways to hell”—seems to become a vanishing quantity.[[45]](#footnote-45) The concern here is not that we cannot recognise that talk is *of* character in a formal sense; but that the theoretical construct of character as it emerges is too thin.

*The Privative Nature of Virtuous Character*

Philosophers have often agreed that the value of the virtues lies in their contribution to human happiness, but they have disagreed on how this contribution should be understood. Two broad alternatives are the view that the virtues *constitute* happiness, and the view that the virtues *lead to* happiness, with the latter defined independently. Aristotle is often taken to have espoused some version of the first view; David Hume is a prominent exponent of the latter.

 In his writings on virtue (and “virtue”), al-Ghazālī aligns himself unmistakably with the second, instrumentalist view. This instrumentalist position emerges in both the *Scale* and the *Revival*, and it is tied to al-Ghazālī’s overall conception of human happiness as consisting in the fulfilment of the intellectual potentialities of human nature. The human *telos* lies in knowledge of reality and in attaining proximity to God. Our bodily appetites and passions, and our attachments to worldly goods, are impediments to the fulfilment of our *telos*.[[46]](#footnote-46) At the most fundamental level, the virtues represent different forms of mastery over these appetites, passions, and attachments, and they are desired under their description as means to our proper *telos*. The improvement of character is thus classed with “that which is desired for the sake of something else” (*urīda li-ghayrihi*), in contrast to knowledge, which is classed with “that which is desired for its own sake” (*urīda li-nafsihi*).[[47]](#footnote-47)

 Yet what is especially important in the present context is how this view of the *value* of good character translates into a view of its *nature*. Its nature emerges as fundamentally privative, as a statement from the *Scale* makes particularly clear. Ethical improvement “aims at eliminating *that which should not be*,” as “the elimination of *that which should not be* is a condition for the subject to be freed up for *that which should be*,” viz. knowledge.[[48]](#footnote-48) The real, positive perfection is thus the intellectual one. The perfection of character, by contrast, is privative in kind. It involves the removal (*izāla, maḥw*), and then the absence, of certain kinds of drives and desires. “Acquiring” virtue, if one can appropriately apply the term, is not about putting something in, but about taking something out. The best kind of person, morally speaking, is marked not by what he has, but by what he lacks.

This privative profile is brought home in many other passages in the *Revival*, but one of the most notable is in the context of a discussion of the different possible types of perfection in the book *On the Condemnation of Status and Dissimulation*. In his list of perfections, al-Ghazālī includes: (a) being the sole existent (only available to God), (b) power (only *really* available to God), and (c) knowledge (available to both humans and God). Where, on this list, is *moral* perfection? A few lines down, and almost as an afterthought, al-Ghazālī tentatively adds a fourth item to the list, which he designates as “freedom” (*ḥurriyya*). This consists in “liberation from the bondage of appetites and worldly cares”—which is what moral perfection consists in on his account. Thus liberated, one emulates the impassibility of the angels, which are “*not* spurred by appetite and *not* incited by anger.” One also emulates the impassibility of God, who is insusceptible to change or to being affected (*istiḥālat al-taghayyur wa-l-taʾaththur*). The negative character of this perfection, already evident in the above, is underlined again when al-Ghazālī goes on to specify it through a series of private statements. It is a matter of “*not* being changed by appetites and *not* submitting to them (*ʿadam al-taghayyur bi-l-shahawāt wa-ʿadam al-inqiyād lahā*)” and “*not . . .* desiring worldly assets (ʿ*adam…irādat al-asbāb al-dunyawiyya*).” The reason he omitted this perfection from his first list, he explains, is that “it reduces to a form of privation and deficiency (*inna ḥaqīqatahu tarjiʿu ilā ʿadam wa-nuqṣān*).”[[49]](#footnote-49)

 In sum: *Virtue is theorised in overwhelmingly privative terms.*

*The Reductive Structure of Character*

I suggested in the previous section that virtuous character comes across as a privative concept in al-Ghazālī’s ethics. Yet there is a further way of characterising the theoretical construct that emerges from his work. Al-Ghazālī’s conception of the psychological structure of virtue appears unusually bare or reductive.

 Al-Ghazālī’s entire ethical vision as it is spelled out in the *Revival* is predicated on a dichotomy between the body, its passions, and mundane goods on the one hand, and God and the next world on the other. The most fundamental conflict, and choice, in the spiritual life is cast as the conflict and choice between these two attachments. Virtuous character ultimately appears to come down to a single orientation, which can be characterised negatively and positively. Negatively, it involves severing worldly attachments (*ʿalāʾiq al-dunyā*); positively, it involves attaching oneself to otherworldly happiness and to God. As al-Ghazālī clearly states in one place: “The end of these character traits (*akhlāq*) is that the love of the world be uprooted from the soul and the love of God take root in it.”[[50]](#footnote-50) This dichotomous, either/or view appears to rest on a particular understanding of the facts of human psychology, as a remark in *On Poverty and Renunciation* suggests. “Perfection (*kamāl*) consists in the heart’s not turning to anything other than the beloved, whether in hatred or in love; for just as two loves cannot be simultaneously present in the heart, so also hatred and love cannot be simultaneously present in the heart.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Perfection is here clearly identified with an affective or conative state; and the claim is that it is impossible for two such states to co-exist in the human psyche.

 This dichotomy and the reductive view of character it grounds can be tracked throughout the *Revival*, across the analyses that al-Ghazālī offers of particular “virtues” and vices. The reduction to this underlying structure is more obvious in some cases than in others. Vices such as miserliness, pride, or gluttony, are clearly problematic insofar as they embody an attachment to mundane goods (respectively wealth, power, and physical pleasure) and the dominance of animal passions. Similarly, a virtue such as “self-control” (*ṣabr*) is directly theorised in terms of an ability to control appetite or desire (*shahwa*) and conquer the drive of passion (*bāʿith al-hawā*) through the religious drive (*bāʿith al-dīn*).[[52]](#footnote-52) With other virtues, the underlying structure lies a little lower beneath the surface. Gratitude (*shukr*), for example, involves not merely acknowledging a benefit, verbally or otherwise, but rather “using this benefit to realise the purpose it was intended for,” which is fundamentally the obedience of God; and this requires overturning “the sovereignty of appetite.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The qualities that encapsulate this dichotomous view are most obviously renunciation (*zuhd*)—which al-Ghazālī defines as a transfer of desire *away* from the mundane world (*raghba ʿan*), as the object of inferior value, and *toward* the next world and God (*raghba fī*), as the object of superior value[[54]](#footnote-54)—and love of God (*maḥabba*). In this regard, these two qualities would seem to represent the master virtues of al-Ghazālī’s ethics. All virtue reduces to renunciation of the world and love of God, which are but two sides of a single motivational structure.

