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Ethics as Medicine: Moral Therapy, Expertise, and Practical Reasoning in al-Ghazālī's Ethics

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Abstract: The idea that ethics might be fruitfully understood in analogy with, or indeed as a form of, medicine has enjoyed a long and distinguished history. A staple of ancient philosophical thinking, it also achieved wide expression in the Islamic world. This essay explores the role of the medical analogy in the work of the eleventh-century Muslim intellectual Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. Al-Ghazālī's use of this analogy offers a unique vantage point for approaching several key features of his ethics of virtue, as notably expressed in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. These include his understanding of the nature of virtue and moral education; the fundamental structure of value; and most importantly, the place of human reasoning in the ethical life. This analogy also illuminates the rhetorical context of the *Revival*, taken as a book that aims to foster skills of practical reasoning and train its readers to become their own physicians.

1 Introduction

The idea that ethics might be fruitfully understood in analogy with, or indeed as a form of, medicine has enjoyed a long and distinguished history. It was one of the hallmarks of Greco-Roman thinking about ethics, where it provided the basis for a widespread conception of the nature of philosophy and its proper task. Philosophy, in Cicero's words, is "a physician of souls," which "takes away the load of empty troubles, sets us free from desires and banishes fears," and in so doing it helps relieve our suffering (Cicero 2014, Bk. 2, 4.11).[1] The vices are but forms of suffering, and philosophy's preoccupation with offering therapy for such pathologies marks it out as an art of living of the most practical order. While this prac-

1 The most vocal exponent of this practical understanding of philosophy in our times has been Pierre Hadot, notably in Hadot 1995.

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tical understanding of philosophy has retreated from the contemporary stage, the connection between virtue and health arguably lives on in many varieties of modern virtue ethics, shaped as they are by a commitment to a certain type of naturalism. The virtues, on a dominant account, are necessary for us to flourish as members of the biological species we are: to become *flourishing* and by implication *healthy* human beings.[2]

This type of idea also achieved wide expression in the Islamic world, where many philosophers writing about ethical subjects – from al-Kindī (d. after 870) and Abū Bakr al-Razī (d. 925 or 935), with his tellingly named *Spiritual Medicine*, to Miskawayh (d. 1030) and beyond – saw their task in the practical terms suggested by the analogy with medicine, as aiding their readers to manage their passions and thereby nursing them to health.[3] The aim of books of ethics, as Miskawayh wrote in his *Refinement of Character* (echoing Aristotle), is to help people become virtuous, and this requires learning to identify the illnesses of the soul (*amrāḍ al-nafs*) so we may then "administer the appropriate medication and treat them with the corresponding remedy" (Miskawayh 1966, 222; cf. 1). Other philosophers used this analogy to frame an understanding not of ethics but of politics. Al-Fārābī (d. 950–1) is a case in point, building on themes of Plato's work to assign to the statesman or political ruler the task of promoting the ethical and psychological health of the community (al-Fārābī 1971, 23–26).[4]

These ideas, it is clear, had deep and multifaceted roots in the philosophical tradition. Yet in the Islamic context, they also had an important kind of resonance with scriptural texts. The Qur'an refers to the illnesses or diseases of the heart on several occasions (e. g. Q 2:10, 5:52, 9:125, 22:53), and it also characterises its own status in therapeutic terms, describing itself as a cure or healing (*shifāʾ*) for the diseased heart (Q 10:57). The possibilities opened by these textual bases came to programmatic fruition in an idea that circulated widely in different types of philosophical and theological literature. The best way to understand the task of prophets and of the supernatural directives they bring, on this view, is in analogy with medicine. When prophets prescribe particular actions, as the Zaydite Muʿtazilite theologian Mānkdīm Sheshdīv (d. 1034) put it, they are like "physicians when they say, 'This herb is beneficial' and 'This herb is harmful'" (Mānkdīm Sheshdīv 1965, 565). For the Muʿtazilites, this analogy helped unlock a broader understanding of the relation between the religious Law and the human

2 For exemplary expositions of this type of view, see Hursthouse 1999 and Foot 2001.

3 For a good introduction into the development of these themes with an emphasis on their Galenic background, see Adamson 2015.

4 For the relevant themes from Plato's work, see e. g. *Laws* 720a–b; *Republic* 459c–d.

mind (and indeed of the necessity of the former), offering a general (*jumla*) way of accounting for the value of supernatural prescriptions while allowing that a detailed insight (*tafṣīl*) into their value might elude us. Like doctors, prophets prescribe drugs that promote our welfare, even if we may not always be able to understand why or how.[5]

In this essay, my aim is to explore the role of the medical analogy in the work of a thinker who stands at the confluence of the diverse intellectual tributaries just outlined, the eleventh-century intellectual Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). Al-Ghazālī's writings on ethics span a range of subjects and fall across a variety of genres. One of his most prominent contributions takes shape in works of theology (*kalām*) and legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), notably his *Moderation in Belief (al-Iqtiṣād fi'l-iʿtiqād)* and *The Quintessence of the Principles of the Law (al-Mustaṣfā min ʿilm al-uṣūl)*. There, al-Ghazālī broaches higher-order questions about moral ontology, moral epistemology, and the principles of the religious Law, and he fields the kinds of answers traditionally associated with the Ashʿarite school. Yet these higher-order projects stand alongside a different type of ethical project with a far stronger normative agenda. Pursued above all in the *Scale of Action (Mīzān al-ʿamal)* and the *Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn)*, this is a project that builds heavily on the joint foundation provided by works of philosophical ethics and Sufi treatises, and it shares in the practical aim of these works and in their aspiration to redirect the moral life of the reader. It also shares in the medical terms employed by certain of these works to articulate that aspiration. Like both philosophers and Sufis, al-Ghazālī's chief concern in this context is with the necessity of recrafting the lineaments of one's interior life, or with what we may call the virtues and the vices.

For anyone interested in grasping al-Ghazālī's ethical thought holistically, the relationship between the different genres in which he cultivated his reflections on ethics poses an apparent puzzle. How exactly do the viewpoints he communicates in these two kinds of projects – the meta-ethics of theology and law,

5 For this facet of the Muʿtazilite view, see briefly Vasalou 2016, 94 f. Touching on Averroes' (d. 1198) mobilisation of the analogy between medicine and the Law, Griffel and Hachmeier suggest (2010/11, 223 f.) that this analogy served to undermine the idea that revelation might enjoy a monopoly on certain kinds of epistemic truths, implying that revelation offers insights equally available, just like medical insights, through reason. The Muʿtazilite use of the same idea shows that this was not always taken to be its implication. So, indeed, does al-Ghazālī's in the *Deliverer from Error/al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, where he uses the medical analogy to build his case, contra the philosophers, that certain kinds of truths are only accessible through prophecy and not through reason. See the extended discussion in al-Ghazālī 1967, 115–31; though there will be more to say about this below.

and the normative ethics of virtue literature – come together? Despite the very different terms on which each project is conducted, their viewpoints are not so insulated from each other as to stifle this general question. For the purposes of the inquiry that follows, two points stand out where this question arises with special force, which concern the fundamental structure of al-Ghazālī's ethical theory. One concerns the structure or nature of value; the other its knowledge. In al-Ghazālī's meta-ethical writings, the focus when considering issues of value is predominantly on action. The question that organised classical debates about ethics was whether *actions* are objectively good (*ḥasan*) or bad (*qabīḥ*), or are known to be good or bad by human reason.[6] When al-Ghazālī, in typical Ashʿarite style, reserves the prerogative of assigning evaluations for the religious Law, the relevant evaluations are naturally taken to apply to actions (*aḥkām al-afʿāl*). It is actions that the Law declares to be obligatory, forbidden, reprehensible, recommended or permitted (in the familiar five-fold classification). In the second set of his ethical works, by contrast, al-Ghazālī's interest is channelled less to actions than to states of character. Although the *Revival* in particular is a house of many mansions and has much to say about human action in both its religious and social contexts, the state of the soul (or heart, *qalb*) is arguably its core concern, and the one it unfolds in the last two quarters of the book, dedicated respectively to praiseworthy and blameworthy traits (*munjiyāt* and *muhlikāt*). How, the question might be asked, do these two ethical concerns – actions and states of the soul – come together in the structure of al-Ghazālī's ethical theory? How does the value of character relate to the value of action?

While the first point generates an open question, the second brings out what seems to be an open conflict between the two viewpoints. In al-Ghazālī's meta-ethical works, he had adopted a characteristically Ashʿarite view of the limited functions of reason as a tool of ethical discovery. Although this view was not without nuance, in the main it confined the operations of "rational" evaluative thought to prudential reasoning and benefit-harm calculations pertaining to the secular or worldly domain.[7] Al-Ghazālī's works on the virtues appear to herald a seismic shift to this epistemological picture. The shift registers especially starkly in the *Scale*, where an emphasis on reason as a source of ethical knowledge sounds out from the opening pages.[8] In the body of the work, al-Ghazālī

6 For these debates, starting points include Hourani 1985, Vasalou 2008, Fakhry 1994 (part 2), Frank 1983, and Shihadeh 2016.

7 For further detail on al-Ghazālī's (and broader Ashʿarite) views, see Vasalou 2016.

8 It is rational to strive for otherworldly happiness; the need to prepare for this happiness through moral improvement and the pursuit of knowledge (*al-ʿilm waʾl-ʿamal*) is also self-evident to reason (*ḍarūrī fiʾl-ʿaql*). Al-Ghazālī 1964, 180 f.; 193.

diffusely refers to both reason and the Law (*al-ʿaql waʾl-sharʿ*) as touchstones for virtue.[9] Perhaps most startlingly, his taxonomy of the virtues includes a number of intellectual qualities whose scope is specified in explicitly ethical terms, involving an ability to determine what is right and wrong in a way that goes beyond secular calculations of utility. Moral wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-khuluqiyya*), for example, is named as the virtue through which the rational power governs the other powers, spirit and appetite, and it involves knowledge of which actions are right (*al-ʿilm bi-ṣawāb al-afʿāl*).[10] In the *Revival*, the emphasis on reason is more gently cushioned, yet still present. How are we to make sense of these impressions? Are these general references to the moral functions of reason discountable in some fashion, perhaps a mere *pro forma*, non-committal reproduction of ideas found in philosophical texts – somewhat the way it has been recently suggested we might discount the appearance of a morally doubtful virtue like greatness of soul in al-Ghazālī's works?[11] Or do these references reflect a genuine commitment to a substantively novel moral epistemology?

Thus, although al-Ghazālī does not expressly thematise meta-ethical questions in his virtue-centred normative works,[12] read against his larger output, these works will naturally be heard as speaking to such questions. Both of the questions I just posed – about the structure of value and about the knowledge of value – in fact turn out to be connected. And it is the analogy between ethics and medicine, to home in on my main theme, that holds them together, and that also holds the key to answering them. Al-Ghazālī's use of the medical analogy, as I hope to show, provides a particularly fertile angle from which to approach his ethics of virtue, and helps illuminate a number of its central features. These include the therapeutic character of his ethical project; the nature of moral education; the concept of human nature that al-Ghazālī relies on, closely linked to the concept of health; the fundamental structure of value he presupposes; and

9 See e. g., purely indicatively, al-Ghazālī 1964, 235 (*islāsuhā liʾl-dīn waʾl-ʿaql,* referring to the spirited part of the soul); 267 (*al-maḥmūd mā yuwāfiqu miʿyār al-ʿaql waʾl-sharʿ*); cf. the striking remark that intemperance involves going overboard with "pleasures which the rational faculty *judges to be bad and forbids*" (*tastaqbiḥuhā al-quwwa al-ʿaqliyya wa-tanhā ʿanhā*); cf. 270, referring to moderation: "the criterion of moderation is reason and the law" (*al-ʿaql waʾl-sharʿ*).

