Two Paths to Illumination in Islamic Mysticism: Self-Annihilation versus Higher Self

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Abstract

Islamic mysticism has been the main focus of many Muslim philosophers and theologians. Great philosophers such as Avicenna and al-Ghazālī have dedicated part of their works to Islamic mysticism. They strove to clarify the meaning, goals and framework of Islamic mysticism. Avicenna presents Islamic mysticism as an intellectual journey that begins with the human and advances toward the Truth. The Truth for Avicenna is absolute being (wujūd mutlaq), which is equivalent with his philosophical definition of the Truth. This philosophical-mystical journey is a kind of psychological-mental journey. By psychological-mental I mean that the journey takes part and flows between different levels of the human psyche, for example from the potential intellect to the active intellect.

Al-Ghazālī argues that Islamic mysticism is a Qur’anic journey that starts from the human and advances toward the Truth. In other words, the Qur’anic journey is a journey closely associated with the Qur’an. The Truth for al-Ghazālī is the Light of Lights. Al-Ghazālī ’s journey toward the Truth requires the combination of physical and mental structures. For example, the seeker of the Truth should obey Islamic law by praying and fasting; however, the seeker must also focus on and remember the attributes of the Truth with his heart.

This comparison of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī illuminates that both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī have observed Islamic mysticism from the philosophical perspective. Also, both understand the Qur’an in a philosophical and mystical context.

This thesis offers a new perspective of Islamic mysticism by comparing Avicenna and al-Ghazālī ’s work and their integration of key elements of Islamic mysticism.

Keywords: Avicenna, Al-Ghazālī, The Truth, The division of world, The division of people, Verse Nūr.
Acknowledgments

I would like to begin with the insightful words of the great Sufi Master Shams Tabrīzī: “You can study God through everything and everyone in the universe, because God is not confined in a mosque, synagogue or church. But if you are still in need of knowing where exactly His abode is, there is only one place to look for Him: in the heart of a true lover.” I believe that the real seekers of the Truth do not belong to the special religions. Rather, the true seekers of the Truth are Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus because the Truth for all religions is the same even though the language used for how to access the Truth is different. By language I mean the structures, traditions and the ways in which human beings approach the Truth.

First and foremost, I would like deeply thank my supervisor, Dr. Gyongyi Hegedus, for continually challenging my ideas so that I had the opportunity to make my argument as compelling as possible. Her knowledge of Islamic Sufism, philosophy and theology, and her ability to effectively convey this knowledge provided me with crucial insight and support for my project. I would also like to thank the Faculty of Theology for their dedication to knowledge and the opportunities they provide graduate students.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the great Muslim philosophers Avicenna and Al-Ghazālī who have been sources of inspiration for generations. These Muslim philosophers have dedicated their life to helping seekers of the Truth achieve enlightenment.

I will end this academic journey with a quote from the Sufi master Farīd al-Dīn ʿAttār: “The home we seek is in eternity; The Truth we seek is like a shoreless sea, of which your paradise is but a drop. This ocean can be yours; why should you stop Beguiled by dreams of evanescent dew? The secrets of the sun are yours, but you Content yourself with motes trapped in its beams. Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems -- Which matters more, the body or the soul? Be whole: desire and journey to the Whole.”
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Introduction

The study of mysticism in the Islamic context is known as Sufism. Various cultural and societal factors have shaped many distinct forms of Islamic mysticism. The main concern of this research is analyzing and understanding philosophical Islamic mysticism according to Avicenna\(^1\) and Al-Ghazālī\(^2\), two great Muslim philosophers. They analyzed Islamic mysticism from a philosophical perspective, and as a result the general framework of their mystical systems draw heavily on philosophy.

Avicenna is famous for his system of thought. The majority of Avicenna’s research and work focused on interpreting and understanding Aristotelian ideology. Furthermore, Avicenna studied and analyzed the schools of Neo-Platonism. Though the main focus or goal of his system was not the interpretation of the Greek philosophers, he drew on various sources and selected what he considered to be material that supported his own views. Thus, his system brings together Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, Farabianism and other Greek and Islamic ideas.\(^3\)

Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that the major books of Avicenna, such as \textit{Kitab al-Shīfā’} (Healing), \textit{Al-īshārāt wa l-tanbīḥāt} (Remarks and Admonitions), and \textit{Kitāb al-Najāt} (The Book of Salvation) do not have any connection with Islamic mysticism. Instead, these books demonstrate Avicenna’s exploration of different subjects, such as logic, mathematics, natural sciences, philosophy and theology. The theological aspects of Avicenna’s books describe and justify key Islamic theological issues: for example, the

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\(^1\) Persian polymath, Ibn Sīnā or Avicenna (980-1037 C.E), was born in Afshanah (a small village neighboring Bukhara, the Capital of the Sāmānid dynasty). It is important to mention that the Latinized name of Ibn Sīnā, Avicenna, is more well-known than his Arabic name among scholars.

\(^2\) Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111 C.E) was a Persian medieval theologian, jurist, philosopher and mystic. He was born in Tabaran, a town in the district of Tus, Khorasan (today part of Iran). It should be clarified that Arabic name of Al-Ghazālī is more well-known than his Latinized name, Algazelus, among scholars.

\(^3\) Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, (2003), 232.
essence and attributes of God. Specifically, this thesis will explore Avicenna’s work on mysticism in the last three chapters of Remarks and Admonitions.

In chapters nine and ten of Remarks and Admonitions, Avicenna elucidates the meaning of gnosis and the gnostic. Also, he outlines some fundamental attributes of the gnostics (ʿārif) to distinguish the gnostic from the worshipper (ʿābid)—a person who prays often through imitation—and from the ascetic (zāhid)—a person who does not pay attention to material life and lives in seclusion.

The goal of philosophical Islamic mysticism is the effort of gnostics (ʿārif) to acquire gnosis (ʿīrfān) by drawing on a philosophical foundation. According to Plato’s definition of gnosis, it is virtually synonymous with spiritual enlightenment. Gnosis, however, is not ordinary knowledge; rather, it connotes the direct experience of divine reality. As such, it is esoteric or secret to the worldly person because he or she does not possess "the eyes to see or the ears to hear;" the intuitive faculties are not yet awakened. Nevertheless, this knowledge is accessible to all who earn their way within its sacred limits. Gnosis is also esoteric, that is, "saving" or healing in the sense of bestowing wholeness: it carries the power to transform and reintegrate one's life into new life. Faith alone cannot save; one must also know and practice redemption. Also, Plato wrote about the inner reaches of gnosis. He explained:

This knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself.4

The key word here, "gnosis," is important to clarify because it is a Greek word that has been translated by Muslim philosophers. The Arabic translation of “gnostics” and “gnosis” are ʿĀrif and ʿīrfān, respectively. The Arabic translation of “gnostics” means a

person who has special knowledge, and this special knowledge is gnosis. Avicenna and al-Ghazālī chose gnosis and gnostics rather than Sufi and Sufism to distinguish philosophical Islamic mysticism from Sufism because Sufism embraces all forms of Islamic mysticism.

With all of this in mind, the main questions become: What turned Avicenna’s attention toward philosophical Islamic mysticism? What sparked his interest in philosophical mysticism?

Studying the works of Avicenna and his autobiography reveals evidence of the work of *Ikhwān al-safā’*—a mystical sect from Shiite. In his autobiography, Avicenna confesses that his father and his brother were interested in Ismā‘īlī and tried to make him familiar with the viewpoint of this mystical sect. The effect of *Ikhwān al-safā’* on Avicenna is fundamental to understanding love in terms of Islamic mysticism. Love is an important concept because the study of Islamic mysticism centers on the love between beloved, the absolute Truth, and lover.

Also, it is clear that the book *Remarks and Admonitions* was written by Avicenna later in his life, resulting in a combination of his teachings on logic, philosophy and mysticism. The first reason for this is that Avicenna divides this book into twenty chapters, with the first ten chapters allocated to Aristotelian logic. The next ten chapters explore philosophy and mysticism. The surprising aspect of this book is that Avicenna makes important connections to mysticism that are not found in his other works, such as *Kitāb al-Shifā’* and *Kitāb al-Najāt*.

Another indication that Avicenna wrote *Remarks and Admonitions* later in life is his integration of mysticism as seen in *Oriental Philosophy*, which examines Islamic


6. From the 4th until the 10th century, coinciding with the first century of Fatimid rule, the *Ikhwān al-Safa’* were an anonymous gnostics of scholars who compiled the *Rasā’il al-Ikhwān al-safā’* (*Treatises of the Brethren of Purity*), an Islamic encyclopedia. *Ikhwān al-Šafā* is connected with the Ismaili movement, which wrote the “Epistles of the Sincere Brethren” in order to propagate the Ismaili’s ideas about the reconciliation of philosophical and religious truth.
mysticism and was also written later in Avicenna’s career. *Oriental Philosophy* is crucial because it shows how Avicenna converted from pure philosophy to mysticism. Also, according to Henry Corbin, *Oriental Philosophy* is Avicenna’s personal doctrine, *hikma.*

The reason this thesis focuses on *Remarks and Admonitions* is that in the last three chapters of this book, especially chapters nine and ten, Avicenna expresses his ideas about Islamic mysticism clearly. In chapter nine, Avicenna explains the stages (*maqāmāt*) of the gnostics and the way humans can experience the Truth. In chapter ten, he describes the quality of the connection to the divine Kingdom and how a gnostic can receive revelations from God and experience union with God.

In addition to examining *Remarks and Admonitions* by Avicenna, I will give equal focus to al-Ghazālī. The well-known (*Ashʿarīte*) theologian, al-Ghazālī, was introduced to the Islamic Empire through his text *Incoherence of the Philosophers.* This book illustrates his philosophical framework. In it, he critiques the Muslim philosophers who follow the Aristotelian school, paying particular attention to Avicenna. His main criticism is leveled against the theorem of cause and effect. Muslim philosophers use this theorem to try to prove the existence of God by considering the invalidity of the endless chain of cause and effect. Al-Ghazālī was a harsh critic of the Aristotelian school and its followers. As a result, he tried to establish his own philosophical foundation based upon only Islamic sources: the Qur’an and Hadith.

After spending years as a professor at the University of Baghdad, al-Ghazālī began to question his faith. When al-Ghazālī experienced this skepticism, he left behind his fame, social position, and even his family to find a remedy for his disease. His disillusionment can be considered a disease, as it negatively impacted both his mental and physical health. The question, then, becomes what revived al-Ghazālī after ten years of skepticism. The answer is Sufism. In his autobiography, al-Ghazālī explains that Sufism was the

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8. Ashʿarīte is the early theological school of Sunni Islam based on clerical authority and rejection of cause and effect reasoning.
Therefore, al-Ghazālī introduced Islamic mysticism as the best path to the experience the Truth. Also, he dedicated his life to writing many masterpieces on mysticism. The way in which he introduced Islamic mysticism is not separated from the Qur’an and Hadith.

This thesis categorizes the mystical perspective of al-Ghazālī as philosophical mysticism because al-Ghazālī’s work has two distinct different periods. The earlier al-Ghazālī was a sharp critic of philosophers, especially Avicenna. However, the later al-Ghazālī was the Sufi who founded his mysticism by connecting it with philosophy and Qur’anic teachings.

*The Niche of Light* (*Mishkāt al-Anwār*) was written by al-Ghazail after he recovered from his skepticism. This text introduces the spiritual path that must be followed to experience the Truth. In *The Niche of Light*, al-Ghazālī’s attempts two key undertakings. On the one hand, he tries to interpret the Qur’anic verse *Nūr* in the mystical-philosophical context. On the other hand, he strives to make a strong connection between this verse and the prophet’s utterance. Al-Ghazālī describes and illustrates his mystical framework by building on the Qur’anic teaching.

The goal of this research is to compare *The Niche of Light* (*Mishkāt al-Anwār*) by al-Ghazālī and Avicenna’s *Al-ış̄hārāt wa al-tanbīḥāt* (*Remarks and Admonitions*). However, before this comparison occurs, it is crucial to understand the philosophical frameworks of both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī and how they conceptualize mysticism as whole. As such, there are three points that require clarification: 1) the definition of the Truth as the primary love for the gnostics; 2) the division of the world; and 3) the division of people, including the seeker and the non-seeker.

Therefore, the structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 1 will establish the outline of two paths toward Islamic mysticism according to Avicenna and al-Ghazālī and the reasons why Avicenna and al-Ghazālī address Islamic mysticism. Further, Chapter 1 is

concerned with the subject of Love in Avicenna’s *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*. Chapter 2 provides a literature review and analyzes the general framework of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s books, namely: *Al-ishārāt wa al-tanbihāt* (*Remarks and Admonitions*) and *Mīshkāt al-Anwār* (*The Niche of lights*). Chapter 3 defines key terms and concepts in Islamic mysticism according to Avicenna and al-Ghazālī. Also, this chapter examines two different interpretations of the Qur’anic verse *Nūr* based on Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s doctrines.

More specifically, Chapter 1 will shed light on the reasons why Avicenna and al-Ghazālī turned towards Islamic mysticism by exploring their personal life. Also, Chapter 1 will trace the philosophical-mysticism sect *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* and its impact on Avicenna’s life. This chapter will also analyze the differences between Avicenna’s and the philosophical-mystical sect’s definition of Love. Chapter 2 is concerned with the general framework offered in *Al-ishārāt wa al-tanbihāt* and *Mīshkāt al-Anwār*. This chapter will analytically review *Al-ishārāt wa al-tanbihāt* and *Mīshkāt al-Anwār* by giving a comprehensive examination of the books. Also, the decision to focus on these two particular books will be explained. Chapter 3 moves from an exploration of the frameworks to a more detailed look at specific keywords. First, common keywords used by Avicenna and al-Ghazālī will be categorized in terms of Islamic mysticism. Then, similarities and differences in each category will be examined. Significant attention will be paid to how Avicenna and al-Ghazālī have a common semantical path but different terminologies. Another concern of this chapter is how Avicenna and al-Ghazālī engage with Islamic mysticism. For example, Avicenna relies on philosophy, whereas the primary texts drawn on by al-Ghazālī are the Qur’an and Hadith, with philosophy playing a secondary role. This chapter will conclude with an interpretation of the Qur’anic verse *Nūr* according to Avicenna and al-Ghazālī.

This research contributes new knowledge to the field, as it critically examines existing research on al-Ghazālī and Avicenna through both a philosophical and theological lens.  

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10. Some key examples include R.M. Frank’s *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazālī and Avicenna*, published by Cambridge University Press; *Monism and Monotheism in al-Ghazālī’s Mīshkāt al-
Also, although previous authors have compared Avicenna and al-Ghazālī to show that al-Ghazālī borrows his philosophical doctrine from Avicenna, they fail to examine the similarities and differences between their doctrines. This research does not merely focus on how al-Ghazālī was inspired by Avicenna; rather, it concentrates on multiple points of similarity in their work and what makes Avicenna’s mysticism significantly different from al-Ghazālī’s.

\textit{anwār}, published by Edinburgh University Press; Maisonneuve and Larose’s \textit{Al-‘Aql al-Qudsī: Avicenna’s Subjective Theory of Knowledge}; and \textit{Imagining the Divine: Ghazali on Imagination, Dreams, and Dreaming} published by Oxford University Press.

Chapter 1

1 Two Paths Toward Islamic Mysticism: Avicenna and al-Ghazālī

The goal of this chapter is to examine the two different paths taken by Avicenna and al-Ghazālī that led to their use mysticism. I will show that Avicenna and al-Ghazālī turned toward mysticism for different reasons, and that they advocated for mysticism because of their enjoyment of experiencing the Truth. In order to understand why Avicenna and al-Ghazālī converted to Islamic mysticism, one must grasp the influences of previous philosophers, theologians and other great scholars on their personal lives. For example, the effect of the *Ikhwān al-safā'* on Avicenna and the influence of al-Ghazālī’s teacher, *al-Juwayni*\(^{12}\), were profound.

In this chapter, I am not aiming to prove that the only origin of inspiration for Avicenna and al-Ghazālī was the *Ikhwān al-safā'* and *al-Juwayni*, respectively. I will compare the texts of Avicenna and the *Ikhwān al-safā'* to show that Avicenna’s view of love was same as taught by the *Ikhwān al-safā'*. I do not claim that Avicenna’s mysticism is directly borrowed from the *Ikhwān al-safā'*. However, their ideas of love are shockingly similar. Avicenna had read many philosophies, such as Aristotelian and Neoplatonism before he studied the *Ikhwān al-safā'*. Further, the system of thought of the *Ikhwān al-safā'* had been established based on Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Pythagoreans. Thus, I only can provide a similarity between Avicenna and the *Ikhwān al-safā'* on the subject of love.

Avicenna has been considered the most influential Muslim philosopher, as his teachings have been embraced by the world. For example, in the Islamic world, many philosophers who came after Avicenna, such as *Suhrāwārdī*, *Mirdamad*, and Mullā *Ṣadrā Shīrāzī*,

\(^{12}\) *Al-Juwayni* was the Sufi master who had been teaching Al-Ghazālī.
were inspired by him. This impact of Avicenna demonstrates his philosophical adaptability and dedication to comprehending the universe from different lenses.