 This reductive view of the structure of virtue is starkly illustrated in a discussion that takes place in the book *On Fear and Hope*, where al-Ghazālī unpacks his view of an important theological topos, the “conclusion” (*khātima*) of life. The moment of death, it emerges, is the most portentous moment in a human life, which has the power to determine its future course. If human acts are judged by their intentions, human lives are judged by their conclusions, and more specifically, by the final instant that brings the entire play to a close, which is when the human heart gives its most fateful performance. If, at the moment the soul is being taken away, either *doubt or unbelief* or *desire for something worldly* enters the heart, this becomes a barrier that prevents a person from entering paradise. The heart is as it were frozen in the rictus of death; the psychological death mask taken at the moment of rigor mortis is the one that remains for all time. A person’s entire lifetime of moral effort is in a sense a preparation for this one moral performance. “All the acts of an entire lifetime are forfeit if one does not escape unharmed at the final breath.”[[55]](#footnote-55) This striking picture invites many questions, among which perhaps the most interesting is whether it supports or undermines a belief in the value of character. Yet the main point to focus on is what it says about the content of character. Doubt and unbelief, and desire for worldly goods, respectively correspond to the intellectual and moral aspects of human perfection. Once again, moral perfection is reduced to a basic motivational structure determined by one of two mutually exclusive desires: desire of bodily and mundane goods versus desire for God and the next world.

 The point I have been framing as a question of motivational structure can be put equally instructively as a point about the virtuous person’s reasons. As Daniel Russell notes, “to have a virtue is (among other things) to be characteristically responsive to certain sorts of reasons” or considerations.[[56]](#footnote-56) These reasons, he suggests, provide the most promising way of individuating virtues, and explaining what makes generosity, justice, courage, or magnanimity *distinct* virtues. The kinds of things one cares about, to rephrase Russell’s point, vary from virtue to virtue. To care about justice is not the same as to care about courage or generosity—which is also why it seems possible for a person to possess one virtue but lack another. It is this structural distinctness that is reflected, for example, in Aristotle’s richly textured portrait of the virtuous person in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the plural traits that make up his character, each with its own distinctive sphere of operation. The Ghazālīan virtuous agent appears to be responsive to a single set of reasons, and to care about a single set of considerations: whether something involves or constitutes an attachment to mundane and body-based goods, or whether it involves or constitutes an attachment to God and the afterlife. Although, as Russell points out, the local or low-level characteristic reasons of individual virtues ultimately connect at a higher level, since “all ascend to a general conception of the place of the virtues in one’s life,” in al-Ghazālī’s ethics low-level reasons appear to reduce almost frictionlessly to high-level reasons.[[57]](#footnote-57)

To sum up: *The structure of character is theorised in highly reductive terms.*

*The Unsituatedness of the “Virtues”*

The last point I want to consider concerns a feature of al-Ghazālī’s account of the spiritual “virtues” that is rather harder to categorise. It is a feature that places his account at a strange angle to a dominant way of thinking about the virtues—so dominant, in fact, that I am not sure whether it has come up for explicit comment in philosophical discussions. In one regard, it forms a natural corollary of the basic conception of what a virtue *is* that was mentioned earlier. A virtue, we saw, is usually understood as a disposition, which is manifested in certain patterns of acting, feeling, judging, and so on. The concept of a disposition logically presupposes a contrast between a person possessing a disposition and that disposition being manifested or activated—a contingent manifestation occurring in particular circumstances and in response to particular occasions. Thus, a person who is generous will manifest that aspect of their character when occasions arise that provide a choice to respond in either a generous or a non-generous way, for example when a friend turns to them for financial help. An honest person will manifest their honesty when testifying under oath or when they are faced with the option of lying instead of disclosing an inconvenient truth.

As Christian Miller puts it, central to dispositions is that they “are sensitive to certain *stimulus events* or *stimulus conditions* specific to the particular disposition.” This is analogous to the way a “vase has the disposition of being fragile, which makes it sensitive to being hit by a baseball, but not to the color of the baseball . . . Because of the way dispositions work, certain events and facts about a situation or environment will end up being relevant to a given disposition, whereas others will not. It is also common to talk of stimulus events *triggering* characteristic *manifestations* of dispositions.” Character traits thus “serve as *causal mediators* between their various stimuli and manifestation events.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

 It is this idea of dispositions as being stimulated by particular events or aspects of a situation that I want to highlight. In part, this is a purely conceptual point, as just noted. But it also mediates an important and more substantive picture of what it means to lead the life of virtue in the grainy context of everyday reality. Virtue, on this picture, is expressed in a sequence of particular, contingent responses to the particular, contingent situations and predicaments that confront us as we go about our daily lives. It is anchored in our transactions with the evolving contingencies of the social and natural world that surrounds us. This not only concretises the idea of what it means to live virtuously. By locating it in the finite context of everyday reality, it also implicitly places certain kinds of limitations on this idea. The emphasis on virtue as a negotiation of contingent particulars is also reflected in a model of moral reasoning which goes back to Aristotle and enjoys broad support among contemporary philosophers of the virtues. Moral reasoning is not about following general rules but about sensitive negotiation of particulars, “fitting one’s choice to the complex requirements of a concrete situation, taking all of its contextual features into account.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Moral judgement, it can thus be said, “depends on perception.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

 Against this background (which I’ve had to spell out at slightly greater length), it is possible to explain what makes al-Ghazālī’s account of the spiritual “virtues” highly unusual. In contrast to most of the vice-virtue sets discussed earlier in the *Revival*—such as gluttony, miserliness, or irascibility, and their opposing virtues—it seems extremely difficult to approach most of the “virtues” featured in the last quarter on the terms outlined above. Many of these “virtues” are ways of responding to one very specific aspect of reality, namely God, viewed from different perspectives. Love is a virtuous response to God’s beauty. Trust is a virtuous response to God’s wisdom, power, and mercy, and to the fact that God is ultimately the sole agent in the universe. Vigilance, if we follow Muhammad Abul Quasem’s construction of it as a virtue, is a virtuous response to the fact of God’s omniscience and his knowledge of one’s inner and outer being.[[61]](#footnote-61) Gratitude is a virtuous response to God’s beneficence (expressed at every moment, and for us, beginning from the very fact of being alive). On a slightly different mould, renunciation is a virtuous response to the evaluative fact that the present world is inferior to the next world and the enjoyment of God’s proximity.

In all these cases, the “virtues” are appropriate responses to unchanging features of metaphysical reality. There is no isolable occasion for their exercise, no determinate and delimited situation in which they are especially called for, and which can serve as a “stimulus” for their activation. They are *always* called for. Their occasions, if we can still use the term, are always present. There is no time when it is *not* appropriate to be loving, vigilant, grateful, trusting, or renunciant.

 This might seem to suggest that the main issue is simply a special case of the philosophical problem sometimes called the “demandingness of morality”—the problem posed when morality appears to ask too much of us, at the expense of goods that lie outside it. Al-Ghazālī would not have thought of this as a problem. There are no competing values outside these ethico-spiritual ones that are entitled to respect; other values (such as the needs of the body, or social needs) only command respect insofar as they enable us to realise these ones. And there is no moment at which these ethico-spiritual values do not make demands of us.[[62]](#footnote-62) Yet commitment to this maximising view is compatible with recognising that certain kinds of conflict or competition can arise *within* the ethical domain. Time spent cultivating or exercising one virtue, for example, is time taken away from another. Time spent experiencing one virtuous emotion is time spent *not* experiencing another. Manifestations of the virtues and virtuous experiences of emotions compete with each other for finite resources of time and psychological space. Traditionally, resolving such conflicts and taking decisions about how to balance different demands has been considered to be the role of *phronesis*, which ensures that feelings and actions are in accordance with the mean. What makes an emotion *virtuous*—and thereby marks the presence of a *virtue*—is that it observes the mean, being felt “at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way,” in Aristotle’s already-quoted words.[[63]](#footnote-63) In his discussion of the spiritual “virtues,” al-Ghazālī maintains a pointed silence concerning the principle of the mean, the role of practical wisdom, the issue of potential conflict or competition, and more broadly questions about the concrete anchoring and realisation of these qualities in the finite expanse of everyday life.[[64]](#footnote-64) It is the underdevelopment of this theoretical infrastructure, combined with the “unsituated” nature of the qualities he discusses (the omnipresence of their “occasion”), that generate a doubt as to whether the talk here is of virtue as we know it.

