Deliverance from Error

AL-GHAZALI

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المنقذ من الضلال

Translated from the Arabic with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) was the most celebrated scholar of his age, professor at the Nizamiyya college in Baghdad, when in 1095 he suffered a crisis, gave up his post and his fortune, and left the city to live for years as a wandering Sufi. Near the end of his life, after he had returned to teaching at Nishapur, he wrote *Deliverance from Error* in answer to a friend who asked how he had found his way through the conflicting sects of his time.

The book tells the story of a mind. Al-Ghazali describes a thirst to know things as they really are, a bout of radical doubt—about the senses, then about reason itself—cured not by argument but by a light God cast into his heart, and a survey of the four groups who claimed the truth: the theologians, the philosophers, the Batinis who followed an infallible imam, and the Sufis. Theology could not cure his doubt; philosophy he studied on his own and found sound in logic and mathematics but fatally wrong in metaphysics; the Batinis had nothing to teach. The Sufi way, he found, is a matter not of learning but of experience—"tasting"—and it opened his eyes to the nature of prophecy.

It has often been compared with Augustine's *Confessions* and with Descartes's *Meditations*, and it remains one of the most personal works of medieval philosophy.

Introduction

Al-Ghazali explains why he writes: the sects are a deep sea in which most drown; his lifelong thirst to know things as they really are, and what certain knowledge is.

1.1 In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

1.2 Praise be to God, with whose praise every letter and every discourse begins. Blessings be on Muhammad the Chosen, bearer of prophecy and of the message, and on his family and his Companions, who guide others out of error.

1.3 Now then: you have asked me, my brother in religion, to set out for you the aim and the secrets of the sciences, and the pitfalls and the depths of the doctrines. You want me to tell you what I suffered in extracting the truth from the turmoil of the sects, with their divergent roads and paths. You want to know how I dared to rise from the lowland of *taqlīd* to the high ground of inquiry. You want to know what I gained, first, from *kalām*; what I found distasteful, second, in the ways of the party of *taʿlīm*, who make the grasp of truth depend on following the imam; what I came, third, to despise in the ways of philosophizing; and what I came at last to approve in the way of Sufism. You ask, too, what core of truth became clear to me as I searched through people's opinions, what turned me away from spreading knowledge in Baghdad, though my students were many, and what drew me back to it in Nishapur after a long interval. Once I was sure your desire was sincere, I hastened to answer your request. So I say, seeking God's help, trusting in Him, relying on

Him and taking refuge in Him:[1] Know—may God Most High guide you well and make you pliant to the truth—that people differ in religions and creeds, and then the leading authorities differ over doctrines. With the great number of sects and the divergence of their ways, this is a deep sea in which most have drowned and only a few have come through safe. Every party claims it is the one that is saved, and "each faction rejoices in what it has." This is what the lord of the messengers (God's blessings on him) foretold to us. He is the truthful one whose word is always true, and he said: "My community will split into seventy-three sects, of which one will be saved." What he foretold has come to pass.[2]

1.4 In the prime of my youth and the bloom of my life, ever since I neared puberty, before I was twenty, and until now, when I am past fifty, I have never stopped plunging into the swell of this deep sea. I have waded through its flood as the bold wade, not as the timid and wary. I have pushed into every darkness, charged at every difficulty and thrown myself into every quagmire. I have examined the creed of every sect and sought to uncover the secrets of every faction's doctrine. My aim was to tell the one in the right from the one in the wrong, the follower of the Prophet's way from the innovator. I have left no Batini without wishing to learn his esotericism, and no Zahiri without wanting to know what his literalism amounts to. I have left no philosopher without seeking to grasp the essence of his philosophy, and no theologian without striving to learn the aim of his theology and his disputation. I have left no Sufi without being eager to find the secret of his Sufism, and no devotee without watching for what his devotion comes to. And I have left no free-

1 *Taqlīd*: accepting beliefs on authority, uncritical conformity. *Kalām*: dialectical theology, whose practitioners are "the theologians". The party of *taʿlīm* ("authoritative teaching") are the Batinis ("esotericists"), the Ismaʿili movement that followed a hidden, infallible imam.

2 Quran 30:32 (also 23:53).

thinking heretic who denies God without spying behind him to discover the causes of his boldness in his denial and his heresy.[3]

1.5 From the very beginning, in the bloom of my life, a thirst to grasp the true nature of things was my habit and my custom. It was an instinct and a natural disposition placed by God in my make-up, not something I chose or contrived. So it was that the bonds of *taqlīd* came loose from me and my inherited beliefs broke apart while I was still barely past boyhood. For I saw that Christian children grow up only as Christians, Jewish children grow up only as Jews, and Muslim children grow up only as Muslims. And I heard the hadith related from the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), in which he said: "Every child is born with the innate disposition; then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian."[4]

WHAT CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE IS

He defines certain knowledge as knowledge that leaves no room for doubt, even before a miracle.

1.6 So my inner self was stirred to seek the true nature of that original innate disposition, and the true nature of the beliefs that are acquired by following parents and teachers. I wanted to distinguish among these borrowed beliefs, which begin as things instilled in us and about which people disagree when they try to tell truth from falsehood. I said to myself first: What I seek is knowledge of the true nature of things, so I must first find out what knowledge truly is. It became clear to me that certain knowledge is that in which the thing known is laid bare with no room for doubt. No possibility of error or illusion goes with it, and the heart has no room even to suppose such a thing. Rather, safety from error must be joined to certainty so closely that if someone who could turn stone into gold and a staff into a ser-

3 The Zahiris ("literalists") held to the apparent sense of the texts; al-Ghazali pairs them with the Batinis, who looked for a hidden inner sense.

4 The Magians are the Zoroastrians. The innate disposition (*fiṭra*) is the natural constitution with which God creates every human being.

pent were to challenge it and try to show it false, that would produce neither doubt nor denial. For once I know that ten is more than three, suppose someone said to me, "No, three is more than ten, and the proof is that I will turn this staff into a serpent," and he turned it, and I saw him do it. I would not doubt what I know on that account. All it would produce in me is wonder at how he was able to do it! But doubt what I know? No.

1.7 Then I knew that whatever I do not know in this way, and am not certain of with this kind of certainty, is knowledge that cannot be trusted and offers no safety. And any knowledge that offers no safety is not certain knowledge.

The Ways into Skepticism

مداخل السفسطة وجحد العلوم

Doubting the senses and then reason itself, the argument from dreams, and the two months of skepticism ended by a light God cast into the heart.

2.1 Then I searched through what I knew and found myself devoid of any knowledge answering to this description, except for sense data and necessary truths. So I said: Now that despair has set in, the only hope of shedding light on difficult questions lies in what is clear, that is, in sense data and necessary truths. I must first make these secure. Then I will be certain whether my trust in what the senses give and my safety from error in necessary truths are of the same kind as the safety I used to feel in what I had taken on authority, and the safety most people feel in the conclusions of reflection. Or is this a verified safety, with no treachery or pitfall in it? So I set to work with great earnestness, examining sense data and necessary truths to see whether I could make myself doubt them. After a long effort at doubting, I reached the point where my soul would no longer grant safety even to sense data. It began to open itself to doubt about them, saying: Where does trust in sense data come from? The strongest of the senses is sight. It looks at a shadow and sees it standing still, not moving, and judges that there is no motion. Then, by experience and observation, an hour later, it learns that the shadow has moved. It has not moved all at once, suddenly, but gradually, particle by particle, so that it was never at rest. It looks at a star and sees it small, the size of a dinar; then geometrical proofs show that it is larger than the earth. In these and

similar cases of sense perception, the judge of the senses passes its judgments, and the judge of reason proves it false and convicts it of betrayal, so that it has no way to defend itself.[1]

2.2 So I said: Trust in sense data has collapsed as well. Perhaps, then, the only trustworthy truths are the truths of reason that are first principles. Examples are our saying that ten is more than three, that affirmation and denial cannot both hold of one and the same thing, and that one and the same thing cannot be both originated and eternal, existent and non-existent, necessary and impossible. But the sense data said: How can you be sure that your trust in rational truths is not like your trust in sense data? You used to trust me. Then the judge of reason came and proved me false, and but for the judge of reason you would have gone on believing me. So perhaps beyond the perception of reason there is another judge. If he appeared, he would prove reason false in its judgment, just as the judge of reason appeared and proved the senses false in theirs. That such a perception has not appeared does not show that it is impossible. My soul hesitated a little over how to answer this. Then the difficulty was reinforced by the case of sleep, and it said: Do you not see that in sleep you believe things and imagine situations, and take them to be firm and settled, and while in that state you have no doubt about them? Then you wake up and know that none of what you imagined and believed had any basis or substance. So how can you be sure that everything you believe while awake, by the senses or by reason, is not true only relative to the state you are in now? A state could come upon you whose relation to your waking would be like the relation of your waking to your sleep, and your waking would be sleep compared with it! When that state arrived, you would be certain that everything you had imagined with your reason was fancy without substance. Perhaps that state is the one the Sufis claim as theirs. For they claim that in their states, when they dive deep into themselves and are absent from their senses, they see things that do not accord with

1 A dinar was a small gold coin. Reason renders *ʿaql*, the intellect, the faculty by which rational truths are known.

these rational truths.[2] Or perhaps that state is death. For the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) said: "People are asleep; when they die, they wake." Perhaps the life of this world is sleep compared with the hereafter. When someone dies, things will appear to him otherwise than he sees them now, and at that moment he will be told: "We have removed your covering from you, and today your sight is keen."[3]

TWO MONTHS OF SKEPTICISM

No proof could cure his doubt; a light God cast into his breast restored trust in reason.

2.3 When these thoughts came to me and struck sparks in my soul, I looked for a cure, but none came easily. For they could be driven off only by a proof, and a proof can be set up only by combining first principles. If these are not granted, no proof can be constructed. The illness grew stubborn and lasted nearly two months. During that time I held the doctrine of sophistry in my actual state, though not in what I said or professed. At last God Most High cured me of that illness, and my soul returned to health and balance. The necessary truths of reason became acceptable again, and I trusted them with safety and certainty. This did not come about by arranging a proof or ordering an argument. It came by a light that God Most High cast into my breast, and that light is the key to most kinds of knowledge. Whoever supposes that unveiling depends on carefully formulated proofs has narrowed the vast mercy of God Most High. The Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) was asked about the "opening" and its meaning in the words of God Most High, "Whomever God wills to guide, He opens his breast to Islam."[4]

2.4 He said: "It is a light that God Most High casts into the heart." He was asked: "And what is its sign?" He said: "Withdraw-

2 The Sufis are the Muslim mystics. Their "states" (*aḥwāl*) are passing spiritual conditions granted in the course of the mystical path.
3 Quran 50:22.

ing from the abode of delusion and turning to the abode of eternity." It is of this light that he (God bless him and grant him peace) said: "God Most High created creatures in darkness, then sprinkled on them some of His light."

2.5 It is from that light that unveiling must be sought. That light gushes forth from the divine generosity at certain times, and one must watch for it. As he (God bless him and grant him peace) said: "In the days of your time your Lord sends breaths of grace, so put yourselves in their way."

2.6 The point of these accounts is that one should put the utmost earnestness into the search, until one ends up seeking what is not to be sought. For first principles are not sought: they are present, and what is present, if sought, is lost and hidden. Whoever seeks what is not to be sought cannot be accused of falling short in seeking what is to be sought.

4 Sophistry (*safsaṭa*) here means radical skepticism, the denial that anything can be known. Quran 6:125.

The Classes of Seekers

القول في أصناف الطالبين

The theologians, the Batinis, the philosophers and the Sufis: the truth must lie with one of them.