Moreover, Avicenna is famous for his system that is considered a continuation of the Aristotelian school. An important point is that there is no evidence suggesting that Avicenna had read Aristotle’s texts or the comments on Aristotle’s work by the Neoplatonism school because the Neoplatonist system of thought was not pure philosophy. The Aristotelian school, on the other hand, holds a purely philosophical world-view without any explicit mystical world-view. However, Avicenna did write some mystical and symbolic stories and dedicated the last three chapters of his major work, *Remarks and Admonitions*, to Islamic mysticism later in his life. Yet, Avicenna’s mystical works have largely been ignored by scholars who focus instead on his major works like the *cānūn, Remarks and Admonitions*, and *Shifāʾ*, and the ways in which they interpret and apply Aristotelian philosophy and logic in an Islamic context.  

Regarding al-Ghazālī, the goal of this chapter is not to show to what extent he was inspired by his teacher, *al-Juwaynī*, because al-Ghazālī’s personal life shows his turn to Islamic mysticism clearly. Also, in his autobiography, al-Ghazālī elucidates the reasons he became Sufi clearly.

Al-Ghazālī, *Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī*, is a well-known Persian polymath and one of the most prominent and influential theologians to refute Muslim philosophers, and Avicenna in particular, for following the Aristotelian system of thinking. His major theological school was *Ashʿarīte*, which was one of the most effective and popular theological ideologies of the subsequent generation. His text, *The

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13. By Islamic context I mean that Avicenna tries to interpret Aristotelian philosophy in accordance with the Qur’an.

14. An Islamic school of theological thought founded by *Abū l-Ḥasan Aš’arī*. This school provided critical arguments on key elements of Islamic theology such as the attributes of God, free will, predestination, etc.
Incoherence of the Philosophers, Tahāfut al-falāsifa, is a significant landmark in the history of philosophy.

Further, al-Ghazālī’s judicial decrees were accepted by scholars and the populace because al-Ghazālī was a professor of Islamic law. In addition, Al-Ghazālī embraced Sufism and Islamic mysticism later in his life by writing several books about Islamic mysticism such as *The Niche of Light, The Alchemy of Happiness*, etc.

1.1 Avicenna on Mysticism

Avicenna had been exposed to different schools of thought like Aristotelian, Neoplatonism, and Farabiansim. However, he refused to adhere to any of their doctrines. Rather, he drew on various sources, selecting what he considered to be convincing and understandable.\(^\text{15}\) Therefore, he established his system of thought independently.

Ibrahim Madkur, in the Introduction of (Ilāhīāt shifā') Healing Theology, claims that Eastern scholars believed Avicenna’s system of thought leaned towards the Aristotle school; however Western scholars considered Avicenna’s system as Neoplatonism.\(^\text{16}\) The diverse ideas around Avicenna’s system of thought reveals that his system cannot be categorized within specific philosophical schools.

Four different traditions, each with its own diverse relations to Arabic religious sciences and their representatives, are drawn on by Avicenna for their extensive classical heritage of philosophy and science. But this thesis will focus on the second tradition, which is the impact of the *Ikhwān al-safā’*.

\(^{15}\) Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, (2003), 232.
\(^{16}\) Avicenna, (1402 A.H), 28-29.
1) The first group of traditions is associated with the earlier philosophic school of *al-Kindī*, which was largely devoted to a legal system. This group offered precise expression that targeted the ethical teachings of early philosophers and sages and what they saw as similarities to the ethical teachings of Islam.

2) The second effective tradition was that of earlier Shiite philosopher-theologians, the *Ikhwan al-safa’*.18

3) The third contemporary group was the scholarly commentators of Aristotle, heirs to the longstanding Hellenistic tradition (partially shared by the philosopher Al-Farabi19) in the older intellectual center of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad.

4) The connection between Avicenna and the scientist and polymath *al-Bīrūnī*, who happily pursued his scientific interests under the benevolent patronage of a zealous Sunni warlord, *Maḥmūd Ghazna*, considered as the fourth tradition.20

The fourth tradition is really important because in the epistles of Avicenna, there is an epistle concerned with answering the questions of *al-Bīrūnī*. This epistle contains the ten answers to the questions of *al-Bīrūnī* regarding astronomy, the soul, resurrection, the separation of the body and soul and the eternity of the soul.21 This epistle shows how much the discussion between *al-Bīrūnī* and Avicenna inspired Avicenna.

17. Earlier Muslim philosophers who lived in the Islamic Empire, (c. 801–873 A.D). He was named the father of Muslim philosophy.

18. Ismaili, a philosophical-theological sect, expanded the resources of Hellenistic philosophic traditions to justify and defend the political and wider soteriological claims of a series of Imam, claiming rightful rule over the Muslim community.

19. Al- Farabi (872-950 A.D) was a famous Muslim philosopher. In the Islam Empire, he was considered a second Master after Aristotle.


The above list of influences shows how Avicenna's philosophy, logic, theology, and mysticism were shaped. However, the emphasis of this research is the formation of his mysticism in particular.

Some orientalists claim that traces of the Shiites can be followed in Avicenna’s works. Hossein Nasr, for example, highlights the role of the Shiites in the formation of Avicenna’s mystical works. Nasr asserts that Avicenna was introduced to the Ismaïlī by his father who was a member of this sect.22

Henry Corbin alludes to Avicenna’s autobiography, highlighting that both Avicenna’s father and his brother were Shiite. Corbin also points to an analogy in structure between Avicenna’s and the Ikhwān al-safā’s cosmology.23 However, Corbin does not examine whether Avicenna was inspired by the Ikhwān al-safā’s framework or not, because, according to Corbin, Avicenna’s autobiography states that he refused to be a member of this mysterious sect.24

The impact of the Ikhwān al-safā’ on Avicenna’s formation of his mystical works is blurred because of the lack of evidence indicating that Avicenna was inspired by the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’s works. Clearly, Avicenna himself claimed that his soul did not accept the Ikhwān al-safā’s way of thinking. On the other hand, Avicenna’s definition of love is similar to that of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’.

Therefore, analyzing the definition of love as a keyword in philosophical Islamic mysticism between Avicenna and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā by referring to their books is important. Clearly, I cannot claim that Avicenna was drawing on the teaching of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā because there is no clear evidence. However, an analysis of the texts does reveal similarities between two paths of thinking.

1.2 Avicenna and the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’ on Love

One of the most contested words in Islamic mysticism is ‘love’ (ʿishq), though not because of its meaning. The word ‘love’ has a deep and complicated context in Islamic mysticism because love embraces material and non-material objects. Thus, many Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ addressed the concept of love and considered it important for understanding Islamic mysticism. Love is an important notion because it can lead to gnosis. Therefore, love means a union between lover and beloved, which for a mystic might refer to the union between God and believer.

The *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’ were a group of Islamic scholars whose names have been concealed because of the political situation of their time. Hence, the identity of the members of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’ have always been in question. This mysterious Muslim group compiled the famous work known as the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity (Rasāʾl Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’)*.

It is worth giving a general illustration of the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, which is considered an Islamic encyclopedia; it includes topics such as: the Pythagorean theory and mathematics; numerology and music; hermetic science, Indo-Persian magic and astrology; Aristotelian physics and logic; and Gnostic esotericism. Additionally, it discusses Neoplatonic cosmology, the theory of emanations and metaphysics, Biblical and Qur’anic *Prophe teology*, Platonic concepts of law and leadership, and Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Manichaean wisdom and allegory. The *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’s preference for the descendant of Ali as the true leader of the Islamic community generally demonstrates Shiite, and more particularly Ismaili or Fatimid, affiliation. They not only depend heavily on Qur’anic verses and the stories of prophets, but also quote from the

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25. The *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* supported the Fatimid ruler (Shiite) while the Islamic Empire was governed by Abbasid leadership (Sunni), a strong opponent of Fatimid.

26. Ali was the fourth caliph and the first Imam of Shiite.
Torah, the Psalms of David from the old and new testament, the Midrash and Talmud from Greek, Persian and Indian literature and have a great respect for Zoroaster, the Jewish prophets, and Jesus.

The aim of this part of Chapter 1 is to explore the meaning of love used by the Rasāʾl Ikhwān al- Ṣafāʾ and its mystical meaning in Avicenna’s work.

The Ikhwān al- Ṣafāʾ’s sixth epistle is dedicated to love, and its essence, stages and title, The Quiddity of Love, shows the important role of love in Islamic mysticism. The sixth epistle commences with a definition of love according to the scholars. However, the Ikhwān al- Ṣafāʾ did not clarify the identity of the scholars, or answer other questions such as whether they were Muslim or Greek. For example, The Ikhwān al- Ṣafāʾ utilized the passive Arabic verb ‘qīla’ (is said), which does not indicate a subject, when they offer a definition of love according to the scholars. The reason for hiding the identity of those scholars by the Ikhwān al- Ṣafā is not clear.

According to the sixth epistle, scholars defined love as human virtue (faḍilat al-insānī). Other scholars had defined love as a human illness, but the Ikhwān al- Ṣafāʾ believed that these scholars lacked an awareness of the real definition of the concept. Some defined love as something that attracts attention of the lover to the beloved; in this case the lover cannot think or focus on anything but the beloved. Also, other scholars explained love as an intensive desire and affection.

The Ikhwān al- Ṣafāʾ, after collecting the views of scholars about love, clarified the definition of love. Love, according to them, is the union between the lover and the beloved, which is a spiritual rather than corporeal union. The reason for denying the

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corporeal union is that the union is a spiritual attribute and belongs to the reasonable soul (
afs nāṭiq).29

The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ present a classification of love in the cosmos in which love emanates in the different stages of the cosmos. Basically, this kind of love is universal love and has an analogical gradation (tashkīkī). From the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’s perspective, the stages of the love are tantamount to the stages of the soul. The soul is categorized into three kinds: the vegetative soul, the animal soul, and the reasonable soul. Each of these souls has their own love, which is in harmony with their unique nature.30

Some of them, the appetitive vegetative soul (Nafs nabāṭī) its love is nutriment, beverages and marriage. Some of them the animal emotional soul (Nafs ḥaywānī) and its love is severity, predominance and superintendence. And some of them the rational soul (Nafs Nātīq) and its love is comprehending the cognitions and acquire the virtues. Be aware my brother, there is no people who does not possess one of those kinds of love that mentioned.31

The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā remarks that the reason for being in love with the object of love is that some of the creatures are causes and some others are effects. The nature of that which is the effect is to have a desire toward its cause, and the nature of the cause is to have affection and mercy upon its effect. They clarified their statement with an example of the relationship between older and younger people.

The existents, some of them are cause and the other are effect. Some of them are initial and the other are secondary. Made in the natural inclination (Fiṭrah) of effects the tendency toward their cause, and desire toward them. Also, made in the natural disposition of causes mercy and affection upon their effect. As well, create

29.Ibid., 272-273.
30.Ibid., 272.
31.Ibid., 272.
this in the parents upon their children, and older toward younger, and the strongest existences toward the weakest existences. Because of the intensive need of the weakest toward the help of strongest existences.32

The *Ikhwān al- Ṣafā*’ also differentiated between love (*'ishq*) and affection (*maḥabba*). They argued that the number of things that can attract the affection of a lover is uncountable. Likewise, beings love something that has a significant amount of things in common with them. The appetitive soul, for instance, would not be attracted to severity and the understanding of cognitions is not the object of the love of the animal soul.33 To be exact, what can be understood from the *Ikhwān al- Ṣafā*’ is that there is a relationship between the stage of beings and their love. Also, we cannot neglect the connection between rationality and the stage of being. Therefore, we can come to the conclusion that there is a strong link between the rationality of beings and their love.

At the end of the sixth epistle, the *Ikhwān al- Ṣafā*’ introduced the real, trustworthy and singular reality (*ḥaqīqa al-wāḥid*) in the cosmos. This single reality for the *Ikhwān al- Ṣafā*’ is equal to the God of Islam, *Allāh*. The single reality is the only real object of love for every being. The main focus in the discussion of love is the Qur’anic verse, “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth.”34 In other words, Allah is the prime love and every being has a tendency toward him and would return toward him too.35

Avicenna observes love as an analogical gradation subject. In this sense, love is a matter that embraces the whole cosmos and cannot be separated from the existence of beings.

32. Ibid., 277.
33. Ibid., 278-279.
34. Qur’an. 24:35.
35. Ibid., 285-286.
This love causes the movement of the cosmos toward the single object of love: the First Cause.36

The love toward the single beloved, the First Cause, circulates in the whole cosmos in different stages. Avicenna offers four different classifications of love. There is a similarity in the classification of love between Avicenna and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’. However, Avicenna adds more options into his classification, which distinguishes him from the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’. For example, Avicenna believes in the love of non-living simple things (mujūd basīṭ ghayr al-ḥayy).

Avicenna asserts that there is love between the non-living simple things such as the substance, the form and the property. This love among the non-living simple things is an instinctive attraction, which is the cause of their existence. Avicenna claims the matter only exists by the form, so there is an instinctive love between the matter and the form. The matter is like an old, ugly woman who cannot appear as herself without a mask, and the mask that she wears is the form.37

Three classifications belong to the love of vegetative soul, according to Avicenna. The first beloved has three different faculties, and each faculty has its own love.

The first beloved (maʾshūq) is divided into three segments (one of them) is the faculty of nutrition (and second) the faculty of growth (and third) the faculty of reproduction or procreation. Also, the love of the vegetative faculty is in three segments (one of them) dedicated to the faculty of nutrition and its origin of its love is the presence of food when it need to that food and its survival in nutritious after the natural digestion. (and second) allocated to the faculty of growth and its origin of its love is gaining the more suitable nutrition (and third) dedicated to the

37. Ibid., 378-379.
faulty of reproduction, and the origin of its love is preparing the origin of being the same as itself. 38

Another difference between Avicenna and the Ikhwan al-Ṣafā’ is the definition of love for the vegetative soul. The Ikhwan al-Ṣafā’ did not describe the love of the faculty of vegetative in more detail. Moreover, the definition of the love for the animal soul makes Avicenna different from the Ikhwan al-Ṣafā’ as well. Avicenna highlights that the animal soul has two faculties: the faculty of anger (qhaḍabīyyh) and the appetitive (shsahwīyyh) faculty. The origin of the love of the faculty of anger is severity (intiqām), predominance (ghalabiah) and superintendence (ryāsat). There are two different kinds of love for the appetitive faculty: natural love (‘ishq ṭabī’ī), which is gained from the natural perfection; and optional love (‘ishq ikhtyārī), which is revealed in the compulsive situation. Avicenna makes his point about natural and optional love clear through an example. He says if the donkey which loves forages naturally sees the wolf, the donkey would escape because he loves to live more than eating forages. So, there are two desires (ma’shūq) for the donkey, forages and life, and the former is natural love while the latter is optional love. 39

According to Avicenna, the origin of faculty for each human is a guidance toward love. Hence, if somebody thinks about the corporeal things they would love a corporeal beloved. Avicenna draws a triangle upon which each angle has a strong connection with other angles: the relationship between love, wisdom and beloved. This triangle, the love,

38. Ibid., 380.

39. Ibid., 380-382.
the thinking and the stage of being, is the epistemology of love in Avicenna. When humans think deeply, they would love deeply and this stage would rise in the cosmos.\textsuperscript{40}

Some common ideas can be found in a comparison between Avicenna and \textit{Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’}. First of all, there is a similar approach to the classification of love between Avicenna and the \textit{Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’}. Both observe the presence of love in the vegetative, animal and reasonable soul. Secondly, both Avicenna and the \textit{Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’} believe that love is an analogical gradation. Furthermore, the prime love for Avicenna and the \textit{Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’} is the First Cause and Allāh, respectively. The First Cause as the object of the love of all being shows that Avicenna does not like to separate himself from philosophy.\textsuperscript{41} Also, it indicates that Avicenna’s mysticism is not concerned with religious structures. Rather, his understanding of mysticism is built upon a philosophical foundation.\textsuperscript{42}

It can be questioned that if Avicenna’s system of mysticism does not have a connection with religious structures, perhaps he is merely claiming to be Sufī while working to violate religious structures. The answer is that a person who is looking for the Truth and to experience non-material enjoyment would not be focused on worldly enjoyment.

The most debated subject regarding Avicenna’s explanation of love is not the similarity of his classification to the \textit{Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’} or the relationship between love and the stages of being. Avicenna, on page 393 of \textit{The Love Epistle}, after a long comment and explanation about love, as mentioned above, claims the union with the first object of love

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 389.

\textsuperscript{41} What I mean by “Avicenna does not want to separate himself from philosophy” is that his mysticism does not have any connection with religion. The object of the love of whole cosmos is the First Cause rather than Allah, the God of Islam.