10 Al-Ghazālī 1964, 266. Similarly, the ability to distinguish between the pathway of happiness and unhappiness is referred to "excellence of mind and discrimination" (*jūdat al-dhihn waʾl-tamyīz*) (255). Cf. the virtues subordinate to the cardinal virtue of wisdom listed at 274 f.; interestingly, most of them concern the determination of means rather than ends.

11 See the discussion in Vasalou 2019, part 1.

12 Unless we count the *Jerusalem Epistle* (*al-Risāla al-Qudsiyya*), interpolated into the *Revival* as book 2 treating the articles of faith (*Qawāʿid al-ʿaqāʾid*), where al-Ghazālī rehearses familiar Ashʿarite positions.

(the theme that will take up most of my attention below) the role that independent human reasoning is understood to play in the ethical-spiritual life. No less importantly, al-Ghazālī's use of this analogy shines a crucial beam of light on the rhetorical context of his writing, and on the type of relationship he seeks to cultivate with his reader.

While my discussion will not directly tackle the thorny question concerning the relationship, and consistency, between al-Ghazālī's viewpoints across different works, it will certainly reinforce its motivation, and provide material toward answering it.[13] Because the picture that emerges from al-Ghazālī's works on the virtues – especially the *Revival*, which, as al-Ghazālī's most mature and comprehensive work, will form my chief focus – indeed suggests that moral progress is not possible through exclusive reliance on universal rules or external authority, including the authority of al-Ghazālī himself as spiritual guide. The moral life is rife with choices which can only be settled through robust moral deliberation undertaken independently by each individual. This form of deliberation has a particularist character, requiring careful consultation of one's particular circumstances, ethical features, and moral needs. True to the medical paradigm in which al-Ghazālī places it, ethical reasoning is reasoning about contingent particulars. Yet this is where the paradigm of medicine converges with, and hands over to, that of law. In undertaking such reasoning, the individual acts not only as her own physician, but as her own legal counsel, in those matters of the heart over which the conventional science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) holds no sway.

Section 2 provides a general entry into al-Ghazālī's use of the medical analogy, showing its role in framing his understanding of the nature of virtue and the education of character. This sets the stage for answering the first question isolated above, concerning the evaluative relation between action and virtue, which also yields an account of the purposes of the religious Law in commanding and prohibiting particular actions. Section 3 then considers a challenge that this model, with its particularist and relative conception of right action,

13 A more thorough attempt to tackle this question would require attending to the chronological relations between al-Ghazālī's works. But such a chronological viewpoint would not settle it, allowing us to construct a tidy developmental story in which (to frame one of the most tempting hypotheses) the perspective of al-Ghazālī's normative virtue-centred works might, for example, be seen as superseding the perspective of his legal and theological meta-ethics. On a widely accepted account of this chronology, the *Iqtiṣād* was penned in the same year as the *Mīzān* (488/1095, al-Ghazālī's final year at the Niẓāmiyya College in Baghdad), while the *Mustaṣfā* was penned after the *Iḥyāʾ* – to say nothing of the complication introduced by the point made in the previous note. See Hourani 1984 for this chronological account. Given this, a discourse-centred hypothesis such as the one Timothy Gianotti entertains in Gianotti 2001 has to be given serious consideration alongside any other attempts to settle the problem.

appears to pose for the unconditional force of religious commands. What prevents al-Ghazālī's therapeutic account of action from unravelling into a familiar type of antinomianism? Section 4 confronts the epistemological implications of the medical analogy, and parses the key question as one concerning the identity of the subject endowed with authority to undertake the particularist ethical judgements that the therapy of character requires. In some contexts, al-Ghazālī appears to delegate this judgement to a type of moral expert we would naturally identify with the Sufi spiritual master or guide. Yet as I show in Section 5, al-Ghazālī extends this authority more broadly, ascribing to his individual reader the capacity (and need) to act as their own doctor or legal advisor. Section 6 considers what this tells us about the status of al-Ghazālī's book and its role in nurturing the deliberative capabilities and moral expertise of the individual reader. Section 7 briefly broaches a question about the relative roles of scriptural revelation and extra-scriptural reflection in al-Ghazālī's model of moral deliberation, and concludes with a final meditation regarding the identity of the deliberator and reader that al-Ghazālī constructs.

2 Moral Health and Moral Therapy: Virtue, Action, and the Religious Law

Just *who* al-Ghazālī envisaged as his audience in writing the *Revival* is a question that might attract different answers. Jules Janssens has suggested that "the book was not intended for a critical reader, but rather for the average man who is not in search of profound, theoretical knowledge (and who in any case lacks the capacity for it), but who is instead in need of guidelines for good behaviour" (Janssens 2011, 632).[14] His view is echoed by Kenneth Garden, who speaks of "a broad rather than elite audience" and takes this to explain why al-Ghazālī, moving on from the *Scale*, "tones down its philosophical content and masks many of those elements of philosophy that remain" (Garden 2014, 68). The emphasis on the broad reader would appear to be in tension with al-Ghazālī's own statement, in one place, that he addresses the "people of strong understanding" and "outstanding scholars" (*fuḥūl al-ʿulamāʾ*) (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1349).[15] Yet whatever view we take of this

14 Cf. Gianotti 2001, 61: the *Revival* "was written to be both readable and practicable for the literate commoner."

15 Is it possible that this circumscription is only meant to apply to the specific topic under discussion – the powers of the soul – so that the *Revival* as a whole does not have a single and undifferentiated type of audience? Note that references to the *Revival* are by volume and page number.

particular point, on another level the audience al-Ghazālī is addressing seems beyond dispute. It is the person with an interest in pursuing the road to the hereafter (*murīd ṭarīq al-ākhira*), who is willing to recognise that he stands in need of change and must therefore "occupy himself with his own self" (*ishtaghala bi-nafsihi*) (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 1:69).[16] The kind of change the *Revival* seeks to foster covers a number of dimensions, as already mentioned, spanning ritual acts, customary acts, blameworthy traits, and praiseworthy traits (the respective topics of each of its four quarters). Taken together, these dimensions comprise what al-Ghazālī terms the knowledge of praxis (*ʿilm al-muʿāmala*), which he makes the focus of the book, to the exclusion of the theoretical type of knowledge he terms the science of disclosure (*ʿilm al-mukāshafa*).

Al-Ghazālī's concern, then, is to provide his readers with tools for effecting practical change. And this, crucially, is a practical intervention he conceives in distinctly therapeutic terms. "The achievement of this science," he writes in the introduction to the *Revival*, "consists in the healing of people's hearts and spirits" (*thamrat hādhā al-ʿilm ṭibb al-qulūb waʾl-arwāḥ*) – a far weightier achievement than the healing of the body with which conventional medicine is concerned (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 1:6). This statement also makes clear that the kind of change that especially preoccupies al-Ghazālī is change that concerns the state of the soul. This is the topic of the second half of the book, dedicated to "destructive" or blameworthy and "salvific" or praiseworthy traits, but it deeply informs his discussion of ritual and customary actions in the first half.

The implication is obvious: those who possess the blameworthy traits detailed in the book and lack the praiseworthy traits may be described not merely in terms that imply moral judgement – as people who are "bad," "flawed," "vicious" or "deficient" – but also, less judgmentally, as "suffering," "unhealthy" or "ill." This is a point al-Ghazālī makes explicit when he comes to specify the key concepts of virtue and vice in the twenty-second book of the *Revival*, *The Discipline of the Soul*. Virtue or good character (*ḥusn al-khuluq*) is realised when the powers that comprise the human psyche – here named as knowledge, anger, appetite, and justice – "are placed in a balanced and harmonious relation" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1435). This state of balance "constitutes the soul's state of health," whereas departure from that balance represents a state of "malady and illness" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1447). Virtuous character is our state of health.

Just above, I contrasted the descriptions "bad" or "vicious," which imply moral judgement, with the terms "unhealthy" or "ill," which do not. Yet this contrast is in one sense misleading, and risks masking the fact that al-Ghazālī's

16 Al-Ghazālī is in fact referring to himself in this remark.

concept of health is deeply normative in kind. It has often been observed that ancient writers who appeal to the concept of "nature" in constructing their ethics understand this concept differently from the way we moderns are apt to. Among ancient philosophers, as Julia Annas points out, the appeal to "nature" doesn't feature as part of an attempt to ground or reduce morality to a non-moral foundation. Human nature as they approach it doesn't belong to the order of "neutral" or "brute" value-free facts that can be uncovered by scientific investigation. It is a fundamentally normative concept, which emerges from a reflective process that mobilises judgements of an evaluative sort.[17]

The same applies to al-Ghazālī's concept of human nature, which is closely linked to his understanding of human health. For human beings, possession of the virtues is a state of health in which our nature finds fulfilment. Virtue ultimately consists in the mastery of reason over the other powers, which makes it possible for human beings to achieve the reason-based pleasures in which their good lies. These pleasures can partly be described as intellectual, though their object is a person, God, and they arise out of a relationship to this person that has both cognitive and emotional dimensions, involving knowledge, love, and worship. "The heart naturally inclines (*muqtaḍā ṭabʿ al-qalb*) to wisdom and to love, knowledge, and worship of God, just as it inclines to food and drink." From this perspective, the appetites are "foreign to one's being and extraneous to one's nature (*ṭabʿ*)." When a person fails to experience the natural inclination toward the higher goods, this is "because he has fallen ill," the way one might fall ill and conceive a repugnance to food and drink (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1445).[18] This evidently implies that people can be mistaken about whether they are healthy – a possibility that, as Martha Nussbaum points out, Hellenistic philosophers also recognised as an important concomitant of the medical analogy.[19]

The medical terms that al-Ghazālī uses to qualify virtue and vice bear even clearer fruit when it comes to describing the process through which character can be reformed and virtue acquired. Here, the medical analogy enters into partnership with a distinctively Aristotelian emphasis on the importance of action as a

17 See Annas 1993, part II, esp. ch. 3; cf. Nussbaum 1994, 29–32.

18 Cf. Sherif 1975, 32 f. For a deeper exploration of al-Ghazālī's understanding of human nature against his philosophical psychology, see Kukkonen 2015 and also Kukkonen 2008.

19 For Nussbaum's nuanced discussion, see Nussbaum 1994, ch. 1, esp. section III. Al-Ghazālī also believes that people can eventually be brought to recognise their original judgement as mistaken, and that this normative concept of health can be validated "in terms of the needs and perceptions of the people themselves" (Nussbaum 1994, 20). This is, for example, the implication of his remarks about the criterion of the superiority of intellectual pleasures in al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 14:2594–96.

means of moral transformation. It is by habituating ourselves to the acts proper to a virtue that we become virtuous. We become by doing – just by just acts, courageous by courageous acts (*NE* II.1). It is the germ of this idea that al-Ghazālī reformulates in medical terms in the following passage:

> Just as the cause that disturbs the balance of the body and induces illness is treated through its opposite – heat through cold, for example, and cold through heat – likewise vice, which is the illness of the heart, is treated through its opposite. Thus, the illness of ignorance is treated by learning, the malady of miserliness by deliberately acting generously (*tasakhkhī*), the malady of pride by deliberately acting humbly (*tawāḍuʿ*), and the malady of gluttony by effortfully abstaining from the object of desire. (Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1448)[20]

It is this medicalised Aristotelian model, in fact, that holds the key to answering the first question I isolated earlier. How, I asked, are we to understand the relation between the value of action – the focus of al-Ghazālī's works of theology and legal theory – and the value of states of character – the focus of the *Revival* and the *Scale*? Given that actions form the immediate concern of the religious Law, taken as the object of jurisprudential science, this is also a question about how the commands and prohibitions of the religious Law integrate into the ethical account presented in al-Ghazālī's virtue-centred works, particularly the *Revival*. Taken as a question about the structure of al-Ghazālī's theory of value, the simplest way of putting it is as follows. In the universe of value, which is the primary or foundational element: Action or character? What we *do* or what we're *like*?[21] Al-Ghazālī tackles this question directly in the thirty-second book of the *Revival*, *On Patience and Gratitude*, and his answer is crystal-clear. It is character that has primacy over action. Action is only valued instrumentally, as a means to cultivating virtue. "The purpose (or benefit: *fāʾida*) of improving the state of the heart (*ḥāl al-qalb*) is that the majesty of God be revealed to one in His essence, attributes, and actions"; and "the purpose of improving action is to improve the state of the heart" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 12:2298). The Aristotelian notion of habituation is here harnessed to provide an explanation of how character, action, and (at another remove) cognition are ordered both causally and evaluatively.