3.1 When God cured me of this illness, by His grace and the breadth of His generosity, I found that the kinds of seekers came down to four groups: 1. The theologians, who claim to be the people of judgment and reflection. 2. The Batinis, who claim to be the party of *taʿlīm* and to have the special privilege of drawing knowledge from the infallible imam. 3. The philosophers, who claim to be the people of logic and demonstration (*burhān*). 4. The Sufis, who claim to be the elite of the divine presence and the people of direct vision and unveiling.[1]

3.2 I said to myself: The truth does not lie outside these four kinds. These are the ones who travel the paths of seeking the truth. If the truth has escaped them, no hope of grasping it remains. For there is no hope of going back to *taqlīd* once one has left it, since it is a condition of someone who follows authority that he does not know he is doing so. Once he knows it, the glass of his *taqlīd* is shattered. It is a break that cannot be mended, a crack that cannot be joined by patching and piecing, unless the glass is melted in the fire and fashioned anew.

3.3 So I hastened to travel these paths and to examine thoroughly what these groups had to offer. I began with *kalām*,

1 The philosophers practice *falsafa*, philosophy in the Greek tradition (Aristotle and his Arabic followers). *Burhān*, demonstration, is proof from certain premises (Aristotle's apodeixis).

turned second to the way of philosophy, third to the teaching of the Batinis, and fourth to the way of the Sufis.

Theology: Its Aim and Its Results

علم الكلام: مقصوده وحاصله

Theology defends orthodox belief against innovators but, arguing from its opponents' premises, could not cure his doubt.

4.1 I began, then, with *kalām*. I mastered it and understood it, studied the books of its most rigorous practitioners, and wrote in it what I wished to write. I found it a science that achieved its own aim but not mine. Its aim is only to preserve the creed of the people of the Sunna for the people of the Sunna and to guard it against the confusion sown by the innovators. For God Most High sent down to His servants, through the tongue of His Messenger, a creed that is the truth. It contains what is good for them in their religion and their worldly life, as the Quran and the hadith make known. Then Satan cast into the whisperings of the innovators things contrary to the Sunna. They harped on these things and all but threw the true creed into confusion for those who held it. So God Most High brought into being the party of the theologians and moved them to defend the Sunna with ordered argument. This argument exposes the deceptions of the innovators and their novelties, which run contrary to the transmitted Sunna. That is how *kalām* and its practitioners arose.[1] Some of them did carry out what God Most High had called them to do. They defended the Sunna well, fought for the creed received with acceptance from prophecy, and resisted the innovations that had been introduced. But in doing so they

1 The people of the Sunna are the Sunni Muslims, who hold to the Prophet's practice (sunna) and the community's consensus.

relied on premises they took over from their opponents, which they were compelled to grant by *taqlīd*, by the consensus of the community, or by simple acceptance from the Quran and the hadith. Most of their effort went into drawing out their opponents' contradictions and holding them to the consequences of what they had granted. This is of little use to someone who grants nothing at all except necessary truths. So *kalām* was not sufficient in my case, and it did not cure the illness I suffered from. True, once the craft of *kalām* had arisen, its practice had spread and a long time had passed, the theologians came to long for a way of defending the Sunna by investigating the true nature of things. They plunged into the study of substances and accidents and their properties.[2] But since that was not the aim of their science, their discussion of it did not reach its furthest limit. It yielded nothing that would wholly dispel the darkness of bewilderment over people's disagreements. I do not rule out that it did this for someone else. In fact I do not doubt that it did so for some, but in a way mixed with *taqlīd* on certain matters that are not first principles!

4.2 My purpose now is to tell of my own state, not to reproach those who sought a cure in *kalām*. For remedies differ as illnesses differ. How many a remedy benefits one patient and harms another!

2 Substances are things that exist in their own right; accidents, such as color or motion, exist only in substances.

Philosophy

الفلسفة

The three kinds of philosophers; their six sciences—mathematics, logic, physics, metaphysics, politics and ethics—and the two dangers they bring.

5.1 · What it amounts to. · What in it is blameworthy and what is not. · For what views its proponent is to be declared an unbeliever, and for what not. · What in it is innovation and what is not. · An account of what the philosophers stole from the words of the people of truth. · An account of what they mixed with the words of the people of truth, so as to pass off their falsehood along with it. · How it happens that people refuse that truth mixed with falsehood and souls recoil from it. · How pure truth is to be extracted from the counterfeit and base coin in everything they say.[1]

5.2 After finishing with *kalām*, I began on philosophy. I knew for certain that no one can recognize what is unsound in any science unless he grasps that science to its furthest reach. He must equal the most learned of its practitioners in its foundations, then go beyond him and surpass his rank, so that he discovers depths and pitfalls that the master of the science himself has not discovered. Only then can what he claims about its unsoundness be true. And I had seen no one among the scholars of Islam devote his care and his energy to that.

5.3 The books of the theologians, where they busied themselves with refuting the philosophers, contained nothing of the

1 These headings outline the section on philosophy that follows.

philosophers' own words except obscure, scattered phrases, plainly contradictory and unsound. These would not be expected to deceive an ordinary person of sound mind, let alone someone who lays claim to the subtleties of the sciences. So I knew that refuting a doctrine before understanding it and grasping its essence is shooting in the dark. I rolled up my sleeves and set about acquiring that science from books, by reading alone, without the help of a teacher. I applied myself to it in the hours left free from writing and teaching in the religious sciences. All the while I was burdened with teaching and instructing three hundred students in Baghdad.

5.4 Through reading alone, in these stolen hours, God Most High (glory be to Him) let me reach the furthest limit of their sciences in less than two years. Then, once I had understood it, I kept on reflecting on it for nearly a year. I went back over it again and again, probing its pitfalls and its depths. In the end I came to know, beyond any doubt, the deception and the confusion, the truth and the illusion in it.

5.5 Hear now my account of them and of what their sciences amount to. I found them to be of several kinds, and their sciences to fall into several divisions. For all their many kinds, the stain of unbelief and godlessness clings to them. Yet between the ancient and the most ancient of them, and between the later and the earliest, there is a great difference in how far they stand from the truth or how near they come to it.

THE THREE KINDS OF PHILOSOPHERS

Materialists, naturalists and theists, and why all of them must be declared unbelievers.

5.6 Know that, for all their many sects and different doctrines, they fall into three divisions: the materialists, the naturalists and the theists.

5.7 The first kind: the materialists. They are a party of the most ancient philosophers who denied the Maker who governs the world, the Knowing, the Powerful. They claimed that the world

has always existed as it is, of itself, without a maker. Animals have always come from sperm and sperm from animals; so it was, and so it will be forever. These are the heretics.[2]

5.8 The second kind: the naturalists. They are people who devoted much study to the world of nature and to the wonders of animals and plants, and went deeply into the anatomy of animals' organs. In them they saw such wonders of God Most High's handiwork and such marvels of His wisdom that they were compelled to acknowledge a wise Creator who knows the ends and purposes of things. No one studies anatomy and the wonderful uses of the organs without gaining this necessary knowledge of the perfect design of the builder who built the animal frame, above all the human frame. But because of their many studies of nature, these people found that the balance of the temperament had a great effect in sustaining the powers of animals. So they supposed that the rational power in man also depends on his temperament, and that it ceases when his temperament ceases and passes out of existence. Then, once it no longer exists, it is inconceivable, as they claimed, that what no longer exists should be brought back.[3] So they held that the soul dies and does not return. They denied the hereafter and rejected paradise and hell, the gathering and the resurrection, the Rising and the reckoning. For them no reward remained for obedience and no punishment for disobedience. So the bridle came off them, and they sank into their appetites as cattle do.

5.9 These too are heretics, because the root of faith is faith in God and the Last Day. These people denied the Last Day, even though they believed in God and His attributes.

5.10 The third kind: the theists. They are the later philosophers, such as Socrates, who was the teacher of Plato, and Plato, who was the teacher of Aristotle. It was Aristotle who ordered logic for them and refined the sciences for them. He set out precisely

2 The materialists (*dahriyyūn*, "the Dahris", from *dahr*, "time") hold the world to be eternal and deny a maker. "Heretics" renders *zanādiqa*, a polemical term for free-thinkers who reject revealed religion.

3 Temperament (*mizāj*): in ancient medicine, the mixture of the bodily humors, whose balance was thought to govern health.

what had not been set out precisely before and brought to maturity what had been raw in their sciences. All of them together refuted the first two kinds, the materialists and the naturalists. In exposing their disgraceful views they said enough to spare others the trouble: "God spared the believers the fighting," through their fighting among themselves. Then Aristotle refuted Plato and Socrates and the theists who came before them, and his refutation was so unsparing that he disowned them all. Yet he too kept remnants of their vile unbelief and innovation, which he did not manage to shake off. So they must be declared unbelievers, and so must their followers among the Muslim philosophers, such as Avicenna, al-Farabi and others. That said, none of the Muslim philosophers took on the transmission of Aristotle's science as these two men did.[4] What others transmitted is not free of muddle and confusion, which so disturbs the reader's heart that he cannot understand it. And how can what is not understood be refuted or accepted? The sum of what we have found to be reliably Aristotle's philosophy, as transmitted by these two men, falls into three divisions: 1. A division for which one must be declared an unbeliever. 2. A division for which one must be declared an innovator. 3. A division that need not be rejected at all. Let us set this out in detail.

THE SIX SCIENCES OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

Mathematics, logic, physics, metaphysics, politics and ethics, taken one by one, with the danger each brings.

5.11 Know that their sciences, with respect to the purpose we are pursuing, fall into six divisions: mathematics, logic, physics, metaphysics, politics and ethics.

5.12 1. Mathematics deals with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, the science of the configuration of the world. None of it touches on religious matters, either to deny or to affirm them. Rather, these are demonstrated matters that cannot be denied

4 Quran 33:25. Al-Farabi (d. AD 950) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina, d. AD 1037) were the leading Muslim philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition.

once they are understood and known. Yet two dangers have arisen from it. The first is that whoever studies it marvels at its subtleties and at the clarity of its proofs. On that account he forms a good opinion of the philosophers and supposes that all their sciences are as clear and as firmly demonstrated as this one. Then he hears the common talk about their unbelief, their denial of God and their disdain for the Law, and he becomes an unbeliever by sheer *taqlīd*, saying: "If religion were true, it would not have escaped these people, given how precise they are in this science!" Once he has learned by hearsay of their unbelief and denial, he concludes that the truth lies in denying and rejecting religion. How many I have seen who stray from the truth on this pretext, with nothing else to support them![5] He may be told: "Someone skilled in one craft is not necessarily skilled in every craft. One skilled in jurisprudence and *kalām* need not be skilled in medicine, and one ignorant of the rational sciences need not be ignorant of grammar. Every craft has its people who have reached excellence and pre-eminence in it, even if foolishness and ignorance may attach to them in other fields. The ancients' discourse in mathematics is demonstrative, while in metaphysics it is conjectural. Only someone who has tried it and gone deep into it knows this." But when this is put to the man who has fallen into godlessness through following authority, he will not accept it. Instead, the sway of passion, vain appetite and the love of seeming clever drive him to persist in thinking well of the philosophers in all the sciences.

5.13 This is a great danger, and because of it everyone who plunges into those sciences must be held back. Even though they do not bear on religion, they are among the starting points of the philosophers' sciences, so their harm and their ill omen spread to the student. Few plunge into them without being stripped of religion and having the bridle of piety slip from their heads.