\textsuperscript{42}Both Avicenna and the \textit{Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’} used the same source of Aristotle psychology (\textit{De Anima}).
is the meaning of love. Union with the first object of love is the idea that led the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā‘* to allocate the sixth epistle to the essence of love.

Our goal in this chapter is, to explain that every being loves the Absolute Good with natural love, the Absolute Good would not illuminate for its lovers unless its lovers accept its illumination and join to its illumination according to their differences. In reality, the close target from the object of love is accepting its illumination based on reality, I mean as perfectly as possible and this is the meaning that some sect of Sufis called union, because of the excellence of the love, the lover receives its illumination and verily the existence of things by it illumination.43

The most interesting point here is that Avicenna did not reveal the identity of the Sufis, perhaps due to the political situation or other reasons. But the definition of love based on what Avicenna quoted from some Sufi is the same as the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā‘*’s definition of love. It is worth noting that this statement does not show that Avicenna was inspired by the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā‘*. The only thing that can be claimed is that both Avicenna and the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā‘* utilized the same source; however, neither Avicenna nor the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā‘* revealed the source.

1.3 Al-Ghazālī On Mysticism

The life of al-Ghazālī was filled with sweeping change that led him to write on various aspects of theology, philosophy, and mysticism. Al-Ghazālī is one of the key scholars known for studying Islamic theology as well as mysticism. Two periods of al-Ghazālī’s life are important to study in order to understand his thoughts and speculations: the time

43. Ibid., 393.
he spent as a professor at Baghdad University and his period of skepticism. The skepticism period plays a crucial role in the life of al-Ghazālī.

Al-Ghazālī was a well-known professor at the University of Baghdad. When he experienced skepticism, he left his position at Baghdad University and abandoned his family. The answer as to why he left everything behind can be found in his autobiography, written a few years before his death. In *Deliverer from Error*, he openly explains his skepticism, describes his spiritual journey, and details his development as a thinker. Al-Ghazālī highlights the beginning point of his skepticism:

I was just a boy since I observed that Christian boys grew up only to be Christian, Jewish boys only to be Jewish and Muslim boys only to be Muslim. I also heard the Hadith attributed to the prophet of God that states: "every child is born in the natural state; his parents make him Jew, Christian, or Magian “I was therefore inwardly moved to seek out the reality of this original nature, as well as the reality of the beliefs acquired out conformity to parents and teachers.45

During the period of his skepticism, he no longer found his senses trustworthy. He explained how the human senses can be fallible. For example, Al-Ghazālī described the shadow that appears static at first glance, but later reveals that it has moved and has been moving all the time gradually, imperceptibly. These types of skepticism extended from the senses to reason. Here again, al-Ghazālī found no assurance that the primary principles of reason can be trusted. Al-Ghazālī’s skepticism was an illness that afflicted him for two months.46 His doubt made him lose the ability to speak, and also affected his eating and drinking.

45. Al-Ghazālī, (1416 A.H), 538.
Al-Ghazālī was searching for certainty to help re-establish his faith and Truth. As he wrote in his autobiography:

I said to myself:” Truth must not lie outside the purview of these four types, for they are the ones who follow the paths of Truth-seeking, if Truth eludes them all, then I have no hope of apprehending it, for there is no point to reverting to conformism once one has left it behind. It is a precondition of being a conforming. Once he comes to know that, the glass of conformity is fractured and damage is irreparable. It cannot be resembled using the techniques of restoration and renovation, but must rather be melted down in the fire and created all over again.  

Al-Ghazālī, in the path of certainty, turned to theology, but he could no longer find a suitable theology, so he left behind this science for people who are interested in theology.

I began with theology, which I acquired and grasped intellectually by reading the works of the reputable authorities among the theologians and by writing some works of my own. I found it to be a science that fulfilled its purpose but not mine. Thus, theology was not sufficient for my needs and did not provide a cure for my disease.

After he turns to philosophy, he studies philosophy and writes an influential book, *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*). However, the science of philosophy failed to satisfy al-Ghazālī.

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47. Al-Ghazālī, (1416 A.H), 541.
48. Ibid., 541-542.
After finishing with theology, I moved on to the science of philosophy. I knew refuting the creed before understanding it and becoming acquainted with its underlying nature was like taking a shot in the dark.\textsuperscript{49}

Thenceforth, al-Ghazālī left Baghdad and dedicated his life to the Sufi path, which he found to be the remedy for his skepticism. Al-Ghazālī recognized that the impetus behind his previous desire to be a professor and writer was worldly achievement. It was not an authentic religious impulse. He also alluded to a deeper reason, namely, dissatisfaction with the purely doctrinal and rational approaches to religion. These bypassed the essential aspect of religious life, the direct experiential, or the \textit{dhawq}, taste. He had read the work of the Sufis and wanted to follow their practice. This meant seclusion and devotion unencumbered by worldly concerns, and thus he decided to leave Baghdad and the prestigious teaching position he held. Eleven years away from teaching and his dedication to Sufi practices made him a Sufi.\textsuperscript{50}

When I was done with these sciences, I turned my energies to the way of mysticism and came to know that their method is brought about by a combination of knowledge and practice. The objective of their knowledge is to overcome the obstacles found in the soul. They free the soul of blameworthy characteristics and malicious attributes in order to clean the heart (the reality of a human's spirit where his recognizance of God is located) of everything but God Almighty and adorn it with the recollection of God.\textsuperscript{51}

The motivation for al-Ghazālī to stay mystic is that he was struggling with skepticism. The period of skepticism was tough for him because it involved his personal life. When al-Ghazālī set out to find certainty, he found the Sufi path to be the best and most secure

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 542.
\textsuperscript{50} Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor, (2005), 139-140.
\textsuperscript{51} Al-Ghazālī, (1416 A.H), 553.
path. Therefore, he dedicated his life after recovering from skepticism to Islamic mysticism.

I remained in this state for ten years, and things were revealed to me during my solitary retreats that cannot be enumerated or detailed. This much I will mention, since it may be a benefit to others: I came to know with certainty that the mystics are exclusively the ones who pursue the course that leads to God Almighty. Their conduct is the best, their way is the most correct, and their characters are the most morally refined. Indeed, if one were to gather the intellect of all rational person, the wisdom of sages, and the knowledge of those religious scholars apprised of the secrets of religious law, they would be unable to find anything in conduct and character of the mystics that could be changed for the better. All their activity, whether outward or inward, is obtained from the light of lantern prophecy, in comparison with which no light on earth is capable of illuminating.52

In this period, al-Ghazālī wrote his magnum opus, the Iḥyā, which strove to reconcile traditional Muslim belief with Sufism. Also, he wrote one of the mystical Islamic masterpieces, The Niche of Light, which is the key-focus of my study of al-Ghazālī’s mysticism.53

Islamic mysticism as a phenomenon was considered by Avicenna and al-Ghazālī later in their lives. It led both of them to modify their thoughts and write considerable masterpieces on the topic, which are studied as the main works in Islamic mysticism. Mysticism was a great mental and physical cure for al-Ghazālī in his period of skepticism. Before this pivotal moment in his life, he was a strict lawyer and speculative theologian. After, he became a Sufi. Therefore, his motivation for studying mysticism appears to be a certainty in which he reconstructs his world-view.

52. Ibid., 554.
53. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor, (2005), 139-140.
There are many similarities between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī. However, there is no proof in Avicenna’s works or his autobiography that he ever experienced skepticism like al-Ghazālī did.
Chapter 2

2 Analyzing Two Philosophical Approaches to Islamic mysticism

In Chapter 1, I presented the reasons why Avicenna and al-Ghazālī were drawn to mysticism. Likewise, I demonstrated that Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s mysticism is philosophical mysticism, which correlates with the intellectual foundation of their work. Further, I provided evidence to show that Avicenna and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ offer the same definition of love. Moreover, I alluded to the possibility that both Avicenna and Ikhwān al-Ṣafā utilized the same source to define love. At the end of the chapter, I highlighted how skepticism was the impetus behind al-Ghazālī’s transformation to mysticism by examining one of his crucial texts: The Deliverance from Error.

In this chapter, I will assess Remarks and Admonitions and The Niche of Lights to explore the differences and similarities between the structure of these books. Considering the structure of these books enables the exploration of some key points: the categorization of the books within the philosophy-mystical genre; the starting point of philosophical Islamic mysticism; and, lastly, the stages of the spiritual journey toward the Truth.

2.1 The Analysis of Remarks and Admonitions

Remarks and Admonitions can be divided into two sections: logic and theology. The section concerning logic comes first because it provides the necessary foundation for understanding Avicenna’s theology. The theology section of the book consists of two parts: a philosophical-theological part about the verification of the essence of the Truth and the divine names and qualities of the Truth, and a purely philosophical section based on the real seeking of the Truth. The second part of Avicenna’s theology illustrates Islamic mysticism.

The mysticism introduced by Avicenna is tantamount to the Prophet Muhammad’s utterance, “He who knows himself knows God.” Avicenna describes a spiritual journey
that begins from outside the human to the inside, and then inwardly moves towards the Truth. Also, the reality with which Avicenna established his mysticism in the Qur’anic framework cannot be ignored. In chapter nine and ten of Remarks and Admonitions, Avicenna unveils his mystical world-view based on Islamic values and ethical framework.

2.1.1 The Gnostics and the Non-Gnostics

Regarding chapter nine, Avicenna divides people into two groups: Gnostics (ʿārif), the seekers of the Truth, and non-gnostics (ghayr ʿārif). He says that non-gnostics can be either pious (ʿābid) or ascetic (zāhid). Avicenna distinguishes between an “ascetic,” one who seeks the contentment of this world, the “worshipper,” one who persists in praying and fasting, and the “gnostics,” those who seek the perpetual illumination of the light of the Truth.⁵⁴

Avicenna believes that the intention of the deeds can change the context of deeds. His emphasis on intention is equivalent to another Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, “Verily, deeds are only with intentions.”⁵⁵

To clarify his idea about the intention of deeds, Avicenna compares worshippers with gnostics and non-gnostics. He remarks that worship for the non-gnostic is a kind of business deal in which someone receives rewards in the afterlife. But for gnostics, worship is the gate for approaching the Truth. Also, worship for a gnostic is the obedience of the carnal soul (nafs ammārah) to the virtuous soul (nafs mutmʿāinnah).⁵⁶ Also, asceticism for gnostics is the inward purification of everything but the Truth.⁵⁷

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⁵⁴ Avicenna (1375C.E), Chapter9, 143.
⁵⁵ Sahih Bukhari, (1388C.E), Volum1, book2, number 51,
⁵⁶ “Carnal soul” (nafs ammārah) and “virtuous soul” (nafs mutmʿāinnah) are Qur’anic phrases.
⁵⁷ Avicenna (1375C.E), Chapter9, 143.
The prime and ultimate purpose of gnostics is the Truth (ḥaqq), and the Truth is superior to every being. Avicenna claims that people who mediate the Truth for everything but the Truth are comparable to children who enjoy childish games and are surprised when older people do not enjoy them too. Avicenna thinks that this type of people has never experienced real enjoyment; therefore, they satisfy themselves with corporeal joys. Also, Avicenna argues that people who only worship God to gain beautiful women and tasty wine in the afterlife are people who only think about their appetites and desires in this world as well as the next.

2.1.2 The Stages of the Gnostics

After illustrating his understanding of gnostics (ʿārif), Avicenna introduces the stages (maqāmāt) of gnostics. According to Avicenna, the first stage is Will (Irāda). Will is an accidental property\(^{58}\) that can be acquired by either demonstrative certainty (yaqīn burhānī) or faith. Will causes a movement and joy that leads the gnostic to be unified with the Truth.

The first step in the knower’s movement is that which they themselves call “willingness” (al-irāda) this is the desire that overcomes the seeker of insight by demonstrative certainty or the one whose soul is tranquil due to the conformation of faith- to establish a strong relation to the world of sanctity.\(^{59}\)

The crucial point about Avicenna’s mysticism is asceticism (zuhd) which is the necessary element for the gnostic. Avicenna defines asceticism as an inward practice that results in the gnostic abandoning everything but concerns about the Truth. However, asceticism

\(^{58}\) An accidental property of an object is one that it happens to have but could lack.

\(^{59}\) Avicenna (1375C.E), 145.
does not mean having to leave behind material or physical life in Avicenna’s framework.⁶⁰

Avicenna remarks that the gnostic requires austerity (rīāẓat)⁶¹ for three purposes or goals, and each goal can be achieved through certain actions. The first goal is to condemn the non-Truth by altruism (īthār) and freedom. What really supports the first aim is real austerity. The second goal is the obedience of the carnal soul to the virtuous soul by the faculty of imagination and fancy guiding it towards the divine Kingdom. Worship along with thinking and awareness can assist the second goal. The third goal is the inward purification of awareness. Pure love is not based on lust and appetite, and pure thoughts assist the third goal.⁶²

The result of devotion is the enjoyment of observing the Truth. This kind of enjoyment is comparable with the short period of shining light for the gnostic that Avicenna calls “moment” (waqt). According to Avicenna, every moment is between two joys, the joy before and after a moment. Avicenna explains that the gnostic would lose peace when connecting to the Truth, and when this happens, others realize his restlessness. However, if the gnostic thinks about his real self deeply, he can connect to the Truth without drawing the attention.⁶³

Asceticism with self-contemplation (tʿaaqquṭ dhāṭī) plays a crucial role in Avicenna’s mysticism. Avicenna believes austerity can help the gnostic to gain real peace and to transform his temporary moment (waqt guzarā) into a permanent moment (waqt dāʾm).

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⁶⁰ Avicenna was strict in his mysticism. He believed that even our imagination should not be preoccupied with the non-Truth.
⁶¹ Gnosis should try to focus on the Truth, which is an internal action.
⁶² Avicenna (1375C.E), 145.
⁶³ Ibid., 146.
To be in a permanent moment means being with the Truth in every moment; if the gnostic disconnects from the Truth he would be restless and suffer.\textsuperscript{64}

One of Avicenna’s interesting points is the journey that starts from self-centering to Truth-centering. In other words, when gnostics are in the higher stages of spiritual journey, they cannot see themselves as an independent existence. As the mystical path is the way that the seeker should follow, he must turn away from everything except the Truth, even himself. Even if he considers himself as observing the Truth, in this stage, the gnostic is a tool for observing the Truth.\textsuperscript{65}

Overall, the goal of Avicenna’s mysticism is not the enjoyment of mysticism; rather, the goal is the Truth. Mysticism is a path for experiencing the Truth and achieving union with the Truth. If the gnostic is too occupied with the enjoyment of experiencing the Truth, he cannot experience the reality of connecting to the Truth.

2.1.3 The Attributes of the Gnostics

Avicenna considers some attributes of a gnostic, with the first being that a gnostic should be happy because they observe the Truth in very moment.

The knower is bright-faced, friendly, and smiling. Due to this modesty, he honors the young as he honors the old. He is as pleased with the unclear headed as he is with the alert. How could he not be bright-faced when he enjoys the Truth and everything other than the Truth, for how could he not treat all as equal when to him, all are equal, they are the object of mercy, preoccupied with falsehoods. \textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 146.
Another attribute of the gnostic is courage; he is not scared of the death. The gnostics see death as another gate for union with the Truth.\(^{67}\)

The knower is courageous. How could he be otherwise, when he is in isolation from the fear of the death? He is generous. How could he be otherwise, when he is in the isolation from the love of falsehood? He is forgiving of others. How could he be otherwise, when his soul is more magnanimous than to be injured with evil by another? Finally, he is forgetful of grudges how he could be otherwise when his memory is preoccupied with the truth.\(^{68}\)

Scrutinizing the states of others is not one of the attributes of the gnostic because the gnostic is always engaged in self-contemplation, which makes him occupied with himself. Therefore, the business of other people does not concern the gnostics.\(^{69}\)

The knower is not concerned with scrutinizing the state of others, nor with gathering the information about others, nor is inclined to anger at observing bad deeds, as he is filled with mercy. This is because he discerns God’s secret regarding destiny. If he requests good deeds so with kindness characterized by advice and not with violence characterized by pointing out disgrace. If he magnifies the value of good deeds, it could be because he wishes to protect such deeds from those who don’t adopt them.\(^{70}\)

Avicenna claims that the gnostic ignores the path through which he acquires the Truth because he does not need anything more than the Truth. Therefore, all the gnostic thinks about is the Truth. As there are no religious duties for people who only focus on the Truth, the gnostics do not have any religious duties (\textit{taklīf}). It important to clarify that

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 147.
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 90.
\(^{69}\) Ibid., 148.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 148.
people who perform religious duties like praying and fasting are broken into two groups: people who think about duties or those who do something by mistake, sinners. However, the gnostic does not make any mistakes because every mistake limits his enjoyment of connecting with the Truth. Also, the gnostic does not think about duties because thinking about duties means preoccupation with non-Truth. Avicenna’s mysticism may have started from Islam, but it goes beyond all religions, including Islam, because of his philosophical discipline.