It is the same idea that underlies the programmatic understanding of the religious Law that Ghazālī adumbrates in this same context. The purpose of the

20 This is a rather different appeal to the notion of opposition from the one found in Aristotle: virtue is a state intermediate between two vices, and reaching it may require first trying to move away from the extreme more opposed to it, whether in itself or relative to our own inclinations (*NE* Bk II.9).

21 This question is explored more fully in Vasalou (in press).

religious Law in commanding and prohibiting particular actions is precisely to help human beings achieve certain kinds of inner states – or as we might say, to educate human character. Yet in al-Ghazālī's discussion, this pedagogical way of framing the point is overshadowed by a different kind of framing that is rather shaped by medical terms. The Lawgiver can be compared to a doctor who prescribes a particular medication (*dawāʾ*) to induce health and healing (*al-ṣiḥḥa waʾl-shifāʾ*). Actions are "a way of treating the illness of human hearts" – and it is under this description that the Law dispenses them (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 12:2300). This view is filled out at greater length in the first quarter of the *Revival*, which deals with ritual observances (*ʿibādāt*). While al-Ghazālī's account of these observances unfolds on several levels, a central focus of his analysis concerns precisely the psychological effects of their performance. The significance of *zakat*, for example, can be viewed in terms of its ability to "purify people from the quality of miserliness (*bukhl*)." For "the way to eliminate the quality of miserliness is to habituate oneself to giving out money; our love of something is only uprooted by forcing ourselves to part with it until it becomes a habit" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 2:388–89). Fasting, similarly, can be understood with reference to its effect in cultivating temperance and helping us master our relationship to physical pleasures.[22]

We may recognise in this view a direct incarnation of the idea mentioned earlier in connection with Muʿtazilite thinkers. Prophets are like physicians who prescribe drugs that benefit us, even if we may not be able to understand why or how. In al-Ghazālī's reformulation, the benefit in question is unpacked in terms of the (notably intelligible) medicinal effects of action on human ethical and spiritual health.[23] This conception of human welfare makes for an important contrast with the types of benefits considered by jurists when inquiring into the aims of the Law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*). In his legal works, al-Ghazālī himself identified religion, reason, life, progeny, and property as the fundamental human

22 For further detail on this account, see Vasalou (in press). The emphasis on ritual observances as embodying the therapeutic function of the Law is also a key feature of al-Ghazālī's remarks in the *Munqidh*, where he rehearses the conception of prophets as physicians and of religious ordinances as medicine for the heart. See al-Ghazālī 1967, 115–131, especially 116 f.

23 Al-Ghazālī's highly rationalising explication of the Law's spiritual purposes, as exhibited in the above, is in apparent tension with remarks he makes in certain other locations, where he leverages the analogy between medicine and the religious Law to frame a point about the limits of our rational understanding of the intended benefits and effects of the latter. See, for example, al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 1:52 f., and also the remarks in the *Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī 1967, 116 f., 126–28. This point could take further discussion, but al-Ghazālī's remarks in the *Munqidh* suggest that one way of resolving it, at least in part, would be in terms of a distinction between an action as a whole and its component parts.

interests promoted by the Law. While the Law has consideration for the welfare of human beings in their mundane life as part of a social and political community, its deepest purpose lies in servicing their spiritual health and otherworldly happiness.

3 Between Therapy and Obedience: Moral Particularism as a Challenge to the Rule of Law?

Character, then, has evaluative primacy over action; and it is the analogy with medicine that provides the tools for plotting this relationship. It will not take much prompting to notice that al-Ghazālī's account of this relationship invites a difficult question. It is a question that again flows directly from the medical model he invokes. As Martha Nussbaum has shown, one of the hallmarks of this model as deployed by ancient philosophers was the crucial emphasis it placed on negotiation of the particular. Like the conventional doctor, the philosopher cannot rely on general principles and formulaic rules. In seeking to cure a particular sufferer, the philosopher must carefully consider his distinctive needs, circumstances, and pathology, and she must tailor her strategies to that individual in all his particularity. While general principles and knowledge of a universal kind may have a role to play, philosophical therapy requires above all a responsiveness to the particular and must always proceed case by case.[24] The importance of this point was also underlined from a different direction by Aristotle at the conclusion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Having highlighted the value of general communal laws for inculcating good habits among people and thus steering them toward virtue, he went on to acknowledge that "education on an individual basis is in fact [...] superior to its communal counterpart, just as individual medical treatment is superior: rest and fasting are generally advantageous for patients with a fever, while for a given one perhaps not." Under such circumstances, "each person gets to a greater extent what applies to him" (*NE* 1180b7–13).[25]

Unlike many of the philosophers considered by Nussbaum, al-Ghazālī's concern in this context is not with philosophical arguments as the curative agent, but with action.[26] Yet it is the same emphasis on the particular that is reflected in

24 Nussbaum 1994, 46; and see s. v. "particularism" for the development of this theme across different schools and thinkers.

25 I draw on the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by C. Rowe, with commentary by S. Broadie (Aristotle 2002).

26 Yet see below.

his discussion. It's in fact inadvisable, he states in *Patience and Gratitude*, to make absolute pronouncements (*qawl muṭlaq*) concerning the value of given actions, for example that "supererogatory prayer is better than all other supererogatory acts of worship," "pilgrimage is better than almsgiving," or "the night prayer is better than other acts." Rather, the value of a given act will vary depending on the pathology and moral needs of particular individuals. The truth of the matter is that

> for the wealthy man who has money to spare yet who is mastered by miserliness and love of money, it is better to give away some cash than to spend whole nights praying or to fast for days. Because fasting is appropriate (*yalīqu*) for the person who is mastered by his appetite for food and who wishes to break the power it has over him. [...] If this is not the condition (*ḥāl*) of the particular individual considering the matter (*hādhā al-mudabbir*), his appetite does him no harm [...] so for him to occupy himself with fasting would be to take on someone else's condition. That would be like a sick person with a stomach-ache taking medication intended to treat headaches – it will do him no good [...] The only way for him to get rid of [his avarice] is to give out money, so he must give some of his cash in alms. (Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 12:2299)

Actions are a kind of medicine; and the right medicine depends on an individual's pathology, and on whether *this* act happens to be the remedy for *this* illness. The message seems clear, and it flows directly from the medical model al-Ghazālī has adopted. Yet at the same time, it brings out an obvious question – and a potentially problematic implication of his account of the relation between character and action. If the state of a person's character (their ethical health) has evaluative primacy over action, and particular actions have value, and are to be chosen, insofar as they promote an individual's ethical health, what does this mean for the unconditional status of the commands and prohibitions of the Law? To be sure, legal rules might be said to be conditional in one respect, to the extent that they only become effective once certain features are realised or certain criteria are met. To take an obvious example, an individual only becomes liable to pay the *zakat* once their property has reached a certain threshold, and of course once they have met the conditions that make them liable to legal obligations in general, such as attaining the age of majority. This holds true a fortiori of obligations generated from and hence conditional on individual decisions to voluntarily enter into binding contracts, whether to do with buying or selling or with marriage. Yet once these general descriptions have been instantiated, the relevant rules apply universally and in this sense unconditionally.[27] By referring the value

27 Though of course they can be relaxed or suspended under particular circumstances, as when they involve special hardship for the individual – the legal principle of "licence" or *rukhṣa*.

of action to the contingent and variable ethical needs of particular individuals, by contrast, al-Ghazālī seems to relativize these rules and put their binding force into question.

How, then, can the highly conditional view of right action deriving from al-Ghazālī's medical model be reconciled with the absolute, unconditional force of religious commands? A problem would only seem to arise if we assumed the possibility that these two sources of normative value, deriving from ethical health ("x conforms to A's ethical needs") and from divine command ("x conforms to the command of the Law"), might come apart in certain cases and deliver divergent normative pronouncements. It is a possibility that is not unimaginable in principle, and it could take at least two separate forms. An act might be commanded by the Law but its omission may better serve the moral needs of a particular person. And an act might be commanded by the Law but no longer serve a moral need for a particular person. For the first, we might think of the case of a temperate person for whom the control of physical appetites poses no problem, but who finds that the rigours of the Ramadan fast (instituted to help induce such control) habitually trigger other kinds of compulsive behaviour in areas of her character where she does have problems; on fasting days, say, her internet addiction or her compulsive online shopping get worse. For the second, we may think of the person who suffers no negative effects on other areas of her character through the performance of religious duties, but who has so thoroughly perfected her control of all appetites and drives that the performance of legal obligations (instituted to induce such control) is simply without meaning or purpose.[28]

It is the second case that makes it possible to settle a familiar name on this problem, recognising it as an instance of a broader reputational threat that Sufism has confronted since its early days: the challenge of antinomianism. As several commentators have noted, this reputational anxiety provided the context for the composition of some of the most prominent works in the Sufi tradition, including Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī's (d. 1038) *The Ornament of the Saints* and Abuʾl-Qāsim al-Qushayrī's (d. 1072) *Epistle*. One of their key concerns, Alexander Knysh writes, lay in "casting Sufism as a legitimate and respectable Islamic science that is in complete harmony with the precepts of the Shari'a" and "cleansing the Sufi tradition of potentially objectionable or embarrassing elements," including the doctrine of the incarnation of God in man (*ḥulūl*) and antinomianism (*mubāḥiyya*) (Knysh 2000, 129, 131). The latter attitude found distinct voice in the work of the tenth-century mystic al-Niffarī (d. ca. 976–7). As Reynold A. Nicholson puts it, the

28 Griffel and Hachmeier (2010/11, 226) suggest that this was the pernicious implication read into the use of this analogy by opponents.

gnostic, for al-Niffarī, should "perform only such acts of worship as are in accordance with his vision of God," even if this leads him to "disobey the religious law which was made for the vulgar. His inward feeling must decide how far the external forms of religion are good for him." A natural progression of this view is the idea that the religious Law represents a "curb that is indeed necessary so long as one remains in the disciplinary stage, but may be discarded by the saint" who has achieved perfection (Nicholson 2002, 52, 92).

Al-Ghazālī's disciplinary account of the Law thus raises questions that take their edge from their chequered history in the Sufi tradition, in which he partly situates his project. Does his therapeutic view of action open the door to antinomianism? And if not, why not? Taken in this form, it is a question that al-Ghazālī does not, to my knowledge, confront directly.[29] And indeed some of the views he expresses appear to implicate him more deeply into this problematic possibility. In a nodal passage in *Patience and Gratitude*, for example, the thesis that right action simply *is* whatever promotes inner health is translated into a rather different and startling set of terms. "Any given action," al-Ghazālī writes, "either leads to a state that impedes disclosure (*mukāshafa*) and serves to darken the heart [...] or to a state that is amenable to disclosure, serves to purify the heart, and severs worldly attachments. *The first is called 'an act of disobedience' (maʿṣiyya) and the latter 'an act of obedience'* (*ṭāʿa*)" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 12:2298; emphasis added). Here, al-Ghazālī appears to *define* obedience and disobedience – concepts that naturally refer us to the command and prohibition of the Law – in terms of the tendency of an action to promote health or sickness.