5.14 The second danger arose from a friend of Islam who was ignorant. He thought religion should be defended by rejecting

every science attributed to the philosophers. So he rejected all their sciences and claimed they were ignorant in them. He even rejected what they say about solar and lunar eclipses and claimed that it contradicted the Law. When this reached the ears of someone who knew those things by conclusive demonstration, he did not doubt his demonstration. Instead he came to believe that Islam is built on ignorance and on rejecting conclusive demonstration, and his love of philosophy and his hatred of Islam grew. Great indeed is the crime against religion committed by whoever thinks that Islam is defended by rejecting these sciences. Nothing in the Law touches on these sciences, whether to deny or to affirm, and nothing in these sciences touches on religious matters. Consider his saying (God bless him and grant him peace): "The sun and the moon are two of the signs of God Most High. They are not eclipsed for anyone's death or life, so when you see that, hasten to the remembrance of God Most High and to prayer."

5.15 There is nothing in this that requires rejecting the science of calculation, which makes known the courses of the sun and the moon and their conjunction or opposition in a particular way. As for the saying attributed to him (peace be upon him), "But when God manifests Himself to a thing, it submits to Him," this addition is not found in the sound collections at all. This, then, is the verdict on mathematics and on the danger that comes from it.[6]

5.16 2. As for logic, none of it touches religion, either to deny or to affirm. It is the study of the methods of proof and of syllogisms, of the conditions for the premises of a demonstration and how they are combined, and of the conditions for a correct definition and how it is ordered. It teaches that knowledge is either conception, which is reached through definition, or assent, which is reached through demonstration. There is noth-

5 "The Law" renders *al-shar'*, the *sharī'a*: the revealed Law, Quran and Prophetic practice, as a whole.

6 The sound collections (*al-ṣiḥāḥ*) are the canonical hadith collections, above all those of al-Bukhari and Muslim.

ing in this that ought to be rejected. It is of the same kind as what the theologians and those who reflect on proofs have set out. The philosophers differ from them only in their expressions and technical terms, and in greater thoroughness in their definitions and subdivisions. An example of their discourse on it is their saying: If it is established that every A is B, it follows that some B is A. That is, if it is established that every man is an animal, it follows that some animal is a man. They express this by saying that a universal affirmative converts into a particular affirmative. What bearing does this have on the essentials of religion, that it should be denied and rejected? If someone rejects it, the only result among logicians is a poor opinion of his intelligence, and even of his religion, which he claims depends on such rejection. True, the philosophers commit a kind of injustice in this science. They lay down conditions for demonstration that are known to produce certainty beyond doubt, but when they come to religious questions they cannot meet those conditions and are as lax as can be. Someone may also study logic, admire it and find it clear, and then suppose that the unbelieving doctrines reported of them are backed by demonstrations of the same kind. So he rushes into unbelief before he has even reached the metaphysical sciences. So this danger, too, finds its way into logic.

5.17 3. Physics (the natural sciences) investigates the world of the heavens and their stars, and the simple bodies beneath them, such as water, air, earth and fire. It also investigates the composite bodies, such as animals, plants and minerals, and the causes of their change, transformation and mixture. This is like medicine's investigation of the human body, its principal and subordinate organs, and the causes that alter its constitution. Religion does not require us to reject medicine, and in the same way it does not require us to reject this science, except on certain specific questions, which we have set out in our book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (Tahāfut al-falāsifa). Any other points on which we must disagree with them will, on reflection, turn out to fall under these. The root of them all is that you

should know that nature is subject to God Most High. It does not act by itself; it is used by its Creator. The sun, the moon, the stars and the natures are subject to His command, and none of them acts by itself or of itself.[7]

5.18 4. Metaphysics is where most of their errors lie. Here they could not meet the conditions for demonstration (*burhān*) that they had laid down in logic, and so they disagreed among themselves a great deal. Aristotle's doctrine on these matters, as transmitted by al-Farabi and Avicenna, comes close to the views of the Muslims. But all their errors come down to twenty points. On three of them they must be declared unbelievers, and on seventeen they must be declared heretical innovators. We wrote *The Incoherence* to refute their doctrine on these twenty questions.

5.19 On the three questions they disagreed with all Muslims. 1. They say that bodies will not be raised at the resurrection. Only disembodied spirits are rewarded and punished, and the rewards and punishments are spiritual, not bodily. They were right to affirm the spiritual ones, for these are real too. But they spoke falsely in denying the bodily ones, and in what they said they disbelieved in the Law.

5.20 2. Another is their saying that "God Most High knows universals but not particulars." This too is plain unbelief. The truth is that "not an atom's weight escapes Him in the heavens or on earth."[8]

5.21 3. Another is their doctrine that the world is eternal and without beginning. No Muslim has ever held any of these views.

5.22 As for the rest, such as their denial of the attributes, and their saying that God knows by His essence and not by a knowledge added to His essence, and the like, their doctrine here is close to that of the Muʿtazilites, and the Muʿtazilites need not be declared unbelievers for such things. In our book *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Heresy* (Fayṣal al-tafriqa

7 *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* is al-Ghazali's critique of the philosophers' metaphysics and physics, completed in AD 1095.
8 Quran 34:3.

bayna l-Islām wa-l-zandaqa) we have shown how wrong it is to rush to declare people unbelievers for everything that differs from one's own doctrine.[9]

5.23 5. Politics: everything they say about it comes down to practical maxims concerned with worldly affairs and the government of rulers. They took these from the scriptures God revealed to the prophets and from the wise sayings handed down from the prophets of old (peace be upon them).

5.24 6. Ethics: everything they say about it comes down to listing the qualities and traits of the soul, naming their genera and species, and describing how to treat and struggle against them. They took this from the words of the Sufis. These are godly people who persevere in remembering God Most High, in opposing their desires, and in traveling the path to God Most High by turning away from the pleasures of this world. In their spiritual struggle the traits and faults of the soul, and the flaws in its actions, were unveiled to them, and they spoke of these openly. The philosophers took them and mixed them into their own discourse, using them as an ornament to help sell their falsehoods. In their time, indeed in every age, there has been a group of such godly people. God, glory be to Him, never leaves the world without them, for they are the pegs of the earth: through their blessings mercy comes down on the people of the earth. So the report has it, where the Prophet (God bless him and grant him peace) said: "Through them you are given rain, through them you are given your provision, and of them were the Companions of the Cave."[10]

9 The Muʿtazilites were a school of *kalām* (theology) that held that God knows by His essence rather than through distinct eternal attributes. *The Decisive Criterion* is al-Ghazali's treatise on the limits of declaring others unbelievers.

10 The "pegs" (*awtād*) are, in Sufi lore, saints on whom the stability of the world depends. The Companions of the Cave are the sleepers of Quran 18:9–26.

TWO DANGERS: REJECTION AND ACCEPTANCE

Truths borrowed by the philosophers should not be rejected, but the unwary are drawn into their errors.

5.25 Such people existed in times past as well, as the Quran declares. When the philosophers mixed the words of prophecy and the words of the Sufis into their books, two dangers arose: one for the person who accepts them, and one for the person who rejects them. 1. The danger for the one who rejects them is great. A group of feeble minds supposed that, since those words are recorded in the philosophers' books and mixed with their falsehoods, they should be shunned and never mentioned, and that anyone who mentions them should be condemned. They had first heard these words only from the philosophers, so it came into their feeble minds that the words were false because the one who said them was in the wrong. They are like someone who hears a Christian say, "There is no god but God; Jesus is the Messenger of God," and rejects it, saying, "That is what Christians say." He does not pause long enough to consider whether the Christian is an unbeliever because of this statement or because he denies the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him)! If he is an unbeliever only because of that denial, then one should not disagree with him on anything else that is true in itself and does not make him an unbeliever, even if he too holds it to be true. This is the habit of weak minds: they know the truth by men, not men by the truth. The intelligent person follows the lead of ʿAli, the master of the intelligent (may God be pleased with him), who said: "Do not know the truth by men; know the truth, and you will know its people." The intelligent person of understanding first knows the truth, and then looks at the statement itself. If it is true, he accepts it, whether the one who said it is in the wrong or in the right. He may even take pains to extract the truth from the sayings of those in error, knowing that gold is mined from dirt. A money-changer does no harm in putting his hand into a counterfeiter's purse and

pulling out pure gold from among the false and base coins, so long as he trusts his own discernment. It is the villager, not the discerning money-changer, who is warned off dealing with a counterfeiter; the clumsy person, not the skilled swimmer, who is kept away from the seashore; the child, not the expert snake-charmer, who is kept from touching a snake.[11]

5.26 By my life! Most people think themselves clever and expert, perfect in intellect and fully equipped to tell truth from falsehood and guidance from error. So the door must be shut firmly: everyone must be warned off reading the books of those in error, as far as possible. For even if they escape the danger just described, they will by no means escape the second one, which we shall describe next.

5.27 Objections have been raised against some of the statements scattered through our writings on the secrets of the religious sciences. They came from a group whose inner grasp of the sciences is not firm and whose insight has not opened onto the furthest aims of the various doctrines. They claimed that those statements belong to the ancient philosophers. Yet some of them are my own ideas—and it is not unlikely that one hoof should fall where another has trodden. Some are found in books of the Law, and most, in substance, are found in the books of the Sufis.

5.28 But suppose they were found only in the philosophers' books. If a statement is rational in itself, supported by demonstration, and not contrary to the Book and the Sunna (the Prophet's practice), why should it be shunned and abandoned? If we opened this door and went so far as to shun every truth that first occurred to someone in the wrong, we would have to shun a great deal of truth. We would have to shun a whole number of verses of the Quran, reports of the Messenger (God bless him and grant him peace), stories of the early Muslims, and sayings of the sages and the Sufis. For the author of the *Brethren of Purity* cited them in his book as evidence, using them to lure the hearts

11 ʿAli ibn Abi Talib (d. AD 661): the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and the fourth caliph.

of fools into his falsehood. In the end those in the wrong would pull the truth out of our hands simply by placing it in their books.[12] The lowest rank of a scholar is to stand apart from the ignorant commoner. He does not refuse honey even if he finds it in a cupper's glass, and he understands that the cupping glass does not change the nature of the honey. Natural aversion to it rests on a commoner's ignorance. It arises because the cupping glass was made for blood, which is filthy; so he thinks blood is filthy because it is in the cupping glass, not realizing that it is filthy because of a quality in itself. Since honey lacks that quality, being in that vessel does not give it the quality, and so should not make it repulsive. This is a false fancy, and it prevails over most people. If you attribute a statement to someone they think well of, they accept it even if it is false; if you attribute it to someone they think ill of, they reject it even if it is true. They always know the truth by men and never know men by the truth —and that is the height of error! This is the danger of rejection.[13]

5.29 2. The second danger is the danger of acceptance. Someone who reads their books, such as the *Brethren of Purity* and others, sees the prophetic wisdom and the Sufi sayings they have mixed into their discourse. He may approve of these, accept them and think well of them. Then he hastens to accept the falsehoods mixed in with them, because of the good opinion he formed of what he saw and approved. That is a kind of luring into falsehood.

5.30 Because of this danger, people must be warned off reading their books, for the treachery and peril in them. Just as someone who cannot swim must be kept away from slippery riverbanks, people must be kept from reading those books. Just as children must be kept from touching snakes, ears must be kept from muddled words. A snake-charmer must not touch a snake in front of his small child if he knows the child will copy him and

12 The *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ): a tenth-century encyclopedia of the sciences with Ismaʿili leanings.

