Al-Ghazali and Descartes from doubt to certainty: a phenomenological approach

Al-Ghazali y Descartes de la duda a la certeza: una aproximación fenomenológica

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Resumen

Este artículo aclara la relación entre Al-Ghazali y René Descartes, para articular similitudes y diferencias en sus respectivos periplos desde la duda a la certidumbre. Algunos investigadores concuerdan en que los argumentos de la duda que emplean Descartes y Al-Ghazali son similares, pero identifican sus caminos desde la duda como radicalmente diferentes: mientras Descartes encontró la superación de la duda mediante el *cogito* o la razón, Al-Ghazali finalizó su Aventura filosófica como un Sufi, abrumado por su experiencia místico-religiosa. Este artículo demuestra lo contrario. Bajo un cuidadoso escrutinio textual y aprovechando algunos conceptos fenomenológicos básicos de Husserl, planteo que la posición de Al-Ghazali fue malinterpretada, y así revelo su verdadera naturaleza filosófica.

Abstract

This paper clarifies the philosophical connection between Al-Ghazali and René Descartes, to articulate similarities and differences in their journeys from doubt to certainty. Some scholars agree that the doubt arguments used by Descartes and Al-Ghazali are similar, but identify their departures from doubt as radically different: while Descartes found his way out of doubt through the *cogito* or reason, Al-Ghazali ended his philosophical journey as a Sufi, overwhelmed by his religious-mystical experience. This paper proves the opposite. Under close textual scrutiny and using of basic Husserlian-phenomenological concepts, I show that Al-Ghazali's position was misunderstood, and thus disclose his true philosophic nature.

Palabras clave

Al-Ghazali, René Descartes, fenomenología, Edmund Husserl, epistemología, escepticismo.

Key words

Al-Ghazali, René Descartes, phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, epistemology, scepticism

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Introduction

This paper clarifies the philosophical relation between Al-Ghazali, a Muslim philosopher (1058-1111), and the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650), with the objective of articulating the similarities and differences in their famous journeys from doubt to certainty. Historical evidence on whether Descartes did in fact read or have knowledge of Al-Ghazali's work will not be discussed in this paper, since my aim is to focus primarily on the chain of their reasoning, starting from their conceptions of truth and the arguments used by each to destroy or deconstruct the pillars of our knowledge and thus reach truth. However, it is important to remind ourselves that the relation between both philosophers was in fact a debated issue among scholars in the field of both early modern and Islamic philosophy. M.M. Sharif in *A History of Muslim Philosophy* pointed out the countless similarities between both philosophers, especially the influence of *Al-Monqith* on Descartes' thought to the extent that he concluded with an impossibility "to deny its influence" (Sharif 1382), but he asserted that he had no evidence of a Latin translation of Al-Ghazali's works that Descartes read. Sami Najm agreed with Sharif that "the two cases of dealing with the problem of doubt are profoundly comparable," but he refrained from arguing that "Al-Ghazali influenced the thinking of Descartes" since it is a matter, he claimed, "for which I have no evidence" (Najm 133).

Stephen Menn, in his essay "The *Discourse on the Method* and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography," has a different but insightful approach to the subject. Menn provided an exposition of the main influence on Descartes' thought in the *Discourse,* but this task itself led him to consider some other authors. The undeniable similarity among the main works of these authors (Al-Ghazali, Ibn Al-Haitham, Tomasso Campanella, and Descartes), as Menn tells us, can be traced to one source; these authors are similar because they "are taking over a strategy of self-presentation that had been originally invented by Galen" (Menn 147). This strategy or style of writing is called 'autobiography.' To prove his case, Menn builds some bridges between Aelius Galen's ideas and these authors, and of course what helps Menn here is the fact that Al-Ghazali quoted Galen by name several times. The problem with Menn's project, I think, for readers like me who are interested in assessing and analyzing the content of Descartes' and Al-Ghazali's arguments, is that it does not tell us much; concentrating on the *art* of writing autobiographies necessarily diverts the attention to literature and the history of writing rather than philosophy.

This is probably why Menn's analysis was limited to depicting the specific model of autobiography, the definition of truth, and the initial preliminary stage of doubt (which will be discussed later in this paper). Because of the scope of his study, Menn did not discuss the nature and implications of the concept of truth, the 'primary' stage of doubt (the dream argument and the unusual malicious demon argument in Al-Ghazali and Descartes), nor the possible link(s) between these primary doubt arguments and Al-Ghazali and Descartes' way out of doubt. We might agree with Menn that the writing style of Al-Ghazali, Ibn Al-Haitham, Campanella and Descartes drew deeply on Galen's but, if we intend to do so, we should remember that the practice of doubt and the attempt to free the self from it is in fact a very natural experience to any human being who chooses the path of thinking. It is worth mentioning that the history of philosophy is full of similar cases and I believe that the genuine experience of thinking was the main trigger of the sceptical journey that existed a long time before Galen.

Apart from Galen, I think that Menn was unaware of some *historical proofs* that linked Descartes directly to Al-Ghazali. I think that these historical links between the two philosophers might be the proper justification for a statement by scholar Tamara Albertini, who claimed that "the similarity between the two philosophers are many — in thoughts, phrasing, and even in the examples they use" (Albertini 6). The most striking evidence of the historical influence of Al-Ghazali on Descartes was put forward by the Tunisian historian Othman Al-Kaa'k, who delivered a paper at the Tenth Annual Islamic Thought Forum in Tunisia in which he claimed to have visited the National Library in Paris and looked at the Cartesian Collection, where he found a Latin translation of '*Al-Monqith*,' with comments written in Descartes' handwriting: "this will be added to our method"[1] (Al-Kaa'k 6). This piece of finding changed the course of literature on the subject indefinitely: V.V. Naumkin (124) and Catherine Wilson (1021-1023) based their studies on this historical proof.[2] Albertini pushed this idea even harder to claim in a footnote that this finding "would … substantiate that Islamic thought has been able to inspire European philosophy well beyond the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (Albertini 13). In fact, as we shall see in more detail, these views might be justified given the similarity between such great minds: both philosophers agreed on the ambiguous character of ordinary, everyday knowledge and both decided to set forth towards

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[1] Othman Al-Kaa'k came later to document his findings in an article published in *Al-Ahram* daily newspaper, Egypt, 30-7-1976, 6.
[2] I personally tried to verify these claims regarding this actual 'evidence,' but access to Descartes' collection in Paris was restricted due to some renovations and relocation.