Yet taking everything together, it is clear that al-Ghazālī cannot mean to legitimate this possibility. In the thirtieth book of the *Revival*, *On Delusion*, he names the antinomian Sufis as one of several groups suffering from the eponymous delusion. These Sufis mark no distinction between what is lawful and unlawful, alleging that "bodily actions have no importance, rather what has consideration is the heart" and claiming that "they have risen above the level of the commoners and no longer need to refine their soul through bodily actions" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 11:2052). Strikingly, al-Ghazālī offers no explanation of *why* these ideas are misguided. Left to fill this gap ourselves, what kinds of reasons might we give? A broader glance at al-Ghazālī's account suggests several lines of development. The

29 There are moments in his works that distantly evoke it, such as his brief remarks about the philosophers' I-know-best appeal to consequences in subverting religious obligations in the *Munqidh* (see especially the remarks in al-Ghazālī 1967, 120). Yet in this work at least, al-Ghazālī represents philosophers as blind to the therapeutic view of the Law and as advocates of its status as an instrument of public utility and social control (precisely the description of *fiqh* regulations that al-Ghazālī himself offers in the first book of the *Revival, On Knowledge*).

possibility, for one, that an individual might reach a settled state of all-around virtue that renders further discipline redundant is one that al-Ghazālī does not seem prepared to acknowledge. Although his work offers conflicting evidence on this point, his prevailing view appears to be that complete virtue cannot be achieved in a normal human life. Even though he acknowledges the superiority of full virtue as described by Aristotle – where virtuous behaviour is experienced as pleasurable and is not accompanied by psychic conflict[30] – all we can ever hope to be, on Aristotle's terms, is continent or *enkratic*, not *phronimoi*. The struggle (*mujāhada*) against evil impulses, he writes in the *Marvels of the Heart* (Book 21), "only ends with one's death, for no-one escapes from Satan so long as he lives. To be sure, one may grow strong enough that one does not submit to him and repels his evil through struggle, but so long as blood continues to flow in one's veins, the need to put up a struggle and ward off attacks never ceases" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1392). Even if full virtue were achievable, and achieved, action would retain its importance as a means of exercising and thus preserving it.[31]

Yet an even more holistic consideration is the following. We saw earlier that al-Ghazālī makes action inferior to, and valuable as a means to, a person's ethical condition. Yet the value of person's ethical condition is in turn grounded in the fact that it enables them to realise the relationship to God in which their good – and health – as a human being lies. "The purpose of improving the state of the heart," as al-Ghazālī stated earlier, "is that the majesty of God be revealed to one in His essence, attributes, and actions." The relevant good, as this remark implies, consists not in knowing God in the dispassionate way we might be said to know a mathematical formula or historical fact, but in knowing him in the affectively coloured way we might know something impressive (sublime, majestic, grand) or beautiful. This cognitive apprehension elicits a response of love (properly attaching to God's modality as beautiful, as al-Ghazālī indicates in *On Love*, Book 36)

30 See e. g. al-Ghazālī 1964, 255 f., and al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1443 f.; a mark of virtue is after all the facility with which the relevant actions are performed (al-Ghazālī 1964, 251–53; al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1434), with hardship and striving (*kulfa, takalluf*) confined to the formative stage.

31 Particularly if one assumes al-Ghazālī's conception of human nature and its proneness to psychic conflict; but this also seems the most philosophically plausible view. Cf. Muhammad Abul Quasem's related remarks in Abul Quasem 1976, 198. Abul Quasem also underlines al-Ghazālī's hostility to antinomian trends in both their Sufi and philosophical forms, as does Kukkonen in Kukkonen 2016, where he reads al-Ghazālī's therapeutic account of religious obligations partly as a response to the philosophers' elitist view of these obligations and its antinomian potential. Al-Ghazālī provides direct support for this reading in the *Munqidh*, though the discussion there is not as unambiguous as one might have wished. The challenge posed by antinomianism in its different forms – notably among Ismailis, Sufis, and philosophers – is a key theme of the book. See al-Ghazālī 1967, 117–31.

and a response of deference, submission, or worship (properly attaching to God's modality as sublime). When we love a person intensely, al-Ghazālī observes in *The Etiquette of Intimacy, Brotherhood, and Companionship* (Book 15), our love becomes transitive and attaches itself to everything or everyone that relates to that person. We thus love those whom that person loves, those who serve him, those who praise him. We also love *what* that person loves (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 5:937).[32] God loves the person who obeys him and hates the person who disobeys him (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 11:2017), and he loves the acts he has commanded and hates the acts he has prohibited. It would thus be incoherent and self-defeating if a person should use as a means for ethical improvement, whose purpose is to establish a loving relation to God, acts that conflict with God's command and thus render him an object of God's hatred.

These are ideas that the Ḥanbalite theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), an avid reader of al-Ghazālī's works, would articulate especially powerfully two centuries later, but they are already strongly present in al-Ghazālī's thinking.[33] The same applies to another holistic consideration, which concerns the overall character and aims of the religious Law. Because on the one hand, a key purpose of the religious Law is certainly to promote human welfare, whether their mundane interests (the jurists' sense of welfare) or their spiritual health (al-Ghazālī's sense in the *Revival*). Yet human interests or *ḥuẓūẓ* represent only one level of the Law's purposes. The other level is the exacting of human servitude (*ʿubūdiyya*) or worship (*ʿibāda*), reflecting the fact that human beings, as a well-known Qur'anic verse declares (Q 51:56), were created to worship God.[34] Servitude, as al-Ghazālī states in his instructional epistle *Letter to a Disciple*, has several meanings; but the very first is "adherence to the Law's command" (al-Ghazālī 1934, 69).[35] It is this paradigm that supplies the deontological limit to a consequentialist[36] approach to the value of action, and ensures that the relativism and particularism yielded by the latter could not undermine the absolute and binding force of God's command. Ethical health may have evaluative primacy over action; yet it could never deliver a mandate for action contrary to God's explicit command.

32 Al-Ghazālī's focus in this book is on *who* God loves rather than *what* he loves – on how the phenomenon of transitivity is expressed in the love of persons – but the love of actions is logically implicit.

33 For more on Ibn Taymiyya's articulation of these ideas, see Vasalou 2016.

34 This differentiation is clearly reflected in the typology of religious duties al-Ghazālī offers in the *Mysteries of the Zakat* (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 2:385 f.), however, see Vasalou (in press) for further context. For Ibn Taymiyya's related understanding, see briefly Vasalou 2016, 176 f.

35 Cf. the remarks about the concepts of obedience and worship at 64 f.

36 Where the relevant consequence is the promotion of virtue.

4 Practical Judgement and the Sources of Authority: The Sufi Master as Moral Expert

I suggested above that the particularist view of right action generated by al-Ghazālī's medical model must ultimately be understood to be constrained by the absolute deontological force of the religious Law. In this regard, al-Ghazālī aligns himself with what many commentators identify as the prevailing attitude to the Law among Sufi thinkers. While the spiritual life does not *stop* at obedience of its exoteric rules, it must always start with it – and seek to inhabit these rules from within. The narrower pathway (*ṭarīqa*) of Sufism branches off from the highway (*sharʿ*) of the Law.[37]

Yet my above discussion, it may now be noticed, left a vital question out of view. Departing from al-Ghazālī's account of the relationship between character and action and his claim about the evaluative priority of the former, I raised a question about its antinomian potential. Yet it is not, in fact, taken as a purely ontological thesis about the structure of value that this account harbours such potential. It is when this ontological thesis is converted into epistemological terms: into a thesis about how people might *reason* about ethical matters, opening the possibility that right action might be *determined* on the basis of an independent (rational) assessment of a particular individual's moral needs, rather than on the basis of scripturally derived rules. Among the many dimensions of al-Ghazālī's appeal to the medical analogy, it is the epistemological implications of this analogy, in my view, that represent its most intriguing aspect – and the aspect that most directly challenges the epistemological picture that emerges from his works of theology and legal theory.

Now, the contrast I just suggested between "rational assessment" and "scriptural derivation" as alternative means of determining the value of action should not be exaggerated. The kind of assessments that jurists arrived at, as part of their text-centred enterprise, also had a rational character to the extent that they relied on analogy (*qiyās*) as a tool of legal reasoning and as a source of Law in its own right alongside scriptural texts. But the comparison with the legal context is in fact instructive. Because there were a number of constraints on this activity that ensured it remained true to what Bernard Weiss calls the "textualist" or "intentionalist" stance and that it did not succumb to the runaway arbitrariness of subjective human judgement (Weiss 1998, ch. 3). Two constraints seem especially relevant in this context, one concerning the process of legal reasoning, the other

37 I owe this phrasing to Schimmel 1975, 98 f. On this point, see also Ayoub 1990, 221–29.

concerning the control of its professional practitioners. On the one hand, while most jurists were happy to recognise the normative force of human welfare so long as this recognition rested on textual foundations – as it did when utility was considered in the context of legal analogy, and more specifically in the appeal to "suitability" (*munāsaba*) as a means of identifying the legal cause – many of these jurists drew a line when it came to taking unattested interests (*maṣāliḥ mursala*) as a source of Law, which would involve the human mind determining the value of actions through a direct consideration of their utility outside a textual framework.[38] A different kind of constraint was introduced by the requirement that jurists satisfy certain criteria and undergo a certain kind of training that qualified them to engage in independent determinations (*ijtihād*) of legal value. This included a good grasp of the relevant scriptural texts, thorough knowledge of the Arabic language, and mastery of the methods of inferential reasoning.[39]

The special interest of the second constraint lies in the fact that it mirrors a constraint no less central to the paradigm of medicine than to that of law. As in law, so in medicine, the relevant judgement is not a matter for just anyone. It belongs to the experts. The question of expertise picks out a point of critical importance in ancient uses of the medical model, as Nussbaum has documented. One of the most significant differences between the ways this model was constructed across different philosophical schools centred precisely on how they approached this question, and on how asymmetrical they envisaged the doctor-patient teacher-pupil relationship and the balance between the authority of the one and the autonomy of the other to be. Aristotle, for example, highlights the active critical engagement of the pupil in the philosophical process, and uses the medical analogy to characterise the mode of ethical reasoning – the practical wisdom – of the *virtuous adult*, who must be like a doctor in exercising particularistic context-sensitive judgement. For the Epicureans, by contrast, the medical model yields a sharp asymmetry of roles, with the patient a passive and obedient follower of the doctor's authority and the particularist judgement confined to the doctor seeking to cure his patient rather than an ingredient of the norm of virtue (that is, health) itself.[40] The Stoics stand closer to Aristotle, taking "particular perception [to be] an essential moral ability" and holding that "the medical therapeutic attention of the teacher/doctor is to be applied by each person to herself in the struggle to examine one's motives and to live well each day" (Nussbaum

38 For a somewhat more detailed statement of this point with reference to al-Ghazālī and (the rather complex case of) Ibn Taymiyya, see Vasalou 2016, 202–11.

39 See, briefly, Hallaq 1997, 117 f.

40 The above draws on a number of moments of Nussbaum's discussion, but see especially Nussbaum 1994, 74 f., 125 f., 487 f.