 Summing up the main point of this section: *The “virtues” are unsituated responses that are not anchored in the structure of human life and practical reasoning.*

**Re-Evaluations**

In the above, I traced out some of the chief aspects of al-Ghazālī’s ethical thought that provoke a doubt about the appropriateness of identifying his thought as an ethics concerned with virtue. These considerations, it may be noted, stand in somewhat uncertain relations to each other; not *all* of them, for example, could be simultaneously accepted as accurate descriptions of al-Ghazālī’s scheme.[[65]](#footnote-65) They are also, in themselves, a mixed sort. All of them concern high-level features of al-Ghazālī’s thinking about character and what we may or may not call “virtue,” but some align more clearly with the basic conceptual or categorial concern I outlined in the beginning, which bears on the fundamental question whether al-Ghazālī has a theory of virtue in the sense of being about something we may recognise as “virtue.” For some of these points (the last is the best example), one of the most pertinent questions is precisely whether they are sufficiently central to our conception of virtue to count as categorial. This, of course, foregrounds the deeper question that my references to “we” and “our” invite, concerning the perspective from which these observations are made and to which these features of al-Ghazālī’s account are declared to bear an awkward or orthogonal relationship.

I have been open about the fact that this perspective is one informed by philosophical ways of thinking about the virtues, past and present. Yet one thing I particularly want to underline here is that the above list of considerations—a list which is not, I should add, entirely complete—was not the result of approaching al-Ghazālī with a kind of “rulebook” of how virtue ethics should be done, and blowing the whistle upon discovering that his account deviates from this rulebook. It emerged from an attempt to reflectively articulate a more immediate sense that, when one confronts al-Ghazālī’s work with a view to how it might be placed in conversation with other philosophical approaches to the virtues, something catches. It was the result of trying to clarify an unprompted sense of doubt.

Yet with these considerations now in the open, it is possible to take another critical step back and ask: Do these considerations offer us *good* reasons for disqualifying al-Ghazālī’s ethics as a theory of virtue? The issues raised in the previous stage of my discussion are extremely large, and each of them deserves a study in its own right. I cannot hope to resolve them in my present space, and I will only try to adumbrate some of the grounds on which the force of these considerations might be questioned. Few of these considerations, in fact, appear unequivocal on closer scrutiny. I will focus on a handful of indicative points, which can help suggest the direction a fuller discussion might take. These points will also pave the way for a more holistic assessment of the question I have been pursuing.

*The Privative Nature and Reductive Structure of Virtuous Character*

It is convenient to start from these points, and take them together. To begin with, it may already be clear that these two points are in tension with each other. Even a reductive view of the structure of character is after all a positive view. Focusing on the “privative” aspect first, there are in fact a number of locations where al-Ghazālī pledges himself to a more positive view of what virtue involves. A number of times he speaks of stocking or “populating” (*ʿammara*) the heart with praiseworthy traits, an achievement that first rests on “emptying” it of blameworthy ones.[[66]](#footnote-66) Perhaps the clearest context that evokes a more positive view of virtuous character is al-Ghazālī’s aesthetic understanding of virtue, an understanding he spells out at particular length in the book *On Love*. Virtue is beautiful, and the quest to acquire virtue is thus a quest to “adorn and beautify [one’s] interior (*taḥliyyat bāṭinihi wa-tajmīluhu bi-l-faḍīla*).”[[67]](#footnote-67)

The connection is not unambiguous, as al-Ghazālī sometimes appears to cling to a negative view of virtue in the midst of expounding on its aesthetic character.[[68]](#footnote-68) Yet perhaps the most relevant point here is one that can be made philosophically before being made textually. Because to understand virtue in terms of the elimination of unwanted appetites and desires (which “should not be”), of “*not* being changed by appetites,” “*not* submitting to them,” and “*not . . .* desiring worldly assets” is merely to say that virtue is *manifested* in an omission or privation. But this privative manifestation must be explained by reference to a state of character understood in more positive terms—to a positive psychological structure. This seems even clearer once we take into account that al-Ghazālī gives his readers little reason to think that full virtue, hence the complete privation of unwanted appetites and desires, can be achieved by most human beings in this life. An ongoing agonistic relationship to the animal parts of the self will almost always be necessary. This is reflected in al-Ghazālī’s description of the virtues and the vices, in the *Scale*, as respectively “dispositions of domination” (*hayʾāt istilāʾiyya*)and “dispositions of subservience” (*hayʾāt inqiyādiyya*)—that is, relative to appetites.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The worry about al-Ghazālī’s privative view of character is perhaps in part the displacement of another worry, concerning the explicitly instrumental and subordinate value he assigns to character. For al-Ghazālī, it is certainly clear that moral perfection plays second fiddle to intellectual perfection. It is our intellectual achievements that al-Ghazālī principally encourages us to see as retaining in the afterlife. Whether our moral as against cognitive features form part of our identity in the otherworldly context is far from obvious.[[70]](#footnote-70)

If moral virtue is defined in terms of an attachment to God and the next world, the positive answer to this question would seem almost trivially true. This brings us to the issues raised by al-Ghazālī’s reductive understanding of virtue (and virtuous reasons). I contrasted this understanding with the one that emerges from Aristotle’s work, and from contemporary thinking about virtuous reasons and the individuation of the virtues. Yet the most obvious point to make here is that this comparison was too partial, and left out of view a rather richer range of philosophical approaches. The relationship between different virtues, and the reason-giving they involve, is a complex one, and philosophers ancient and modern have taken a lively interest in it. Among ancient philosophers, a significant number, including Aristotle,took the view that certain relations of dependence or entailment hold between apparently distinct virtues. A more radical version of this view was that having one entails having them all (the thesis usually known as the “unity of the virtues”). An important subset of ancient philosophers, which notably included Socrates and the Stoics, took an even stronger position, arguing that virtue is a single unified condition, and that, as John Cooper puts it, “there [is] really no set of distinct and separate virtuous qualities at all, but at bottom only a single one,” with specific virtues representing merely “distinguishable aspects or immediate effects of [this] unitary ‘virtue’.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

Placed in this light, al-Ghazālī’s reductive understanding of virtue may look rather less alien. An interesting and more substantive task would therefore be to compare his understanding with these conceptions. More broadly, this suggests that the conceptual continuity we establish between al-Ghazālī’s ethics and philosophical approaches to the virtues may depend on the part of the philosophical tradition we choose to focus on; and it signals the importance of taking an inclusive view of this tradition. A more inclusive view would also uncover other parallels (how far, for example, does al-Ghazālī’s privative conception of virtue lie from the ideal of a-patheia among Stoic thinkers?). If one is slow to cultivate an inclusive view in this case, in considering al-Ghazālī’s reductive conception of virtue, it may be wondered whether that is because this is another case of displaced concern—where the real concern is with al-Ghazālī’s overtly supernaturalistspecification of this conception, and with how hospitable this makes his ethics to philosophical engagement and appropriation.