13 Cupping: drawing blood through a glass or horn applied to the skin, a common medical treatment.

think himself as capable. He must warn the child off by being cautious himself and not touching it in front of him. The firmly grounded scholar must act in the same way. And when the skilled snake-charmer takes a snake, tells the antidote from the poison, extracts the antidote and renders the poison harmless, he has no right to withhold the antidote from someone who needs it. Likewise, when the discerning money-changer, expert at assaying coin, puts his hand into a counterfeiter's purse, takes out pure gold and throws away the false and base coins, he has no right to withhold the good, approved coin from someone who needs it. The same holds for the scholar. Someone who needs the antidote may recoil from it on learning that it was extracted from the snake, the very seat of poison; he must then be told the facts. A poor man in desperate need of money may shy away from taking gold drawn from a counterfeiter's purse; he must then be made aware that his aversion is sheer ignorance, and the cause of his missing the very benefit he seeks. He must be told that the close neighborhood of false coin and good does not make the good false, just as it does not make the false good. In the same way, the close neighborhood of truth and falsehood does not make truth false, just as it does not make falsehood true.

5.31 That is as much as we wished to say about the danger and the harm of philosophy.

The Doctrine of Authoritative Teaching and Its Dangers

القول في مذهب التعليم وغائلته

The Batinis' claim that truth comes only from an infallible imam, and why it offers nothing.

6.1 Then, when I had finished with the science of philosophy—acquiring it, understanding it, and exposing what is false in it—I realized that this too did not fully meet my aim. Reason cannot, on its own, grasp every question or lift the veil from every difficulty. Meanwhile the party of *taʿlīm* had sprung up, and people everywhere were talking of their claim to know the meaning of things from the infallible imam who upholds the truth. So it occurred to me to investigate their teachings and see what they had in their quiver. Then, as it happened, a firm command reached me from the caliph's court to write a book exposing the true nature of their doctrine. I could not refuse it, and it became an outward spur added to my inner motive. So I began by seeking out their books and collecting their teachings. Some newer statements of theirs had also reached me, the product of minds of our own time and not in the familiar manner of their predecessors.[1] I collected those statements and arranged them in a tight order, close to rigorous investigation, and I answered them fully. I did it so fully that one of the people of the truth objected to my going to such lengths in setting out their argument. "This is doing their work for them," he said. "They would be unable to support their doctrine with such specious arguments if you had

1 The caliph was al-Mustazhir (r. AD 1094–1118).

not worked them out and arranged them." In one respect this objection is right. Ahmad ibn Hanbal objected to al-Harith al-Muhasibi (may God have mercy on them both) for writing a refutation of the Muʿtazilites. Al-Harith said: "Refuting heretical innovation is a duty." Ahmad said: "Yes, but you stated their specious argument first and then answered it. How can you be sure that someone will not read the argument, have it lodge in his mind, and pay no attention to the answer—or look at the answer and fail to grasp its substance?"[2]

6.2 What Ahmad ibn Hanbal said is right, but only for a specious argument that has not spread or become well known. Once it has spread, it must be answered, and it cannot be answered without first being stated. True, one should not invent for them a specious argument they have not themselves produced, and I did not do that. I had heard the argument from one of my companions who used to visit me, after he had joined them and adopted their doctrine. He told me that they laughed at the writings of those who wrote refutations of them, because those authors had not yet understood their argument. Then he set out the argument and reported it from them. I was not content to have it thought that I had overlooked the core of their argument, so I included it; nor to have it thought that I had heard it and not understood it, so I set it out in full.

6.3 The point is that I set out their specious argument as fully as possible, and then showed its unsoundness with all the force of demonstration.

THE INFALLIBLE TEACHER

He grants the need for an infallible teacher and answers that the Prophet is that teacher.

6.4 The upshot is that these people have nothing to show and their talk has no substance. Were it not for the poor support of the ignorant friend, that innovation, weak as it is, would never

2 Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. AD 855), the traditionist after whom the Hanbalite school is named; al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d. AD 857), an early Sufi of Baghdad.

have reached this level. But intense partisanship led the defenders of the truth to drag out the dispute with them over the premises of their argument and to contradict them in everything they said. So they contradicted their claim of "the need for teaching and a teacher," and their claim that "not just any teacher will do; there must be an infallible teacher." Their argument for the need for teaching and a teacher came out looking strong, and the position of those who denied it looked weak. Some people were taken in by this. They thought it came from the strength of their doctrine and the weakness of their opponents', not understanding that it came from the weakness of the defender of the truth and his ignorance of how to go about it. The right course is to acknowledge the need for a teacher, and that the teacher must be infallible—but our infallible teacher is Muhammad (God bless him and grant him peace). If they say, "He is dead," we say, "And your teacher is hidden." If they say, "Our teacher has taught the missionaries and sent them out through the lands, and he awaits their return to him if they disagree or some difficulty perplexes them," we say: "Our teacher too taught the missionaries and sent them out through the lands, and he completed the teaching, for God Most High said: 'Today I have perfected your religion for you and completed My favor upon you.' Once the teaching is complete, the teacher's death does no harm, just as his absence does none."[3]

6.5 There remains their question: "How do you judge what you have not heard? By an explicit text, when you have not heard one? Or by independent judgment and opinion, which is exactly where disagreement is to be expected?" We say: "We do what Muʿadh did when the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) sent him to Yemen: we judge by the text where there is a text, and by independent judgment where there is none." Indeed, we do just what their own missionaries do when they are far from the imam in distant lands. Such a missionary cannot judge by text, for finite texts cannot cover the infinite cases that arise. Nor can he go back to the imam's city for every case: by the time

3 Quran 5:3.

he has traveled there and back, the person who asked for a ruling will have died, and the benefit of going back will be lost. Someone who is unsure of the direction of prayer (the qibla) has no way but to pray by his own judgment; if he traveled to the imam's city to learn the qibla, the time of prayer would pass. So prayer facing away from the qibla is valid when it rests on one's best estimate. And it is said: "Whoever errs in independent judgment has one reward, and whoever is right has two."[4] So it is in all matters of independent judgment. So too with giving alms (zakat) to a poor man. The giver may judge him poor, though he is secretly rich, having hidden his wealth. The giver is not held to account for this, even though he erred, for he is held accountable only for what his judgment required. If the opponent says, "The other man's opinion is as good as his," I say: "He is commanded to follow his own opinion, like someone judging the qibla, who follows his own opinion even if someone else disagrees." If he says, "Then does the one who follows authority (*muqallid*) follow Abu Hanifa or al-Shafiʿi (may God have mercy on them both), or someone else?" I say: "When the qibla is unclear, the one who follows authority about it uses his judgment to find out who is most excellent and most knowledgeable about the signs of the qibla, and follows that judgment. So too with the legal schools."[5]

6.6 So the prophets and the imams, of necessity, sent people back to independent judgment, knowing that they might err. The Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) even said: "I judge by what is apparent, and God takes charge of what is hidden." That is: I judge by the most likely opinion formed from the witnesses' testimony, and they may be mistaken. If even the prophets had no way to be safe from error in such matters of judgment, how can anyone hope for it?

6.7 Here they raise two questions. The first is this: "Even if that holds for matters of independent judgment, it does not hold for

4 Muʿadh ibn Jabal, a Companion whom the Prophet sent to Yemen as judge, said he would rule by the Quran, then the Sunna, then his own judgment (*ijtihād*).

the foundations of belief, since whoever errs there is not excused. So how is one to reach the truth about them?" I say: "The foundations of belief are contained in the Book and the Sunna. As for the details beyond that, and the matters in dispute, the truth about them is known by weighing them on the Just Balance. These are the balances God Most High mentioned in His Book. They are five, and I have set them out in my book *The Just Balance* (al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm)."[6] If he says, "Your opponents disagree with you about that balance," I say: "It is inconceivable that anyone should understand that balance and still disagree about it. The party of *taʿlīm* will not disagree, since I drew it from the Quran and learned it there. The logicians will not disagree, since it agrees with the conditions they laid down in logic and does not contradict them. The theologian will not disagree, since it agrees with what he says about the proofs of theoretical matters, and by it the truth is known in questions of *kalām*." If he says, "If you have such a balance in hand, why don't you put an end to disagreement among people?" I say: "If they listened to me, I would put an end to their disagreement. I have described the way to end disagreement in *The Just Balance*. Study it, and you will know that it is true and would certainly end disagreement if people listened. But they will not all listen! Some did listen to me, though, and I ended the disagreement among them. Your imam wants to end the disagreement among them even though they do not listen. Why has he not done so up to now? Why did ʿAli (may God be pleased with him), the head of the imams, not do so? Or does he claim he can force them all to listen? Then why has he not forced them up to now? For what day has he put it off? Has his summons brought people anything but more disagreement and more opponents? True, people used to fear some harm from disagreement—but not a harm that would go as far as bloodshed, the ruin of lands, children left

5 Abu Hanifa (d. AD 767) and al-Shafiʿi (d. AD 820) founded two of the Sunni legal schools.

6 The phrase "the just balance" comes from Quran 17:35 and 26:182. *The Just Balance* is al-Ghazali's treatise against the party of *taʿlīm*.

orphaned, roads cut off and property plundered. Yet the blessings of your 'ending disagreement' have brought into the world a disagreement such as was never known before." If he says, "You claim you can end disagreement among people. But a man bewildered among conflicting doctrines and opposing views is under no obligation to listen to you rather than to your opponent. Most of your opponents disagree with you, and there is no difference between you and them,"

6.8 this is their second question. I say: "First, this can be turned back against you. When you call this bewildered man to yourself, he will say: 'What makes you more deserving than your opponents, when most scholars disagree with you?' I wonder how you would answer! Would you answer by saying, 'My imam has been designated by an explicit text'? Who would believe your claim of a designating text, when he has not heard the text from the Messenger? He hears only your claim, while the scholars are unanimous in calling it your invention and a lie.[7] Then suppose he grants you the text. If he is bewildered about the very basis of prophecy, he will say: 'Suppose your imam produces the miracle of Jesus (peace be upon him) and says, "The proof that I am truthful is that I will bring your father back to life," and he brings him back to life, and my father tells me that the imam is in the right. How do I know he is truthful?' Not all people knew Jesus (peace be upon him) to be truthful from this miracle. It raises difficult questions that can be answered only by subtle rational reflection, and in your view rational reflection cannot be trusted. Nor can one know that a miracle proves truthfulness without knowing what magic is and how to tell it from a miracle, and without knowing that God does not lead His servants astray—and the problem of God's leading astray, and the difficulty of framing an answer to it, is well known. So how will you fend off all that? Your imam is no more deserving to be followed than his opponent!" So he falls back on the rational proofs he denies, while his opponent pro-

7 The designating text (*naṣṣ*): the Shiʿi doctrine that the Prophet explicitly named ʿAli, and each imam his successor.

duces proofs of the same kind, and clearer ones. This question has been turned back against them with tremendous force. If the first and the last of them joined together to answer it, they could not.

6.9 The trouble arose only from some weak people who debated them and busied themselves not with turning the argument back on them but with answering it. That takes a long discussion and does not quickly reach people's understanding, so it is no good for silencing an opponent. If someone says, "This is turning the argument back; is there an answer to it?" I say: "Yes. The answer is this. If the bewildered man says, 'I am bewildered,' without specifying the question he is bewildered about, he is told: 'You are like a sick man who says, "I am sick," without specifying his illness, and asks for a cure. He is told that no cure exists for illness in general, only for a particular illness —a headache, diarrhea or some other.' In the same way, the bewildered man should specify what he is bewildered about. If he specifies the question, I will make known to him the truth about it by weighing it on the five balances. No one understands them without acknowledging that they are the true balance, and that whatever is weighed on it can be trusted. He understands the balance, and from it he also understands that the weighing is correct—just as a student of arithmetic understands arithmetic itself, and also that his teacher knows arithmetic and is truthful in it." I have explained this in *The Just Balance* in about twenty folios; let it be studied there.