1994, 487). This last point is clearly conveyed by Cicero in a notable passage from the *Tusculan Disputations* (Bk 3, 3.6): "There is, I assure you, a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavor with all our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves."[41]

Where does al-Ghazālī stand against this context? Put differently: In al-Ghazālī's construction of the medical model, just where – in whose hands – is ethical judgement, and its authority, to be located? That the medical analogy cannot merely offer a paradigm for inertly characterising the structure of value, but also identifies the dynamic space for a distinctive kind of reasoning and decision-making, may already be obvious from some of the things said above. Al-Ghazālī places it beyond doubt in a seminal passage of the *Scale of Action*, which simultaneously provides what seems to be an unambiguous answer to the question of *who* is empowered to make the relevant judgement. The passage, which is worth quoting at some length, appears in the context of al-Ghazālī's discussion of how character can be reformed. The standard or criterion (*miʿyār*) of actions, al-Ghazālī states, must here derive from a person's attributes and character traits (*al-ṣifāt waʾl-akhlāq*).

> In this matter, the right approach will depend on the individual, and even for a single individual, it will depend on their state (*aḥwāl*). Those who have been blessed with insight are able to identify the malady (*ʿilla*)[42] and treat it using the means that befit it. Yet given that the majority of people lack the capacity to do so, and given that it was hard for the revealed Law (*sharʿ*) to provide a detailed account (*tafṣīl*) that would meet the needs of all individuals across all ages, the Law confined itself to detailing the common ordinances that bring general benefit (*al-qawānīn al-mushtaraka allatī taʿummu jadwāhā*), [identifying] acts of obedience [to be performed] and acts of disobedience to be avoided, and cautioning against permissible things pursued for the sake of pleasure, using fine sayings such as the following: "The love of the world is the root of all sin." Then the people of insight inferred the full extent[43] of what must be achieved and the means of doing so, and the full extent of what must be avoided and the means of doing so, and they thereby uncovered the detailed account and guided those who were fortunate enough to become their followers to it (*arshadū ilayhi man wuffiqa li-ittibāʿihim*). By supplying the particulars of the general account given by the prophets, they served as representatives of the prophets [...] this is why the Prophet said: "The learned are the heirs of the prophets." (Al-Ghazālī 1964, 263 f.)

41 Here I use Nussbaum's translation of this passage in Nussbaum 1994, 316.

42 Or "cause" – i. e. of the malady.

43 *Ghāyat al-maṭlūb wa-ṭarīqahu wa-ghāyat al-maḥdhūr wa-ṭarīqahu*. An alternative translation would be "the *purpose* of [the acts] desired/recommended" – a reference to the inner states that acts were intended (by the Legislator) to promote. But this seems to me to make less sense overall.

It may take a moment to digest this dense and richly veined passage. Its backbone is given in a distinction between general and particular, which is used to differentiate between two domains of normative guidance. One is provided by revealed scripture, taken as a universal message addressed to all humanity. Taken as such, scripture had to confine itself to guidance of a general form, offering general rules and prescriptions that work to the common benefit. It is hard not to hear this as a reference to public interest (*maṣlaḥa ʿāmma*) as conceptualised in works of legal theory. This domain would seem to correspond to the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Yet this general type of guidance is not sufficient for instructing people on their truest welfare – which is to say, their otherworldly welfare. Their true welfare is vested in their inner state of character, their virtues and their vices. In this domain, a different type of guidance is needed that takes a more particularised form and is tailored to the individual in the way that al-Ghazālī's medical model suggests.[44] And in this passage, al-Ghazālī makes clear that the task of providing this guidance belongs to one specific class of individuals endowed with extraordinary insight. These extraordinary individuals must play this role because ordinary people lack the ability to execute it themselves. Bereft of the rational powers that would enable them to doctor themselves, they need someone else to act as their physician.

Al-Ghazālī's account resonates interestingly with Aristotle's distinction (touched upon earlier) between education by general laws and personalised education. It may also remind us of a familiar philosophical view of written texts that goes back to Plato's *Phaedrus*, which highlights the limitations of publicly available texts and privileges oral communication and personal exchange. Formative (therapeutic) experiences can happen in a relationship with a person as they cannot quite happen in a relationship with a text.[45] Taken in its strongest form, to be sure, this attitude cannot reflect al-Ghazālī's view, and is incompatible with the primacy of the text in Islamic scriptural culture. Yet al-Ghazālī's account here rests on a recognition of the limitations of the text taken on its own.

44 Moments before, al-Ghazālī has said that scripture provides the particulars (*tafṣīl*) about the virtues and vices (al-Ghazālī 1964, 262: *al-akhlāq al-ḥasana waʾl-sayyiʾa qad faṣṣalahā al-sharʿ*). This seems puzzling. The most plausible interpretation is that al-Ghazālī means that scripture specifies, that is *identifies*, the virtues and vices – an identification which, for purposes of moral education, does not go far enough. Compare al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 15:2805, where he refers the reader to the Qur'an for the general contours (*majāmiʿ*) of the praiseworthy/salvific and blameworthy/destructive states. He describes his own accounts of these states in the *Revival* as an aid for probing them on a particular level (*tafṣīl al-fikr*). Cf. the discussion that follows in the main text.

45 Cf. Nussbaum 1994, 336 f.

Our relationship to the text needs to be mediated by specially placed individuals who help us go beyond its general injunctions to outward actions and realise certain states of character through a more particularised type of guidance. To the extent that these states are taken to represent purposes of the Law, this personalised guidance could still be said to be expressive of, and rooted in, an interpretive stance. Just like the law experts, these virtue experts study action against the Law's attested purposes, with reason as their tool. The greatest difference between them is in the types of purposes that orient their assessment of right action.

This last characterisation raises questions about the relation between reason and scripture that I will be returning to later in the discussion. Yet from our perspective, the main interest of this passage lies in the answer it provides to our question about ethical judgement and authority. The particularised judgement necessary in the domain of virtue and vice, it says, is the responsibility not of the ordinary person but of the expert. Who exactly are these experts? Al-Ghazālī calls them "scholars," but they are obviously to be distinguished from scholars of the science of jurisprudence, who are only concerned with the outward forms of faith. In the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī contrasts these scholars with a different class of people he calls "scholars of the hereafter" (*ʿulamāʾ al-ākhira*), whose province is the care of the soul.[46] Yet there is a thicker and more informative way of identifying these experts, which is flagged by al-Ghazālī himself in the above passage. Al-Ghazālī speaks of these scholars as providing guidance (*irshād*) to their followers. These terms will naturally put us in the mind of a persona with a distinctive role in the institutional structures of Sufism, the spiritual guide (*murshid*) or master (*shaykh*) responsible for overseeing the spiritual progress of his disciples (*murīd*).

More direct evidence for this identification is offered in the book *On the Discipline of the Soul* in the *Revival*.[47] For the spiritual seeker, the direction provided by a spiritual master is no mere luxury – it is a vital necessity of the highest order. The solitary seeker is exposed to grave danger, like a traveller setting out to cross the desert all alone with no-one to act as his guard. A person "necessarily needs a master and a teacher to lead him and show him the way." Having found a guide, one must "cleave to him as a blind man cleaves to the guide who leads him along the edge of the river, so that one entrusts oneself to him fully and does not deviate

46 For this distinction, see generally the discussion in al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 1:28–49.

47 Though there are also clear references to the spiritual master as physician in the *Mīzān* itself. See e. g. al-Ghazālī 1964, 260; this passage is the counterpart to the section of the *Revival* discussed next in the main text.

from him in any move he makes [...] and he should know that what he stands to gain should his master happen to be in the wrong is greater than what he stands to gain should he himself be in the right."[48]

The authority of the spiritual guide, this makes clear, is absolute, and obedience must be unconditionally given. As among certain Hellenistic philosophers, the relation between master and disciple is sharply asymmetrical, defined by passive submission and complete suppression of autonomous judgement for the latter. Ethical judgement lies firmly in the hands of the former. This judgement, as al-Ghazālī's discussion in the same context shows, has all the traits of the particularised reasoning at home in the medical context. The Sufi guide is the physician of his followers' souls, and treating their illnesses requires a sensitive attention to the particulars of their situation. Every remedy needs a standard (*miʿyār* – al-Ghazālī's term in the *Scale*), and this standard is set by the nature of the malady (*ʿilla*). In conventional medicine, before a physician can prescribe a treatment for bodily sickness, he must ascertain the nature of the malady, e. g. whether it has to do with heat or cold, he must ascertain the modality, whether it is too strong or too weak, and finally he must also consider the features of the specific patient, including his physical condition, his age, and his profession. Likewise with the spiritual physician who treats the illnesses of his followers' souls (*al-shaykh al-matbūʿ alladhī yuṭabbibu nufūs al-murīdīn*). He must first take full cognisance of their ethical state and pathology:

> Were a doctor to prescribe a single treatment for all sick people without distinction, he would send most of them to the grave. The same applies to the spiritual master [...] he must consider the novice's (*murīd*) illness, his condition, his age, his temperament, and the level of discipline that his constitution can handle, and tailor his discipline accordingly. (Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1448 f.).

A proud novice he will send begging; a gluttonous novice he will place on a fast and have him prepare the finest meals and serve them to others. Unlike the philosophers of the Hellenistic world, the principal tool in the master's toolkit is not arguments, but actions.

48 Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1474 f. Cf. the remarks in al-Ghazālī 1934, 67 f.

5 The Individual as Moral Expert and Physician

It is spiritual guides of a Sufi mould, then, that al-Ghazālī appears to identify as the moral experts in matters of virtue and vice, and to whom he delegates the type of particularised ethical judgement required for the therapy of the soul. For the ordinary person who lacks the capacity for such judgement, the only possible course is to locate an expert of this kind and submit themselves unconditionally to their better judgement.

And yet one of the most remarkable features of the *Revival* – a book otherwise so deeply imbued with Sufi ideas – is just how easy al-Ghazālī makes it for the reader to lose sight of this particular aspect of Sufi practice. With the exception of a handful of concentrated references to the relation between spiritual guide and disciple, including the passages of *The Discipline of the Soul* just considered, this relation recedes into the background in the development of the *Revival* as a whole. Throughout the book, al-Ghazālī maintains a relative silence on the social relations, institutional structures, and moral communities within which the spiritual life might be pursued.[49] Part of the reason for this silence, where the formative relation between spiritual guide and disciple is concerned, may lie in his profound sense of pessimism about the availability of such guides. One of the leitmotifs of the *Revival* is al-Ghazālī's bleak assessment of the moral state of scholarship in his day. The industry of learning is fuelled by character flaws at the most fundamental level, with scholars chiefly driven by the lust for status, a desire for dominance, and pride. And the type of learning that interests most scholars is the letter of the Law and its outer forms, this being the science that carries the greatest cachet. *True* scholars, bone fide spiritual guides, are in fact preciously hard to find – "rarer than red sulphur" (al-Ghazālī 1934, 68). "The physicians are the scholars, yet they have succumbed to illness [themselves] [...] [this is why] this expertise has gone out of the world, and nobody knows anything any more concerning the medicine of the heart or the illnesses it is prone to" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1452).

However we might account for it, this type of relation takes the back seat in the *Revival*. Possibly the most striking feature of the book *On Intimacy, Brotherhood and Companionship* is its near-total silence on the two types of moral-spiritual companionship that would seem to provide the most natural contexts for the pursuit of virtue: the (equal) relations between friends, and the (unequal) rela-

49 For more on these relations and communities, and the form they would have taken in al-Ghazālī's own time, see Karamustafa 2007, ch. 5.

tion between spiritual master and disciple.[50] While social relations *can* be said to provide a context for self-improvement, that is less as an intended effect than as an accidental by-product. Human society is so rife with vice and evil, that one who *wishes* to train their character will find ample opportunity. Constant exposure to the harm of one's fellows is a hardship that can ultimately "break the soul and subdue the appetites" and help induce the virtue of humility. It is in this spirit that people might dedicate themselves to others' service in Sufi ribats or go begging in the markets (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 6:1067). Yet these are character-forming opportunities one must actively seek out, and this evidently presupposes a will to do so. It presupposes that one have a desire to achieve change, and that one have sufficient self-knowledge to be able to identify the change required and the means through which it might be brought about. It presupposes, in other words, that one know one's pathology, and be able to identify the particular cure – that one be able, in short, to act as one's own physician.