Avicenna summarizes mysticism’s three goals. First, the separation (tafrīq) of the gnostic and whatever makes him busy. Second, the abandonment (tark) of everything, even one’s self as an independent existence. Third, the rejection (rafḍ) of everything but the Truth.

The mysticism beings by truly adept's separation (tafrīq), detachment, abandonment (tark), and rejection(rafḍ) —concentrating on a togetherness that is the togetherness of the attributes of the Truth, reaching one and then stopping.

2.1.4 The Connection with the Divine Kingdom

Chapter ten of Remarks and Admonitions is dedicated to the quality of the revelation that the gnostic would receive from the Divine Kingdom. Also, Avicenna addresses supernatural acts that only the gnostic perform.

Avicenna says the gnostic is capable of refusing food for a long time and that this kind of refusal is not supernatural. Then, Avicenna explains how the gnostic can refuse food based on nature.

71. Ibid., 148-149.
72. Ibid., 147.
73. The Divine Kingdom, or the hidden world, is the world of things ordinarily not seen or understood by humans, such as future events.
Remember that if our natural powers are distracted by digestion of bad materials from processing the good materials, the latter will be preserved with slight dissolution and with no need for substitution. He who enjoys the retention of the good materials may afford being deprived of nourishment for a long time. If one in a different state is deprived in a similar way—rather, for one-tenth of the time of his deprivation, one would perish. On the contrary, in spite of this, the life of the one retaining the good materials is preserved.\textsuperscript{74}

In addition, Avicenna explains the philosophical reason for refusing food from the gnostic’s perspective.

If the tranquil soul tames the bodily powers, these powers are pulled behind the soul along with their preoccupations toward which these powers turn, whether or not there is a need for these preoccupations in the management of the body. If pulling of these powers toward the divine realm is intensified, as is their being distracted from the direction that they had abandoned. Thus, the natural acts that are attributed to the power of the vegetative soul, stop, and the only dissolution of good, materials that occur is less than that which occurs in the states of illness. …the knower has a nature that is distracted from matter, with the addition of two more advantages: the lack of dissolution resulting from something like the hot, bad mixture, and the lack of illness that opposes these powers. Furthermore, the knower has a third assistant. That is bodily rest from the movements of the body—a rest that is the best assistant. Therefore, it is more appropriate for the knower’s bodily power to preserved than for those of ill. What is related to you concerning this is not in opposition to the teaching of nature.\textsuperscript{75}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} Avicenna (1375C.E), 149.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 149-150.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
As mentioned above, the gnostic is able to perform supernatural acts, such as being aware of the future. According to Avicenna, being aware of the future is not impossible, and he proved that it is possible through philosophical and experimental argument. The philosophical proof confirms that it is possible to access the divine realm of awareness because people have access to the divine realm in their sleep. Also, experiences confirm that there are some people who could predict the future.

Avicenna believes that knowing the future requires particular conditions, suggesting that everybody cannot have access to the divine realm. Before he provides the necessary conditions for knowing the future, he explains a related premise.

The particular things are imprinted in the intellectual world under a universal aspect. After that, it was pointed out to you that celestial bodies have souls that possess the particular knowledge and particular wills produced by a particular opinion. There is nothing that prevents this soul from conceiving the particular concomitants of particular movements of these bodies—these concomitants are expressed by beings these bodies produce in the world of elements. Furthermore, if what is revealed by kind of consideration is concealed except from those who are well grounded in the exalted wisdom—namely, that the celestial bodies have after the separate intellects that belongs to them as principle, rational souls that are not imprinted in their matters but possess a certain relation to their matters (as do our souls with regard to our bodies), and that by virtue of this relation, the celestial bodies will have an additional significance in this. They manifest a particular opinion and another universal one.  

Avicenna emphasizes that accessing the future for the gnostic requires removing hindrances (mawāi) and having an innate disposition (istʿidād) to such abilities.

76. Ibid., 150-153.
77. Everything that distracts humans from the Truth.
Avicenna then divides the faculties of people into two categories: internal and external. The external faculties are the senses of sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. The internal faculties include anger, attraction, desire, digestion, disposal, estimation, reproduction, evacuation and the appetitive faculty. Avicenna claims that as much as the human soul can gain strength by altruism, its influence diminishes due to these internal and external faculties.78

Avicenna illustrates the way that the gnostic can connect to the divine realm by avoiding the external and internal preoccupations.

Once, sensory preoccupations are reduced and fewer preoccupations remain, it is not unlikely for the soul to have escapes that lead from the work of the imagination to the side of sanctity. Thus, representation of the invisible world is imprinted in the soul, which then flow to the world of imagination and are then imprinted in common sense. This happens either in the state of sleep, which preoccupies the external senses or in the state of a certain disease, which weakens the imagination.79

Avicenna highlights the strength of the soul; he believes that the substance of the soul's essence can connect to the divine realm in a mode of awareness. Also, the faculty of imagination can imprint forms from the divine realm onto the soul.

Furthermore, the faculty of imagination facilitates access to the Divine Kingdom for both gnostics and prophets. Therefore, according to Avicenna, revelation and inspiration require interpretation because the human must transform forms from the Divine Kingdom into language through the assistance of the imagination.

78. Avicenna (1375C.E), 154-155.
79.Ibid., 154.
The imaginative power is constituted such that it imitates any neighboring intellectional or temperamental disposition and moves quickly from one thing to its like or to the opposite—in brief, to whatever is due to that thing by virtue of a cause. Undoubtedly, there is particular cause of the individuation of that thing, even though we ourselves do not realize them concretely. Were this power not so constituted, we would not have what assists us in the movement of thought that seeks a conclusion by grasping the middle terms and what resembles them in some manner, in the recalling of things forgotten, and in other benefits.\textsuperscript{80}

2.2 Analysis of The Niche of Lights

Al-Ghazālī divided The Niche of Lights into three chapters. In the first chapter, which concerns the light, he tries to unveil the meaning of the light. Also, he claims that the use of the name “light” for both material light (e.g., sun, lamp) and intellectual light (e.g., light of understanding) is sheer metaphor without any reality. Chapter two is dedicated to a controversial verse in the Qur’an, the \textit{Nūr} verse:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.\textsuperscript{81}

This verse has been examined by many Muslim philosophers. Many of them, including al-Ghazālī, have attempted to clarify the meaning and significance of this verse because they consider it to be extremely metaphorical and symbolic. The second chapter of this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 156-157.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Qur’an, 24:35.
\end{itemize}
book is divided into two parts: the first examines the mystery and method of using similitudes and the second clarifies the level of luminous human spirit, both of which help one come to know the similitudes of the Qur’an. In the last chapter, al-Ghazālī connects the \textit{Nūr} verse and the following utterance by the prophet: “God has seventy veils of lights and darkness.”

In the first chapter of \textit{The Niche of Lights}, Al-Ghazālī explains the keywords of his main concepts, such as light, illumination, and soul. He then relies on the Qur’anic verse \textit{Nūr} for explaining his world-view.

In general, \textit{The Niche of Lights} is the story of the existence of universe from its origin and the role of the Truth. Al-Ghazālī discusses two journeys that are famous in Islamic philosophy: A journey started by the creator for creatures and a journey made by humans to the creator.

2.2.1 The Common, the Elect, the Elect of Elect

Chapter one begins by classifying people into three categories: the common people, the elect people, and the elect of the elect people. These categories are crucial in Al-Ghazālī’s work because they form the basis of his definition of light, as the meaning of light is different for each category of people.

For the common people, the meaning of light alludes to manifestation, which is relative in the sense that a thing may be manifest to one person while remaining non-manifest for another.\textsuperscript{82} To explain this concept, Al-Ghazālī defines the eye in two different ways: the material eye, or the eye we use to observe the world of sensation, and the immaterial eye, or the eye that is embodied in the human heart and completely free of imperfections. The immaterial eye is also called the rational faculty. The rational faculty has inward and outward spies working for it, making the rational faculty aware of the world. The five

\textsuperscript{82} Al-Ghazālī, (1998) 3-4.
senses are the outward spies, whereas the inward spies are imagination, fancy, reflection, recollection and memory. After comparing and contrasting the limitations of both, Al-Ghazālī concludes that the second eye, or the rational faculty, is supreme. According to Al-Ghazālī, this eye is the light used to compare things, and also darkness results if this eye is not utilized.\textsuperscript{83} Al-Ghazālī believes that if humans never start their journey towards the heavenly realm, they will stay at the level of materialism. Specifically, he asserts that humans should be free from the sensation faculties and instead rely on their imagination for entering the heavenly realm. For the people who accomplish this—namely the prophets—the door of knowledge will be open; they will have access to the heavenly and invisible world. The visible and sensible world is simply a shadow of this heavenly world. Thus, the real light for the Sufi is the Light of Lights, the Truth, while for common people the real light is, for example, the sun or a lamp.

Overall, light, is defined by Al-Ghazālī as that which sees itself and others. Therefore, if an independent thing can be seen and also allows for other things to be seen, then it is worthy of the name “light” and can be named a “light-giving lamp.” Al-Ghazālī further divided light into two categories: heavenly light and earthly light, with each type having its own hierarchy. However, it is important that the hierarchy of these lights is not endless because an endless hierarchy is impossible. Therefore, the lights must all go back to an independent light that does not have any cause, and all lights are illuminated by this light. This light is called the Light of Lights.\textsuperscript{84}

In Al-Ghazālī’s paradigm, all lights, heavenly and earthly, are not real lights; rather, they are metaphorical lights because they do not have an independent existence without the Light of Lights. Therefore, alone, the lights are darkness and can only be illuminated and shining when they are connected to their source. Prophets and saints who have studied

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 5-6.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 12-14.
the source of lights have seen a unity of lights. They believe that given this unity, there is no room for anything else except the Truth, which is the Light of Lights. At the highest level of lights, there are rational lights that fill both the higher and lower worlds. The rational lights are the substance of the angels.

The order of the lights forms a hierarchy, with the Light of Lights being the cause of all the lights, and each light below a relative cause for the lights that fall below in the hierarchy. The low human light causes the world of sensation, and the heavenly world is caused by angelic light. In sum, based on this dualistic—outward, or material and inward, or immaterial—world, there are two types of light for humans: the visible light and the non-manifested light.\(^85\)

There are two ways to declare God’s unity according to al-Ghazālī. The first translates to “There is no gods but God,” and it is for common people who are stuck in the material world. The second is for the elect people, and can be translated as, “There is no god but He.” This second definition of oneness belongs to the prophets and saints. In relation to this idea of oneness, al-Ghazālī explains that the most important concept of Islamic mysticism is annihilation, (fanāʾ). Annihilation, for al-Ghazālī, is not physical death for the sake of God but rather unity with God.\(^86\)

From al-Ghazālī’s perspective the Qur’anic equivalent of common people, the elect people, and the elect of elect people are heedless and veiled (ghāfilūn), firmly rooted in knowledge (rāsikhūn) and righteous (ṣiddīqūn), respectively.\(^87\)

2.2.2 The Dualistic Cosmos: One world, Two Perspectives

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85. Ibid., 15.
86. Ibid., 20.
87. Ibid., 23.
According to Al-Ghazālī, the cosmos consists of two worlds: the bodily, sensory, low world and the spiritual, rational, high world. These names for the different worlds vary according to perspective. For example, when these two worlds are viewed individually, they are called the bodily world and the spiritual world, respectively. These dual worlds can also be referred to as the unseen world and the dominion world (ʿālam malakūt). This kind of classification can be confusing for people who get mired in the visible and sensory world; they may think that these different terms to signify the world might indicate different realities, but there is only a single, unified reality.\textsuperscript{88}

Al-Ghazālī claims that the sensory world functions as a ladder to climb to reach the spiritual world. Therefore, he does not deny the importance of the sensory and bodily world for spiritual development; he considers the bodily world a necessary step. Nevertheless, the sensory world is different from the spiritual world even though there is a relationship between them. It is important to note that al-Ghazālī has never denied any aspect of human life, but he asserts that some aspects are supreme to others. For example, the spiritual, intellectual aspect of humankind is supreme to the physical.\textsuperscript{89}

The spiritual, rational, high world of holiness (ʿālam quds) is beyond both the sensory world and the world of imagination and fancy (wahm). Therefore, the prophets and saints ripped the veil from the sensory and imaginary world; they progressed from the lowest world to the highest world when witnessing the unseen and spiritual world. The only gate between the spiritual and bodily worlds is the human soul because the soul has attributes of both the spiritual and bodily worlds. The aim of \textit{The Niche of Lights} is therefore to show that the human soul is the way to connect with the Light of Lights. This path (ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm)\textsuperscript{90} is said to be in the Qur’an, at least from the Sufi’s perspective, the journey from the bodily, sensory, low world towards the spiritual, rational, high world by

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{90} Qur’an, 1: 6.
means of the human soul. For al-Ghazālī, angels are noble and high luminescent substances in the holy world. Angels illuminate the human soul, and they also provide different levels of light.

Then, al-Ghazālī illustrates the human ascent from the sensory world to the holy, spiritual, intellectual world. There are several steps in this process: first, one must leave his or her body. What exactly enables humans to stay on this path is ethics, morality, and Islamic law (ṣharīʿah).\(^1\)

Entering the holy world requires a journey via both the bodily and spiritual worlds. The knowledge of God is sent from the holy world and received in the world below by some receptive substances (jawāhir qābilitih) which then transfer this knowledge to other receptive substances in the lower levels. But what is really important in receiving wisdom (ḥikmah) is the potential of the substance, as the Light of Lights illuminates this knowledge to all. Next, al-Ghazālī clarifies the symbolic meaning of “pen,”\(^2\) “the preserved tablet,”\(^3\) and “the unrolled parchment.”\(^4\) In The Niche of Lights, Al-Ghazālī divides the cosmos into two parts: the seen and unseen world. He also elucidates that the human being is a small cosmos—everything that exists in the big cosmos exists in the human too.\(^5\)

To explain this idea further, there are two cosmoses for Al-Ghazālī: cosmos (al-ʿalam akbar) and human (al-ʿalam asghar). Though they are different from each other, there is an analogy and connection between them. People who are eager to be on the path of the Truth should start from within themselves, which is parallel with the cosmos. For

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\(^1\) Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 28.
\(^2\) Qur’an, 68:1.
\(^3\) Qur’an, 85:21.
\(^4\) Qur’an, 52:3.
example, a gnosis who wants to experience the Light of Lights should start from within himself by paying less attention to his senses, ignoring material things in the sensory world.

The imaginary faculty has a crucial role in the path of the Truth, as the imaginary faculty has two key aspects: if it becomes blurred, it cannot reflect the knowledge from the spiritual world, and once it is purified from the senses and fancy, it can be seen as a mirror that reflects the image of the spiritual world.

2.2.3 Unveiling the Key Words in Nūr Verse

Al-Ghazālī classifies the human spirit (rūḥ) into five layers: the sensible spirit (rūḥ hasāṣ), imaginal spirit (rūḥ khīyālī), rational spirit (rūḥ ‘aqlī), reflective spirit (rūḥ fikrī), and the holy prophetic spirit (rūḥ quds nabawī). The sensible spirit belongs to the five senses, and it is like a gate to the outward world. The role of the sensible spirit is to transfer whatever it receives from the outward world to the imaginal spirit, which preserves that data and then transfers it to the rational spirit. The rational spirit belongs to the human being and makes humans capable of understanding meaning beyond senses and imagination. The reflective spirit is the receiver of abstract, rational knowledge, whereas the holy prophetic spirit is particular to prophets and apostles (rusūl). Al-Ghazālī also argues that there is a level beyond the rational which the saints are incapable of reaching. These spirits are lights because sensory and imaginal beings would be observable as a result of these spirits. There are three categories for knowledge: faith, accepting via imitation; knowledge, drawing the analogy; and taste, discovering the Truth.96

96. Ibid., 36-37.
Al-Ghazālī’s aim is to harmonize the Qur’an, God’s words, and the prophet’s words: the hadith “God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived Him.”

The Light of Lights, undoubtedly, discloses himself to his essence in his essence. There is no veil or border that hides the Light of Lights from him. The veils that hide the Light of Lights hidden his creatures are caused by his creatures. These veils can be light, darkness or light along with darkness. Al-Ghazālī divides veils into three categories that cover human’s eyes from the illumination of the Light of Lights.

2.2.4 Veiled by Darkness

People who are veiled by sheer darkness fall into two groups. Firstly, people who do not believe in God and the last day. Secondly, people who put all their power and focus into material successes. The second group can be further divided into two categories: people who look for the cause of the world and people who are busy with their senses. Al-Ghazālī asserts that these veils are sheer darkness for both groups because both looking for the cause or sinking into the seen world are tied to the world of sensation, and the world of sensation is sheer darkness because it is the shadow of the unseen world.