*Virtue in the Future Tense*

Al-Ghazālī’s anti-realist reduction of virtue to a future outcome can be taken as a reflection of two important things: (a) how he believed people *ought* to regard the value of virtue (recall the instrumentalist view of virtue), and (b) how he believed most people he was addressing *in fact* regard the value of virtue. In the context of the religious metaphysics he shared with his readers, perfections have powers—not simply in terms of what they cause us to do or feel (the philosophical conception of the power of virtue) but in terms of what they cause us to receive in otherworldly bliss. Since, taken as a thesis about the nature of virtue, this anti-realist position is clearly inconsistent with the view of virtue as a stable disposition that al-Ghazālī articulates elsewhere, maybe the best interpretive decision here is the most charitable one: to bury this piece of textual evidence and assume it does not represent al-Ghazālī’s considered position. This evidence would not carry as much weight were it not for the environment of doubt constituted by other evidence.

*Virtues as Unsituated Responses*

One way of querying my portrait of the spiritual “virtues” as perpetually mandated unsituated responses to unchanging reality might be by arguing that this picture is partial. The “occasion” of these “virtues” is not God’s reality, but God’s reality as this intersects with some facet of human life. For instance, in the case of trust, it is not merely God’s status as the sole true agent, as wise, powerful and merciful, that creates the context for the exercise of a virtuous experience of trust. It is this combined with the fact of being faced with the possibility of some specific action, which opens up the space for viewing or relating to one’s agency in different ways. Similarly, it is not the evaluative reality that “the mundane world is inferior to the next” that we should reasonably see as the relevant “occasion” for renunciation, but some concrete context in which we are faced with the option of choosing the next world over this one. It is these circumstances that provide the more direct stimulus or triggering condition. One difficulty with this view is that these “situations” are not delimited, to put it mildly. We are *always* being faced with the possibility of some action, we are *always* being faced with some worldly good we could prefer over an otherworldly one, by virtue of simply being in the world. (This is especially true if you follow al-Ghazālī’s maximising view of morality, in which morality has no gaps or work-play distinctions.) These generic possibilities are as much part of our current reality as God’s attributes are part of his.

 Is this a fatal difficulty? It is a question that seems well worth exploring. Exploring it would involve taking a closer look at the key assumptions that underpin philosophical thinking about these issues. Even though, as I have said, the emphasis on situations, and on the dramaticcharacter of the manifestation of the virtues,[[72]](#footnote-72) permeates philosophical thinking on the subject, this emphasis squares far more comfortably with some virtues than others. If we think there are virtues that govern self-esteem, for example, it is not obvious that they could be accommodated to this model without artificiality. Similarly, the emphasis on situations as providing discrete dramatic occasions for exercises of the virtues overlooks the fact that virtue is often expressed in *seeking out* relevant situations, and in recognising virtue-relevant situations even when they do not confront one with the immediate dramatic force of a baseball hitting a vase (to recall Miller’s example). (This points to the potentially misleading effects of comparing virtues to the dispositions of physical objects.) It also overlooks the fact that there are countless occasions—not necessarily turning up on one’s doorstep, but out there to be sought out—that create a potential demand for virtuous responses. There is always someone who could form an appropriate object for our compassion or generosity, always something for which to experience gratitude. How unusual is the diffuse construction of the “situation” I just experimented with reading into al-Ghazālī’s work—which potentially creates a constant demand for the virtues—once we take this into account?

 The existence of potentially infinite occasions for the virtues, set against the finitude of human life and resources, evidently requires some kind of choice. For most philosophers, making this kind of choice would be the better part of practical wisdom, providing prime testimony of why practical wisdom is indispensable to the virtuous life. The more stubborn difficulty with al-Ghazālī’s account is to be found here, and in the underdevelopment of theoretical infrastructure it diagnoses. This leads us to the last set of points.

*The Substantive Content and Terminology of the Spiritual “Virtues”*

I have left this pair of interconnected points for last, as they are the ones that seem to me to pose the deepest and most complex difficulties. The first point came down to the observation that a number of al-Ghazālī’s supposed “virtues” don’t appear to be virtues in the familiar sense; the second to the observation that al-Ghazālī’s theoretical terms for these “virtues” don’t appear to pick out virtues. The two points intersected in this claim: a number of al-Ghazālī’s supposed “virtues” appear to be emotions; and al-Ghazālī’s theoretical terms for these supposed “virtues” (viz, *aḥwāl*) appear to pick out occurrent phenomenological experiences that are co-extensive with emotions either in whole or in large part.

 The second of these issues looks like the one that runs least deep, and that should be the easiest to clear up. Al-Ghazālī himself often expressed impatience with verbal disputes: so long as we know what we’re talking about, there’s “no need to quarrel over words” (*lā mushāḥḥa fī l-alfāẓ baʿda maʿrifat al-maʿānī*).[[73]](#footnote-73) There are different routes one could follow here. One would be to adopt a *via media* between the views taken by Sherif and Abul Quasem, and conclude that al-Ghazālī employs the term *ḥāl* equivocally, sometimes using it in the Sufi sense (where it refers to a transient involuntary occurrent state) and sometimes using it in the sense of a more stable disposition.[[74]](#footnote-74) Evidence for this can be gleaned in various locations, but one of the most compelling is in the context of an important discussion that takes place in *On Patience and Gratitude* where al-Ghazālī sets out to explain the relation between states (*aḥwāl*), cognitions, and actions in his triadic scheme. His account mobilises a number of ideas rooted in philosophical ethics that he has elsewhere articulated in clear reference to character traits. These include the idea that moral virtue (here *ḥāl*) is a means to intellectual illumination and hence to happiness, and the (Aristotelian) idea that moral virtue (here *ḥāl*) is acquired by habituating oneself to the relevant actions; in the same context, al-Ghazālī brings up specific qualities, such as miserliness, which represent textbook cases of character traits.[[75]](#footnote-75) Philosophical ideas elsewhere decked out in the language of virtue and character are thus re-clothed here in the language of states, making a strong case for the equivalence between the two sets of concepts.