Despite al-Ghazālī's emphasis on the need for expert guidance in certain parts of his work, it is in fact this alternative emphasis, I would argue – on self-directed moral effort, and on the exercise of independent judgement in the pursuit of virtue – that emerges more powerfully in the *Revival*. For a book that has been described as a source of "guidelines for good behaviour" (Janssens 2011, 632) or a dramatic "script" to be performed (Ormsby 2007, 115 f.), one of the most striking aspects of the *Revival* is the number of times it openly declares the limits of its ability to offer conclusive direction. Across the *Revival*, there are numerous occasions on which al-Ghazālī brings up a dilemmatic situation or particular area of human life where choice is required, only to declare that there is no single right answer, no choice that is universally and absolutely right or wrong which he can unequivocally recommend. We see this, for example, in his discussion of marriage, and again in his discussion of whether we should seek or avoid human society. Is it better to marry or to remain celibate? Is it better to mix with people or to seclude oneself? There is no single answer, al-Ghazālī explains, that fits all. "Sometimes a person is better off secluding himself rather than associating with people, just as a person is sometimes better off staying at home instead of going out to fight; but that does not show that not fighting is [intrinsically] better," or that association is better than seclusion in the absolute. In the question of marriage as in the question of association, "it is a mistake to make absolute judge-

50 Al-Ghazālī certainly has things to say about spiritual friendship ("love in God," *al-ḥubb/al-taḥābb fī'l-lāh*), but less to say about this kind of friendship as a school of character. Some of his very few remarks on the master-disciple relation appear at al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 6:1068, and they focus on the moral perils this poses for the *master*.

ments of superiority (*al-ḥukm ʿalayhā muṭlaqan*)." The right answer "will depend on the circumstances and on the particular individuals."[51] All one can do, all that al-Ghazālī can do, to help frame that decision, is to furnish a detailed analysis of the reasons for and against, the benefits and costs, stacked on the side of each option, and of the different contextual considerations that must be taken into account.[52] The implication is that the decision about how to balance these considerations – how to find the just measure (*iʿtidāl*) between them[53] – will then have to be taken by each individual after careful investigation of their own circumstances.

This implication steps more clearly into the open elsewhere. Some of the evidence in fact already came before us earlier when we considered the linchpin passage from *Patience and Gratitude*, where al-Ghazālī set out his view of the medicinal effect of action and the importance of tailoring actions to the pathology of individuals. For an avaricious person to fast instead of giving alms, he had said, "would be like a sick person with a stomach-ache taking medication intended to treat headaches." He continued: "so the person must examine the destructive trait that dominates in him," and having identified this as avarice, "he must give some of his cash in alms" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 12:2299).[54] The person undertaking this diagnosis and the person being treated are plainly identified here.

An even clearer example is presented in *The Mysteries of the Zakat* (Book 5), where, in the course of his discussion, al-Ghazālī broaches the question whether it is better to receive alms in public or in private. This question, al-Ghazālī observes, has aroused dispute; and he proceeds to offer his reader a catalogue of the reasons or considerations (*maʿānī*) that support each choice. Taking privately, for example, has the advantage of preserving the dignity of the receiver and shielding them from humiliation; it also helps the giver realise an act of greater value, as it is better for *them* to give in secret. Taking publicly, on the other hand, is more properly expressive of the duty of gratitude, and it also inculcates humility in the receiver. Some of these considerations, it may be noticed, appear to be in conflict. How can the humility-effect be both a reason *for* and a reason *against* the same act? Yet what this registers is the fact that, once again,

51 For these quotes, see al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 6:1045, 1074, 1046, respectively.

52 Which is precisely what he does in this book, offering a list of benefits and harms, *fawāʾid* and *ghawāʾil*, for association and seclusion respectively, many of which involve careful attention to the characteristics and motives of the parties involved.

53 Al-Ghazālī's term: see al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 6:1074.

54 *Ḥaqquhu an yanẓura fiʾl-muhlik alladhī istawlā ʿalayhi*. Cf. the reference to the "particular individual considering the matter (*hādhā al-mudabbir*)"; *tadbīr* is a standard term for "deliberation."

this particular dilemma has no single right answer. The right act "depends on the intention, and the intention depends on the circumstances and on the individual" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 3:415).[55] Whether humiliation is a reason for or against taking openly, thus, will depend on the state of character and the moral needs of the individual in question. For a proud person, it may be a reason to take publicly; for a humble person, it may not.

Crucially, it is possible for an individual to deceive themselves about their true reasons and intentions. A person may thus justify his decision to take in private by citing the consideration that this is beneficial for the giver, whereas his *real* reason is the mortification he himself would suffer. Conversely, he may justify the decision to take openly by reference to the duty of expressing gratitude, whereas his *real* reason is a desire to ingratiate himself with the giver and ensure the largesse is replicated. The right act for a given person will thus depend on the quality of their fundamental motive. The well-known Prophetic dictum, "actions depend on their intention" (*al-aʿmāl biʾl-niyyāt*), here becomes a generative principle for identifying right action, as against a clarification of the most meritorious way of performing (inhabiting internally) an action already known to be right.[56] And it takes an exquisite feat of introspective analysis, a kind of surgery of moral consciousness, for one to recognise one's own motives and diagnose the true state of one's soul. A person who cares for his heart (*man yurāʿī qalbahu*) must pay close attention to these subtleties (*daqāʾiq*) and watch over his soul (*yakūnu [...] murāqiban li-nafsihi*) to avoid self-deception, and he must pass himself through a crucible (*miḥakk, miʿyār*) to uncover his true condition (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 3:415–17).

The right act, thus, depends on the state of a person's character; and it is the individual himself that must carry out this diagnosis and then issue the relevant prescription.[57] Even more potent evidence for this point is provided in *The Mysteries of Prayer* (Book 4), where al-Ghazālī brings up another contested question, concerning the permissibility of perpetual fasting. Some, he notes, have expressed disapproval of this practice; he then outlines two reasons why disapproval might be appropriate. If these reasons do not obtain, however, and "one judges that the well-being of one's soul (*ṣalāḥ nafsihi*) lies in perpetual fasting, let one do so." He continues:

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55 And see generally 3:412–17. Here and above, the Arabic for "circumstances" is *aḥwāl*, which can also be taken as a reference to the inner condition or state (*ḥāl*) of the individual.

56 My expression of this point echoes Katz's in Katz 2003, 44 f., in the very different context of discussing al-Ghazālī's view of the practice of birth control.

57 Compare Gianotti's remarks on self-knowledge in a more limited context in Gianotti 2001, 36.

> The ideal case is for a person to understand the meaning of fasting, and that its purpose (*maqṣūd*) is to purify the heart and to turn the mind wholly to God. [Armed with this understanding,] the person cognisant of the subtleties of the inner realm (*al-faqīh bi-daqāʾiq al-bāṭin*) then examines his particular condition. His condition may necessitate that he fast perpetually, or that he take food perpetually, or it may require that he alternate between fasting and eating. Once he has understood the meaning [of fasting] [...] it will be clear to him where the well-being of his heart lies. (Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 3:432 f.)

What is especially fascinating about this passage is not only the emphasis it places on the need for individual judgement, but also the specific terms used to frame the structure of this judgement. Knowing the *purpose* for which an action was instituted by the Law (= the ethical need it serves) and knowing one's *particular moral needs*, one prescribes oneself the act best designed to serve these needs. While this idea continues to resonate with the medical paradigm al-Ghazālī deploys elsewhere, it is a different type of paradigm that will capture our attention here. The deliberative process just limned will remind us of nothing more strongly than the purpose-based (*maqāṣidī*) process of reasoning at home in the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

It is the same paradigm that stands out even more significantly in another part of the *Revival*, where al-Ghazālī broaches yet another dilemmatic question. What is the best way to handle the persistent sinner? To counsel and admonish – yet what if counsel is of no avail any more? Should one then ostracise the person, shun their company, and refuse to even return their greeting? The matter, once again, attracts debate; and once again, the right act depends on the intention. One can be gentle with the sinner out of a spirit of humility, or one can be gentle out of a calculating desire to please or out of fear of negative consequences. One can be harsh with the sinner out of a desire to deter him, or out of arrogance and a sense of moral superiority. In these cases, al-Ghazālī states, it is the heart that must be asked for a ruling (*al-mustaftā fīhī al-qalb*).

> Everyone who wishes to do the works of religion strives with his own forces (*mujtahid maʿa nafsihi*) to ferret out these subtleties and observe these states closely. The heart [then] pronounces judgement (*al-qalb huwa al-muftī fīhī*), and sometimes it may get the interpretation right (*qad yuṣību al-ḥaqq fī ijtihādihi*) while at other times it may get it wrong. (Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 5:946 f.)

Here we see al-Ghazālī again clearly indicate the need for independent moral deliberation on the part of the individual. Yet what makes this statement particularly striking is the open displacement of the medical paradigm by the paradigm of law in characterising the deliberative process. This paradigm is flagged by a number of telltale terms, including *ijtihād* and *iftāʾ*. It is also flagged by al-Ghazālī's evocation of a well-known legal discussion point concerning the

evidential status of the legal opinions arrived at by different jurists, which both highlights the independent nature of the reasoning involved, and accepts the risk of fallibility it carries.[58]

6 The *Revival* and the Art of Practical Reasoning

In matters of virtue and vice, thus, the individual must deliberate independently and exercise their own authority in determining the actions that are right for their needs. In exercising this authority, the individual can be said to act, not only as their own physician, but as their own legal expert (*mufti* and indeed *mujtahid*).[59] To return to a question raised earlier, it is clear from al-Ghazālī's examples that this authority is expressed in dilemmatic situations where textual evidence does not settle the issue, and where the choice concerns actions that belong not to the domain of obligation or prohibition, but rather to a domain of discretion. It is in this discretionary domain, as several commentators have emphasised, that Sufi morality in general finds its distinctive scope and material. Far from being antinomian, it is therefore best described as hypernomian.[60]

Yet al-Ghazālī's invocation of the legal paradigm raises a pointed question. In the legal context, a jurist had to undergo a specific course of training to qualify as a *mujtahid* capable of issuing his own legal decisions. Now, in a legal judgment error might be tolerated – but only if one has met the preconditions and done one's best. In this case, what puts the individual in a position to make such judgements? Put differently: how do they *qualify* for such judgement? How do they acquire the necessary skill and expertise? It is a question that arises equally,

58 Most legal opinions were commonly acknowledged to lie in the domain of probability rather than certainty – an acknowledgement that was linked to a special debate concerning the fallibility or infallibility of legal judgements. For discussion, see Weiss 1998, chs 5 and 6. For a rather more restricted discussion of al-Ghazālī's understanding of moral deliberation from a very different perspective, see Heer 1981.

59 This self-doctoring function is also clearly implied by a passage in *The Etiquette of Seclusion*: "The soul is like a sick man who needs a gentle doctor to treat him. If this man who is sick and lacking in knowledge should keep aloof from the doctor *before he has learned to practice medicine*, his illness will no doubt deteriorate. So seclusion only befits the learned." (Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 6:1064) Seclusion, thus, can be dangerous if entered into prematurely – and more specifically: before one has acquired the skills to doctor oneself.