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undermining its foundation. Their projects are significantly similar: in order to undermine the foundation of this doubtful knowledge, we must begin with a model through which this knowledge is compared.

I suggested earlier that this historical debate and the search for actual proof is not an aim of this paper; however, due to the nature of the subject, some historical attention can be justified. As promised, my approach to the subject focuses more on the *content* of their arguments: a. I will argue that the doubt arguments used by Descartes and Al-Ghazali are similar in their structure and goals and I will show this by reconstructing these arguments, b. I will debate the conviction among some scholars (Moghniya) that Al-Ghazali's and Descartes' ways out of doubt are radically different. These scholars, as we shall see in more detail in subsequent sections, believe that, while Descartes found his way out of doubt through the *cogito*, establishing, therefore, a priority for the role of reason, Al-Ghazali ended his philosophical journey as a Sufi where the self is in a sheer state of passivity waiting for the truth to be revealed by God. This paper demonstrates this is not the case: Al-Ghazali's belief in reason was never diminished nor questioned, although his writings were overwhelmed to a certain extent by the effects of the Sufi godly light. Under close textual scrutiny, I show that Al-Ghazali's position was misunderstood, thus revealing his true philosophic nature, not only the Sufi influence.

As for the use of the 'phenomenological approach,' I define it negatively: it is a-historical, a-theological, and anti-reductive. Such a methodological stance will help reconsider an abundance of possibilities for the texts of both philosophers. The Husserlian tradition has allowed us, through various concepts, to uncover some implicit aspects in the writings of both philosophers, such as the natural and the philosophical attitude of the mind, epochè, intentionality, etc. The underlying assumption of this approach is that, while the writings of both Descartes and Al-Ghazali are different from that of Edmund Husserl, the Husserlian tradition still holds a certain importance in discovering the fabric of their writings and assessing the value of the phenomena they research. As discussed later, these phenomenological concepts help in explicating the relation between consciousness and its objects, as described by both philosophers. Moreover, they also clarify the content of the obscure domain of consciousness. In other words, I believe that Husserl is one of the most important philosophers who approached the domain of consciousness through various revolutionary concepts and analyses. I think that using these phenomenological concepts might be of some benefits in enhancing

our understanding of two philosophers who devoted many of their works to analyzing the phenomenon of consciousness. Of course, Husserl was aware of Descartes and responded directly to him, but he was unaware of Al-Ghazali. Part of what is presented in this phenomenological approach is to see how Husserl's criticism might be applied to the case of Al-Ghazali.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. I first focus on the movement along the concept of doubt for both philosophers from the beginning until the end (i.e., the final stage of doubt—the stage at which certainty is reached). I will begin by identifying how they define or conceive of truth, and then continue by discussing how this conception of truth motivated both, unsurprisingly, to move in the same direction of thinking. While doing so, I deal with doubt on two planes: preliminary and primary. Then, I outline some conditions for the success of their doubt arguments. Finally, I provide a critical conclusion concerning the reading of both philosophers.

The concept of certainty

Al-Ghazali's and Descartes' conceptions of truth are strikingly similar. Al-Ghazali's says:

> What I seek is knowledge of the meaning of things. Of necessity, therefore, I must inquire into just what the true meaning of knowledge is. Then it became clear to me that sure and certain knowledge is that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor can the mind suppose such a possibility (Al-Ghazali *Deliverance*, 63).

The above conception of truth is profoundly similar to that of Descartes in his first rule of the method:

> Never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its *truth*: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it [emphasis added] (Descartes Vol.1 120)[3].

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[3] Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch. The Philosophical Writings of Descartes. 2 Volumes. Hereafter will be referred to as CSM (CSM1: Vol. 1, CSM2: Vol. 2).

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Sharif (33) did not miss this opportunity to remind us of the similarity between this concept of truth in *Al-Monqith* and that of the *Discourse*. It is unfortunate that Sharif's study focuses solely on the *Discourse* since the same idea is actually repeated throughout his entire work. It is important also to notice that both philosophers emphasize in their understanding of truth a basic dichotomy: the object of knowledge, on one hand, and the act of knowing, on the other. If we were to pay attention to the terms used to describe such knowledge, then we would identify terms such as 'evidence,' 'clearness,' 'certainty,' 'assurance,' 'meaning of things,' and 'indubitability.' Indeed, these terms imply the understanding of what truth is to these philosophers, making it important to notice that, in this understanding of truth, a special emphasis is placed on the manner through which these objects of knowledge are given to consciousness, described by terms such as 'made so manifest,' and 'presented itself to the mind.' Such terms clarify their concern with truth as if it were some form of a *disclosure*, where knowledge becomes certain when the known object discloses its meaning or truth to the *knowing* mind. Without further emphasis, it is clear that their accent is on the nature of the object known rather than the act of knowing, in the sense that the emergence of such an object and its standing there before consciousness would not be mistaken as anything else but the truth.

It is really hard to find a distinction between truth and certainty in the context of both philosophers, as they seem to agree implicitly on considering certainty as an epistemic property of truth. Certainty in this sense is a direct intuition that 'discloses' the thing known. The Arabic word for 'certainty' is '*yaqin*' or '*ilm al-yaqin*,' which is defined by Al-Ghazali as "that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it" (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 63). This quest for such *yaqin* or certainty has a special meaning in the case of Al-Ghazali because of its religious aspect. As we shall see later, this certainty will be identified as something beyond the sphere of transcendence and the natural attitude of the mind altogether; it is in fact an intuitive faculty that is higher than senses and reason. Al-Ghazali dedicated most of his time and energy later in his life to this intuitive faculty; later in *Al-Monqith* he tells us how this intuitive faculty contributed to his understanding of many riddles in the universe. However, as I argue later, this stage of Al-Ghazali's later thought was misunderstood: the use of this faculty was never a state of mind that dismisses both senses and reason so that the self is left helpless waiting for everything to be revealed to it by God.