6.10 My aim now is not to show the unsoundness of their doctrine, for I have done that elsewhere. I did it first in *al-Mustaẓhirī*; second in *The Proof of the Truth* (Ḥujjat al-ḥaqq), an answer to arguments of theirs put to me in Baghdad; third in *The Dispute Set Out in Detail* (Mufaṣṣal al-khilāf), in twelve chapters, an answer to arguments put to me in Hamadan; fourth in *The Scroll* (al-Daraj), laid out in tables, which deals with feeble arguments of theirs put to me in Tus; and fifth in *The Just Balance*, a self-standing book whose aim is to set out the balance of know-

ledge and to show that whoever masters it has no need of the infallible imam.[8]

6.11 My aim, rather, is to show that these people have nothing of the healing that rescues one from the darkness of opinions. Quite apart from their inability to prove who the imam is, we have often gone along with them. We granted the need for teaching and for an infallible teacher, and that he is the one they have designated. Then we asked them about the knowledge they had learned from this infallible one, and put difficulties to them. They did not understand them, let alone solve them! When they were stumped, they referred us to the hidden imam and said, "One must travel to him." The wonder is that they wasted their lives seeking the teacher and boasting of having found him, and learned nothing at all from him. They are like someone smeared with filth who wears himself out looking for water and then, having found it, does not use it, and stays smeared with foulness.

6.12 Some of them claimed to have some of this knowledge, and what they offered came down to bits of the feeble philosophy of Pythagoras. He was one of the most ancient of the ancients, and his doctrine is the feeblest of all philosophical doctrines. Aristotle refuted him, and indeed found his words feeble and contemptible. It is what is related in the book of the *Brethren of Purity*, and in truth it is the dregs of philosophy.

6.13 How strange, then, that someone should toil all his life to acquire knowledge and then be content with such feeble, worthless knowledge, thinking he has reached the furthest goals of the sciences! These people too we tested, and we probed them outside and in. What they amounted to was luring ordinary people and weak minds by showing the need for a teacher, and by arguing against those who denied the need for teaching with strong, silencing words. But when someone agreed with them on the need for a teacher and said, "Produce his knowledge and let us benefit from his teaching!", the man stopped short and

8 *Al-Mustaẓhirī* is the book commissioned by the caliph al-Mustazhir and named after him. Hamadan and Tus are cities in Iran; Tus was al-Ghazali's birthplace.

said: "Now that you have granted me this, go and seek it; this much was all I intended." For he knew that if he went any further he would be exposed and unable to solve the slightest difficulty—indeed, unable even to understand it, let alone answer it.

6.14 This, then, is the truth of their condition. "Test them and you will come to loathe them": once we had tested them, we washed our hands of them as well.[9]

9 An Arabic proverb (*ukhbur taqlih*), roughly "get to know someone and you will hate him."

The Ways of the Sufis

طرق الصوفية

His crisis in Baghdad, his departure and ten years of retreat; the Sufi way as experience ("tasting") rather than learning.

7.1 When I had finished with these sciences, I turned my whole attention to the way of the Sufis. I knew that their way is completed only by both knowledge and practice. The substance of their knowledge is to cut through the obstacles the soul puts in the way and to cleanse oneself of its blameworthy traits and vile qualities. By this one arrives at emptying the heart of everything but God Most High and adorning it with the remembrance of God.[1]

7.2 Knowledge was easier for me than practice. So I began by acquiring their knowledge from reading their books, such as *The Nourishment of Hearts* (Qūt al-qulūb) by Abu Talib al-Makki (may God have mercy on him), the works of al-Harith al-Muhasibi, and the scattered sayings handed down from al-Junayd, al-Shibli and Abu Yazid al-Bistami (may God sanctify their spirits), and from other masters. In this way I came to know the core of their aims in knowledge, and acquired what can be acquired of their way through study and listening. Then it became clear to me that what is most distinctive of them cannot be reached by study, but only by *dhawq*, "tasting", by (spiritual) state and by a change of one's qualities. How great is the difference between knowing the definition of health and the definition of satiety,

1 Remembrance (*dhikr*): the constant recollection of God, above all by repeating His name, central to Sufi practice.

with their causes and conditions, and actually being healthy and sated! Or between knowing the definition of drunkenness—that it is a name for a state that arises when vapors rising from the stomach overpower the seats of thought—and being drunk! Indeed, a drunk man, while he is drunk, does not know the definition of drunkenness or the science of it, and has none of that knowledge with him.[2] A sober man, on the other hand, knows the definition of drunkenness and its elements, yet has nothing of drunkenness in him. A doctor who is ill knows the definition of health, its causes and its remedies, while he himself is without health. In the same way, there is a difference between knowing the true nature of renunciation, its conditions and its causes, and having renunciation as your state, with your soul turned away from this world!

7.3 So I knew with certainty that they are masters of states, not purveyors of words, and that whatever can be acquired by way of knowledge I had already acquired. What remained could not be reached by listening and study, only by tasting and by walking the path. Now, from the sciences I had practiced and the paths I had followed in searching through the two kinds of science, the religious and the rational, I had already gained a certain faith in God Most High, in prophecy and in the Last Day.

7.4 These three foundations of faith had become firmly rooted in my soul, not through any one specific, carefully formulated proof, but through causes, indications and experiences whose details are beyond counting.

7.5 It had also become clear to me that I could have no hope of happiness in the hereafter except through fear of God and restraining the soul from its desires. The head of all this is to cut the heart's ties to this world by withdrawing from the abode of delusion, turning back to the abode of eternity, and devoting oneself to God Most High with all one's resolve. And this cannot

2 *Dhawq*, "tasting": direct, lived experience, al-Ghazali's term for the knowledge of the Sufis. Abu Talib al-Makki (d. AD 996), al-Junayd (d. AD 910), al-Shibli (d. AD 945) and Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. c. AD 875) were early Sufi masters.

be achieved except by turning away from rank and wealth, and fleeing from distractions and attachments.

THE CRISIS IN BAGHDAD

He sees his teaching is driven by ambition, wavers for six months, and falls silent and ill.

7.6 Then I considered my circumstances, and there I was, immersed in attachments that had closed in on me from every side. I considered my activities—the best of them being teaching and instruction—and found that in them I was devoted to sciences that were neither important nor of any use on the way to the hereafter.

7.7 Then I reflected on my intention in teaching, and found that it was not purely for the sake of God Most High. What drove and moved it was the pursuit of rank and the spread of my fame. So I became certain that I stood "on the brink of a crumbling bank", and that I was already on the verge of the Fire unless I set about putting my affairs right.[3]

7.8 So I kept thinking this over for some time, while I still had the freedom to choose. One day I would firmly resolve to leave Baghdad and be free of those circumstances; the next day I would undo my resolve. I would put one foot forward and draw the other back. No sooner did a sincere desire to seek the hereafter arise in me in the morning than the army of appetite charged against it, and by evening it had cooled. The appetites of this world were dragging me with their chains to stay, while the herald of faith was calling out: "Away! Away! Only a little of your life remains, and a long journey lies before you. All the knowledge and all the work you are engaged in are mere show and illusion! If you do not prepare for the hereafter now, when will you prepare? If you do not cut these ties now, when will you cut them?" At that the impulse would be roused, and my resolve would be fixed on escape and flight.

7.9 Then Satan would return and say: "This is a passing state; beware of giving in to it, for it will soon fade. If you yield to it and abandon this broad prestige, this well-ordered standing free of trouble and vexation, this unchallenged authority untouched by any rival's dispute, your soul may well look back on it with longing, and it will not be easy for you to return."

7.10 So for nearly six months, beginning with Rajab of the year 488 AH (AD 1095), I wavered between the pull of worldly appetites and the calls of the hereafter. In that month the matter passed beyond choice into compulsion, for God locked my tongue so that it was held back from teaching. I would struggle with myself to teach for a single day, to please the hearts of those who came to me, but my tongue would not utter a single word; I simply could not do it. This impediment of the tongue brought on a grief in my heart, and with it my power to digest and my relish of food and drink were lost: I could not swallow a sop of bread in broth, nor digest a single morsel. It went on to weaken my faculties, until the doctors gave up hope of treating me and said: "This is something that has come down upon the heart, and from there it has spread through the constitution. There is no treating it, except by the inmost self finding relief from the anxiety that has befallen it."[4]

7.11 Then, when I felt my helplessness and my power of choice had collapsed entirely, I took refuge in God Most High as one in dire need who has no other recourse. He who "answers the one in distress when he calls on Him" answered me, and made it easy for my heart to turn away from rank and wealth, family, children and companions. I made a show of resolving to set out for Mecca, while privately planning a journey to Syria, for fear that the caliph and all my companions would learn of my resolve to settle in Syria. So I contrived, with subtle stratagems, to leave Baghdad, resolved never to return to it. I made myself a target for all the religious leaders of Iraq, for there was none

3 Quran 9:109.

4 Rajab is the seventh month of the Islamic calendar. Al-Ghazali was then teaching at the Nizamiyya college in Baghdad.

among them who could allow that there might be a religious reason for abandoning the position I held. They thought it was the highest post in religion; that was the extent of their knowledge.[5]

7.12 Then people became confused in their conjectures. Those far from Iraq thought it was because I feared something from the authorities. But those close to the authorities saw how insistently they clung to me and pressed themselves upon me, and how I turned away from them and paid no attention to what they said; so they would say: "This is a matter from heaven. Its only cause is an evil eye that has struck the people of Islam and the company of the learned."

TEN YEARS OF RETREAT

He leaves Baghdad for Damascus, Jerusalem and the Hijaz, then returns home to seclusion.

7.13 So I left Baghdad. I gave away what wealth I had, keeping only what would suffice for myself and sustenance for the children. I allowed myself this on the grounds that the wealth of Iraq is set aside for the public good, being an endowment for the Muslims. I have seen nowhere in the world any wealth more proper for a scholar to take for his family.[6]

7.14 Then I entered Syria and stayed there nearly two years, with no occupation but seclusion and retreat, discipline and spiritual struggle. I devoted myself to purifying the soul, refining my character and cleansing the heart for the remembrance of God Most High, as I had learned from the books of the Sufis. For a time I would stay in retreat in the mosque of Damascus, climbing its minaret for the whole day and locking its door behind me.[7]

5 Quran 27:62. Syria (al-Shām) here means greater Syria, including Damascus and Jerusalem.
6 An endowment (*waqf*) is property set aside in perpetuity for pious or charitable purposes; its revenues funded scholars and colleges.
7 The Great (Umayyad) Mosque of Damascus.

7.15 Then I traveled from there to Jerusalem, where every day I would enter the Rock and lock its door behind me.[8]

7.16 Then the call of the duty of pilgrimage stirred in me, together with the wish to draw on the blessings of Mecca and Medina and to visit the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), after completing my visit to the Friend of God (God's blessings and peace be upon him). So I traveled to the Hijaz.[9]

7.17 Then various concerns, and the pleas of my children, drew me back to my homeland, and I returned to it, after having been the last person in the world one would expect to return there. There too I chose seclusion, eager for retreat and for cleansing the heart for remembrance.[10]

7.18 But the events of the time, the concerns of my family and the necessities of making a living altered the course of my purpose and troubled the purity of my retreat. My state became clear only at scattered times. Even so, I did not give up hope of it: obstacles would push me away from it, and I would return to it.