60 The term is Paul Heck's (Heck 2006). The morality of virtue, as al-Ghazālī underlines in many places, manifests itself in the negotiation of the domain of the permissible or *mubāḥ*. See, e. g., al-Ghazālī 1964, 399; al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1459.

of course, out of the medical model, to the extent that it is used to describe the self-directed activity of an individual, whether in the process of *seeking to acquire* virtue and heal their illness (Cicero's idea of "doctoring ourselves" – the therapeutic stage) or in the process of *practising* virtue (the stage of health). In the latter case, the expertise consists in the capacity to make particularist judgements about moral situations, which is an expression of the developed virtue of practical wisdom or *phronesis*. It is the former that most closely reflects al-Ghazālī's focus, which is squarely on the flawed person striving for virtue rather than the perfected person who has already acquired it. Yet this case too would appear to require a certain type of expertise in practical reasoning, about which one might legitimately inquire how it became available.

What type of expertise? As this reasoning emerges from al-Ghazālī's examples, it would seem to involve a number of elements. The person confronting a given dilemmatic situation and weighing different possible actions must (a) review the types of considerations that may in principle (prior to a particularised examination of the agent) provide reasons for choosing one of the available range of actions. They must then (b) consider the action that attracts them, the surface reasons they articulate for their preference, the deep reasons that actually underlie their preference, and what this reveals about their character (the state of character the deep reasons represent). They must also (c) consider the general effect of a given action on human character and psychology. On that basis, they must then (d) choose the action that is best suited to have an effect on their specific (disvalued) state of character and to promote a different (valued) state of character. This evidently presupposes that they (e) hold a particular state of character to be valuable.

This is only a partial attempt to break down the reasoning process al-Ghazālī depicts; and certain of these components have clearer application in some of the cases he presents than in others. What kinds of capacities do each of these elements reflect? The first (a) requires a capacity to recognise certain types of reasons *as* reasons, and as such reflects a substantive moral sensibility.[61] Component (b) involves a developed capacity for self-examination and self-knowledge, while (c) involves a factual type of knowledge concerning relations of cause and

61 On one prominent account, part of what it means to *have* a virtue is to be responsive to certain kinds of reasons (see, e. g., the discussion in Russell 2009, ch. 6, esp. 6.1.5). To *recognise* a character trait as a virtue is in turn to recognise the reasons that "people with that character trait characteristically have *as* reasons, to recognize them as reasons for oneself" (Hursthouse 1999, 234). And as Hursthouse notes, this type of recognition is compatible with not possessing that virtue, at least on a non-intellectualist view of virtue. This would seem to best reflect the standpoint of al-Ghazālī's non-virtuous yet virtue-seeking agent.

effect, or means and ends. Element (e) is linked to (a), and again reflects a substantive evaluative sensibility and awareness of the kinds of things that are to be counted as ends worth pursuing.[62]

How, then, might such a complex and multi-layered skill be acquired? Among ancient philosophers, it is training in philosophy taken as the "medical art for the soul" (in Cicero's expression) that would provide the answer to that question. What about al-Ghazālī? This question would seem to confront a special difficulty in al-Ghazālī's case, given that training in a particular art must normally be overseen by those proficient in that art, and given what we have seen of al-Ghazālī's scepticism about the availability of the relevant experts. If the scholars who would normally have dispensed (and taught) "the medicine of the heart" have themselves become ill and "this expertise has gone out of the world," by what means could such training be acquired?

It is a question, I would suggest, that can only be answered by turning our attention to the *Revival* itself as a book, and reflecting on its aims and on the type of relationship it seeks to cultivate with its reader. I mentioned earlier that despite al-Ghazālī's profound debts to Sufi thought, his vision of the moral life appears to float free of the moral communities and institutional structures in which this life was pursued in the Sufi tradition, including the formative relation between spiritual guide and disciple. His own intimate dialogue with the reader seems to unfold against the assumption, to embody the assumption, that such living guides are absent. Yet this is not to say that guides are entirely absent. Instead, it is al-Ghazālī himself, addressing us directly through the pages of the book, who officiates as our moral expert and spiritual guide. This is of course a text written for public consumption, with all its inherent limitations, so al-Ghazālī cannot offer his readers the particularised kind of attention and treatment that a good physician would. Yet he can give them the next best thing: the tools that enable them to be their own physician. One of the best ways of understanding the *Revival* is precisely in terms of an aspiration to provide its readers with a certain kind of training, helping them develop the skills of reasoning they need in order to take charge of their own moral formation.

Many aspects of al-Ghazālī's account in the *Revival* can be read as attempts to supply the moral, psychological, and factual knowledge implicated in the model of practical reasoning as analysed above. Al-Ghazālī's emphasis on the importance of character, and his many passes at explaining *why* our state of character

62 It would be an interesting exercise to compare these operations to the scope of the specific intellectual virtues described in the *Mīzān* (and rehearsed against in al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1437) – see note 10 above.

matters and why certain inner states are worth pursuing, are so many ways of providing the core of the moral knowledge mobilised in this reasoning process (elements (a) and (e)). In different parts of his discussion, he also supplies the reader with crucial insight concerning the factual knowledge represented by (c). We see this, for example, in his account of the formative effect of ritual observances (fasting heals gluttony, *zakat* heals miserliness), which then yields a more general way of looking at actions that lie outside the domain of obligation and that can be dispensed as required (such as perpetual fasting or supererogatory almsgiving). Yet we also see it in his discussion of specific traits in the last two quarters of the *Revival*. In the quarter that deals with blameworthy or destructive traits (*muhlikāt*), al-Ghazālī typically opens with an account of the nature of the relevant vice followed by an account of the means of treating it, in which he outlines the various actions that can be undertaken for this therapeutic purpose.

This type of recommendation reflects al-Ghazālī's commitment to Aristotle's principle of habituation. Yet it is important here to broaden the picture, and in doing so to correct both a limited picture of al-Ghazālī's use of the medical model and also a limited picture of how al-Ghazālī understands this Aristotelian principle. In certain parts of his work, al-Ghazālī appears to adopt a mechanistic rote-performance view of this principle,[63] arguing that the repeated performance of (outward) action can produce virtue even in the absence of any cognitive type of participation or education. Thus, we do not need to know that God prescribed certain acts to make us virtuous in order to become virtuous through their performance.[64] Yet this idea is ultimately inconsistent with key elements of al-Ghazālī's understanding. This includes, above all, his programmatic view of jurisprudence as a science of limited utility, given its focus on outward actions which *taken alone* cannot guarantee salvation (exactly because they do not automatically involve or engender the inner qualities that matter).[65] It is also inconsistent with his own therapeutic practice and recommendations in the *Revival*. Because al-Ghazālī does not merely prescribe actions; he also seeks to educate his readers' reasons.

63 This is a view that used to shape interpretations of Aristotle's notion of habituation, but has since yielded to more nuanced accounts that highlight the training of perceptual, affective, and deliberative capacities it involves. See, e. g., the discussion in Sherman 1989, ch. 5.

64 He conveys this for example in al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 12:2299–301, with another calculated appeal to the medical paradigm, though also the paradigm of parental pedagogy.

65 This view is expressed with the greatest concentration in the book *On Knowledge*: al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 1:30–33. In the quarter of the *Revival* dedicated to ritual acts, al-Ghazālī clearly demands of his reader that he deliberately cultivate the interior dimensions appropriate to these acts and that he approach them with an awareness of their intended spiritual purpose. Without such self-conscious targeted effort, that transformative purpose will not be realised.

Action *and* cognition, he openly states, are the means through which character is changed.[66]

Many of al-Ghazālī's discussions of particular vices in the third quarter of the book fulfil this mandate by presenting to the reader detailed reasons for *why* the cognitive attitude embodied in these vices is mistaken or inappropriate. Often this involves drilling down to the very bedrock of metaphysical reality. Al-Ghazālī's intellectual offensive against the vices of pride and conceit, for example, partly takes shape as an exposé of God's all-encompassing deterministic control of reality, which reveals that human beings could never be plausibly described as responsible for any of the praiseworthy features they possess. In one sense, conceit is founded purely on ignorance.[67] In another context, al-Ghazālī goes so far as to say that this holds true of all vice.[68] On a broader vista, it is al-Ghazālī's account of the purposes for which the different powers of the human psyche (anger, appetite, reason) were created that underpins his view of the right way of ordering these powers.[69] And of course it is his (related) account of human nature and the human telos in relation to God that holds his ethical vision together and forms the foundation of the moral knowledge referred to above. Ethics is grounded in metaphysics.

Moral therapy thus proceeds not by the mere prescription of rote action, but by theological argument and metaphysical description. As with the Hellenistic philosophers, therapy takes place through the giving of reasons. It is these reasons that then inform a reader's efforts to deal with problematic parts of their character and that of course enable them to see them as problematic in the first place.

What about the other element of the deliberative model I outlined – self-knowledge? It is here that possibly the most extraordinary achievement of the *Revival* may be located. For the reader approaching the *Revival* for the first time, one of the most striking features of the experience must be the exquisite quality of the attention it invites to the life of the mind. The quality of this inward-directed

66 Epigrammatically at al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 12:2193: "knowledge and action are the components out of which the medicaments for all illnesses of the soul are composed." But the idea is pervasive.

67 See indicatively the discussion at al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 11:1992: *ʿillat al-ʿujb al-jahl al-maḥḍ*.

68 Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 15:2803, though here he also refers to a "malignancy" in one's nature as an additional factor. A purely intellectual account of vice would ultimately be inconsistent with his understanding of human psychology.

69 Al-Ghazālī 1964, 270: "The criterion for the mean [*iʿtidāl*] is provided by reason and the religious Law. Thus, one must understand the purpose for which [the power of] appetite and anger were created [...]" And see the discussion following this statement.

attention expresses al-Ghazālī's conviction that it is a person's inmost thoughts and desires that hold the key to their happiness and salvation. As such, we must learn to attune ourselves to these inner states and acquire the ability to make certain kinds of fine discriminations. We must learn to identify certain kinds of phenomena, and this means learning to name them. We must also develop a reflective distance from these phenomena, which allows us to engage them critically, as in a kind of inward dialogue or conversation.

This is the light, for example, in which we might read al-Ghazālī's account of how to treat the pernicious trait of dissimulation (*riyāʾ*), where the desire for social status becomes the key motive for the performance of pious acts. Treating dissimulation requires carrying out nothing less than a live surgery of our moral consciousness in the here-and-now of concrete religious performances (*fī athnāʾ al-ʿibāda*) as we come under the assault of defective states of mind. To this end, we must learn to learn to distinguish between three such states of mind or mental events which represent distinct temporal stages of the progression of dissimulation: the *belief* or *hope* that others see us, the *desire* that we win their praise and esteem, and the *endorsement* of this desire and the *resolve* to realise the desirable state of affairs. The best stage for confronting dissimulation is the first. Confronting it here means engaging with it intellectually, in a kind of dialogue or argument (still possible at this stage). A person should counter his own thought of being seen by others by *saying* to himself (*bi-an qāla*), "What's it to you whether or not others know so long as God knows what you're doing?" He should then proceed by *contesting* the value of others' knowledge and by *reminding* himself of why dissimulation is an evil. Though such self-talk one refreshes one's cognitive set and this triggers the proper attitude to others' knowledge and esteem, namely aversion in the place of desire (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 10:1892).