Further, such characteristics of the sought truth can be exemplified by the science of mathematics. Mathematics, according to these philosophers, is the science that contains neither doubt nor deception. Thus, Descartes says: "Above all I delighted in mathematics, because of the certainty and self-evidence of its reasonings" (Descartes Vol. 1 114). Al-Ghazali, agrees:

For if I know that ten is more than three, and then someone were to say: "No, on the contrary, three is more than ten, as is proved by my turning this stick into a snake" — and if he were to do just that and I were to see him do it, I would not doubt my knowledge because of his feat. The only effect it would have on me would be to make me wonder how he could do such a thing. But there would be no doubt at all about what I knew! (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 63-64)

It is true that both philosophers value mathematics, but the ground from which they do so is different. For instance, Al-Ghazali values mathematics in the sense that it provides him a good model for truth; that is to say, if he were to assume an indubitable proposition in any respected field of knowledge, it would be mathematics. Descartes shares this opinion, but emphasizes this point more, in the sense that mathematics becomes for him the basic concept in his famous project *mathesis universalis*.[4]

Removing preconceptions as a necessary step toward truth

I turn now to examine the link between the model of truth, the object of knowledge that discloses itself to the mind, and the acts of knowing that pave the way for pursuing that model. A model defined as such plays a very important role, as subsequently demonstrated, in determining the value of any form of directedness the knowing subject has towards the object. The objective to be analyzed here is regarding the definition of truth and how it might lead to the destruction of our ordinary knowledge and preconceived opinions. Here, Descartes will say that since his childhood he accepted many ideas and beliefs that were never doubted, but later he admits that he was forced to change his opinion: "For I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I have gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance" (Descartes, Vol. 1 112-113).

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[4] In a famous passage from the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes explains what he means by this expression: "general science that explains everything that it is possible to inquire into concerning order and measure, without restriction to any particular subject-matter." (Descartes, vol. 1 19).

Al-Ghazali's experience was no different. He writes retrospectively that, when he was over 50, "the thirst for grasping the real meaning of things was indeed my habit and wont from my early years and in the prime of my life. It was an instinctive, natural disposition placed in my make up by the hands of God Most High … as a result, the fetters of servile conformism fell away from me and inherited beliefs lost their hold on me" (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 62-63).

The experience of both philosophers is strikingly similar, and neither is without a dramatic content. Descartes, after years of studying, came to realize that he did not gain anything but increased recognition of his ignorance. Al-Ghazali, too, went through the same experience. As such, the result of going through these experiences, which seems to be natural to any true learning process, is that they felt the need to get rid of the burden of conformism. Therefore, Al-Ghazali reminds us that the fetters of conformism fell away, and Descartes explains: "I thought that I could do not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at one go" (Descartes, Vol. 1 117).

Because of the distinctive aims of these two philosophers, truth, as they conceptualized it, they headed in the one direction: freeing themselves from all fetters of conformism. However, the question of the meaning of conformism is significant, for the answer would provide us with an insight into the meaning of the moment when one decides to eliminate conformism.

The meaning of 'conformism'[5] is clearly defined by Al-Ghazali, in that imitation or conformism is conditioned by the ignorance that one is an imitator. As such, at the *moment* one *knows* that one is an imitator one is no longer one, and this is considered a result of a logical reasoning:

> For there can be no desire to return to servile conformism once it has been abandoned, since a prerequisite for being a servile conformist is that one does not know himself to be such. But when a man recognizes that, the glass of his servile conformism is shattered—an irreparable fragmentation and a mess which cannot be mended by patching and piecing

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[5] Conformism is translated by McCarthy from the Arabic '*taqlid*,' which simply means imitation. Therefore, we can say that a follower is 'imitating' the Imam, i.e., following his words and deeds. In the following discussion of 'getting rid of imitation or conformism,' Al-Ghazali appears radical rather than orthodox; in fact he surpasses Descartes in his conception of liberation from religious dogmas.

together: it can only be melted by fire and newly reshaped.
(Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 67)

In other words, Al-Ghazali believes that it is only through knowledge that we come to abandon knowledge: one must purge oneself from knowledge, in the sense of eliminating preconceived opinions in order to arrive at true knowledge. Therefore, if knowledge is to be the opposite of something, then it must be imitating blindly the others, not simply ignorance. Now, when the awareness of imitation is present, no return to *taqlid* is possible.

Al-Ghazali believes that knowledge is necessarily conditioned by prior knowledge, for we are humans not divinities. As such, the search for knowledge must be triggered by the mode in which we naturally live and learn. Indeed, we cannot understand Al-Ghazali as completely uprooting all preconceived *doxai,* simply because they are preconceived; rather, he gave this *doxai* some active role, an epistemic role: although it hinders us from attaining true knowledge, it provides the principle of removing it, thus the seeming paradox.

Fable of doubt and exercising doubt arguments

From the preceding two steps, after defining the concept of truth for both philosophers, as well as their understanding the need to eliminate preconceived opinions, we can say that their aim is the true meaning of knowledge or the type of knowledge that is certain, self-evident, and indubitable. This sought knowledge, insofar as its certainty is concerned, should be modelled after the science of mathematics. It is precisely this aim that led both philosophers to consider the ways of attaining it, coined by both in the form of removing preconceived *doxa*. However, as we scrutinize this *preliminary* method, in which both felt the need of getting rid of *doxai* —which is to be distinguished from the *primary* method, where both philosophers used their famous doubt arguments— we see that this preliminary process is rather complicated. This method must satisfy one condition if it is to be successful in its application, namely, that one must go *through* a stream of ideas. Husserl has his own way of describing this state, which necessarily precedes any critique of knowledge. The question "of the *cogitation* —more precisely the phenomenon of knowledge itself— is beyond question … Such existences [of the *cogitationes*] are already presupposed in the initial statement of the problem of knowledge" (Husserl 33). Husserl calls

this stage the 'natural attitude of the mind' in which any decision to perform the phenomenological reduction, or to eliminate preconceptions is conditioned by prior thoughts, as we have seen in the analysis of Al-Ghazali and Descartes. This analysis is clear in the case of Al-Ghazali and Descartes. Put differently, it is natural for humans to learn but, after reflecting on our ideas by comparing types of knowledge, looking for their consistency, etc., we realize that something else must take place, namely, freeing one's self from preconceptions. Arriving at truth is not literally an arrival, as if truth were something revealed to us by some abstract entity, but rather a destructive process through which other thoughts, accepted before as truths, are now eliminated since they do not fulfil the conditions that determine what truth is —it is through this destructive process, or acts of consciousness, that truth appears.