Moreover, “state” is al-Ghazālī’s term of choice for referring to the subject of the second half of the *Revival*, dedicated to the “science of the states of the heart” and covering both destructive and salvific qualities.[[76]](#footnote-76) It is not only that he describes the same part of the *Revival* as focusing on “character traits” (*akhlāq*), as noted earlier—it is hard to know how much weight to attach to isolated pieces of nomenclatural evidence like these—but that in doing so he refers to elements that we can clearly identify as character traits (all those recognisable vices treated in the third quarter, such as miserliness, gluttony, envy, etc). This combines with a rather broader consideration: given the Sufi understanding of “states” as transient and unwilled experiences, it is simply hard to see how al-Ghazālī could have seen his entire ethical project as centring on these. Whatever other doubts we may have, it makes no sense to doubt his interest in promoting lasting moral change (and change that lies in our voluntary control). And we certainly know from both his philosophical definitions of “character trait” and “virtue” and his Sufi definition of “station,” if from nothing else, that he had a reflective concept of *that*.[[77]](#footnote-77)

To this proposal I would add another point, which may help explain al-Ghazālī’s seemingly wayward use of the term “state” to refer to spiritual “virtues” even where the former term appears to denote a meaning closer to its conventional Sufi usage. This usage may in fact reflect a tension between al-Ghazālī’s more reflective rigorous application of terms and a more ordinary or widespread type of usage. Al-Ghazālī often opens his discussions of the spiritual “virtues” with an explicit statement that identifies these “virtues” with the tripartite complex of the “station,” which comprises cognitions, states, and actions—and which as such is presumably stable once properly acquired. Thus, repentance for example is made up of the *knowledge* that sins cause great harm, the *state of emotional pain* at the thought of losing something desirable (which is what is called “remorse,” *nadam*), and the *action* of abandoning and avoiding sins and redressing past ones. The term “repentance,” he writes, “is applied to the aggregate (*majmūʿihā*).” Yet he continues: “it is often applied to the element of remorse alone.” A prophetic dictum is cited to illustrate this usage (“repentance is remorse”).[[78]](#footnote-78) This shows al-Ghazālī distinguishing between two kinds of usages, with the former representing the theoretically normative one. That al-Ghazālī takes a normative view of the application of these terms is made especially clear in his discussion of hope, which he insists is *only* properly applied when hope is properly justified (otherwise it is called delusion or folly).[[79]](#footnote-79) In ordinary usage, by contrast, the terms of the “virtues” may be used to signify only one part of this triadic complex, often the “state.” Even from our own linguistic perspective, the idea that a single term may be used to refer to psychological elements that fall in distinct conceptual categories seems perfectly intelligible. A good example is “compassion,” which can refer both to a state of feeling, and to a state of character. The point seems even more intelligible vis-à-vis al-Ghazālī’s subject matter, given that many of his targets, such as hope, fear, and love, would be naturally taken to refer to feelings in ordinary usage; to view them as virtues would require an education of this ordinary starting point. Even then, feelings will retain a natural epistemological primacy over traits, to the extent that stable traits are ascribed to people by first observing the feelings they express and the actions they perform.

More work would need to be done to establish this proposal more firmly, and to evaluate additional or alternative interpretations. Al-Ghazālī’s use of Sufi technical terms, more generally, requires far more extensive investigation. Yet this brings me to the other point I mentioned, concerning the content with which al-Ghazālī populates his list of the spiritual “virtues.” I suggested above that there is a way of construing al-Ghazālī’s Sufi terminology that permits us to assimilate terms that ostensibly refer to transient phenomenological states to the philosophical category of virtue, thereby supporting our ability to say that al-Ghazālī is talking *about* virtue. Yet this point rests in large part on considerations about the formal terminology al-Ghazālī’s uses. This leaves open the possibility that the substantive things that he uses this terminology to talk *about*—or a significant fraction of these things—may resist being assimilated into the category of virtue; and this holds true even if we recognise, less formally, al-Ghazālī’s fundamental interest in fostering *lasting* change. There’s “no need to quarrel over words”—but that’s if we *are* sure we know what we’re talking about, and that we’re talking about the same thing.

Now it is certainly hard to deny that some of the contents of Ghazālī’s list of the spiritual “virtues” do not fit into the category of the virtues. Yet first of all, it is worth noting that this problem is not particular to this part of his discussion. His discussion of the “destructive” qualities in the third part of the book includes such topics as excessive speech, making false promises, lying, slander, or backbiting, which we would also struggle to accommodate under the same category. A simple conclusion to draw from this is that the *Revival* is a more motley narrative universe than al-Ghazālī himself encourages us to think. The compass that al-Ghazālī volunteers to help readers navigate this universe—naming his subject in quarters 3 and 4 as “character traits” or “states”—is simply too narrow, we may say, and breeds false expectations. But to make an obvious point, just because a description doesn’t apply to the whole, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t apply to a part. Even if it is the case that not everything that the *Revival* places under the heading of destructive and salvific elements represents a virtue or a vice, it is enough for our purposes if a sufficient subset does. More constructively, our task should be to try to come up with a better compass, one that provides a more faithful reflection of the complexity of the *Revival’*scontent and concerns.

Yet that still presupposes that a sufficient subset of its content can indeed be identified as concerned with matters of virtue and character. The main problem, as I have said, arises especially in connection with the spiritual “virtues.” One possible strategy here is to look for ways of interpreting or reconstructing some of the more unwieldly elements al-Ghazālī places on his list that would allow us to accommodate them to the paradigm of virtue. This move, which reflects a commitment to upholding al-Ghazālī’s own compass to his subject, has been made by certain commentators. To take one example, both Sherif and Abul Quasem propose ways of reading al-Ghazālī’s treatment of poverty that orient attention away from the objective state of lack (al-Ghazālī’s apparent focus) to the internal attitudes involved, which might enable us to construe poverty as a disposition.[[80]](#footnote-80)

The most problematic case, and the most stubborn in my view, is those “virtues” that appear to be identified with passions, a family that includes hope, fear, and most importantly, love—the flagship of al-Ghazālī’s ethical vision. In some of these cases, as I have indicated, al-Ghazālī’s treatment can be seen to have a normative dimension. Hope, for example, is answerable to certain justificatory standards. Similarly, present (if more implicit) in al-Ghazālī’s account of love is a normative conception of the objects that *merit* that response. Yet this justificatory dimension is not enough to secure their status as traits, rather than emotions. It is a familiar part of the “grammar” of emotions that they are subject to critical or rational assessment. It is true, too, that al-Ghazālī (*pace* Sherif’s earlier point) in factinvokes the concept of the mean in connection with at least some of these cases; hope and fear are the best examples.[[81]](#footnote-81) But again, is this enough to secure their place in the category of virtue, taken alone? One can perfectly well criticise someone for feeling too much or too little hope, too much or too little fear, without this implying anything about the relation of these feelings to their stable character.

 Commenting on al-Ghazālī’s reticence about the mean in his treatment of the spiritual “virtues,” Abul Quasem states that “the reason is that the use of the mean for otherworldly purposes is obviously inappropriate to all mystical virtues”—so obvious, in fact, that he does not clarify this gnomic statement any further.[[82]](#footnote-82) Yet why is the mean inappropriate? Is it because there can be no reprehensible *excess* in connection with these “virtues”: the more love, trust, renunciation, gratitude, etc, we exhibit, the better? This would be consistent with al-Ghazālī’s maximal view of morality, as I suggested earlier. Yet as I also noted earlier, it reflects an inattention to questions of conflict and competition that diagnoses the underdevelopment of a certain kind of theoretical infrastructure, including a more explicit concern with and theoretical articulation of the role of practical reasoning. And the relevant point here is that this infrastructure would have made it easier for us to situate the topics of al-Ghazālī’s concern as virtues rather than emotions—as stable and integrated parts of a person’s character manifested in the concrete temporal expanse of a particular life.[[83]](#footnote-83) Overall, there is little in al-Ghazālī’s discussion that thematises the endurance of these passionate responses, and that encourages us to think of them as stable features of inner life. While we can ultimately make al-Ghazālī’s terminology face in the right direction, as I suggested above, the absence of a strong terminology and robust theoretical framework in which these features are unambiguously and explicitly articulated as stable dispositions certainly does not help.[[84]](#footnote-84)

**Lessons of Doubt**

Each of the points I have considered raises complex questions, and my brief forays, to repeat, should not be seen as attempts to fully resolve them. Part of my aim in the above was to showcase their complexities, and to tentatively pick out the contours of a fuller treatment. Yet my main aim was to offer a more nuanced approach to the doubt I articulated along several axes in section 2. The dialectical structure I adopted for my discussion may seem like a stiff and untidy artifice. This kind of structure provides a truer representation of the uncertain course inquiry often follows before certainties crystallise. While we often clear away these antecedents in the interests of an integrated narrative and a unified viewpoint, it may sometimes be fruitful to publicly preserve them, especially where the issues are complex and certainties seem more elusive. In this case, I hope this structure can be taken as an expression of good faith, and of a commitment to genuine debate.