For those who think that the ultimate goal of this life is to satisfy their appetite and desire, their veil is their impure soul. For those with an ultimate goal of domination and taking control over other people by killing, capturing, and generally showing their power, their veil is predatory attributes. They are most content with an abundance of ownership. The last group, those veiled by their imagination, pretends to possess a rational faculty, and their ultimate goal in life is fame and honor.97

2.2.5 The Light Veil Along with Darkness

97. Ibid., 45-47.
The origin of the light veiled with darkness is the senses, imagination and corrupt rational comparison. The first group is people who pray for their idols; they are not looking for the knowledge of God. Also, people who pray for idols are in three groups. The first group is comprised of people who consider God mightier than everything else, but their sense is their darkness; therefore, they make gods out of precious substances like gold and silver and pray for them.

The second group is divided into two classes. First, the light veiled along with the darkness of sense, are people who do not have any official religion or creed, but they are enchanted with the beauty of their lord because their lord is the most beautiful. They love the beauty of nature and humans; in other words, they believe in naturalism. The second class, the light veiled along with the darkness of imagination, understands that there is something beyond the senses, but they cannot go further than their imaginative faculty. Al-Ghazālī classifies many of the Islamic theological schools in this category. The lowest level of people who cannot go further than the imagination is called Karram iyyah. This class believes that God has sovereign attributes, but they make a comparison between themselves and God. For example, they see human’s power so they come to the conclusion that God has power too but in the highest level. All are veiled to the light along with darkness because of corrupted rational comparison.

The third group consists of people who believe that their God is luminous in his own essence. Their God is the sensible and visible light. Some of them pray to fire while others pray to the stars, moon and sun. Also, there are some people who see light and darkness but believe that the light is sovereign. These people believe in dualism. The third group, veiled by sheer light, is divided into three classes. The first class believes that God does not have the same attributes as human beings, so they deny that it is possible to

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98. One of the Islamic theological schools that believed in the corporeality of God. Also, faith in God can be confirmed by tongue. Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology. 2014.

know God via his attributes. Instead, they come to know him in his relation to his creatures. The second class contends that God is the first mover and mover of everything. The last class goes further than the previous classes, turning their attention away from God as the mover of heaven and the celestial bodies and towards God as the origin of heaven and the celestial bodies. Also, this last group is divided into two levels. The first level is comprised of those who are burned up, effaced and annihilated. However, by observing the beauty, might, and holiness, they remain an observer of their own essence in the beauty. In other words, annihilation and losing all identity as a human being is missing. These people fake the loss of their identity; the identity of their self remains. The level is made up of people who do not have any identity except the image of God, and for them everything is dead except his face. They do not have any self-identity; they only have God’s image. In other words, they are annihilated and al-Ghazālī calls these people the elect of the elect.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 50-53.
Chapter 3

3 The Comparison of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s Mysticism Keywords

The aim of this chapter, after clarifying Avicenna’s and al-Ghazālī’s mystical viewpoints, is to explore similarities and differences in their use of Islamic Mysticism. It is clear that the main focus of Islamic mysticism is the definition of the Truth (ḥaqeq). According to what has been said in the previous chapters, mysticism is a path that begins from the human and moves toward the Truth. Therefore, many Muslim thinkers attempt to clarify mysticism and its goal. From the Islamic mystical perspective, the aim of mysticism is the union of true seekers and the Truth. Thus, at the core of Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism is the quest for the Truth.

Avicenna and al-Ghazālī have different approaches to Islamic mysticism due to their dissimilar philosophical structures. However, their different viewpoints do not mean that they neglect the overall common goal of Islamic mysticism: union with the Truth. Interestingly, though, Avicenna and al-Ghazālī offer different definitions of the Truth.

It is worth noting that the Truth for all Muslim thinkers is fundamentally the same, but they utilize different language for expressing it. Rumi, for example, expresses the Truth through poetic language, while Avicenna expresses mysticism through the language of philosophy. Using different languages to define the Truth, though, does not mean that the reality of the Truth is different.

3.1 The Absolute Truth

In chapter four of Remarks and Admonitions, Avicenna defines the Truth in philosophical terms, but it seems that the definition of the Truth from both a philosophical and mystical perspective is the same for him.
Avicenna believes in the absolute being (\textit{wujūd muṭlaq}), which does not need a definition because the absolute being is recognized by reason itself (\textit{ʿaql}).\(^{101}\) There are two classifications of the absolute being: the necessary being and the contingent being. According to these categories, Avicenna proves, philosophically, the existence of the necessary being as the philosophical Truth.

The being of that entity which being, is either necessary (\textit{wājib}) in itself due to its own nature, or it is not necessary. The being of that which is not necessary in itself is either an impossible (\textit{mumtaniʾ}) or a contingency (\textit{mumkin}). Whatever is impossible in itself can never be realized (\textit{mujūd}). Consequently, it must be contingent due to itself and necessary due to the condition (\textit{shart}) that its cause exist, whereas it is an impossibility due to the condition that its cause does not exist. One factor is its being and another distinct factor is the condition of the existence or non-existence of a cause. When one considers its being-qua-being without any other condition, it is neither necessary nor an impossibility. When one considers that determined cause, which is the condition for realizing its cause, it becomes necessary, whereas it becomes an impossibility of one considers as its cause. the condition of the non-realization of its cause. Hence, if one considers number without regard to any conditions which are usually associated with it, its nature cannot be an impossibility for as such it would never exist. But if one regards the state of the number four which result from two times two, the result must be necessary, for its non-realization as four is an impossibility. Hence, any existing entity, for which existence is not intrinsically necessary (\textit{wujūdī wājib}) is contingent in itself. Since becoming an existent is contingency, and since a contingency in itself is never realized because it has not come from a cause, it is necessary, therefore, that the contingency be realized by means of a cause.\(^{102}\)

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102. Ibid., 48.
Philosophically, Avicenna tries to clarify the role and the definition of the necessary being. Also, Avicenna remarks that the necessary being does not have any relation with any cause due to its necessary nature.

In itself, necessary Existent cannot be united with any cause. since it being is necessary in itself without being caused. It’s being cannot be due to a cause. thus it is not united with any cause. if it’s being were not necessary without a cause, it would not be Necessary Existent in itself. ¹⁰³

Form a mystical viewpoint, the Truth for Avicenna is the absolute being (*wujūdi muṭlaq*), which is clear and therefore does not need to be defined.

Being is recognized by reason itself without the aid of definition (*ḥadd*) or description (*rasm*). Since it has no definition, it has either no genus (*jins*) no differentiation (*faṣl*) because nothing is more clear than it. Being does not have a description because nothing is better known than it.¹⁰⁴

Consequently, the Truth for Avicenna can be philosophical Truth (the necessary being), or mystical Truth (the absolute being). For Avicenna, both the philosophical and mystical descriptions of the Truth do not require a distinct definition because of their clearness. Also, the reality of the absolute being and the necessary being is same for Avicenna; however, he uses two different words to define the same reality.

Unlike Avicenna, al-Ghazālī’s mystical definition of the Truth is within the Islamic context, the Qur’an and Hadith. When al-Ghazālī defines the Truth, he utilizes the Qur’anic word Light (*nūr*) in a metaphorical way for his definition, "the real light is

¹⁰³. Ibid., 49.
¹⁰⁴. Ibid., 15.
Allah and that the name light for everything else is sheer metaphor, without reality.”\footnote{105} Al-Ghazālī draws on the Qur’an and Hadith to describe his meaning of the Truth.

We say: that which sees itself and others is more worthy of the name” light.” So if it be something that also allows other thing to see while seeing itself and others, then it is even more worthy of the name of light than that which has no effect at all on others. Or rather, it is more appropriate that it should be called a “light-giving-lamp,” since it pours forth its light upon other things.\footnote{106}

Since “light” can be used in different contexts with different meanings, al-Ghazālī offers a classification of it to make his own definition clear. Thus, al-Ghazālī wants to illustrate a comprehensive picture of the light for seekers of the Truth. According to al-Ghazālī, the first classification of the light is sensible light, which is divided into three stages.

Regarding the first sense of the word, “light” alludes to manifestation. Manifestation is relative affair (\textit{amr izāfī}). In relationship to visual sensation, things are of three kinds: first those which cannot be seen themselves, such as dark bodies. Second, those which can be seen in themselves but by which other things cannot be seen, such as bright bodies or starts that are not aflame. Third are those which can be seen in themselves and by which other things can be seen, such as sun, the moon, a lamp, and a flaming fire.” Light” is a name that belong to third kind.\footnote{107}

The goal of al-Ghazālī is to prove the real and absolute light in the whole universe: “the Light of Lights.” Therefore, he explains the different kinds of light and their attributes, conceptualizing them as metaphoric lights representing the sheer light “Allah”.

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item 106. Ibid., 12-13.
\item 107. Ibid., 4.
\end{itemize}}
The clarification of the meaning of the intellectual light makes it distinct from the sensible light. Al-Ghazali explains the attributes of the intellectual light, which make it a supreme existent upon the sensible light, the light of the seeing eye.\textsuperscript{108} Then, al-Ghazālī remarks that if the intellectual light is not veiled by fancy and imagination, it offers an accurate view of the real nature of beings.

The rational faculty is more worthy to be named “light” than outward eye. Because its measure is lifted beyond the imperfection. As for rational faculty, once it disengages itself from the covering of fancy and imagination, it is inconceivable that can commit an error. On the contrary, it will see things as they are in themselves\textsuperscript{109}.

As demonstrated in the above discussion, light plays an important role in al-Ghazālī’s mysticism. Al-Ghazālī’s mysticism is shaped by the hierarchy of lights. The hierarchy of lights commences with the Light of Lights, followed by the intellectual light, and ending with the sensible light. The Light of Lights occupies the highest place in the universe. Also, the Light of Lights bestows on other beings its illumination.

Since you have recognized that lights have a hierarchy, know also that this hierarchy does not continue on to infinity. Rather, it climbs to the first source, which is light in itself and by itself and to which no light comes from any other. From this light all the lights shine forth, according to the hierarchy. Consider now if the name “light” is more appropriate and worthy for that which is illuminated and borrows its light from another, or for that which is luminous in itself and which bestows light upon everything else. It seems to me that the Truth of this is not hidden from you. Thus, it is verified that the name “light” is more appropriate

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 6-9.
for the furthest, highest light, beyond which there is no lights and from which light descends to others. 110

It is worth noting that al-Ghazālī begins by remarking on the similarity between the meaning of Truth and the light. Then, he describes the attributes of this pure light, which is based on the Islamic monotheistic creed, “There is no gods but God.”

So the real light is he in whose hand is “the creation and the command” and from whom illumination comes in the first place and by whom it is preserved in the second place. No one is a partner with him in the reality of this name, nor in being worthy for it, unless he should name him by it and show him kindness by naming him so, like a master who shows kindness to his slave by giving him property and then calling him a master. When the reality is unveiled to the slave, he knows that he himself and his property belong only to his mater, who, of course, has no partner whatsoever in any this. 111

The common point between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī regarding the definition of the Truth is that both of them believe that the Truth is clear and does not need a definition.

Furthermore, both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī highlight the analogical gradation of the Truth, indicating that the Truth contains stages. Avicenna, for example, divides the absolute being into the necessary and the contingent being. Similarly, al-Ghazālī categorizes light into the sensible light, the intellectual or rational light, and the Light of Lights.

To be precise, the meaning of the Truth for Avicenna and al-Ghazālī has many similarities. At first glance, it seems that Avicenna becomes mired in philosophy, whereas al-Ghazālī is supported by religion. However, there are some points that make

110. Ibid., 15.
111. Ibid., 15.
Avicenna and al-Ghazālī the same in their definition of the Truth. First, the notion of light for al-Ghazālī is tantamount to the notion of being for Avicenna, as both contend that there is no need for any definition of “the light” and “being”. Also, they both remark that “the light” and “being” do not need to be defined because they are clear.

The second point that Avicenna and al-Ghazālī have in common on the subject of the Truth is their division of “the light” and “being”. For Avicenna, the necessary being is equivalent to the Light of Lights in al-Ghazālī’s paradigm because both occupy the first place in the hierarchy of the cosmos. Also, the Light of Lights bestows light to others just as the necessary being gives existence to everything. Despite these similarities, however, there is a difference between the object of the Light of Lights and the necessary being. The necessary being, for Avicenna, has a philosophical context; Avicenna names the necessary being the First Cause. In contrast, al-Ghazālī compares the Light of Lights with Allah, the God of Islam.

Furthermore, the intellectual light and the sensible light are tantamount to contingent being because they do not have any independent light without the Light of Lights. The contingent being is nothing without the First Cause.

Another common point between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī is the subject of illumination (ishrāq). According to Avicenna’s philosophy, the highest place in the hierarchy of existence is occupied by the absolute being. Beings come into existence by the emanation of the absolute being. The absolute being in Avicenna’s system is the life giver, form giver, and the giver of existence.

The Light of Lights awards the light, which means existence, to other lights. Also, there would not be any kind of light without the emanation from the Light of Lights. Additionally, the name “light” for intellectual light and sensible light is pure metaphor because the real light is the Light of Lights.
This investigation into Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s definitions of the Truth reveals that they suggest a similar meaning but utilize different terminology. What can be said about the terminology of Avicenna is that he is a philosopher who speaks philosophically and attempts to keep a philosophical framework in his mysticism. On the other hand, al-Ghazālī utilizes the Qur’anic context for the definition of the Truth.

3.2 Dualistic Universe

According to the previous sections, the goal of Islamic mysticism is the union of human beings with the Truth. Furthermore, the meaning of the Truth has been clarified from Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s viewpoints. This section will explore the path that the seeker should take to find the Truth and the division of the world according to Avicenna and al-Ghazālī.

It is important to note that Avicenna does not offer a clear division of the world in chapter ten and nine of Remarks and Admonitions. However, his division of the world can be found in other parts of Remarks and Admonitions indirectly. Avicenna divides happiness into material and immaterial, then he introduces immaterial happiness as a preliminary step for the mystical journey. In chapter eight of Remarks and Admonitions, he addresses the different kinds of immaterial joy and happiness that he sees as being connected to the division of the world. Avicenna divides happiness into an internal and a material happiness. He claims that internal happiness is superior to material happiness.

It had occurred to the common minds that strong and lofty pleasures are those of the senses, while other pleasures are weak and are all unreal objects of the imagination. It is possible to draw the attention of one who belongs to this group and who is capable of distinction. Thus, it can be said to this person is not sex, food and what resembles them the most pleasurable thing in this class that you describe? However, you know that one who is capable of a particular victory, even in a trivial matter such as chess or backgammon, would reject food or sex if
presented with them. This is due to imagined pleasure of victory that one experienced.\textsuperscript{112}

Avicenna believes in the sensible and immaterial world by comparing sensible and spiritual pleasures. Likewise, he claims that spiritual pleasure holds a higher position than sensible pleasure. Avicenna remarks that sensible pleasures are external but spiritual pleasures are internal.\textsuperscript{113} Thus, we can come to conclusion that Avicenna divides the world into internal and external world with his division of pleasure. The external world is the world of the senses, and the internal world has several divisions.

According to Avicenna, spiritual pleasure belongs to the internal world. The internal has another classification that is higher than imaginal world. The higher classification of the internal world belongs to the intellectual world, as the intellectual pleasures occupy a higher place in Avicenna’s hierarchy.\textsuperscript{114}

Another division of the internal world according to Avicenna is the dominion world (\textit{ʿālam Malakūt}). This world occupies the highest position among the other worlds—sensible, imaginal and intellectual. The seeker of the Truth can attain the dominion world though the purification of their soul.\textsuperscript{115} Avicenna remarks that attaining the dominion world can be reached before the separation of the soul from the body.

This pleasure is not completely lacking when the soul is in the body. Rather, those who indulge in reflecting on the divine power and who abandon preoccupations with the body achieve, while in the body, an abundant portion of this pleasure, which may take hold of them, thus distracting them from everything else.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{112} Avicenne, (1375C.E), Chapter8, 136.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{116} Shams Inati, (1996), 77.
As the above quotation demonstrates, Avicenna does not offer a clear division of the world directly. However, he presents the classification of happiness and the levels of the soul, which means that each happiness belongs to its own world. The general classification of the world is the internal and external world. The external world is the material world that gives minor pleasure and happiness to people, while the internal world has several subdivisions, such as the imaginal world, intellectual world and dominion world.

The intellectual world has been further divided into four subdivisions by Avicenna. The potential intellect (‘aql bil quwah), the habitual intellect (‘aql bil malaka), the actual intellect (‘aql bil f‘il) and the active intellect (‘aql fa‘āl). Each individual, regardless of material or immortal substance, possesses the potential intellect. The habitual intellect is something that can be acquired through habit. The third stage is the actual intellect, which means that the human, by means of the primary truths, can acquire the secondary truths without any help from the sensitive or imaginative faculties. The final and highest position in the hierarchy of intellects belongs to the active intellect. The active intellect is the union between apprehension (idrāk) and apprehender (mudrik).\(^{117}\)

It is beneficial to note that the role of subjectivity in the division of the world is important. Avicenna divides the world into external and internal, but the core of this division is the human and not the cosmos. According to Avicenna, the external world is something outside of the human, whereas the internal world is immaterial and within the human mind. Furthermore, what can be seen in Avicenna’s system of thinking is that the human is considered as the world (‘ālam asghar). The sensible dimension of the human is alongside the material world, and the internal part is connected with the non-material

\(^{117}\) Avicenna, (1379 CE), 333-336.
world, as well as the intellectual and dominion world. Therefore, the seeker of the Truth, according to Avicenna, should pass to the subdivisions of the internal world.