The condition of eliminating preconceptions as a necessary step towards truth can be called the 'inner' condition, designating the a *priori* situation in which an act of consciousness pursuing knowledge is produced. Now, we can also provide an 'outer' condition, which is derived from the basic principle or goal both philosophers described at the beginning of their journeys, namely, their conceptions of truth: eliminating preconceptions as a tool of examining knowledge, not merely for the sake of eliminating them (the essence of scepticism), must be applied successfully to its objectives. Henceforth, we must turn our attention to the application of this destructive process or the actual removal of preconceived opinions. This destructive process is in fact encapsulated in the doubt arguments used by both philosophers. I thus consider these arguments on two levels: the first I call the 'preliminary' stage of doubt, as distinguished from the 'primary' doubts described in the subsequent section.

By 'preliminary' doubts, I refer to the doubts closely related to the moment of eliminating preconceived *doxa*. They relate to it in that they constitute the moment of coming to an awareness after a state of ignorance, freeing one's self, as Descartes or Al-Ghazali would put it. These doubts are the first actual stages of the method.

For Al-Ghazali, this stage was exemplified in that moment of the example he provided when he noticed that "the children of Christians always grow up embracing Christianity, and the children of Jews always grew up adhering to Judaism" and so he felt "an inner urge to seek the true

meaning of the original *fitra*[6] [natural disposition], and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through slavish aping." (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 63; emphasis added). The same moment is found in Descartes. He tells us the story of his childhood being "governed for some time by our appetites and our teachers," then he blames his mistakes on abandoning the "full use of our reason from the moment of our birth" (Descartes, vol. 1 117).

Both arguments, of Al-Ghazali and Descartes, are based on the same grounds, for the aim of both is to demonstrate that we, through the natural attitude of the mind, as Husserl coins it, are occupied by many preconceived opinions that we take for granted without real questioning. Now, since these arguments clearly show us that we cannot be certain regarding the truth of *doxa,* then it is unreasonable to accept them as indubitable truths. Therefore, we have to move beyond this stage, that is, deepen our doubts.

Doubt arguments and their consequences

Doubt, in this stage, is different from the preceding one. For this doubt is more profound and aims to uproot every idea from the mind that bears the label 'uncertain.' Moving away from the natural attitude of the mind towards a more philosophic one, the demand for truth requires that one must practice an *epochè*, that is, suspend all judgements regarding all ideas until their certainty is revealed.

The first doubt is that of the senses. However, it is worth noticing that none of these arguments used by Descartes or Al-Ghazali is actually novel as the history of philosophy provided them in different shapes and forms. We must note that the many different doubt arguments provided by Al-Ghazali were given as if there were a dialogue between senses and reason, while this is not the case with Descartes. I consider these doubts overall, without differentiating the aim to which they are directed (i.e., senses or intellect), although I may occasionally refer to the aims. I begin with the argument of Al-Ghazali, since he is the true 'father' of this method. After defining what truth should be like, he goes on to see whether there is any knowledge that might correspond to his description of truth. In this context, he mentions:

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[6] According to the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, the word '*fitra*' has its origins in the Quran as the "the original state in which humans are created by God. However, the commonly accepted meaning of the word derives from the traditions of Muhammad, according to which God creates children according to *fitra,* and their parents later make them Jews or Christians." Oxford Dictionary of Islam, Edited by John L. Esposito, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Now that despair has befallen me, the only hope I have of acquiring an insight into obscure matters is to start from things that perfectly clear, namely sense-data and the self-evident truths … with great earnestness, therefore, I began to reflect on my sense-data to see if I could make myself doubt them. This protracted effort to induce doubt finally brought me to the point where my soul would not allow me to admit safety from error even in the case of my sense-data [then reason asked the senses] whence comes your reliance on sense-data? The strongest of senses is the sense of sight [reason continues], sight also looks at a star and sees it as something small; then geometrical proofs demonstrate that it surpasses the earth in size. (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 64)

Descartes offers the same argument in many of his works:

> The first reason for such doubts [senses] is that from time to time we have caught out the senses when they were in error, and it is prudent never to place too much trust in those who have deceived us even once. (Descartes, vol. 1 194)

Now, if we were to speak of the very example given by Al-Ghazali, we would find it in the first *Meditation*: "senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are *very small or in the distance*" (Descartes, vol. 2 17; emphasis added). Another argument given by Descartes to demonstrate that senses are deceivers is his famous argument on dreaming (Descartes, vol. 1 194). The very same argument, again, is given by Al-Ghazali in his doubting rational data (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 64). The famous Cartesian argument of doubt, omnipotent God or malicious demon, in accordance with the different translations of the *meditations* and *principles* is used to prove the same notion (Descartes, vol. 1 194). Such a God, devil, evil spirit, or malicious demon is, again, present in Al-Ghazali's work: though it has a different name, it has the same function. The doubt argument he offers is pictured, as previously mentioned, as if there were a dialogue between senses and reason, each of which is trying to refute the argument of the other, while the 'I' is standing in the middle contemplating the debate:

Then the sense-data spoke up [to the 'I']: "what assurance have you that your reliance on rational-data is not like your reliance on sense-data?" Indeed, you used to have confidence in me. Then the reason-judge [reason] came along and gave me the lie. But were it not for the reason-judge, you would still accept me as true. So there may be, beyond the

perception of reason, *another judge*. And if the latter revealed itself, it would give the lie to the judgments of reason, just as the reason—judge revealed itself and gave the lie to the judgments of sense. The mere fact of the nonappearance of that further perception does not prove the impossibility of its existence. (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 65; emphasis added)

It is this judge —which is beyond the perception of reason, and is hidden— that has the basic character and function of what Descartes called the 'malicious demon.' Malicious demon did not exist by name in Al-Ghazali's context but as a function; he called it the 'third judge' —a hypothetical faculty that aimed to refute both sense data and rational data. This argument, in particular, refutes both sense and rational data because of the supposition of something that supersedes them altogether.