WHAT THE RETREAT REVEALED

The Sufis' way is the best of ways; its states can be known by tasting, company or demonstration.

7.19 I continued like this for about ten years. In the course of these retreats, things were unveiled to me that cannot be counted or fully set out. The portion I will mention, so that others may benefit from it, is this: I came to know with certainty that it is the Sufis above all who travel the path of God Most High, that their conduct is the best of conduct, their way the most correct of ways, and their character the purest of characters. Indeed, if the intellect of the intelligent, the wisdom of the wise and the

8 The Dome of the Rock, the shrine built over the rock on the Temple Mount.
9 The Friend of God (al-Khalīl) is Abraham, whose tomb is at Hebron. The Hijaz is the region of western Arabia containing Mecca and Medina.
10 His homeland was Tus, in Khurasan (northeastern Iran).

knowledge of those scholars who grasp the secrets of the Law were all brought together to change anything in their conduct and character and replace it with something better, they would find no way to do so. For all their movements and their stillness, outward and inward, are drawn from the light of the niche of prophecy; and beyond the light of prophecy there is no light on the face of the earth by which one may be illumined.[11]

7.20 In short, what can anyone say about a way whose purification—its first condition—is to purify the heart entirely of all that is other than God Most High; whose key, corresponding to the opening consecration of the prayer, is the heart's complete absorption in the remembrance of God; and whose end is complete passing away in God? And that is its end only relative to its beginnings, which fall almost within the scope of choice and effort. In truth, it is the beginning of the way; everything before it is like an entrance hall for one traveling toward it.[12]

7.21 From the very beginning of the way, unveilings and direct visions begin, so that while awake they see angels and the spirits of the prophets, hear voices from them and gain benefits from them. Then the state rises from seeing forms and images to degrees that the range of speech is too narrow to hold: anyone who tries to express them will find that his words contain an evident error he cannot avoid.

7.22 In short, it ends in a closeness that one group almost imagines to be indwelling, another union, and another arrival—and all of this is an error. We have explained the nature of the error in our book *The Noblest Aim* (al-Maqṣad al-asnā). Rather, one who has been in that state should say no more than: "Something happened—what, I shall not mention; so think the best, and do not ask for the story!"[13]

7.23 In short, whoever has not been granted any of this by tasting grasps nothing of the reality of prophecy but its name. The

11 The "niche" echoes the Light Verse, Quran 24:35.

12 The opening consecration (*taḥrīm*) is the "God is greatest" that begins the ritual prayer. "Passing away" (*fanā'*) is the Sufi term for the extinction of the self in God.

wonders of the friends of God are, in truth, the beginnings of the prophets. That was the first state of the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), when he went out to Mount Hira, where he would be alone with his Lord and worship, so that the Arabs said: "Muhammad has fallen in love with his Lord!"[14]

7.24 This is a state that one who walks its path verifies by tasting. One who has not been granted tasting may become certain of it through experience and hearsay, if he keeps much company with them, until he understands it with certainty from the evidence of their states. Whoever sits with them gains this faith from them, for they are the people whose companion is never wretched. And whoever has not been granted their company, let him know its possibility with certainty through the evidence of demonstration, as we have set out in the book *The Wonders of the Heart* (ʿAjāʾib al-qalb), one of the books of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn).[15]

7.25 Verification by demonstration is knowledge; being in that very state is tasting; and acceptance, from hearsay and experience, with a good opinion of others, is faith. These are three degrees: "God will raise by degrees those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge."[16]

7.26 Beyond these are ignorant people who deny the very basis of all this. They marvel at such talk, listen and mock, and say: "How strange! How they rave!" Of them God Most High said: "Among them are some who listen to you, but when they go out from your presence they say to those who have been given knowledge, 'What was that he said just now?' They are the ones

13 Indwelling (*ḥulūl*) and union (*ittiḥād*) are the claims that God enters, or becomes one with, a person; *The Noblest Aim* is al-Ghazali's treatise on the names of God. The verse is by the poet Ibn al-Muʿtazz.

14 The "wonders" (*karāmāt*) of the friends of God are distinguished from the miracles of prophets. Hira is the mountain near Mecca where Muhammad received his first revelation.

15 "The people whose companion is never wretched" echoes a hadith about those who gather to remember God. The *Revival* is al-Ghazali's great work on the religious life, divided into forty "books".

16 Quran 58:11.

whose hearts God has sealed, and they follow their own desires"—and He made them deaf and blinded their sight. Among the things that became clear to me by necessity from practicing their way is the true nature of prophecy and its special character. I must point out its basis, for the need for it is pressing.[17]

17 Quran 47:16; the final phrase echoes 47:23.

The True Nature of Prophecy and Everyone's Need for It

حقيقة النبوة: واضطرار كافة الخلق إليها

Beyond the senses and reason lies a further faculty; how to become certain that someone is a prophet.

8.1 Know that the human substance, in its original disposition, was created empty and simple, with no knowledge of the worlds of God Most High. The worlds are many, and none can count them but God Most High, as He said: "None knows the hosts of your Lord but He."[1]

8.2 It gains knowledge of the worlds only through perception. Each of the faculties of perception was created so that through it a human being might become acquainted with one world of existing things; by "worlds" we mean the kinds of existing things.

8.3 The first thing created in a human being is the sense of touch, by which he perceives certain kinds of existing things: heat and cold, moisture and dryness, softness and roughness, and so on. Touch is utterly incapable of perceiving colors and sounds; for touch they are as good as nonexistent.

8.4 Then the sense of sight is created for him, by which he perceives colors and shapes; this is the widest of the worlds of sensible things.

8.5 Then hearing is breathed into him, and he hears sounds and melodies.

8.6 Then taste is created for him, and so on until he passes beyond the world of sensible things. Then discernment is created in

him, at around the age of seven. This is another of the stages of his existence: in it he perceives things beyond the world of sensible things, none of which is found in the world of the senses.

8.7 Then he rises to another stage, and reason is created for him, by which he perceives what is necessary, what is possible and what is impossible, and things not found in the stages before it.

8.8 Beyond reason there is another stage, in which another eye is opened, by which one sees the unseen, what will happen in the future, and other things from which reason is barred—just as the faculty of discernment is barred from perceiving the objects of reason, and the faculty of sense from the objects of discernment. And just as a child who has reached discernment, if the objects of reason were presented to him, would reject them and think them far-fetched, so some people of reason have rejected the objects of prophecy and thought them far-fetched. That is ignorance itself, for they have nothing to rely on except that this is a stage such a person has not reached, which does not exist for him, and so he supposes it does not exist in itself. A man born blind, had he not learned about colors and shapes through widespread report and hearsay, and were they described to him for the first time, would neither understand them nor accept them. God Most High has brought this close to His creatures by giving them a sample of the special character of prophecy, namely sleep. For the sleeper perceives the unseen that is to come, either plainly or clothed in an image whose meaning dream interpretation reveals.[2] If a person had not experienced this himself, and were told, "There are people who fall down in a swoon like the dead, lose their sensation, hearing and sight, and perceive the unseen," he would deny it and offer a demonstration of its impossibility, saying: "The sensing faculties are the causes of perception. Someone who does not perceive things while these faculties are present and at work is all the less likely

1 Quran 74:31.

2 Widespread report (*tawātur*): a report transmitted by so many people that their agreeing on a falsehood is inconceivable, so that it yields certainty.

to perceive them when they lie dormant." This is a kind of syllogism that existence and observation prove false. Just as reason is one of the stages of human life, in which an eye arises that sees various kinds of intelligible things from which the senses are barred, so prophecy too is a name for a stage in which there arises an eye with a light, in whose light the unseen appears, together with things that reason does not perceive.

HOW TO KNOW A PROPHET

Doubt about prophecy is answered by its possibility, its existence, and by testing a prophet's words.

8.9 Doubt about prophecy may concern its possibility, its existence and actual occurrence, or its being found in a particular individual.

8.10 The proof of its possibility is its existence. The proof of its existence is that there are kinds of knowledge in the world that cannot conceivably be attained by reason, such as the sciences of medicine and astrology. Whoever investigates them knows by necessity that they can be grasped only by divine inspiration and help from God Most High; experiment offers no way to them. Some astrological judgments concern events that occur only once in a thousand years; how could that be attained by experiment? The same holds for the special properties of drugs. This demonstration makes it clear that there can be a way of perceiving these things that reason does not perceive, and that is what is meant by prophecy. Not that prophecy is only this: rather, perceiving this kind of thing, which lies outside the objects of reason, is one of the special properties of prophecy, and it has many others besides.[3] What we have mentioned is but a drop from its ocean. We mention it only because you have a sample of it with you, namely what you perceive in sleep, and you have with you sciences of its kind in medicine and astrology. These are miracles of the prophets (God's blessings and

3 Astrology renders *ʿilm al-nujūm*, "the science of the stars," which then covered both astronomy and astrology, the reading of events from the heavens.

peace be upon them), to which the people of reason have no access at all with the stock-in-trade of reason.

8.11 As for the special properties of prophecy other than this, they are perceived only by tasting, through following the Sufi path. For I understood even this much only through a sample I was granted, namely sleep; without it I would not have believed it. If the Prophet has a special property of which you have no sample and which you do not understand at all, how can you believe in it? Assent comes only after understanding. That sample is attained at the beginnings of the Sufi path: through it one attains a kind of tasting, to the extent that it has been attained, and a kind of assent, by analogy with it, to what has not been attained. This one special property is enough for you to believe in the basis of prophecy.

8.12 If you come to doubt whether a particular individual is a prophet or not, certainty can be reached only by knowing his states, either by direct observation or by widespread report and hearsay. For once you know medicine and jurisprudence, you can recognize jurists and doctors by observing their states and hearing their words—and even if you have not seen them. Nor are you unable to know that al-Shafiʿi (may God have mercy on him) was a jurist and Galen a doctor, and to know it truly, not by *taqlīd*, following someone else's authority, but by learning something of jurisprudence and medicine and reading their books and writings; then you attain necessary knowledge of their standing.[4] In the same way, once you understand the meaning of prophecy and reflect a great deal on the Quran and the reports, you will attain necessary knowledge that he (God bless him and grant him peace) stood at the highest degree of prophecy. Confirm this by testing what he said about acts of worship and their effect in purifying hearts: how truly he spoke (God bless him and grant him peace) when he said, "Whoever acts on what he knows, God will make him heir to knowledge of what he does not know"; how truly he spoke when he said, "Whoever helps a wrongdoer, God will give the wrongdoer power over him"; and

4 Galen (d. c. AD 216) was the great Greek physician.

how truly he spoke when he said, "Whoever rises in the morning with all his cares made a single care, God Most High will spare him the cares of this world and the next."

8.13 When you have tested this in a thousand cases, in two thousand, in many thousands, you will attain necessary knowledge that you cannot dispute.

8.14 Seek certainty about prophecy by this path, then, and not from the turning of a staff into a serpent or the splitting of the moon. For if you consider such a thing on its own, without the countless accompanying indications, you may well think it is magic and illusion, or that it is God Most High leading people astray, for He "leads astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills."[5]

8.15 Then you will be confronted with questions about miracles. If your faith rests on a well-ordered argument about how a miracle serves as proof, it will be broken by an equally ordered argument setting out difficulties and doubts against it. So let such extraordinary events be one of the proofs and indications within the whole of your reflection, until you attain necessary knowledge whose basis you cannot pinpoint. It is like someone told a piece of news by many people in a widespread report: he cannot say that his certainty comes from the words of any one of them; it comes from where he does not know, neither from outside the whole nor from any single individual. This is strong faith grounded in knowledge.