Al-Ghazālī divides the world, the whole cosmos, into two different segments: the seen and the unseen. Al-Ghazālī refers to the first and lowest segment as the sensible and material world. The higher and non-material world is named the spiritual and unseen world. Al-Ghazālī believes in the dualistic world, or the bodily and spiritual world.

The visible and sensible world for al-Ghazālī is the material world, which is connected with the unseen world. Al-Ghazālī highlights that the sensible world is like darkness and the spiritual world is light. He further remarks that just as the exhibition of light is required to be alongside darkness, the material world is alongside the spiritual world. Likewise, al-Ghazālī believes that the seeker of the Truth needs to journey through the seen and material world if he wants to acquire the unseen world. Therefore, the material world is like a ladder for ascending the hierarchy; without the ladder, the seeker cannot advance in their journey for the Truth.

Know also that the visible world in relation to the world of dominion is like the shell in the relation to the kernel, the form and the mold in the relation to the spirit, darkness in relation in the light and the low in relation to high. That is why the dominion world called the “high world,” the “spiritual world,” and the “luminous world,” while standing opposite to it is the low, corporeal, and the dark world. And do not suppose that by the “high world” we mean the heaven, since they are “high” and “above” only in the respect to visible and sensible world, and the beasts share in perceiving them.

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118. The non-material world is not a part of the whole universe; instead, it is a part of the human.
120. Ibid., 27.
121. Ibid., 11.
Al-Ghazālī believes that the unseen world would be unveiled for the real seeker; thus, the seeker of the Truth should explore the unseen world. Al-Ghazālī utilizes Qur’anic verse\textsuperscript{122} to explain that the cosmic position of the people who have business in the sensible world is equivalent to the animal.

> When this has been unveiled to you with a complete unveiling. Then the first door of the world of dominion will have been opened to you. In this world there are wonders in relation to which the visible world will be disdained. If a person does not travel to this world, then, while incapacity makes him sit in the lowland of the visible world. He remains a beast deprived of the specific characteristic of humanity.\textsuperscript{123}

There is another classification of the unseen world; it is the world for special servants. The special servants are people who abandon the material world because the unseen world attracts them. These people are seekers of the Truth who do not have any concerns regarding the material and the sensible because the illuminations of the Truth embrace them.

As for servant, the door to the world of dominion will not open for him and he will not become “dominional” (\textit{malakūti}) unless, in relation to him, the earth changes to other than earth and the heaven [to other than the heavens]. Then everything that enters into the senses and imagination will become his earth and this includes the heavens; and whatever stands beyond the sense will be his heaven. This is the first ascent for every traveler who has begun his journey to the proximity of Lordly Presence (\textit{ḥaẓrat al-rubūbīat}).\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{122} Qur’an, 7:179.  
\textsuperscript{123} Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 11.  
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 11.
Another segment of the unseen world belongs to prophets, and this is called the world of “holiness.” According to al-Ghazālī, prophets know everything from both the unseen and seen world. They have access to the visible world and the unseen world equally, and as a result they know the mysteries and hidden commands of both worlds.

When the ascent of the prophets reaches its farthest point, when they look down from there upon the low, and when they gaze from top to bottom, they become informed of the heart of the servants and gaze upon certain amount of the science of the unseen. For when someone is in the world of dominion (malakūti) he is with God, “ and with him are the keys to unseen”[6:59]125

The world of “holiness”, according to al-Ghazālī, is beyond the senses and the imagination because having access to the meaning of holiness in the world of holiness is not easy for everybody.

No one comes near to God unless he steps into the midst of the enclosure of holiness. What we mean by the world of “holiness” is the world that is elevated beyond the perception of the senses and the imagination.126

Al-Ghazālī, believes that the seen and sensible world is caused by the unseen world. He suggests that the unseen world is the secondary cause of the seen world because the First Cause and the absolute agent is God.

From the God, the secondary causes of existent things descend into visible world, while the visible world is one of the effects of the world of dominion. The visible world comes forth from the world of dominion just as the shadow comes forth

125. Ibid., 12.
126. Ibid., 26.
from the thing that throw it, the fruit comes forth from the three, and the effect comes forth from the secondary cause.\textsuperscript{127}

One commonality in the philosophy of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī is that both divide the world into the outward world (\textit{zāhir}) and the inward world (\textit{bātin}). Another similarity between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī is the position of the sensible world. Both believe that the sensible world is in the lowest position in the cosmos. Further, they claim that the external and sensible world is a visible world that humans can feel and see by his or her senses.

The most important difference between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s categorization of worlds is their terminology. Avicenna, for example, named the unseen world the intellectual and holiness world. In comparison, the unseen world for al-Ghazālī is the Qur’an,\textsuperscript{128} “the world of dominion; it is the Qur’an and the revealed books of God.”\textsuperscript{129} Then, he classifies the unseen world as the world for special servants and prophets.

On the other hand, Avicenna divides the intellectual world into four groups: potential, habitual, actual and active intellect. Then, there is the higher level of the world, which he names the holiness world. For Avicenna, the intellectual worlds and dominion world are accessible for both prophets and the gnostics. Further, the relation between the unseen world and seen world is cause and effect.

Another important difference in Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s world classifications is that the division of the world, according to Avicenna, is the human. In other words, the internal world for Avicenna is the stage for human intellect. In contrast, Al-Ghazālī divides the universe into the internal and external, which suggests that the external world

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{128} By Qur’an Al-Ghazālī means the meaning of the Qur’an, not the material book itself.

\textsuperscript{129} Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 11.
has an unseen element. Thus, the unseen world is not separate from the seen, material world, according to al-Ghazālī.

What is revealed through this comparison of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s work is that they believe that humans are capable of different levels of thinking and spirituality, which results in dissimilar perspectives of reality.

3.3 The Division of People

Only the bravest people who pass through the material life and are attracted by the divine emanation (fīd ilāhī) are capable of commencing the journey toward the Truth. The idea that the path of Truth is only for people with the potentiality of awareness has always been the main focus of great thinkers like Avicenna and al-Ghazālī. Hence, the great thinkers write their texts for special people who are able to comprehend the depth meaning of their work. The focus of the current subchapter is to explore the division of people according to Avicenna and al-Ghazālī.

There are two groups of people for Avicenna: the gnostics and the non-gnostics. According to Avicenna, a gnostic is a person who is in love with the absolute Truth. The knowers, or gnostics, have the highest position in Avicenna’s classification of people. Avicenna believes that the focus for the gnostics is the Truth.

The name ‘gnostic’ (ʿārif) is reserved for one who disposes one’s thought toward the sanctity of divine power, seeking the perpetual illumination of the light of the Truth into one’s innermost thought.130

Avicenna divides the non-gnostics into two groups: the worshippers (ʿābid) and the ascetic (zāhid).

130. Avicenne, (1379 C.E), 144.
The name ‘ascetic’ (zāhid) is reserved for one who shuns the delights and goods of this world. The name ‘worshipper’ is reserved for one who persists in exercising the worship by prostration, fasting and what resemble them.\footnote{Ibid., 144.}

The basic duty in all religions is praying. Avicenna, however, highlights the difference between the praying of the gnostics and the non-gnostics.

Worship for non-gnostic is kind of business deal, as if one acts in the present life for salary that one will receive in the second life as retribution and reward. But for gnostic it is kind of exercise of one’s faculties, including the estimative and imaginative powers of one’s soul, to orient them by habit from the side of error to the side of the Truth.\footnote{Ibid., 145.}

Moreover, the main part of chapters nine and ten of Remarks and Admonitions focus on asceticism. However, Avicenna differentiates between the asceticism of the gnostics and the non-gnostics.

Asceticism (zuhd) for non-gnostic is a kind of business deal, as if one buys the delights of the second life with the delights of the present one. But for the gnostic it is a kind of abstinence from that which distracts one’s innermost thought from the Truth and elevation over everything other than the Truth.\footnote{Ibid., 145.}

Death has been a significant fear for human beings; yet, death for the gnostics is like a gate that can help them attain absolute freedom and union with the Truth.

In their present life, the gnostics have stations and ranks that are reserved for them to the exclusion of others. It is as if, while being clothed by their bodies, they

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 144.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 145.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 145.}
\end{itemize}
have shed their bodies, become free from them and attained the world of dominion. To them belong things concealed in them and things manifested by them. The latter are protested against by those who deny them and are considered as great by those who know them.\textsuperscript{134}

In the last part of chapter nine, Avicenna claims that the gnostics do not have any religious duties such as praying and fasting. The reason for this is that religious duties are only for two groups of people: the sinners and the people who understand the imposition of religious duties.

The knower may be inattentive to the thing by virtue of which he reaches the Truth. Thus, he becomes ignorant of everything around him. Therefore, he is in the same class as those on whom religious duties are not imposed. How could this be otherwise, when religious duties are imposed only on one who understands the imposition of religious duties at the time one understands it, and on one who becomes a sinner for not abiding by the religious duties, even though he does not but has the capacity for doing so.\textsuperscript{135}

According to the evidence from chapter nine of \textit{Remarks and Admonitions}, one might argue that Avicenna’s discussion of praying is rather vague. This impression is created by the fact that praying can have different meanings for Avicenna. When Avicenna highlights the praying of the gnostics, he does not mean praying in the context of religious duties. Therefore, praying can have different meanings for Avicenna, such as preoccupation with the Truth and remembering the Truth at every moment. So, praying based on an Islamic structure is not the primary focus for Avicenna.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 148.
Another aspect worth noting about the division of people according to Avicenna is that he does not clarify the position of prophets in his philosophical system (prophecy). However, in his classification, he describes the gnostics and the non-gnostics. Therefore, it is possible to infer that in Avicenna’s philosophical system, the prophets belong to the same category as the gnostics; the prophets and the gnostics walk the same path. It can be questioned what the difference is between the prophets and the gnostics if they belong to the same group of people. In order to address this question of difference between the prophets and the gnostics, one must look beyond chapters nine and ten of Remarks and Admonitions to Avicenna’s Shifā (Healing).\textsuperscript{136}

In another one of Avicenna’s works, al-Nijāt (The Book of Salvation), he returns to his classification of the stations of the intellect, and names another type that belongs to the prophets, or, as he describes them, the people who possess the highest potentiality to connect with the Truth. Avicenna claims that prophets actually have attained all knowledge and gnosis by themselves. They are not in need of anyone to direct them toward anything. This quality belongs to people who possess exceptionally great natural capacities: (dharfyyat tabī‘).\textsuperscript{137} Thus, prophets can be distinguished from the gnostics by that fact that the prophet is a person of extraordinary intellectual endowment. As a result of this endowment, the prophets are able to know all things without the instruction of an external source. On the other hand, the gnostics need some preparation for connecting to the Truth because the gnostics do not have the highest natural capacity or extraordinary intellectual endowment.

Common people who do not fall under Avicenna’s categories of gnostics, worshipers, and ascetics do not have any place in his system. According to Avicenna, ordinary people are not important enough to be classified.

\textsuperscript{136} Avicenne, (1402 A.H), Chapter 10, 441.
\textsuperscript{137} Avicenne, (1379 C.E), 339-342.
Al-Ghazālī divides people into three distinct groups: the common people, the elect, and the elect of the elect. It is beneficial to note that there is a straight connection between the classification of light and the division of the people in al-Ghazālī’s framework.

Al-Ghazālī contends that common people are not capable of accessing any experiences beyond the sensible world; therefore, their understanding of the universe is based on their senses. The origin of the universe is the Light of Lights, and the light comes in an analogical gradation. Thus, the light has a material presence for common people who comprehend the world via the senses.\footnote{138. Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 3.}

After classifying people into the three groups outlined above, al-Ghazālī offers another classification system for people that is based on the classification of the human spirit \textit{(rūḥ)}. The human spirit can be divided into five groups: the sensible \textit{(ḥasās)}, imaginal \textit{(khīālī)}, rational \textit{(`aqlī)}, reflective \textit{(fikrī)} and prophetic spirit \textit{(nabawī)}. The relationship between the human spirit and the station of people in the cosmos is important for al-Ghazālī, as he believes that it is through the classification of people’s spirit that they can be divided into the common, elect, and the elect of elect categories.

The first type of human spirit is the sensible spirit, which belongs to the five senses. The sensible spirit is common between both humans and animals. The second stage is the imaginative spirit; its responsibility is to organize and store the information brought in by the senses. Also, the imaginative spirit presents information for the rational spirit when necessary. The rational spirit serves as a border that separates humans from other creatures. The reflective spirit takes pure rational knowledge and facilitates combination and analogy. The last stage of the human spirit, the holy prophetic spirit, is dedicated to the elect of elect people and prophets. The holy prophetic spirit has access to seen and unseen knowledge without additional help from the material world.\footnote{139. Ibid., 37.}
According to the above discussion, the main difference between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s division of people is that al-Ghazālī has a much more comprehensive classification than Avicenna.

Avicenna divides people into two main categories: the gnostics and the non-gnostics. The gnostics category contains all aware people ranging from philosophers to prophets. The worshipers and the ascetics belong to the non-gnostics category, and everyone else—the common people—are not worth classifying in Avicenna’s system.

Al-Ghazālī divides people into different groups, such as common people and elect people. Further, there is a distinct category for the prophets, which does not have any connection with other people because prophets for al-Ghazālī are the elect of elect who have been sent by God. Moreover, al-Ghazālī presents a classification for elect people, and within this classification the elect people have different kinds of levels. For example, there are elect people who are veiled by light or by light alongside with darkness.

3.4 The Path Toward the Truth

The goal of Islamic mysticism is to experience the Truth and to be satisfied by that experience. The seeker of the Truth should proceed in the direction that leads him to an indescribable experience of union with the Truth. Thus, entrance onto the path to the Truth requires preparation. In the sciences, for example, fields such as physics require knowledge of mathematics and other basic skills. Along the same lines, the mystic path needs either inward or outward preparations, praying or meditation to help seekers to understand the importance of this way. Some Muslim philosophers like Avicenna believe that the gnostics need meditation. Other Muslim scholars like al-Ghazālī believe in both internal and external preparation. For Al-Ghazālī, external preparation means the Islamic practices, praying, fasting and being obedient to Islamic law.

Avicenna’s description of mysticism is based on rationality and love. For Avicenna, love engulfs the whole universe. Every being has enjoyed this love as a result of their natural
potentiality. However, this love that surrounds the whole universe has a hierarchy. Also, there is a relationship between this love and the depth of thinking.\(^{140}\)

On the other hand, al-Ghazâlî’s world-view is based on the Islamic framework and a new idea that he introduced, taste (ḥikah al-dhawqî). Avicenna’s primary focus for his mysticism is love (ʿīshq), as it has been defined in his epistle of love. In comparison, the foundation of al-Ghazâlî’s mysticism is Islam, but an Islam that relies on taste and inclination (dhawq) more than knowledge. Moreover, al-Ghazâlî believes that rational thinkers are the masters of taste. Also, according to al-Ghazâlî, knowledge is above faith and taste is above knowledge.\(^{141}\) Though Al-Ghazâlî does not offer a clear definition of taste, the meaning can still be gleaned from his writing. From al-Ghazâlî’s perspective, taste is a characteristic that allows people to acquire special talent. For example, al-Ghazâlî claims that the poet has the taste of poem. Al-Ghazâlî considers taste as a faculty of human beings.

If you desire a similitude of this taken from all the characteristics we witness in some people, then consider how taste in poetry, which is a kind of sensation and perception, is singled out for a single group of men. Some people are so deprived of this taste that, for them, harmonious melodies cannot be distinguished from the disharmonious. Consider also how the strength of taste within some people is so great that they derive from music, song, strings instruments and many types of musical modes which produce sadness, delight, sleep, laughter, madness, slaying and loss of consciousness. These effects are only strong in one who possesses the root of this taste.\(^{142}\)

\(^{140}\) Avicenna, (1400 AH), 375.

\(^{141}\) Al-Ghazâlî, (1998), 38.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 37-38.
On the other hand, Avicenna defines taste (dhawq) quite differently from al-Ghazālī’s definition. According to Avicenna, taste is the certainty of certain pleasure.

It may be that one can affirm a certain pleasure with certainty, but if the notion called ‘taste’ (dhawq) does not occur, it is permissible for us not to find desire for this pleasure. Similarly, one can affirm a certain harm with certainty, but if the notion called ‘being subject to suffering’ (al-muqāsāt) does not occur, it is permissible not to be highly caution of this harm.\(^{143}\)

Avicenna defines taste as the perception of pleasure, such as how a person who is physically unable to have sex cannot have a preparedness to have sex.\(^{144}\) However, al-Ghazālī defines taste as the characteristic that allows the possessor of taste to acquire special talent.