So at the end of this exercise, where do we stand with regard to the questions we have been pursuing? My discussion throughout has been steered by a simple question: Does al-Ghazālī have a theory of virtue, in the sense of talking about something we may recognise as virtue? This question holds the key to establishing the most basic continuity of concepts required if we wish to place al-Ghazālī’s ethics in dialogue with philosophical approaches to the virtues. Many of the points outlined in the previous section (section 3) offered ways of disarming the scepticism articulated in the previous stage of my discussion (section 2).[[85]](#footnote-85) Yet my discussion did not, it may be noticed, disarm all of the points mentioned previously. Taking everything together, it seems clear that we can, with reasonable confidence, describe al-Ghazālī as talking *about* virtue at least in part. The degree of confidence depends on the parts of his corpus we happen to be considering. It is far stronger when considering the *Scale* than the *Revival*, and far stronger when considering the *Revival*’s discussion of the vices than the virtues. Some of the doubts raised by the latter cases couldin principle be smoothed away through targeted interpretive moves, as I suggested above. For example, we can come up with plausible ways of relating al-Ghazālī’s Sufi vocabulary to the conceptual categories of virtue and character. We can also build more nuanced maps of his ethical output that enable us to be more sensitive to the plural ethical concerns that animate it. Maybe, too, we can do some reconstructive work of our own, which helps anchor his ideas more firmly in a virtue-ethical framework.

All of these moves require some type of building work on our part; and to that extent all of them involve acknowledging that certain features of al-Ghazālī’s ethics make such building work necessarily, if the continuity at issue is to be established. The doubt I have been considering does not, after all, arise in a void. And one of its most constructive functions consists precisely in what it tells us regarding the character of al-Ghazālī’s writing, and the real features of his work to which it calls attention. One such feature concerns the level of its internal integration. The coalescence of Sufi and philosophical ideas in al-Ghazālī’s work has often come up for scholarly comment, as already mentioned. At an earlier time, it gave rise to a specific debate about al-Ghazālī’s evolving relationship to the *Scale of Action*, and about whether he rejected the philosophical ideas expressed there after his spiritual crisis in 488/1095.[[86]](#footnote-86) The consensus now is that he did not, and that many of these ideas continue to be active in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, albeit in subtler forms conditioned by the more composite intellectual framework of this work, and by the strong influence of Sufi ideas in particular. This influence can be tracked in many places across the *Revival*, but it expresses itself most distinctly in the last quarter, devoted to the spiritual “virtues.” Although it would be highly misleading to talk about a “Sufi part” of the *Revival* and a “philosophical part,” it seems to be a fact that each type of influence is not expressed equally strongly in all parts of the *Revival*. It also seems to be a fact that these two influences, and the intellectual paradigms they constitute, are not placed by al-Ghazālī in a crystal-clear relationship. They are not, in a word, fully integrated with each other.

The fact that we must resort to our own interpretive wiles to provide an account of the relation between Sufi “states” and “stations” on the one hand and philosophical “dispositions,” “virtues,” and “traits of character” on the other is a symptom of this lack of integration, and of al-Ghazālī’s abstention from offering an unambiguous high-level account of this relation. Another symptom is the conspicuous absence of certain kinds of bridges between different parts of al-Ghazālī’s discussion. A rather remarkable example of this is provided by book 2 of the third quarter of the *Revival*, the *Discipline of the Soul.* This is a book in which the philosophical paradigm expresses itself especially strongly. It is here that we find philosophically inspired definitions of character, philosophically inspired discussions of its education, and philosophically inspired taxonomies of the virtues and the vices (overlapping to a great extent with the ones given in the *Scale*) structured around the type of philosophical psychology also described in the *Scale*. In these taxonomies, remarkably, the “virtues” discussed in the last quarter of the book—representing the Sufi-influenced spiritual “virtues”—*make no appearance*.[[87]](#footnote-87) From the other end, when al-Ghazālī comes to these “virtues” later, he makes no contact with the theoretical framework deployed in this book. He says little, notably, concerning how these “virtues” are to be located against the philosophical psychology detailed earlier.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Al-Ghazālī’s extraordinary intellectual capabilities make it natural to credit, with Taneli Kukkonen, the existence of a “unitary account” and a “theoretical backdrop” that would unify “al-Ghazālī’s seemingly disjointed accounts,” and to strive to locate that account.[[89]](#footnote-89) Yet insofar as we as readers have to piece this unitary account together, it reflects the imperfect integration that characterises al-Ghazālī ethical corpus. It also reflects (what is related but distinct) the imperfect articulation of his theoretical framework and the limitations in the analytical character of his discussion. This applies especially to his treatment of the spiritual “virtues” in the last part of the *Revival*, which arguably represents the heartland of his ethics. Does al-Ghazālī have a theory of virtue? Ultimately there may be virtue enough; but there may be rather less of theory.

It is perhaps this feature of al-Ghazālī’s ethics that explains at the deepest level the immediate sense of doubt—the sense that something “catches”—that I described as the stimulus of this inquiry. And from the perspective that has framed my inquiry—in which the quest for continuity of concepts has taken its meaning from a broader concern about the possibility of placing al-Ghazālī’s ethics in conversation with philosophical approaches—it is this feature that might create the greatest complication for both modes of philosophical engagement I outlined earlier, “historical” and “normative.” Focusing on the former, even if one might, for example, suggestively juxtapose al-Ghazālī’s reductive view of virtue to the kinds of accounts offered by ancient philosophers (as mentioned earlier), a dramatic and potentially prohibitive difference between the two would be that al-Ghazālī, unlike these philosophers, provided no explicit theoretical acknowledgement and defence of this view.

Does this mean that al-Ghazālī’s ethics is placed beyond philosophical interest? This would not be my argument, and I do not take anything that I have said here to entail it. To the extent that al-Ghazālī can be appropriately described as offering an ethics that is at least in part *about virtue*, even with some qualifications, this is sufficient licence for seeking to explore the many interesting ways in which he may be written into the history of the subject. And some of the points I outlined in interrogating the grounds of my own scepticism also suggest that even those features of al-Ghazālī’s ethics that appear to separate him most vividly from a contemporary philosophical understanding—such as his conception of “virtues” as unsituated responses—can serve as catalysts for making us more self-conscious about fundamental features of our own understanding. Such self-consciousness may lead us to revise some of our ideas; or it may lead us to deepen and fortify our commitment to them, by forcing us to articulate them more clearly. Either way, such encounters with radical difference are productive, and can bear genuine philosophical fruit.