The last argument provided by Descartes can hardly find any equivalent in Al-Ghazali, which concerns doubting mathematical proofs (Descartes, vol. 1 194) (although Al-Ghazali spoke of some dangers arising from the complete reliance on mathematical demonstrations). One could argue also that Al-Ghazali when doubting rational data was in fact doubting mathematical proofs. However, if we decide to focus on this example itself, it will be revealed that it is the most genuine in his written corpus; it actually reveals Descartes the mathematician, at least before beginning his philosophical journey of doubt. Let's consider now the success of these doubt arguments to their objects.

Doubt arguments, any success?

A new horizon of understanding the doubt arguments of both philosophers can be opened up if we turn our attention to the *successfulness* of the application of doubt to its objects. Let us consider the Cartesian example first. In truth, the warnings that Descartes put forward regarding areas that cannot be reached by doubt make it difficult to believe that Descartes was in fact successful in applying his own method. Precautions such as restricting the performance of the method to "those on whom God has bestowed more of his favours," or intellectuals, and that this method should be not be open to everyone (see Descartes, vol. 1 118); that the aim of the method is reforming his own thoughts only, and, most importantly, the provisional moral code given in the third section of the *Discourse*, are evident examples that doubt cannot extend to some object, such as the laws and customs of a country or the religion

he was taught from his childhood. Descartes seems to have considered there are things open to doubt, while others are not.

Can one conclude from this a Cartesian failure of understanding the *radical nature* of doubt itself? An answer to this question requires further analysis. As we saw in some earlier suggestions, doubt is *linked* by its nature to a moment in which one discovers her/his freedom —a freedom of imitation or '*taqlid*' to use Al-Ghazali's terminology. As such, the moment of doubt, if it is to be real, will occur simultaneously with a beginning of a radical movement towards *freedom* from the burden of *doxa* or preconceived opinions. Doubt is an intentional act of consciousness through which it expresses itself and reaches its objects. Thanks to a phenomenological analysis of intentionality, this logical relationship between an intention or an act of consciousness and its corresponding object or its *noema* is established[7]; that you cannot remember or love or evaluate, for instance, if there is nothing to be remembered, loved, or evaluated. Hence, a closer look must be given to the *object* or *beliefs* upon which doubt is applied. Given the Cartesian hesitancy of applying doubt to some objects and beliefs —discussed earlier— one can conclude that he decided to move away from an integral component of the experience of doubt itself, that is, its radical nature. This Cartesian hesitancy was probably due to an absence of the experience of lived doubt, and if we have to follow this line of thinking and push it to its logical ends, we might conclude that Descartes was feigning his experience of doubt altogether. However, it might also be possible to think of this negligence of applying doubt to its natural objects as a sign of an insufficiency of understanding the intentional nature of doubt as an act of consciousness.

Al-Ghazali's case is a bit different: an orthodox as he was, an Imam of traditionalism, he appears to offer an alternative view. In the compressed text of Al-Ghazali, we find the most radical lines in *Al-Munqith*: "As a result [of doubt], the fitters of servile conformism fell away from me, and *inherited beliefs* lost their hold on me, when I was still quite young" (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 63; emphasis added). He says also:

When these thoughts [doubts] occurred to me they penetrated my soul, and so I tried to deal with that objection. However, my effort was unsuccessful, since the objection could be refuted only by proof. But the

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[7] On the structure of intentionality in Husserl's writings, I refer the reader to the excellent study by Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern, and Edward Marbach, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, 88 and what follows.

only way to put together a proof was to combine primary cognitions. So if, as in my case, these were inadmissible, it was impossible to construct a proof. (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 66)

The consistency of Al-Ghazali's thought is both unique and radical. The dramatic picture he offers was *natural* from its beginning and so it was able to extend to everything. Consequently, he was *unable* to end his doubt, for to get out of doubt he needed a proof, which is a combination of thoughts already demolished — thoughts which originate either from senses or reason. The development of Al-Ghazali's thoughts on doubt was not a series of events known beforehand or a 'fable,' as Descartes once labelled his doubt; rather, it was a real experience reflected in his spontaneous consistency. This point indeed has not been noticed by many of those who read Al-Ghazali, since they read him from a historical perspective, as a medieval thinker and an Imam of orthodoxy or a Sufi who would surrender his mental faculty to godly given truths. In his excellent essay, Omar Edward Moad blames Western critics and Muslim modernists for labelling Al-Ghazali as someone who "single-handedly 'killed philosophy' in the Muslim world" (Moad 88). Moad actually charged them with forgetting that Al-Ghazali was someone who "freed Islamic thought from the limitations of the Aristotelian framework" (88). Al-Ghazali in accordance with this reading should be viewed as a representative of the *human* mystery of knowledge in its turn from the natural attitude of the mind to the philosophical.

The way out of doubt

Both Descartes and Al-Ghazali realized that they must not fall into the trap of scepticism. In this section, we explore how both philosophers reached an end concerning their doubts. Descartes' move towards his 'first piece of truth,' or *cogito ergo sum* (when I doubt, undoubtedly, there is no doubt that I doubt) is evident. The *cogito* is a clear and distinct idea that comes to the mind from the mind itself (i.e., from within). Therefore, he can claim that he has an indubitable knowledge of his thoughts. The words 'thought' and 'soul' are defined as "everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it. Hence, thinking is to be defined here not merely with understanding, willing and imagining, but also with sensory experience" (Descartes, vol. 1 195).