Next, I am going to explain what kind of preparation the seeker of the Truth requires to experience the Truth according to Avicenna and al-Ghazālī. Avicenna, in chapter nine of Remarks and Admonitions, highlights that the first step for the seekers of the Truth is willingness (al-irāda). Hence, the first move towards the Truth would commence from the seeker. The seeker would want to experience the Truth and to be satisfied by connecting with the Truth. But the meaning of willingness needs to be clear according to Avicenna.

Avicenna remarks that the willingness is the desire toward the Truth. Hence, this desire overcomes the seeker’s insight.\(^{145}\) Also, Avicenna defines love as a desire, a natural desire toward the object of love as well. So, it can be argued that love is the cause of movement toward the Truth. However, this love of humans for the Truth must be considered alongside the awareness that for other beings it is a natural desire. Avicenna

\(^{143}\) Avicenne, (1375C.E), Chapter8, 139.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 139.

\(^{145}\) Ibid., 145.
believes there are two ways to attain this willingness, faith (īmān) and demonstrative certainty (burhān yaqīnī). Based on the philosophical structure of Avicenna’s paradigm, demonstrative certainty is attainable philosophically and rationally. However, Avicenna does not offer an accurate definition of faith in Remarks and Admonitions. Yet, in the epistle about the quiddity of praying (māhīat ṣalāt) Avicenna relies on the prophet’s utterance about the faith: “no faith in those who do not pray from him” (lā īmān li man lā ṣalāt lah). Avicenna then explains two different kinds of praying, namely external and internal. According to Avicenna, external praying is what Islam introduced to Muslim people, 5 daily prayers. Internal praying belongs to special people and is about observing the Truth through the purification of the heart.146 Avicenna believes that the human soul (nafs insānī) is heart.147 Therefore, according to the above discussion, faith for Avicenna is the observation of the Truth through the purification of the heart. By clarifying the way of purification, Avicenna introduces asceticism. A major part of chapter nine of Remarks and Admonitions is dedicated to asceticism (zuhd).

According to Avicenna, austerity (rīāżat) is required for the seeker of the Truth. Austerity for Avicenna is asceticism, which is a purification of the heart and all thinking except for that which leads to the Truth.148 The meaning of real asceticism is to purify the heart and rational faculties, such as the imagination, of all things other than the Truth. Therefore, austerity prepares the seeker for experiencing the Truth.

It can be questioned what is the result of willingness and asceticism according to Avicenna. The answer to this question is that willingness and asceticism assist the seeker in preparing for encountering the pleasurable experience with the light of the Truth. In this experience, the seeker can observe the short illumination from the light, which is the Truth. Avicenna named these kinds of experiences that the seeker encounters at the

146. Avicenna, (1400 A.H), 304.
147. Ibid., 334.
beginning of his path ‘moments’ (awqāt).\textsuperscript{149} He highlights that if the seeker performs spiritual exercise, he will experience the light of the Truth. Thus, asceticism plays an important role in experiencing the Truth.

Avicenna believes that asceticism has an impact on the soul, as it makes the soul of the seeker tranquil. As well, the seeker would experience the situation in such a way that he could have a journey toward the Truth while he is awake. Additionally, asceticism makes the seeker connected to the Truth in every moment by the wish of the seeker.\textsuperscript{150}

Avicenna’s asceticism does not suggest that the seeker should abandon the material world and avoid people to experience the Truth. Instead, he introduces a path to the Truth that is supported by rationality and pure love. Moreover, his mysticism is completely internal asceticism, which means the purification of thinking from all but God. The seeker cannot pay attention to himself, as this would be a preoccupation with the non-Truth. The exact definition of Avicenna’s mysticism is practicing thinking to focus on the Truth by asceticism.

He abandons himself, thus, he notices the side of sanctity only. If he notices himself he does so inasmuch as it notices the Truth, and not inasmuch as it is ornamented with the pleasure of having the Truth. At this point the arrival is real. Paying attention to whatever the Truth revealed (nāzīl) is preoccupation.\textsuperscript{151}

Though al-Ghazālī does not define Sufism in The Niche of Lights, his definition of it can be explored in his other works. He primarily defines Sufism based on Islamic values, the law of Allah, and the right of people. It is necessary to explain these Islamic values for comprehending al-Ghazālī’s definition of Sufism.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 146.
\item \textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 147.
\item \textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 147.
\end{itemize}
The right of Allah refers to absolute obedience to the commands of Allah, such as fasting and praying. The right of people means to treat people nicely; however, al-Ghazālī believes that other people’s behaviour should fall within the Islamic framework of law, Sharʿīa. Drawing on these two Islamic values, al-Ghazālī explains the real meaning of Sufism in the following way: “Sufism consists of two things: the honesty and truthfulness with God (ṣidq ma’ Allāh) and good behavior with people.”152 Al-Ghazālī introduces these two qualities for the Sufi to distinguish the real Sufi from people who claim they are Sufi.

Al-Ghazālī, with his definition of Sufism based on the Islamic framework, suggests that the seeker of the Truth would be real Sufi because real Sufi would not violate the Islamic law that was sent by Allah. Thus, it is clear that the first step for being Sufi is obedience of Islamic law, which is an external action. The second step of being Sufi and to prepare for the illumination of the Light of Lights is the purification of the inner self from the darkness of imagination and sense perception.153

Al-Ghazālī does not explain in The Niche of Lights how the Sufi can be purified from the darkness and murkiness. However, exploring other his works shows the ways of purification.

One of the best ways to purify the heart is to remember God. Remembering God (dhikr) has two aspects, one external and the other internal. The seeker of the Truth would start by remembering God by his tongue (lisān). If the seeker persists on remembering God by the tongue and makes it a habit, then the seeker would move on to the internal aspect: remembering God with heart and without tongue.154

152. Al-Ghazālī, (1416 A.H), 174.
154. Al-Ghazālī, (1416 A.H), 179.
Thenceforth, al-Ghazâlî introduces another step that he calls meditation (murâqibh). Meditation occurs after purification because al-Ghazâlî believes that purification opens the gates to the divine realm. So, meditation for al-Ghazâlî is the observation of the Truth with the continuity of insight. Also, meditation develops from observing with one’s eyes and exploring the lights of the unity of the Truth.155 Thus, it requires an internal journey toward the observation of the Truth through the internal eye—the heart.

Divine knowledge (ʿilm ladunî) is the fruit of purification and meditation. Al-Ghazâlî remarks that divine knowledge is the light of inspiration (ilhām) that will help lead the seeker to the Truth. The other important element for attaining divine knowledge is reflection. Al-Ghazâlî does not believe that just any type of thinking can lead to the observation of the light of Truth.

The seeker should think about his thoughts and evaluate them to guide him toward the hidden gates of divine knowledge.156 According to al-Ghazâlî, thinking is the connection between the soul (nafs) and the universal soul (nafs kulî). This kind of thinking leads to the divine knowledge that belongs to the elect people, and to the elect of the elect.157 Therefore, real and accurate knowledge can be attained through the connection between the human soul and the universal soul. Divine knowledge is the only trustworthy and infallible knowledge.

The last step for the Sufi is annihilation (fanā), which results when the Sufi loses all of his identities158 and acquires the union with the Truth.

155. Ibid., 179.
156. Al-Ghazâlî, (1416 A.H), 235.
157. Ibid., 230.
158. Identification means the Sufi should lose whatever would hinder him from the union with the Truth.
When this state gets the upper hand, it is called ‘extinction’ (*fanā*) in relation to one who possesses it. Or, rather, it is called ‘extinction from extinction’ (*fanā al-fanā*) since the possessor of the state is extinct from himself and from his own extinction. For he is conscious (*yashʿar*) neither of himself in that state, nor of his own unconsciousness of himself. If he were conscious of his own unconsciousness, then he would [still] be conscious of himself. In the relation to the one immersed in it, this state is called “unification,” according to the language of metaphor, or is called “declaring God’s unity,” according to the language of reality.  

Both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī acknowledge that the seeker requires preparation for becoming Sufi and experiencing the Truth. Willingness and asceticism are what Avicenna offers as the basic steps toward the Truth. The Sufi would be prepared by purification (*tazkīh*), meditation (*murāqibh*) and thinking (*tafakur*), according to al-Ghazālī.

There is a similarity between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī regarding the basic steps of mysticism. Firstly, both emphasize purification and asceticism, which means purifying the inner self from everything but the Truth. This purification is considered an Islamic value known as (*khulūṣ*).

Based on al-Ghazālī’s mysticism, the Sufi can be distinguished from other people who pretend to be Sufis by two qualities that have been introduced when al-Ghazālī defines Sufism. On the contrary, Avicenna believes the gnostic does not have any religious duties due to preoccupation with the Truth, as was explained previously.

Another major difference between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī is their philosophies regarding the goal of mysticism. Avicenna highlights that the goal mysticism is to

experience the union with God. The goal of mysticism for al-Ghazālī, however, is the acquisition of divine knowledge (ʿilm ladunī). An exploration of Avicenna’s work reveals that experiencing the union of the Truth is much more important than gaining divine knowledge. Al-Ghazālī describes two different declarations of God’s unity, which shows the union with God indirectly. One of these declarations is directed towards the common people: “There is no gods but God.” The second declaration of God’s unity is “There is no god but He,” and this is directed towards the elect people. Whereas the first declaration is fairly straightforward, the latter declaration raises some questions.

“There is no god but He” alludes to an element of Islam that has meaning too deep for common people to grasp, as common people only see the surface of reality. This Sufi phrase points to God in everything, and this implies that the core is the human. Therefore, the Sufi path is just the remembrance of this reality, which is the union of God and human.

Hence, there is no god but He. For “god” is an expression for that toward which a face turns through worship and becoming godlike (wajh Allāh). Here I mean the faces of the hearts, since they are lights. Indeed, there is no god but He, so also there is no he but He, because “he” is an expression for whatever may be pointed to, and there is no pointing to anything but Him. Or, rather, whenever you point to something, in reality you are pointing to Him…………………Therefore, “there is no god but God” is the declaration of God’s unity for common people, while “there is no god but He” is the declaration of God’s unity of the elect, since this declaration of God’s unity is more complete, more specific, more comprehensive, more worthy and more precise. It is more able to make its possessor enter into sheer singularity and utter oneness. 160

3.5 Engraving the Divine Image Upon the Human Soul

160. Ibid., 20.
The seeker commences along the mystical path by purification, meditation, thinking, or willingness and asceticism, moving toward an indescribable experience of the union with the Truth. Also, the mystical experience that is a part of the Sufi path has analogical gradation (tashkīk), as each step of the mystical journey differs from but is related to the other steps. The mystical experience is like a fleeting spark at the start, but it will develop into a fire that burns the seeker if the seeker persists on his or her path.

The goal of the Sufi path is to achieve the connection between the human soul and the divine realm. The divine realm is totally beyond the material world. Therefore, the seeker must be equipped with non-sensory perception to comprehend the divine realm.

There is a significant contention regarding these religious experiences, specifically about how they occur and how the human soul is capable of connecting with the divine realm. Muslim scholars like Avicenna and al-Ghazālī attempt philosophically to confirm the truth of these mystical experiences. Avicenna and al-Ghazālī argue how divine images (taṣāwīr ilāhīyya) engrave upon the human soul. Hence, the soul is the bridge between the seen and the unseen world. Moreover, both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī use the metaphor of the mirror for showing the reflection of the human soul from the divine realm. Both authors utilize this mirror metaphor, as the mirror reflects images specifically, comprehensively and clearly, eliminating any murkiness.

Avicenna’s theory of reflecting the divine image on the human soul is that he claims the human soul is not a physical or corporeal being. According to Avicenna, the human soul is non-material, but it belongs to material. Avicenna, however, does not explain the connection between immaterial, the soul, and the material body.

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161. Avicenna, (1375C.E), Chapter3, 89.
162. Ibid., 82.
Avicenna, in his major work *Healing* (*Shifāʾ*), outlines eight reasons that explain the separation between the body and soul as part of his discussion about natural philosophy (*ṭabīʿyāt*). As the human soul does not have any material and physical characteristics, the real function of the human soul is to comprehend intelligible (*maʿqūlāt*)\(^{163}\).

The mystical path is the path along which the soul can abandon material preoccupations that are created by the senses, referring to its original characteristic, which is the comprehending of intelligible. Avicenna commences his introduction about how the divine image engraves upon the human soul with the claim of notification from some events in the future. Avicenna remarks that the gnostics are capable of seeing some future incidents\(^{164}\) and thereby argues that they can be informed about it.

Avicenna attempts to prove his statement about the gnostics’ ability to see the future by linking it to the relationship between the human and the divine realms via the human soul. Avicenna highlights that the human soul can receive imprints from the intelligible world based on two conditions: first, through the preparation of the human soul by asceticism; and secondly, by removing the obstacles from the soul through depth of thoughts, going beyond the surface.\(^{165}\)

According to Avicenna, the human soul can connect to the divine realm and receive these divine images only if it is at peace and far from any material preoccupation. Once the human soul connects to the realm of sanctity, images of the invisible world are inscribed on the human soul. Then, these representations of the invisible world flow to the world of imagination, where the images are engraved into the receiver’s common sense (*ḥiss*

\(^{163}\) Avicenna, (1404 A.H), Chapter6, the second article, 182.

\(^{164}\) Avicenna, (1375 C.E), 150.

\(^{165}\) Ibid., 151.
Common sense, based on Avicenna’s definition, is the accumulation of these senses.

The common sense is the tablet of imprints (tanaqush). When the imprints take hold of this tablet, they enter the class of observed things. A sensible thing that produces an imprint may be removed from the external sense, while its form remains in the common sense for a short time. Thus, it remains in the class of observed things and not those imagined. Thus, if the form is represented in the tablet of common sense, it becomes observed (mushāhidah).

Engraving the images from the invisible world happens either during a state in which the body is only mildly preoccupied by the senses like during sleep, or in the state of a certain illness that makes the senses weak. The human soul can only connect to the invisible world when its senses are in a feeble state. The imagination would return to the images from the invisible world and receive them completely. Hence, the imagination would engrave the accepted images upon the common sense. The common sense begins to find the closest image from memory that matches the images from the invisible world, and then those representatives are stored in the memory.

Therefore, Avicenna emphasizes that both revelation and inspiration need to be interpreted for the clarification of their real meaning.

Whether in the state of wakefulness or sleep, is either inspiration (ilhām), a pure revelation (wahy), or a dream that does not require interpretation or expression. But that which itself has ceased, while its semblances and effects remain, requires

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166. Ibid., 154.
167. Ibid., 154-155.
168. Ibid., 154.
one of two: revelation requires interpretation (tafsīr) and dream requires explanation (tʿawīl).\textsuperscript{169}

It is worth noting that inspiration and revelation are the effect of the connection between the human soul and the divine realm. The divine realm is nonmaterial, whereas what has been stored in the human mind comes from the material and physical world through experience. Consequently, once the human soul connects to the divine realm, it receives intelligible images that are not material. As result, inspiration and revelation require interpretation to clarify their real meaning.

Al-Ghazālī supports the dualistic idea of the body and soul, as his classification of the world into the seen and the unseen realms suggests this dualism. Al-Ghazālī highlights that the soul belongs to the divine realm because it is eternal and cannot be eliminated by death.

The soul is the heart that is known by an inner eye and your reality is your inner side not your body……… the heart is not a piece of meat in your left side of your chest. Because the animal and dead people have a heart. Everything that can be seen by external eyes belong to the world that named the visible world. But, the Truth of the heart does not exist in this world, it belongs to the invisible world. Therefore, the heart (the soul) is a stranger in the visible world.\textsuperscript{170}

According to al-Ghazālī, the human soul belongs to the invisible world and the goal of mysticism is to attain divine knowledge (ʿilm ladunī). Divine knowledge imprints upon the human soul if the human soul is prepared to acquire divine knowledge. Al-Ghazālī explains how divine knowledge imprints upon the human based on the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{170} Al-Ghazālī, (1416 A.H), 420.
Al-Ghazālī commences his description of receiving divine knowledge with the use of a premise. The premise is the first waystation that the gnostics pass through on their journey to the divine kingdom and the purification of the murkiness of the imagination and senses that is required. He explains that the only concern for the gnostics is a focus on the Truth. Therefore, the gnostics should abandon both worlds, this world and the next.

If one is only able to walk in this holy riverbed by throwing off both this world and the next world and by turning one’s face toward the One, the Real—because this world and the next world are two contraries and counterparts, and because they are accidents of the luminous human substance and can be thrown off at one time and put on at another.  

Al-Ghazālī believes that the heart, the soul, is like a mirror that is capable of reflecting the divine images that it receives via ‘the preserved tablet’ (al-luh al-mahfūz). The divine knowledge would not transfer from the preserved tablet to the heart unless the heart does away with all worldly appetites. According to al-Ghazālī, divine knowledge imprints upon the heart because the heart belongs to the divine world.