8.16 Tasting, however, is like seeing with your own eyes and taking a thing in your hand, and it is found only on the path of the Sufis.

8.17 This much about the true nature of prophecy is enough for the purpose I have in view now. I will explain later why it is needed.

5 The staff is that of Moses (Quran 7:107), and the splitting of the moon a miracle of Muhammad (Quran 54:1). The quotation is Quran 35:8.

Why He Returned to Teaching

سبب نشر العلم بعد الإعراض عنه

The weakening of faith in his time and its four causes, his return to teaching at Nishapur, and remedies for each group.

9.1 Then, when I had persevered in seclusion and retreat for nearly ten years, it became clear to me by necessity in the course of that time, for reasons I cannot count—sometimes by tasting, sometimes by demonstrative knowledge, sometimes by the acceptance of faith—that a human being is made of a body and a heart. By "heart" I mean the reality of his spirit, which is the seat of the knowledge of God, not the flesh and blood that he shares with a corpse and a beast. The body has a health on which its happiness depends and a disease in which lies its ruin. The heart likewise has a health and soundness—and none will be saved "except one who comes to God with a sound heart"—and it has a disease in which lies its eternal ruin in the hereafter, as God Most High said: "In their hearts is a disease." Ignorance of God is a deadly poison to it; disobeying God by following desire is the illness that sickens it; knowing God Most High is its life-giving antidote; and obeying Him by opposing desire is its healing remedy. There is no way to treat it, removing its disease and gaining its health, except by remedies, just as there is no way to treat the body except by them.[1] Now the remedies of the body bring about health by a special property in them that people of reason cannot perceive with the stock-in-trade of reason; in these one must follow the authority of doctors, who

1 Quran 26:89; 2:10.

took them from the prophets, who by the special property of prophecy came to know the special properties of things. In the same way it became clear to me by necessity that the remedies of acts of worship, with their limits and measures defined and fixed by the prophets, work in a way that cannot be grasped with the stock-in-trade of the intellect of the intelligent. In these one must follow the authority of the prophets, who perceived those properties by the light of prophecy, not with the stock-in-trade of reason. Again, drugs are compounded of ingredients that differ in kind and quantity, some double others in weight and quantity, and this difference in their quantities is not without a secret belonging to the class of special properties. So too the acts of worship, which are remedies for the disease of hearts, are compounded of actions that differ in kind and quantity: the prostration is double the bowing, and the dawn prayer is half the afternoon prayer in quantity. This too is not without one of the secrets that belong to the class of special properties, which can be known only by the light of prophecy. Whoever has sought to derive a rationale for them by way of reason, or has supposed that they were laid down by chance and not from a divine secret in them that requires them by way of special property, has been very foolish and very ignorant. And just as drugs have bases that are their main ingredients and additions that complete them, each with its own particular effect on the working of the bases, so the supererogatory prayers and the customary practices are complements that perfect the effects of the pillars of worship.[2]

9.2 In short, the prophets (peace be upon them) are the doctors for the diseases of hearts. The use and function of reason is only to make this known to us, to bear witness to prophecy by assenting to it, and against itself by confessing its inability to grasp what the eye of prophecy grasps. It has taken us by the hand and handed us over to prophecy, as the blind are handed over to their guides and bewildered patients to caring doctors. This far

2 Each cycle of the ritual prayer contains two prostrations and one bowing; the dawn prayer has two cycles, the afternoon prayer four.

reason runs and reaches; it is barred from what lies beyond, except for understanding what the doctor imparts to it.

9.3 These are things we came to know, during the period of retreat and seclusion, with a necessity equivalent to direct vision.

FOUR CAUSES OF WEAKENING FAITH

Philosophy, false Sufism, the Batinis and the conduct of scholars have weakened people's faith.

9.4 Then we saw that people's beliefs had grown slack—in the basis of prophecy, then in its true nature, then in acting on what prophecy had set out—and we verified how widespread this was among people. So I looked into the causes of people's slackness and the weakness of their faith, and found that there were four: 1. a cause stemming from those who plunge into philosophy; 2. a cause stemming from those who plunge into the Sufi path; 3. a cause stemming from those who lay claim to *taʿlīm*, authoritative teaching; 4. a cause stemming from the conduct of those who are known among people as learned.

9.5 For some time I followed up individuals one by one, asking anyone who fell short in following the Law about his doubt, and probing his belief and his inmost thoughts. I would say to him: "Why do you fall short in it? If you believe in the hereafter and do not prepare for it, but sell it for this world, that is folly! You would not sell two for one, so how can you sell what has no end for a few numbered days? And if you do not believe, then you are an unbeliever! So see to yourself and seek faith, and look into the cause of your hidden unbelief—which is your doctrine inwardly and the cause of your boldness outwardly, even if you do not declare it, adorning yourself with faith and taking honor from mentioning the Law!"

9.6 One would say: "If this were something that had to be observed, the scholars would be the ones most bound to observe it. Yet So-and-so, famous among the eminent, does not pray; So-and-so drinks wine; So-and-so devours the revenues of endow-

ments and the property of orphans; So-and-so lives on the sultan's stipend and takes no care to avoid what is forbidden; So-and-so takes bribes for judging and for bearing witness!"—and so on, with others like them.

9.7 A second claims knowledge of Sufism and asserts that he has reached a level where he has risen above any need for worship!

9.8 A third makes excuses with another of the doubts of the antinomians! These are the ones who have strayed from Sufism.[3]

9.9 A fourth has met the party of *taʿlīm*, and says: "The truth is obscure and the way to it is hard; there is much disagreement about it, and no doctrine has a better claim than another. The proofs of reason contradict one another, so there is no trusting the opinion of those who reason. And the one who calls to *taʿlīm* makes arbitrary claims without proof. So how shall I give up certainty for doubt?"

9.10 A fifth says: "I don't do this out of *taqlīd*. I have studied the science of philosophy, and I have grasped the true nature of prophecy: it comes down, in the end, to wisdom and the public good. The purpose of its acts of worship is to keep the common mass of people in check and to restrain them from killing and quarreling with one another and from giving free rein to their appetites. I am not one of the ignorant common people, that I should step into the confinement of religious obligation. I am one of the wise. I follow wisdom, I see clearly into it, and in it I have no need of following authority!"

9.11 This is the furthest reach of faith among those of them who have studied the doctrine of the theistic philosophers and learned it from the books of Avicenna and Abu Nasr al-Farabi. These are the people who wear Islam as an ornament.

9.12 You may even see one of them reciting the Quran, attending the congregations and the prayers, and praising the Law with his tongue, yet all the while he does not give up drinking wine and various kinds of depravity and debauchery! If he is

3 The antinomians (*ahl al-ibāḥa*, "the people of permissiveness") held that religious obligations no longer bound them.

asked, "If prophecy is not true, why do you pray?" he may answer, "To exercise the body, to keep to the custom of the townspeople, and to keep my wealth and my children safe!" Or he may say, "The Law is true, and prophecy is real!" Then he is asked, "So why do you drink wine?" and he answers, "Wine was forbidden only because it breeds enmity and hatred, and my wisdom guards me against that. I drink it to sharpen my mind." Avicenna even went so far as to write in a testament of his that he had made a covenant with God Most High on such-and-such points: to honor the ordinances of the Law, not to fall short in the acts of religious worship, and not to drink for pleasure, but only as medicine and cure. So the furthest he got in purity of faith and commitment to worship was to make an exception of drinking wine for the sake of a cure.[4]

9.13 Such is the faith of those among them who lay claim to faith. A number of people have been taken in by them, and what deceived them further was the weakness of those who argued against them. For these opponents argued by attacking geometry, logic and other sciences whose truths the philosophers know by necessity, for the reason we explained earlier.

9.14 I saw that the various classes of people had grown weak in faith to this degree for these reasons. And I saw that I myself was ready to lay bare this confusion, so that exposing these people was easier for me than a drink of water, because I had delved so deeply into their sciences and their methods—I mean the methods of the Sufis, the philosophers, the party of *taʿlīm*, and those who pass themselves off as scholars. Then it flashed into my mind that this was a duty at this time, one that could not be avoided. What good would retreat and seclusion do you, when the disease had spread everywhere, the physicians themselves had fallen ill, and humankind stood on the brink of perdition? Then I said to myself: "When will you take up the task of lifting this gloom and confronting this darkness? This is an age of slackness, an era of falsehood. If you took up the work of calling people from their ways to the truth, the whole of this age would

4 "Enmity and hatred" echoes Quran 5:91, one of the verses forbidding wine.

turn against you. How could you stand up to them, and how could you even live among them? That cannot be done without a favorable time and a pious, powerful ruler."

THE RETURN TO NISHAPUR

The ruler orders him to teach at Nishapur, and after consulting others he returns in AD 1106.

9.15 So, between myself and God Most High, I allowed myself to remain in seclusion, excusing myself on the grounds that I was unable to make the truth prevail by argument. Then God Most High decreed that the ruler of the time should be moved to act of his own accord, not at anyone else's prompting. He issued a binding order that I set out for Nishapur to remedy this slackness, and the order was so insistent that, had I persisted in refusing, it would have ended in estrangement. It occurred to me that the grounds for my dispensation had grown weak. What keeps you clinging to seclusion should not be laziness and ease, the wish to preserve your dignity and to shield yourself from people's harm. You should not grant yourself a dispensation because dealing with people is hard. For God, glory be to Him, the Most High, says: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Alif Lam Mim.[5] Do people suppose that they will be left alone because they say, 'We believe,' and will not be tested? We tested those who came before them..." and so on to the end of the verse. And, mighty and majestic is He, He says to His Messenger, the most honored of His creatures: "Messengers before you were called liars, and they bore patiently being called liars and being harmed until Our help came to them. There is no changing the words of God, and you have already received some of the tidings of the messengers."[6]

9.16 And, mighty and majestic is He, He says: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Ya Sin. By the wise Quran..." down to His words, "You can warn only the one who

5 The order came from Fakhr al-Mulk, the Seljuk vizier governing Khurasan.
6 Quran 29:1–3; 6:34.

follows the Reminder and fears the Merciful, unseen." I consulted a number of people who were masters of hearts and of direct vision about this, and they agreed in advising me to give up seclusion and leave my retreat. On top of this came many dreams of righteous people, reported again and again from many sources, testifying that this move was the beginning of good and right guidance, decreed by God, glory be to Him, at the head of this century. So hope grew firm, and a good opinion prevailed because of these testimonies—and God, glory be to Him, has promised to revive His religion at the head of every century. God Most High made the move to Nishapur easy, to take up this important task, in Dhu l-Qaʿda of the year 499 AH (AD 1106). I had left Baghdad in Dhu l-Qaʿda of the year 488 AH (AD 1095). So the period of seclusion came to eleven years.[7] This was a move God Most High decreed, one of the marvels of His decrees, for it had never once flashed into my heart during this seclusion—just as leaving Baghdad and withdrawing from those circumstances had never even occurred to me as possible. God Most High is the one who turns hearts and states about, and "the heart of the believer is between two of the fingers of the Merciful." I know that, even though I have returned to spreading knowledge, I have not returned. For to return is to go back to what was before. In that earlier time I spread the knowledge by which prestige is won, and I called people to it by my words and my deeds; that was my aim and my intention. But now I call people to the knowledge by which prestige is abandoned, and by which one comes to know how low the rank of prestige really is.