Descartes subsequently makes his second famous metaphysical move: he tries to get out of the *cogito* understood as self-awareness by his idea

of God as manifested in the *cogito*. First, God is a perfect innate idea, the source of which is *not* the ego for it lacks such perfection. *God* himself must be the source of this idea and must exist independently of the knowing subject since he is perfect, and existence is counted among perfections. Second, since God is perfect, he cannot be a deceiver, and if one has a strong inclination to consider the surrounding world as existing, then it *is* and God is the grantor of this certainty. At this stage, Descartes reveals his own goals by claiming that, since the existence of the world is real, we can construct a science and knowledge of that world, provided we begin from clear and distinct ideas and, henceforth, deduce from these ideas their application, which enables us to be the masters of nature.[8]

As previously mentioned, removing doubt in the case of Al-Ghazali was not possible by virtue of proof, since any proof is a combination of thoughts already destroyed due to his destructive version of doubt arguments. Accordingly, the idea of a *proof* itself is inadmissible. Al-Ghazali's way out of doubt, contrary to Descartes,' was found in the '*effect of godly light*':

> This malady was mysterious and it lasted for nearly two months. During that time I was sceptic in fact, but not in utterance or doctrine. At length God Most High cured me of that sickness. My soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But this was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge. (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 66)

A traditional reading of Al-Ghazali reminds us that he was in fact a Sufi toward the end of his life and, according to this reading, *Al-Munqith* must be read as a document that refuted different sciences in their ways to the truth, except for sophism. As such, Mohammad Jawad Moghniya argues that "the aim of Al-Ghazali through his fruitional experience and the divine light is to show the testimony of the kind heart to what it sees and feels; that what it sees and feels is truth" (261). Al-Najjar agrees on this traditional reading as well:

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[8] We are reminded here of the tree of philosophy, as well as part four of the *Discourse on the Method*.

> Thus, Al-Ghazali claimed in the end that his fruitional experience or inspiration is the most important source of knowledge after divine revelation. It is a god given gift to the heart of the Sufi, if he [the Sufi] is ready to receive such a great inspiration. Such knowledge, which is based in the heart, is accompanied by an internal feeling of certainty; and the light of certainty is to be found in the believers and those who are knowledgeable. When such light overwhelms the heart everything becomes clear and transparent. (Al-Najjar 109)

The meaning of Al-Ghazali's use of the term 'divine light' is the most difficult to approach or explain, essentially because explaining is a way of interpreting something that is given to our consciousness through its different acts and expressed in ordinary *thingly language*. Now we can, to some extent, understand why Al-Ghazali justified his claim negatively: that he regained his health after this sickness by *neither* a proof nor an argument, since this light is neither an object of senses nor intellect. Therefore, such light was difficult to be explained or, more appropriately, impossible to be communicated, simply because, if we want to explain it, we must do so through a language that is not 'designed' to express this realm, the realm of *meta-things.* The divine light, by its very definition, transcends the natural attitude of the mind.

The truth of the Sufi is not the truth that can be affirmed or denied by proof or argument. One cannot criticize such truth from the viewpoint Sufis admittedly undermine, namely, theoretical reasoning. Truth, according to them, is knowledge that comes through *practice*, that is, fruitional experience. Similarly, their truth cannot be studied but only exercised. Although Al-Ghazali cannot explain or communicate his gift of the 'divine light,' it is obvious that this divine light has a function in his work and his overall thinking. We must remind ourselves that Al-Ghazali believed in the limitations of philosophy (metaphysics in particular) given the differences in the opinions of philosophers regarding truth and certainty in addition to the human reason's inherent inability to provide a comprehensive understanding a sphere that transcends this natural world. Hence, as we shall discuss later in this section, he opened the door to another faculty that might play some role in attaining truth.

What I have argued is that Descartes and Al-Ghazali are different in their departures from doubt. Descartes found the way out of doubt through his *cogito*, while Al-Ghazali found it in the godly light that was

put in his chest. I believe that arriving at such a traditional conclusion is insufficient and does not do justice to the depth of Al-Ghazali's thought.

I argue that Al-Ghazali *presupposes* the soul as an indubitable fact of consciousness to which doubt cannot extend. I believe that his doubt arguments did in fact undermine all foundations of knowledge save that which is given immediately, namely, reason or soul. In this latter sense, the Cartesian *cogito* offers a picture that can hardly be distinguished from that of Al-Ghazali.

One might remember the Cartesian assertion that the *cogito* was not a result of syllogism, but an *immediate intuition*. This was clear from Descartes' reply to Pierre Gassendi, but more importantly from his reply to Father Mersenne, who criticized him by claiming:

> From the fact that we are thinking it does not seem to be entirely certain that we exist. For in order to be certain that you are thinking you must know what thought or thinking is, and what your existence is; but since you do not yet know what these things are, how can you know that you are thinking or that you exist? Thus, neither when you say "I am thinking" nor when you add "therefore, I exist" do you really know what you are saying. (Descartes, vol. 2 278; emphasis added)

This was a harsh criticism of Descartes. Father Mersenne seems to be saying that, if Descartes is really committed to his method of doubt, then why did he doubt not the concept of existence altogether, thought, or even the method itself.

When Descartes was confronted with this objection, his reply was:

> It is true that no one can be certain that he is thinking or that he exists unless he knows what thought is and what existence is. But this does not require reflective knowledge or the kind of knowledge that is acquired by means of demonstrations; still less does it require knowledge of reflective knowledge … it is quite sufficient that we should know it by that *internal awareness* which always precedes reflective knowledge. This inner awareness of one's thought and existence is so innate in all men that, although we may pretend that we do not have it if we are overwhelmed by preconceived opinions and pay more attention to words

than to their meanings, we cannot in fact fail to have it.
(Descartes, vol. 2 285; emphasis added)

Father Mersenne's objections are far stronger than Descartes' replies, which seem to appeal, wrongly, to common sense, as if he assumes that this inner awareness is clear to all people —a position that begs the question really. However, one must note that the difficulty arising in the Cartesian context is partly due to the destructive doubt arguments he used prior to his arrival to the *cogito*. This Cartesian picture of the nature of thought being discovered solely through an internal awareness —an internal awareness that will later become the seat of knowing God— is similar to that of Al-Ghazali. In the following, I explain these two points of Al-Ghazali in details: the immanence of the soul and it being the principle of knowing God.