Another crucial point about the imprinting of the divine image upon the heart according to al-Ghazālī is that the connection between the heart and the divine world usually happens during sleep because sleep causes the emancipation of the heart from the preoccupations of the senses.

172. Ibid., 30.
173. Ibid., 31.
Sleep has an effect on witnessing such as these because the ruling authority of the senses forces the person to turn away from the inward divine light, since the senses keep him occupied and attract him toward the world of sense perception, turning his face away from the world of unseen and dominion.\textsuperscript{175}

Then, al-Ghazālī clarifies that once the knower connects to the divine dominion, divine knowledge imprints upon the heart by the preserved tablet. Next, the imagination faculty looks for the similar meaning that is equivalent with the divine image.\textsuperscript{176} However, al-Ghazālī does not clearly or specifically explain the exact role of the imagination. Instead, al-Ghazālī elucidates the connection between the human and the divine world, and the process of acquiring images from the divine world.

Both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī allude to the important role of the imagination faculty. Also, they both remark that sleep is one of the best ways to free the soul from material preoccupations.

3.6 The Interpretation of the Verse \textit{Nūr}

I would like to close this chapter with an interpretation of the verse \textit{Nūr} from Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s perspective for two reasons. First of all, the concept of the light is a key focus of Islamic mysticism and philosophy. Moreover, many Muslim philosophers, including Avicenna and al-Ghazālī, consider the verse light as a metaphoric verse that needs to be explored to determine its meaning.

The verse \textit{Nūr} states that:

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The Parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: The Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass

\textsuperscript{175} Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 34.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 35.
as it was a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the east nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light: Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things."\textsuperscript{177}

This verse contains some key words and phrases with vague meanings, such as “the niche”, “the lamp”, “the glass”, “the blessed tree”, and “the olive oil”. The goal of this section is to clarify the meaning of these key words and phrases according to Avicenna and al-Ghazālī. Also, it is important to note that Avicenna does not allude to the verse \textit{al-Nūr} in \textit{Remarks and Admonitions}. However, Avicenna does dedicate another work, \textit{tisʿa Risālih fī al-Ḥikmah wa al-Ṭabīyāt}, to explaining and interpreting this verse.

3.6.1 The Niche

Avicenna relies on his philosophical knowledge to explain the real meaning of “the niche”. He believes that “the niche” is similar to potential intellect (\textit{ʿaql bil quwih}) because “the niche” has the potentiality of being the light. Also, the potential intellect has the potentiality of being the actual intellect.\textsuperscript{178}

Al-Ghazālī’s interpretation of “the niche” is a kind of psychological-philosophical interpretation, as his explanation alludes to different layers of the human soul.

As for the sensible spirit, when you consider its specific characteristic, you find that its lights come out of numerous holes, like the two eyes, the two ears, the two nostrils, and so forth. Hence the most suitable similitude for this spirit is in the visible world is the niche.\textsuperscript{179}

\textsuperscript{177.} Qur’an, 24: 35.
\textsuperscript{178.} Avicenna, (1326A.H), 126.
\textsuperscript{179.} Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 39.
Avicenna and al-Ghazālī refer to “the niche” as the lowest level of the human soul, and the human spirit, respectively.

3.6.2 The Glass

The main characteristic of glass is its clarity, which enables it to accept the light in the best form. Avicenna utilizes this characteristic of glass to liken “the glass” in the verse Nūr to the habitual intellect (ʿaql bil malaka). According to Avicenna, the habitual intellect is able to accept the second intelligible (mʿaqūl al-thānī) readily like “the glass” accepts the light easily.180

The equivalence of “the glass” according to al-Ghazālī is the imaginal spirit. Al-Ghazālī outlines three major characteristics for the imaginal spirit that make it similar to “the glass”.

The first characteristic of the imaginal spirit is that it derives from the clay of the dense, low world, which means the imagination faculty receives the image from the material world. Then, in the absence of the material object, the imagination re-pictures the material object with its color, shape and some specific characteristics.

Moreover, once the imagination spirit is polished, purified and organized, it is equivalent to rational meaning (mʿanāy mʿaqūl). The last characteristic is that the beginning the imagination needs to record and organize rational knowledge. The organization of knowledge helps the imagination not to be dispersed by the scattering that eliminates organization. Al-Ghazālī discusses the characteristics of the imagination spirit, and then he explains the relation between imaginal spirit (rūḥ khīyalī) and “the glass”.

We find these three characteristics in relation to the seen light of the visible world only in glass. Originally glass is a dense substance, but once it is purified and

made clear, it does not veil the light of lamp. Rather it conveys the light in a proper manner. Furthermore, it protects the light from being extinguished by violent winds and rough moments. Glass, therefore, is the first similitude for the imaginal spirit.\textsuperscript{181}

3.6.3 The Lamp

“The lamp” is luminous and has a bright light that produces the light it emits. In the same way, the actual intellect (‘\( \text{aql} \) \( \text{bil} \) \( \text{f’il} \)) comprehends the knowledge without any assistance from anything. Thence, Avicenna highlights that “the lamp” is a metaphor for the actual intellect.\textsuperscript{182}

Al-Ghazālī suggests that the rational spirit (\( \text{rūḥ} ‘\text{aql} \)) is similar to “the lamp” because the rational spirit comprehends the noble and divine knowledge. Also, nothing can be hidden from the rational faculty.\textsuperscript{183}

3.6.4 The Tree

Avicenna remarks that “the tree” is tantamount to thinking because thinking is capable of accepting the light after purification. “The tree” was a seed that developed via the earth to receive the light of the sun.\textsuperscript{184}

On the contrary, al-Ghazālī highlights that the most important characteristic of the reflective spirit (\( \text{rūḥ} \text{ fikrī} \)) is that it begins with a single root and then branches off from there into other branches. Then, each of these new branches divides into two more that

\textsuperscript{182} Avicenna, (1326A.H), 126.
\textsuperscript{183} Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 40.
\textsuperscript{184} Avicenna, (1326A.H), 127.
produce fruit. These fruit go back to the seed of the same fruit; therefore, “the tree” is similar to the reflective spirit.\textsuperscript{185}

\subsection*{3.6.5 Olive Oil}

Avicenna believes the phrase “well-nigh” expresses the holy intellect (‘\textit{aql qudsī}). The “olive oil” catches fire without touching the fire, in the same way that the holy intellect comprehends the intelligible automatically without any assistance.

Also, Avicenna stresses the similarity of the active intellect (‘\textit{aql f‘āl}) and fire. The luminosity of fire leads to the brightness of its environment, and the active intellect is like a fire that makes the intelligible clear.\textsuperscript{186}

Al-Ghazālī expresses the same idea about this part of the verse, “well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it.” For al-Ghazālī, this suggests an association with the holy prophetic spirit (\textit{rūḥ quds nabawī}) because it is in the utmost degree of purification and nobility.\textsuperscript{187}

The difference between al-Ghazālī and Avicenna regarding the interpretation of this verse is that Avicenna explains the grades of intellect while al-Ghazālī remarks on the level of spirit. I can say, both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī explain one reality from two different perspectives. Avicenna refers the key word of this verse to the Greek philosophy while al-Ghazālī tries to refer to different level of the human soul in Qur’an.

\textsuperscript{185} Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 40.
\textsuperscript{186} Avicenna, (1326A.H), 127.
\textsuperscript{187} Al-Ghazālī, (1998), 41.
Conclusion

The central concern of this project has been to arrive at an understanding of Islamic mysticism from Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s perspective. Comparing Avicenna and al-Ghazālī reveals that al-Ghazālī lived in an age when philosophy had an esteemed place in universities and among scholars. Therefore, al-Ghazālī’s intent was to show that the Qur’an could be understood in rational terms by interpreting Qur’anic verses through a philosophical lens. For example, al-Ghazālī’s understanding of verse Nūr is completely philosophical. However, the Qur’an for Avicenna is religious book that guides common people along the right path. Avicenna does not attempt to illustrate the Qur’an as a philosophical book; rather, his understanding of the Qur’an is in a philosophical context.

Avicenna’s book Remarks and Admonitions, and especially chapters nine and ten, illustrate a comprehensive framework of Avicenna’s mystical world-view. Avicenna established his mystical viewpoint through philosophy. Avicenna describes his mystical framework as an intellectual journey toward the Truth. This journey starts with self-contemplation (t’aaqqul dhātī) and the awareness of the divine realm to form a union with the Truth. Intellect and love support the philosophical-mystical journey toward the Truth from Avicenna’s perspective. Avicenna emphasizes the collaboration between love and intellect in individuals following the philosophical-mystical path. It is important to consider how Avicenna’s definition of love is similar to Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, as this shows that both Avicenna and Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ utilized the same source.

Perhaps the most important point about Avicenna’s mysticism is that Avicenna divides the world into external and internal based on the human. In other words, the human as subject is a key focus of Avicenna’s understanding of the division of the world. Thus, the external world is beyond the comprehension of the human intellect regardless of whether it is a shadow of another world or not. Also, the internal world is inside humans and has different layers. Therefore, the seeker of the Truth has to journey inside himself through different layers of his being.
On the other hand, al-Ghazālī’s *The Niche of Lights* illustrates the structure of Islamic mysticism based on two pillars. The first pillar is the principle of dualism, which means that everything in the universe has two aspects or sides: outwards and inwards, respectively. However, even though these two sides are totally different and apparently incompatible, there is cooperation between them. In Al-Ghazālī’s framework, the outward world is the ladder and basic step for the journey toward the inward world. This dualism is necessary because without the existence of one, realization of the other would not be possible. It is also worth noting that Al-Ghazālī’s division of world mainly focuses on a division of the universe and not the human. Although the human is included in his paradigm, and it has seen and unseen aspects also, the side that can be seen is a shadow of the unseen world.

The second pillar—which cannot be found in the philosophical systems of other Muslim philosophers—is the consideration of the Qur’an and Hadith as two wings for the human spiritual journey. Al-Ghazālī firmly connects the two main sources of Islam in his book. Also, many of his philosophical and mystical books are the interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna. His well-known book *Incoherence of the Philosophers* is a refutation of philosophers’ arguments on many subjects, including their definition of God as the cause of causes, which is against the Qur’anic definition of God. Both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī consider the human as (*al-ʿalam asghar*) and the cosmos as (*al-ʿalam akbar*), also both believe that the external world is material world and the internal world is the immaterial world.

Avicenna divides humans into gnostic (*ʿārif*) and non-gnostics (*ghayr ʿārif*); non-gnostics are pious (*ʿābid*) or ascetic (*zāhid*). Also, gnostics are prophets and saints, but Avicenna did not consider common people as worth enough to classify. The division of people, according to al-Ghazālī, is: common people; the elect people, which includes saints; philosophers and thinkers; and the elect of the elect who are prophets.
The comparison of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī clarifies some points that are important to mention. First, both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī remark that prophets possess the highest natural capacity for receiving revelation and inspiration without the assistance of external sources. However, the gnostics need to extend their natural capacity by mysticism. The mystical path prepares the gnostics to receive inspiration from the divine realm. Second, al-Ghazālī was inspired by Avicenna’s philosophical explanation of the role of the imaginative faculty. Avicenna describes the role of the imaginative faculty as a mirror that reflects divine images from the holiness world. This mirror reflects the picture clearly and completely once all murkiness is polished from the mirror. Thus, the mystical path is the path that purifies the imaginative faculty from murkiness in order to reflect divine images. Most crucially, Avicenna and al-Ghazālī differ on whether the gnostic retains his identity when he confronts the Truth, as the last step of mystical path requires either a union with the Truth or annihilation (fanā) once the gnostic loses his identity. Avicenna discusses a union between the gnostic and the Truth in which the gnostic keeps his identity as a person who observes the Truth. In other words, the gnostic does not have an independent identity apart from the Truth. Therefore, the gnostic consciously observes both the Truth and himself as an observer of the Truth. On contrary, al-Ghazālī believes that the union between the gnostic and the Truth leads the gnostic to relinquish his identity because the real identity for the seeker of the Truth is the Truth. The reason that al-Ghazālī removes the personal identity of the gnostic is the Qur’anic verse “Everything is perishing except His face.”188 Thus, the primary important difference between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī is their interpretation of personal identity once the Truth has been attained. My perspective is that Avicenna has never ignored the human as subject; however, the real subject for al-Ghazālī is the Truth.

It is important to note that the classification of the human soul, according to al-Ghazālī, is equivalent with Avicenna’s classification of the human intellect. The difference between

188 Qur’an. 28:88
Avicenna and al-Ghazālī’s classification of the human intellect is that al-Ghazālī’s division of the human soul is a Qur’anic division not a philosophical one. In other words, the division of soul for al-Ghazālī is not an Aristotelian division of soul that includes a vegetative soul, animal soul and reasonable soul; rather, his division includes the carnal soul (nafs ammārah) and the virtuous soul (nafs mutm’ainnah). Also, both agree that the equivalent of the human soul is Sufism’s word ‘heart.’ Avicenna and al-Ghazālī also both believe that the verse Nūr needs to be interpreted to unveil its hidden meaning. Further, al-Ghazālī and Avicenna contend that this verse illustrates the stages of the human soul or intellect, respectively.

The key difference between Avicenna and al-Ghazālī is that Avicenna claims that Islamic law does not apply to the mystics, whereas al-Ghazālī argues that Islamic law applies to everyone without any exception.

My conclusion based on the comparison of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī is that Avicenna viewed Islam as separate from his philosophy. Avicenna was more concerned with being a great philosopher than perpetuating the adherence of Islamic law. In contrast, al-Ghazālī’s life was based upon a foundation of Islamic law, philosophy and mysticism. In other words, Avicenna used a philosophical lens to explore many different subjects, whereas al-Ghazālī utilized an Islamic lens in his work to further Islamic teachings, including the Qur’an and Hadith.
Glossary

**absolute being (wujūd muṭlaq):** Necessary Being, that which exists by itself or that which cannot but exist, for non-existence of it is unthinkable.

**active intellect (ʿaql faʿāl):** a kind of intellectual contact with the divine. This connection with the innermost, eternal reality of things is available neither to the ignorant multitude nor even to the Sufis (who misunderstand the nature of their mystic experiences), but only to philosophers, who grasp by means of their reason the true objects of knowledge: immaterial, timeless, universal and intelligible forms.

**actual intellect (ʿaql bil ḥil):** Intellect in action or the actualized intellect which, through the illumination that it receives from the agent intellect, is activated into thinking upon the universal forms of objects as well as ultimate concepts.

**animal emotional soul (Nafs ḥaywānī):** The animal soul or mind; it possesses all the powers or faculties of the vegetable mind, viz. the nutritive power, the power of growth and the power of reproduction.

**annihilation, (fanā):** the dissolution of the individuated, finite self

**carnal soul (nafs ammārah):** “The commanding soul”, i.e. the soul which is wont to enjoin evil, an expression used in the Holy Qur’an (12:53) for the lowest stage in the spiritual growth of man, the stage when the low desires and animal passions rule the mind of man and he succumbs to his carnal desires like a brute.

**common sense (ḥiss mushtarik):** The common sense combines all the forms of the sensible objects that are received through the five external senses.

**divine emanation (fayḍ ilāhī):** one in which the nature of God (as an absolutely unitary, necessary being) overflows in its superabundance, giving rise to a chain of successively
dependent ‘intellects’ which ultimately generate our contingent physical cosmos of change and multiplicity.

*Divine knowledge (ʿilm ladunī):* "Inspired knowledge", or "knowledge derived from the presence of God", mystical comprehension—inspired by an encounter with God—of things spiritual.

*gnosis (ʿīrfān):* gnosis (maʿrifa), which has as its practical prerequisite spiritual exercises that prepare the heart to receive an influx of divinely bestowed illumination.

*habitual intellect (ʿaql bil malaka):* the ‘habitual’ intellect” is potential intellect that has now developed the ability to grasp and employ universals in thought, yet is not perpetually doing so.

*holy intellect (ʿaql qudsī):* holy intellect – as the reception of intelligibles by the imagination – within the context of an Aristotelian/Neoplatonic worldview.

*illumination (ishrāq):* illumination is direct experience of something, and we do not need to use any abstract concepts to understand our experience.

in which one sees through the multiplicity of the manifest world and experiences its ontological unity, is followed by ‘perpetuation’ (baqa’), a state in which one sees the world with ‘two eyes’, as it were – simultaneously recognizing one’s creaturely uniqueness even as one also sees one’s unity with God.

*innate disposition (istʿidād):* Capacity, power, actual (biʾl-fiʾl) or potential (biʾl-quwāwah) possessed by a thing either to act in a certain manner or to suffer a certain change; it may be innate or acquired.

*potential intellect (ʿaql bil quwah):* the ‘potential’ or ‘material’ intellect is the human being’s innate capacity for receiving intelligible, universal forms. It is not literally
corporeal, as the name might suggest, but rather simply a kind of un-actualized potentiality.


*universal soul (nafs kulî):* The universal soul inclusive of all the individual souls; corresponds to the Psyche of Plotinus.
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