It is no accident that some of the most impressive examples of this kind of training in introspective critical attention can be found in the book of the *Revival* dedicated to dissimulation. This is a motive that is exquisitely hard to detect – like a black ant creeping along a dark stone in the dead of the night, in al-Ghazālī's captivating image (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 10:1828).[70] Detecting it means outgunning our most powerful capacities for self-deception. When you join others in certain kinds of extraordinary prayers, for example, is your *real* motive to worship God, or is it to secure these others' approbation? If you're unsure, try picturing to yourself certain counterfactual situations and test your response.[71] Imagine you were

70 Al-Ghazālī ascribes the image to a Prophetic hadith, though it seems of questionable authenticity.

71 "Testing" is al-Ghazālī's term: *imtiḥān liʾl-nafs*. Al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 10:1924.

seeing them (*an yaʿriḍa ʿalā nafsihi annahu law raʾā*) pray from a place where they could not see you. Would you still feel the same alacrity to perform your prayers? Or again, when others begin to shed tears during their prayers and with an effort of will you force yourself to cry, is this for a good reason – because you fear your own hardness of heart – or because you want them to think well of you? Here is a touchstone (*miḥakk*):[72] imagine you were hearing the others weep from where they couldn't see you. Would you still feel the urge to wring out tears? "*If* one finds this would not be the case *on the hypothesis* (*taqdīr*) of being invisible to them, *then* his real fear is that *others might say* he is hard-hearted, and one must then refrain from making oneself cry."[73]

Self-knowledge thus requires working through one's formidable powers of self-deception. And al-Ghazālī here not only provides a model of what this work might look like, but indeed furnishes the reader with a concrete tool for the purpose which harnesses the resources of the imagination. An effective means to gain insight into the deeper levels of the self is to conduct on-the-spot thought experiments, running mental simulations of one's own responses under hypothetical conditions. Another tool, deployed widely across al-Ghazālī's discussions of different vices and boasting a more obvious philosophical lineage, involves using the experience of pleasure or pain as a diagnostic. The reluctance we feel about performing a particular action tells us something important about our state of character and our distinctive pathology. By the same token, it provides us with a simple decision procedure for identifying right action, i. e. the action best adapted to that pathology: choose the act that you find least attractive. "Whenever a person judges an act to be more congenial to his desires and natural inclinations, his best course is to choose its contrary" (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 5:947).[74]

By offering such analytical and practical tools and by modelling their use for the clinical dissection of moral consciousness, al-Ghazālī teaches his reader how to make a practice of a certain kind of attention to the self and how to discriminate between subtle psychological phenomena. He trains them, in other words, to become the "person cognisant of the subtleties of the inner realm (*al-faqīh*

72 This term doesn't appear in this particular discussion, but it appears in similar contexts; see e. g. al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 3:415.

73 For all the above, see al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 10:1920–22.

74 Cf. the advice given at al-Ghazālī 1964, 242–44: "[good] character mostly lies in what we dislike" (*akthar al-khuluq fi'l-karāha*). Al-Ghazālī's discussion here directly echoes al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's in Iṣfahānī 2007, 92 f. Cf. Aristotle *NE* 1109b1–10. Of course, this decision procedure is only helpful *on the assumption* that the agent is not virtuous (and does not, thus, take pleasure in virtue) – otherwise it would be positively destructive or perverse.

bi-daqā'iq al-bāṭin)" who has sufficient self-knowledge to take charge of their own moral formation and serve as their own guide (*hidāyat nafsihi*).[75] This kind of practice, arguably, produces self-knowledge not in the simple (realist) sense of revealing the self or making its existing content visible. What emerges from this reflexive attention to the self, and from the effort to observe its features against the practical aim of manipulating it toward an ideal, is a new moral personality in which such reflexivity is less a means to an end than a fundamental constituent.

7 Practical Reasoning Between Reason and Scripture, Between Commoners and Elite

In the above, I explored al-Ghazālī's use of the medical model from a number of perspectives, detailing what it tells us about the nature of virtue, moral education, and the structure of value; how its particularist perspective on right action harmonises with the unconditional force of the religious Law and the universal rules it imposes; and how we should understand its epistemological implications, in particular the subjects to which it ascribes the capacity and authority to exercise the relevant judgement and to carry out the particularist assessments needed for the therapy of character. Although in certain places al-Ghazālī appears to delegate this judgement to selected experts, a broader reading of the *Revival* reveals a clear commitment to the understanding that it is the individual who can and must act as their own doctor or legal advisor.

I mentioned at the outset that the epistemological picture that emerges from al-Ghazālī's works on the virtues is not obviously consistent with the picture that emerges from his works on theology and legal theory. While this is not a point I can take up directly, just how deep we take the inconsistency to run will partly depend on how we interpret the relative roles of scriptural revelation and extra-scriptural reflection in the model of practical reasoning I isolated earlier. This is a topic that requires delicate navigation, as it bears on challenging questions about how we should understand the intellectual sources of al-Ghazālī's ethical scheme – and on even more challenging questions about how *al-Ghazālī* understood his sources, and about whether al-Ghazālī's own *description* of his

75 The term appears in *On Delusion*, where al-Ghazālī describes the deluded person (*maghrūr*) as one "who has not achieved a state of insight such that he is able to guide himself" (*bi-hidāyat nafsihi kafīlan*). The implication is that with the right kind of insight, such self-guidance is a real possibility (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 11:2006).

sources provides us with an entirely faithful or honest compass to those sources or to his understanding of them. We know that al-Ghazālī was often chary of acknowledging his debts to philosophical works, and eager to advertise the role of scriptural texts and scripturally infused Sufi reflection in providing the foundations for an ethics of virtue.[76] At the same time, there is no reason to doubt the earnestness of al-Ghazālī's declaration, repeated across different works, that on the topic of ethics, the views of Sufis and philosophers – the results of scripture-based and reason-based reflection – converge.[77]

The way we approach such questions will determine how we characterise, more finely, the type of reasoning in which al-Ghazālī is invested, and whether we conclude that it has a predominantly interpretive or textualist character – not unlike the reasoning undertaken by scholars of the law – or a more independent rational character. Among the different components of the deliberative model I outlined (moral, factual, psychological), the greatest interest attaches to the first, and to the question how we take the fundamental values and ends that orient the deliberative process to be epistemologically derived: how we know that certain reasons count as reasons, that certain states of character are worth pursuing – and indeed why. Is it as modes of human well-being (*maṣlaḥa*) whose considerability is established through scripture, and which can be said to represent textually attested purposes of the Law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*)? Or is it as modes of human well-being that we can understand to be valuable independently of any revealed scripture?

Al-Ghazālī certainly suggests, in a number of places, that scripture provides normative warrant for the virtues and the vices, but he never, to my knowledge, states that scripture is the *only* source of this warrant. And there is much to suggest, on the contrary, that scripture is not the only route to such insight. In one place of the *Scale*, al-Ghazālī refers to the virtues and the vices as "common knowledge": they are *mashhūra*. As a translation of Aristotle's *endoxa*, this is not *quite* a concession to moral rationalism, especially at the hands of a seasoned Ashʿarite.[78] Yet as

76 This is especially manifest in the *Mīzān* – where the conspicuousness of al-Ghazālī's philosophical debts makes his failure to acknowledge them and his decision to instead highlight his Sufi connections (e. g. al-Ghazālī 1964, 358, 405) rather remarkable – but also in the *Iḥyāʾ*. This point is a theme in Garden 2014.

77 See, e. g., al-Ghazālī 1964, 221; cf. the discussion in al-Ghazālī 1967, 86–90, which adds another twist, however, by questioning the originality of the philosophers' insights.

78 Ashʿarites like al-Ghazālī had seized on Avicenna's analysis of moral *endoxa* as a weapon against Muʿtazilite-style moral rationalism. For some context, see Vasalou 2016, esp. chapter 2. For the reference in the *Mīzān*, see al-Ghazālī 1964, 262. There's also a question whether al-Ghazālī means to say the virtues and vices are common knowledge *because of their widespread scriptural attestation*, as the phrasing in "Al-Risāla al-Laduniyya" suggests rather more strongly: al-Ghazālī 1934, 30.

I noted at the outset, the emphasis on reason as a source of evaluative understanding is pervasive in this work. The same applies in the *Revival*, where al-Ghazālī notably classes the knowledge of the states of the heart with the rational sciences (*ʿulūm ʿaqliyya*) (al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 8:1369). More broadly, it is clear that both the way al-Ghazālī specifies *which* qualities are virtues and vices – particularly in the *Scale* though also in the *Revival* – and the way he explains *why* certain qualities are virtues and vices – leans heavily on resources provided by the philosophical tradition. This point too, however, invites nuancing. Al-Ghazālī's specification of the virtues and the vices is in certain contexts far more clearly indebted to scripturally infused Sufi reflection, as notably illustrated by his account of the spiritual virtues or *munjiyāt* in the fourth part of the *Revival*. Similarly, his account of why certain qualities are virtues, which draws on a conception of human nature and the purposes of the different powers of the human psyche, is inextricably entwined with scriptural elements, including the broader Qur'anic vision of humanity as finding fulfilment in a relationship of obedience and adoration toward God.

Whether we can tease out this delicate skein of influences – scripture and scripturally infused reflection, common intuition and systematic philosophical reflection – is an open question.[79] Yet taking everything together, it seems clear that the picture of the human mind that emerges from al-Ghazālī's writings on the virtues incorporates a strong acknowledgement of the rational powers of the individual to self-orient in moral space. A certain type of independent moral reasoning and exercise of practical judgement is not only possible but necessary for navigating the ethical-spiritual life. Although it may require nurturing, the human individual as al-Ghazālī conjures him in the *Revival* possesses a robust capacity to deliberate and reason about moral matters.

Yet put this way, this point raises a natural question, which invites a more nuanced appraisal of the identity of the subjects endowed with this capacity. Because al-Ghazālī, we may remember, had explicitly denied that the average individual is capable of exercising such judgement in the *Scale*. It is because "the majority of people lack the capacity to do so" that experts are needed to undertake it. In the above, we saw that al-Ghazālī was prepared to extend that ability more widely. Yet to the extent that this picture emerged from a consideration of al-Ghazālī's transactions with his implied or conjured reader, the constituency to which this ability was extended was, strictly speaking, not all human beings. It was those who could be reasonably envisaged as his readers. The question *who* possesses this reflective capacity thus coincides with the question raised at the outset concerning the identity of al-Ghazālī's intended reader. If we assume that

79 For a thoughtful attempt to do so, see Kukkonen 2016.

al-Ghazālī's view of the reflective powers of the average person as poor and (hence presumably) incorrigible survived from the *Scale* to the *Revival* unchanged, the natural conclusion would be that the person he addressed in the *Revival* did not fall in that category, and that his intended readership was the elite who, having trained in the art of medicine at least in part under the book's tutelage, would one day become expert physicians for the dependent masses. This interpretation seems consistent with the dichotomy between commoners and elite that runs through al-Ghazālī's work. It *may* be that the telos of human beings – their true state of happiness and health – lies in a fruition of their intellectual powers. But as a matter of fact, not all human beings will realise that telos.[80]

For my part, I'm not so sure. It is not only (a more prosaic textual point) that al-Ghazālī declares the type of knowledge of virtue and vice he offers in the *Revival* an *individual* obligation (*farḍ ʿayn*).[81] It is also that, while al-Ghazālī expects much of his reader, the reader he conjures is at the same time profoundly flawed. Yet perhaps the deepest reason why this restrictive interpretation is hard to credit is that it seems self-defeating. A book is an expression of hope in the existence of a reader. And it is the power of a book to create a reader who had not existed before – out of whatever material it finds. Often, one does not know whether one can be that reader until one tries.[82]

NE Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
Q Qur'an, cited by chapter and verse

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80 See, indicatively, the distinction al-Ghazālī draws between salvation (*najāt*) and happiness (*saʿāda*) at al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 1:90. Cf. Abul Quasem's remarks about the different grades of happiness in Abul Quasem 1976, 57–78.

81 Al-Ghazālī 1934, 74; cf. the slightly more qualified remarks at al-Ghazālī 1937/38, 1:27.

82 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the conference "Casuistry, Contingency, Ambiguity: New Approaches to the Study of Ethics in the Islamic Traditions" at the University of Cambridge in July 2019. I am grateful to the organiser, Feriel Bouhafa, for the opportunity to participate, and to the members of the audience for their comments and questions. I am also thankful to two anonymous reviewers for the *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* for their constructive feedback.

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