A comprehensive theory of the soul in Al-Ghazali's writings is found in some of his other works but, since my aim is to study *Al-Munqith* primarily, I will confine myself to its account. In the most difficult and controversial passage in *Al-Munqith*, Al-Ghazali says:

> The aim of this account is to emphasize that one should be most diligent in seeking the truth until he finally comes to seeking the unseekable. For primary truths are unseekable, because they are present in the mind; and when what is present is sought, it is lost and hides itself. But one who seeks the unseekable cannot subsequently be accused of negligence in seeking what is seekable. (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 67)[9]

To properly understand this text, we must realize that the reference in this passage is being made to *primary truths* —as opposed to minor truths given by the natural attitude of the mind— such as the soul or God, but with an emphasis on the former as the seat of knowing the latter. Now, Al-Ghazali urges all people to do their best to reach the truth, meaning that people should go through the entire process of doubt to arrive at a distinction between what is relative in this contingent world and what is absolute in us. It is only when one suspends judgement, performs a

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[9] This passage was claimed to be 'odd' by some editors of the Arabic manuscript of *Al-Munqith* but it does exist in all manuscripts. The translation of J. McCarthy, which is being used in this paper, I believe, is the closest to the Arabic manuscript. In a footnote to his translation, J. McCarthy asserts that this passage "may sound a little odd at first, but I think the meaning is quite clear." (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 90).

phenomenological *epochè*, and puts the entire natural world between brackets through doubting, that one comes to realize that one stands on solid ground —the grounds of the unseekable, which can be discovered neither by senses nor the intellect in the natural mode of existence. Things unseekable by the intellect and senses are distinguished by their very nature from those perceived by these two faculties. Indeed, they are unseekable because they are in the sphere of immanence. Now, what is immanent can be attained neither by senses nor the intellect because, thanks to the doubt arguments, they are open to doubt. The 'stuff' of the sphere of immanence is different by its very nature from things out there in the world. If it happened that we approached this sphere of immanence as a thingly sphere, we are apt to be misled, for the sphere of immanence requires a specific method of approaching, an intuition. Al-Ghazali's paragraph above carries a paradox within it: the soul is present, but although present, it tends to hide itself and become lost if it is to be approached as an ordinary thing in the natural attitude of the mind. This idea may be clarified by the metaphor of the sun: we see the sun, we are certain that it is there, it is present, but its very nature hides it from our eyes, namely, its strong shining light. Light, by virtue of which everything is known, is the very reason its nature is hidden. Similarly, the soul is present but hides itself when we look at it as an object of senses.

From the above quote, Al-Ghazali seems to believe the soul is present and is not seekable in the manner of seeking any other object: its mode of givenness is the reason it is distinguished from objects of the outer doubtful world. Indeed, the reading of the dialogue between senses and reason or the judges of senses and reason, as provided by Al-Ghazali, and the refutation of each of them to the other clearly indicate that the soul was not an object to be doubted at all. Instead, this given soul is the source from which all other forms of knowledge are judged and ordered. The overall picture looks as though the soul was standing amid this debate, longing for the truth, which cannot be seated save in the soul itself. Now, if the soul is present and is something that cannot be doubted given its own givenness in the sphere of immanence, how can we account, then, for the idea of God? According to Al-Ghazali, our knowledge of God is based on the soul. He further tells us that it became clear to him "that man is formed of a body and a heart-and by the 'heart' I mean the essence of man's spirit which is the *seat of the knowledge of God*, not the flesh which man has in common with corpse and beast" (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 101; emphasis added).

Hitherto, Al-Ghazali's account is similar to that of Descartes: Descartes began by doubting everything that can be doubted, arriving later at the immediate presence of the *cogito* as an indubitable proposition. Then, from this presence of the soul, he deduced the existence of God. Similarly, Al-Ghazali believed in the immediate *givenness* of his soul and that it is the "seat of the knowledge of God." However, there is a *difference* in the role of the self in both philosophers. According to Descartes, knowledge of the self can be justified even after doubting the self, while Al-Ghazali considers that the self, once open to doubt, can never become a reliable source of attaining true knowledge.

Albertini agrees that this is an important difference between Descartes and Al-Ghazali: the "difference has to do with Al-Ghazali never doubting his own self, in the sense of questioning his very existence in the way Descartes did in his *Meditations*" (Albertini 7). To Albertini, it is precisely this experience of 'self-doubting' that becomes "the necessary preparatory stage leading to the eventual defeat of skepticism" (7) and so the birth of the *cogito*. Albertini then turns to compare the Cartesian doubt experience to that of Descartes stating that "These lines [of doubting one's self] could never have been written by al-Ghazali" (7). The major difference between these two great minds lies in the fact that, after their sceptical journeys, Descartes was open to the idea of doubting one's self, which made him face endless difficulties as we saw earlier, while the self was never open to doubt in the case of Al-Ghazali thus escaping, indirectly, these difficulties altogether.

In addition to Descartes' difficulty with his contemporaries discussed above, such as those raised by Father Mersenne and Gassendi, there is the other difficulty that later came to be known as the 'Cartesian Circle,' an allegedly circular reasoning in which Descartes "deduces the existence of God from clear and distinct perceptions and then deduces the reliability of our clear and distinct perceptions from the existence of God" (Rose 80). This is in fact the critique that was directed to Descartes immediately after the publication of his *Meditations*.[10]

The third difficulty was put forward by the German philosopher Husserl: although Descartes came to be known as the founder of the sphere of immanence, of consciousness, he was at the same time the one to escape

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[10] An excellent survey of this charge in the literature can be found in Willis Doney.

from it. In Husserl's words: "In a certain sense, the historical significance of the Cartesian meditation no doubt lies in the discovery of this kind of evidence. But for Descartes, to discover and to abandon were the same" (66). Husserl points to Descartes' search for clear and distinct ideas, which he first found in the sphere of evidence or consciousness, but abandoned later when he attempted to find the proper guarantee for such ideas. Here, Descartes, according to Husserl, was ready for his departure from philosophy to transform the nature of his undertaking into a theological one.