My aim in this paper has not been to settle the conversation but to open one. At the very least, I hope to have shown the many questions about al-Ghazālī’s oeuvre that remain unexplored; and I hope that some of what I have said will provide an impetus for others to don their boots, strap on their head-lamps, and start making their own way through its lush wilderness.

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1. George F. Hourani, “Ethics in Classical Islam: A Conspectus,” in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 21; reprinted from *Essays on Islamic Philosophy and Science*, ed. Hourani (Albany: State University of New York, 1975), pp. 128-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Two of the most recent contributions in this vein are Cyrus Ali Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017), and Sophia Vasalou, *Virtues of Greatness in the Arabic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zargar, *Polished Mirror*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See e.g. the remarks in Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of ʿAbd al-Jabbār* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kristján Kristjánsson, “Twenty-First-Century Magnanimity: The Relevance of Aristotle’s Ideal of *Megalopsychia* for Current Debates in Moral Psychology, Moral Education and Moral Philosophy,” in *The Measure of Greatness: Philosophers on Magnanimity*, ed. Sophia Vasalou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 266. This is a line I tried to develop in my *Virtues of Greatness* apropos the ideal of “greatness of spirit” in the Arabic tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For an overview of the structure and content of the *Revival*, see Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and His* Revival of the Religious Sciences(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 3, and at greater depth, with reference to Ghazālī’s ethics, see Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), and Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī: A Composite Ethics in Islam* (Petaling Jaya: Muhammad Abul Quasem, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 108. The title of the book already says it all. Those who adopt this term in characterising al-Ghazālī’sethics include Garden, Abul Quasem (writing around the same time as Sherif), and Zargar. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*/*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Lajnat Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1937-38), 8:1434. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For the first remark, see Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*; for the second, Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, 10 and 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There has been much discussion about the relationship between these two works. For some context on earlier debates, and a particular position on them, see Abul Quasem, “Al-Ghazālī’s Rejection of Philosophic Ethics,” *Islamic Studies* 13 (1974), 111-27, and for a more recent view that emphasises the continuity between the two works, see Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gary Watson, “On the Primacy of Character,” in *Identity, Character, and Morality*, ed. Owen J. Flanagan and Amélie O. Rorty (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a brief statement of the distinction between virtue ethics and virtue theory, see Nancy E. Snow, “Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I explore the second question in “Virtue and the Law in al-Ghazālī’s Ethics,” in *Islamic Ethics as Educational Discourse: Thought and Impact of the Classical Muslim Thinker Miskawayh,* ed. Sebastian Günther and Yassir El Jamouhi (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Through this discussion, I will place the term in scare quotes so as to retain it at investigational arm’s length. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Commentators have offered different accounts of the relations (including hierarchy) between these elements. Compare, for example, Sherif’s distinction between supporting and principal virtues (*Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 113-15) with Abul Quasem’s rather different distinction between means-virtues and ends-virtues (*The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, 148-50). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Iḥyāʾ*, 1:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Though slightly indirectly, referring to the need to study the illnesses of the soul and to strive to treat them so as to “save it from sources of possible destruction” (*yunajjīhā min mahālikihā*). Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, ed. Constantine Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1966), 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As Rosalind Hursthouse puts the standard view in her entry on virtue ethics: a virtue is a “disposition, well entrenched in its possessor . . . to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways.” https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/ accessed November 3, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *NE* 1106b21-23; I draw on the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The schema is strongly expressed in the Scale, and also registers in earlier parts of the *Revival*, notably the first two books of the third quarter. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This applies not only to love, but also to fear, which he unhesitatingly describes as a “state of character” (*Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 111). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Though note that the term *faḍīla* does not always carry the signification of “virtue” in the sense of a positive character trait in the *Revival*. Sometimes it simply means “excellence” in the sense of “value” or “high worth,” in which sense it forms the contrary of the term *dhamm* (e.g. *dhamm al-ghaḍab, dhamm al-dunyā, dhamm al-jāh wa-l-riyāʾ*). When al-Ghazālī thus refers to *faḍīlat al-rajāʾ,* *faḍīlat al-khawf*, or *faḍīlat al-zuhd* (e.g. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2312, 13:2340, 13:2441) this should by no means be taken as decisive terminological evidence that he considers hope, fear, or renunciation virtues. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Louis Gardet, “*Ḥāl*,” *Encyclopedia of Islam,* 2nd edition, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\_islam\_COM\_0254, accessed November 3, 2019. Cf. Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd ibn al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1972), 1:204-208.And see also Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2308; cf. 16:3032. Sherif (*Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 112-13) and Abul Quasem (*The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, 152) take this statement to express a sui generis view that distinguishes al-Ghazālī’s usage from Sufi convention. But that seems far from clear. Al-Ghazālī’s formulation is very close to the definition from al-Jurjānī’s *Ta’rifat* cited by Gardet in his EI2 entry: “If the ḥāl endures, it becomes a possession (*milk*) and is then called *maḳām*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. And some of the few cases where the two terms do appear in close textual proximity have far from evident implications. Does apposition, for example, entail opposition? If so, al-Ghazālī’s reference to *aḥwāl al-qalb wa-akhlāqihi al-maḥmūda wa-l-madhmūma* (*Iḥyāʾ*, 1:29) would mark a distinction; yet then so would his reference to *al*-*akhlāq al-maḥmūda wa-l-maqāmāt al-sharīfa* (15:2806). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See respectively *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2206 and 11:2072. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2171. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2171-72; cf. 12:2173: “the omission of acts one desires is an action that is produced by a state (*ḥāl*) called ‘self-control’ (*ṣabr*).” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Iḥyāʾ*, 13:2436. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2309. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jules Janssens, “Al-Ghazālī Between Philosophy (*Falsafa*) and Sufism (*Taṣawwuf*): His Complex Attitude in the *Marvels of the Heart* (*ʿAjāʾib al-qalb*) of the *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*,” *Muslim World* 101 (2011), 616. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, 151; the numbering of the statements is my own. Abul Quasem offers a second argument, but it is a rather weak one. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For a recent exposition and defence of this dispositional view, see Christian B. Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 172-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Owen Flanagan, “Moral Science? Still Metaphysical After All These Years,” in *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 60-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Iḥyāʾ*, 8:1434. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See for example the remarks at *Iḥyāʾ*, 10:1852-53 (discussing love of praise), 11:1980 (discussing pride). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Discussing praise, for example, one of the first points he makes concerns the need to ascertain whether one actually possesses the perfection being praised (*hādhihi al-ṣifa…anta muttaṣif bihā am-lā*, *Iḥyāʾ*,10:1852). His remarks about the right and wrong ways of relating to one’s perfections in the context of his account of conceit would also seem to rest on an acknowledgement that these perfections are present and can be accurately judged to be present. See *Iḥyāʾ*, 11:1991-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Iḥyāʾ*, 13:2415. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See, for example, Miller’s remarks in *Character and Moral Psychology*, 19-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. I have framed this point as a general one about traits and perfections, which would naturally extend to moral virtue as well. Yet one of the most surprising aspects of al-Ghazālī’s discussion of the vices of self-esteem is that there is virtually no mention of *moral* traits as a basis of self-esteem. The features that al-Ghazālī typically mentions as objects of positive self-esteem—as more appropriate objects anyway, in contrast e.g. to beauty, wealth, et al—include knowledge (*ʿilm*), piety, and worship (*waraʿ, taqwā, ʿibāda*). Is this because al-Ghazālī thinks of moral perfection in the negative way I describe in the next section? Occasionally al-Ghazālī refers to action (*ʿamal*) as an object of self-evaluation (e.g. *Iḥyāʾ*, 11:1953). Now “action” may indeed be understood to include moral character in its scope; there is good evidence that al-Ghazālī uses the term in this inclusive sense (see e.g. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2236, where he translates the expression “faith and good character (*ḥusn al-khuluq*)” into “knowledge and action (*ʿamal*)”). Cf. the definition of *ʿamal* in *The Scale of Action/Mīzān al-ʿamal*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1964), 192. Nevertheless, there is something very strange in al-Ghazālī’s suppression of an *overt* reference to moral perfections in this context, and of an express concern with the pride a person might take in her moral or spiritual accomplishments. The conceptual bundling of character under “action” also gives pause for thought. Both aspects represent cases where moral character is not found where one expects it, and as such they provide additional fuel for the doubt I am considering. My discussion of the above point, in any case, rests on the assumption that al-Ghazālī also had moral perfections in mind, as would seem reasonable, in making general statements about perfection. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See *Iḥyāʾ*, 8:1426; I am paraphrasing slightly. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. This view is expressed pervasively across al-Ghazālī’s work, but see indicatively *Mīzān*, 195-97, 221; *Iḥyāʾ*, 8:1451. I say al-Ghazālī’s alignment with the instrumentalist view is “unmistakable”; but like almost every other point in this essay, this could take deeper discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Mīzān,* 220. See also *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2297-98, for another expression of this instrumental view. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Mīzān*, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Iḥyāʾ*, 10:1844. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Iḥyāʾ*, 8:1444; the “end,” or “the ultimate point” (*ghāya*). Cf. Abul Quasem: “the evil qualities of the soul are but various aspects of its love of the world” (*The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Iḥyāʾ*, 13:2394. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2172-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2275. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Iḥyāʾ*, 13:2436. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Iḥyāʾ*, 13:2371; and see generally the discussion 13:2363-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid, 197. Which means that the present point can also parsed as a question about how clearly the virtues are individuated in al-Ghazālī’s scheme. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Christian Miller, “Virtue as a Trait,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Snow, 14-15, all emphases in original. It is difficult to overstate how deeply the emphasis on virtue-relevant situations is ingrained in philosophical thinking about what virtue is, how it is exercised and expressed, and even how it is educated. By way of purely indicative sample, consider Howard J. Curzer’s Aristotelian procedure for character change: “First, determine the sorts of *situations* that elicit problematic responses . . .” “Aristotle and Moral Virtue,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Snow, 110, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 67; and see generally the discussion in chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *NE* 1109b23. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For Abul Quasem’s discussion, see *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, 173-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. This view is signalled especially clearly in the book *On Vigilance and Self-Examination*. See, indicatively, *Iḥyāʾ*, 15:2754-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *NE* 1106b21-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. The closest al-Ghazālī comes to creating that anchoring is in *On Vigilance and Self-Examination*, which expresses a very strong awareness of time as a finite and quantifiable good. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. To take one example (touched on below), even a reductive view of virtue is a positive view, and involves the ascription of a real psychological feature in the present time. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Iḥyāʾ*, 15:2806 (indeed populating it also with stations: *yuʿammiru qalbahu bi-l-akhlāq al-maḥmūda wa-l-maqāmāt al-sharīfa*). Cf. 2:223: *al-ghāya al-quṣwā ʿimāratuhu bi-l-akhlāq al-maḥmūda wa-l-ʿaqāʾid al-mahsrūʿa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Iḥyāʾ*, 1:89; cf. 1:127. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See, for example, *Iḥyāʾ*, 14:2586 and 2588-89, in the context of discussing the features that ground the beauty of, and thereby our love for, exemplary people; the reference to ethical features is framed negatively in terms of the absence of or freedom from (*tanazzuh*) deficiencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *Mīzān*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. This could take a lot of discussion. For some evidence that suggests the survival of moral features, see Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, 149-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. John M. Cooper, “The Unity of Virtue,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. “Dramatic character”: this is also reflected in the suggestion that moral perception takes the natural form of a *story or narrative* about the relevant situation. See Susan Stark, “Virtue and Emotion,” *Noûs* 35 (2001), 442, redeploying Jonathan Dancy’s account in *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 111-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā min ʿilm al-uṣūl* (Būlāq: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Amīriyya, 1904), 1:28. Yet words are after all the way we know what we’re talking about. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Sherif himself in fact appears to acknowledge this equivocal use at *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 111 (esp. n.2). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2297-99. I discuss this passage at greater length in “Virtue and the Law in al-Ghazālī’s Ethics.” [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. See e.g. *Iḥyāʾ*, 1:36. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Some help toward resolving this question might also be thought to be provided by al-Ghazālī’s discussion of ethics in the *Munqidh,* where he identifies the concerns of philosophical ethics (viz, *ṣifāt al-nafs wa-akhlāquhā*) with the concerns of Sufi discourse (*The Deliverer From Error/Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, ed. Jamīl Ṣalībā and Kāmil ʿAyyād [Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1967], 86). But as he makes no reference to specific Sufi concepts such as stations or states there, this evidence does not take us far. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *Iḥyāʾ*, 11:2072-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2309 (“*if* the expectation [of the desirable outcome] is due to the fact that most of its causes have been realised, *then* the term ‘hope’ correctly applies to it”). A very tall linguistic order! [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 139; Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī,* 166-67. They offer similar reconstructive proposals for other cases where al-Ghazālī’s formal triadic structure appears to be absent. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. See *Iḥyāʾ*, 12:2315 for hope, and 13:2334 for fear. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. There may be something more to say, however, about implicit appeals to practical reasoning in the *Revival*; I hope to explore this point elsewhere. Taken alone, duration—which al-Ghazālī’s above-quoted statement makes criterial for the distinction between states and stations—certainly does not seem like an adequate criterion for drawing the categorial boundary between an emotion and a virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. A fuller treatment of this question would benefit from a comparative view of how similar issues were addressed in the intellectual traditions of other faith communities. The notable case is the Christian tradition, where love and hope feature as key theological virtues. Space, and the contingencies of COVID-19, have made that impossible in the present iteration of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Partly by showing how individual pieces of evidence interact, and how their weight changes in the total environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. See **n.10**. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. See *Iḥyāʾ*, 8:1436-37. The only ostensible exception is self-control/patience (*ṣabr*). This represents the most notable instance of shared territory between philosophical and Sufi lists of the virtues, and is also discussed in the *Mīzān*. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. For a slightly different reading, at least partially, see Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 123-24 (though compare his remarks at p. 112). Both Sherif and to a lesser extent Abul Quasem offer particular proposals for understanding the relationship between the more philosophical virtues and the Sufi “virtues” discussed in the *Revival,* and for thereby integrating the different parts of the work. One reason these proposals seem to me problematic is that they do not openly signal their own status as speculative rationalisations, for which al-Ghazālī himself provides precious little explicit support, transitioning seamlessly from “philosophical” to “Sufi” ideals with little to suggest that he is registering this *as* a transition. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Taneli Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on the Emotions,” in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī: vol. 1*, ed. Georges Tamer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)