The question of whether Al-Ghazali was able to foresee these difficulties if he chose the course of doubting one's self as Descartes did is a question for which I do not have an answer. One thing I know for sure: when Al-Ghazali opened the door for another human faculty, the heart or the purity of heart, a faculty to which doubt cannot extend, he was able to escape these difficulties. It is a bit curious that Albertini does not in fact push her analysis deeper to consider the implications of Al-Ghazali's indirect choice for not doubting the self. I believe that failing to do so will minimize our chances for understanding Al-Ghazali's tragic experience properly in addition to his account of the self as an active source of knowledge in a unique sense. To be precise, the doubt arguments advanced by both Al-Ghazali and Descartes were so destructive to the extent that they do not leave room for having any trust in the self as the grounds from which certainty could be reached. Our textual analysis above of both: 1. the so called 'odd' passage, where he states clearly that primary truths that appear in the sphere of immanence such as the soul are not 'seekable' simply because of their evident presence, and 2. the famous dialogue between the faculties of reason and senses, or the judges of reason and senses, both indicate clearly that the soul was not an object to be doubted at all for Al-Ghazali.

The only problem for Al-Ghazali here is that he himself cannot provide us with any positive description of this heart-experience without the danger of being misunderstood. At this juncture, he advances a poetry line:

> There was what was of what I do not mention
> So think well of it, and ask for no account! (Al-Ghazali,
> *Deliverance* 57)

The problem with the Sufi fruitional experience is that it is so individualistic and cannot represent the grounds on which science could be erected. However, it is important to note that Al-Ghazali's form of Sufism is a unique one, since it criticizes and reforms the nature of the Sufi experience itself:

The state of drunkenness which is similar to that of the Sufi can easily lead to individualistic immature states, and so it is the habit of the Sufi to tell his own states alone —from hence it is immature. When the Sufi is led to irrationality during his state of ecstasy, it is his duty to return to the judge of reason … Al-Ghazali believes that God does not uncover any truth to the Sufi except that which the Sufi's reason can understand and recognize. (Alfalahi 163)

According to this excellent reading of Al-Ghazali, one could say, with Abdullah Alfalahi, that the laws of reason and the fundamental principles of logic have an *a priori* nature that precedes any mystical gifts. This is why Al-Ghazali advises anyone who is willing to take the course of Sufism to be knowledgeable: "He who learns the traditions, the scriptures and science then pursues Sufism will succeed, but he who pursues Sufism before such learning endangers himself" (Al-Ghazali, *Revival* 99). To the same effect, and in a text that seems so remote from his classical philosophical works, his work on jurisprudence, Al-Ghazali reiterates his belief in the priority of reason using the exact word that he used in the *Deliverance from Error*: "The judge of reason, the ruler which has been *neither deposed nor changed*, and the evidence of the *Shari'a*, which is credible and just, have spoken (emphasis added)" (Al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfa* 2). The proofs that Al-Ghazali does put the "judge of reason" above and before the scriptures, the traditions or any mystical gifts are many. In the opening of his book *Moderation in Belief* (*Al-Iqtisad Fi Al-I'tiqad*), he tells us:

> How could right guidance be attained by one who is content with conforming to a tradition and a testimony and rejects the methods of investigation and theorization? Does he not know that there is no basis for the divine teaching other than the statements of the master of mankind, and that his truthfulness in what he relates is established by a demonstration of the intellect? … the one who forsakes the intellect, relying only on the light of the Qur'an, is like the one who dwells in the sunlight with his eyelids shut, so that there is no difference between him and the blind. (Al-Ghazali, *Moderation* 3-4)

Al-Ghazali's Sufi experience was never illogical or contradictory to the laws of reason. It is true that almost all Sufis admit the limitations of reason and its inherent inability to reach the truth, but Al-Ghazali seems to be opening the door to an unfamiliar form of rationality —a rationality, similar to that of Kant, that admits the limitations of the mind itself. His rationality is established on the basic laws of reason, but at the same time realizes its own limitations, and thus it paves the way to the neighbouring fruitional experience that begins with establishing doubt, confusion, and uncertainty as a legitimate method to truth and *meaning*.

When Al-Ghazali opened the door for another human faculty, that of the heart and fruitional experience, he was unconcerned with sound arguments to prove the existence of the soul or God, or whether there is a *cogito* or not; simply, he was concerned with the importance of a *genuine* experience: "How great the difference there is between your *knowing* the definitions and causes and conditions of health and satiety and your *being* healthy and sated" (Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance* 90).[11] Al-Ghazali was convinced until the end of his life that the Sufis are masters of practicing truth and, above all, he believed that they are the ones who deserve it.

Conclusion

This paper aimed partly to show an astonishing similarity in their sceptical experiences and an unpredictable difference in their departure from it. I argued for an alternative reading of Al-Ghazali that would respect the high value he ascribed to reason throughout his entire corpus. On one hand, I argued that textual scrutiny does not really support this traditional reading of the philosopher. On the other, I posited that Al-Ghazali was probably aware of the limitations of reason and the difficulties related to doubting one's self and so he found himself compelled to look for another faculty that might help him reach his truth. The reading presented here suggests that Al-Ghazali's form of Sufism is a unique one that values the laws of logic and reason, while also conditioning all divine revelations and rejecting them if they do not conform to such conditions.

So far, I have attempted to distance Al-Ghazali from a traditional reading that rendered his view of the self-overwhelmed by sophism and religious dogmas, neglecting a major role that is played by reason.

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[11] The emphasis was added in McCarthy's translation, and is nowhere to be found in the Arabic manuscript.

However, and as a suggestion for future investigation, I believe that there is ample evidence that might render the position of Descartes closer to that of Al-Ghazali: let us remember that the truth of the *cogito* was known to him through *natural light*, and that its relation to God is still an ongoing debate. Is it true then to conclude that their difference in their departure from doubt is actually not that different? Isn't the self, which is the foundation of all knowledge, discoverable by this natural light that makes sense only when the concept of God is posited? These suggestions, I believe, could bridge the gap between two traditional concepts: 'god of philosophers' and 'god of religion.'

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