9.17 This is now my intention, my aim and my wish; God knows this of me. I seek to reform myself and others, and I do not know whether I shall reach my goal or be cut off before attaining my purpose. But I believe, with the faith of certainty and direct vision, that there is no power and no strength except in God, the High, the Mighty; that I did not move, but He moved me; that I did not act, but He made use of me. So I ask Him to reform me

7 Quran 36:1–11. The promise of a reviver "at the head of every century" comes from a hadith; Dhu l-Qaʿda is the eleventh month of the Islamic year.

first and then to reform others through me; to guide me and then to guide others through me; to show me the truth as truth and grant me to follow it, and to show me falsehood as falsehood and grant me to avoid it.

REMEDIES FOR EACH GROUP

He sets out how to answer the Batinis' followers, the antinomians, the philosophers and critics of scholars.

9.18 Let us now return to the causes of weak faith we mentioned, and set out the way to guide these people and rescue them from their perils. As for those who claim to be bewildered by what they heard from the party of *taʿlīm*, their cure is what we set out in *The Just Balance*, and we will not lengthen this letter by repeating it.

9.19 As for the fancies of the antinomians, we have gathered their doubts under seven headings and exposed them in *The Alchemy of Happiness* (Kīmiyāʾ al-saʿāda).[8]

9.20 As for someone whose faith has been corrupted by the path of philosophy, to the point of denying the very basis of prophecy: we have explained the true nature of prophecy and that it necessarily exists, on the evidence that there is knowledge of the special properties of drugs, of the stars and so on. We put forward that preliminary discussion precisely for this purpose. We drew the proof from the special properties found in medicine and astrology because they belong to the philosophers' own science. For every scholar of any branch of learning, such as astrology, medicine, natural science, magic and talismans, we can present an example from his own science as a demonstration of prophecy.

9.21 As for someone who affirms prophecy with his tongue but makes the ordinances of the Law conform to philosophical wisdom, he is in truth an unbeliever in prophecy. What he believes in is a sage born under a particular ascendant, whose ascendant

8 *The Alchemy of Happiness* is al-Ghazali's Persian summary of his religious teaching.

required that he be followed; and that has nothing to do with prophecy. Rather, faith in prophecy means acknowledging that there is a stage beyond reason, in which an eye opens that perceives particular objects of perception from which reason is barred—just as hearing is barred from perceiving colors, sight from perceiving sounds, and all the senses from perceiving the objects of reason. If he does not admit that this is possible, we have already established a demonstration of its possibility, and indeed of its existence. If he does admit it, then he has conceded that there are things called special properties which the workings of reason do not even come near; indeed reason all but calls them false and judges them impossible. For a daniq's weight of opium is a deadly poison, because its excessive coldness congeals the blood in the veins.[9] Whoever claims knowledge of natural science holds that any compound that cools does so only through the elements of water and earth, since these are the two cold elements. Yet it is well known that many pounds of water and earth would not cool the inside of the body to that degree. So if a natural scientist were told of this without having tested it, he would say: "This is impossible. The proof that it is impossible is that opium contains the elements of fire and air, and air and fire do not make it any colder. Suppose it were all water and earth: even that would not produce such excessive cooling. So if two hot elements are added to it, all the more reason that it would not." And he would reckon this a demonstration! Most of the philosophers' demonstrations in natural science and metaphysics are built on this sort of thing. For they conceived of things only as far as they had found and understood them, and whatever they were not familiar with, they reckoned impossible. If truthful dreams were not familiar, and someone claimed that when the senses are at rest he knows the unseen, people with minds like these would deny it. If someone were asked, "Could there be something in the world the size of a grain which, placed in a town, would consume that whole town and

9 The ascendant is the sign of the zodiac rising at the moment of birth, the key to a horoscope. A daniq is a small weight, one sixth of a dirham.

then consume itself, leaving nothing of the town or of what is in it, and nothing of itself?" he would say, "That is impossible; it belongs among the fables!" Yet this is what fire does, and someone who had never seen fire would deny it on hearing it described. Most denial of the marvels of the afterlife is of this kind. So we say to the natural scientist: "You have been forced to admit that opium has a special property of cooling that does not fit what reason understands about nature. Why, then, should it not be possible for the ordinances of the Law to have special properties for curing and purifying hearts that are not grasped by rational wisdom, but can be seen only with the eye of prophecy?" Indeed, in what they have set down in their books, they have acknowledged special properties still more astonishing than this. Among them are the wonderful, well-tested properties used to treat a pregnant woman whose labor is difficult, by means of this figure:

9.22 4 9 2
3 5 7
8 1 6[10]

9.23 It is written on two pieces of cloth that water has never touched. The pregnant woman looks at them with her own eyes and places them under her feet, and the child at once hastens to come out. They have admitted that this is possible and have recorded it in *The Wonders of Special Properties* (ʿAjāʾib al-khawāṣṣ). It is a figure of nine cells, in which particular numerals are inscribed so that the sum of any one line is fifteen, whether you read it down the figure, across it or diagonally.

9.24 I wish I knew! How can someone believe that, and yet his mind has no room to accept that fixing the dawn prayer at two cycles, the noon prayer at four and the sunset prayer at three is due to special properties that philosophical reflection does not know? Their cause is the difference between these times, and such properties are grasped only by the light of prophecy. The

10 In the Arabic each row is also written in letters: the same numbers in the Arabic alphabet used as numerals (abjad).

strange thing is that if we changed the wording to the language of the astrologers, they would understand the difference between these times. We would say: "Doesn't the judgment of a horoscope differ according to whether the sun is at mid-heaven, in the ascendant or in the descendant? So much so that on this basis they calculate, in their progressions, differences in treatment and variations in lifespans and appointed hours of death. Yet there is no difference between noon and the sun's being at mid-heaven, nor between sunset and the sun's being in the descendant. Is there any reason for believing the one and not the other?" None, except that he hears the one in the language of an astrologer, whose lies he may have found out a hundred times.[11] Yet he keeps coming back to believing him. So if the astrologer told him, "When the sun is at mid-heaven, and such-and-such a star is in aspect to it, and the ascendant is such-and-such a sign, if you put on a new garment at that time you will be killed in that garment!" he would not put on the garment at that time, and might even endure bitter cold because of it—and he may have heard this from an astrologer whose lies he has discovered several times!

9.25 I wish I knew! If someone's mind has room to accept such oddities, and he is compelled to admit that they are special properties—knowledge of which was a miracle granted to some of the prophets—how can he deny the like when he hears it from a truthful prophet, supported by miracles, who was never once known to lie? Why has his mind no room for its possibility?

9.26 If a philosopher denies that such special properties are possible in the number of cycles of prayer, the stoning of the pillars, the number of essential rites of the Pilgrimage and the other acts of worship of the Law, he will find no difference at all between these and the special properties of drugs and stars. He may say: "I have tested some astrology and some medicine and found some of it true, so belief in it arose in my mind, and my sense that it was far-fetched, and my aversion to it, fell away

11 The five daily prayers are made up of fixed numbers of cycles (*rakʿa*s) of bowing and prostration.

from my heart. This I have not tested, so how am I to know that it exists and is real?" If you do grant that it is possible, I say: "You do not limit yourself to believing what you have tested. You have listened to the reports of those who tested things and followed them on authority. So listen to what the prophets say, for they tested and saw directly the truth in all that the Law brings. Follow their path, and you will grasp some of it by direct vision."[12]

9.27 Moreover, I say: "Even if you have not tested it, your reason requires you absolutely to believe and follow. Suppose a man has come of age and has his wits, and has never experienced illness. He falls ill. He has a loving father, skilled in medicine, whose claim to medical knowledge he has heard ever since he came to understanding. His father mixes a medicine for him and says, 'This is good for your illness and will cure you of your sickness.' What does his reason require, if the medicine is bitter and foul-tasting: that he take it? Or that he call it a lie and say, 'I can't see how this medicine is suited to bringing about a cure, and I have not tested it!'? You would surely think him a fool if he did that! In the same way, people of insight think you a fool for hesitating!" If you say, "How am I to know the loving concern of the Prophet (God bless him and grant him peace) and his knowledge of this medicine?" I say: "And how did you know your father's loving concern, when that is not something perceived by the senses? You knew it from the evident signs of his conduct and the evidence of his actions in all his comings and goings: a necessary knowledge about which you have no doubt."

9.28 Whoever reflects on the sayings of the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), and on the reports of his concern to guide people and his gentleness in drawing them, with every kind of kindness and gentleness, toward better character and toward setting right their relations with one another—in short, toward whatever sets right their religion and their worldly life—will attain a necessary knowledge that his loving

12 The stoning of the pillars at Mina, near Mecca, with a fixed number of pebbles is one of the rites of the Pilgrimage.

concern (God bless him and grant him peace) for his community is greater than a father's loving concern for his child.

9.29 And when he reflects on the marvelous deeds that appeared at his hands, on the marvels of the unseen that the Quran told of through his tongue and that are told of in the reports, and on what he foretold about the end of time, which came to pass just as he foretold it, he will know by necessary knowledge that he reached the stage beyond reason, and that the eye was opened for him through which the unseen is unveiled—the unseen that only the elite perceive, and the things that reason does not grasp.

9.30 This, then, is the method for attaining necessary knowledge that the Prophet (God bless him and grant him peace) is truthful. So try it: meditate on the Quran and study the reports, and you will know it by seeing it for yourself.

9.31 This much is enough to awaken the would-be philosophers. We have mentioned it because it is so badly needed in this age.

9.32 As for the fourth cause—weak faith caused by the conduct of scholars—this disease is treated in three ways. The first is that you say: "The scholar who, you claim, consumes what is forbidden knows that it is forbidden just as you know that wine, pork and usury are forbidden—indeed, as you know that backbiting, lying and slander are forbidden. You know that, and you do it anyway, not because you lack faith that it is a sin, but because your appetite overpowers you. His appetite is like yours, and it has overpowered him as it has overpowered you. His knowledge of questions beyond this, which sets him apart from you, does not bring with it any greater restraint from this particular prohibited thing. How many people who believe in medicine cannot keep away from fruit and cold water, even though the physician has warned them against it! That does not show that these are harmless, or that belief in medicine is unsound. This is how the lapses of scholars are to be understood."

9.33 The second is that the ordinary person should be told: "You should believe that the scholar has made his knowledge a

treasure stored up for himself in the afterlife. He thinks his knowledge will save him and intercede for him, so that he will be treated leniently in his deeds on account of the merit of his knowledge. And if it is possible that his knowledge will be an additional argument against him, it is also possible that it will be an additional rank for him; that is possible. So even if he has abandoned good deeds, he can plead his knowledge. But you, ordinary person! If you look at him and abandon good deeds, when you yourself are devoid of knowledge, you will perish through your bad deeds with no one to intercede for you!"

9.34 The third, which is the truth of the matter, is this: the true scholar commits a sin only by way of a lapse, and never persists in sins at all. For true knowledge is what makes one know that sin is a deadly poison and that the afterlife is better than this world. Whoever knows that will not sell what is better for what is lesser.

9.35 This knowledge is not attained through the kinds of learning with which most people busy themselves. That is why such learning only makes them bolder in disobeying God Most High. True knowledge, however, increases its possessor in awe, fear and hope, and that stands between him and sins—except for the lapses from which no human being is free in moments of weakness, and these do not indicate weak faith. For the believer is often tested and often repents; he is far from persisting and being bent on sin.

9.36 This is what I wished to say in censure of philosophy and *taʿlīm*, of their dangers, and of the dangers of those who opposed them in the wrong way.

9.37 We ask God the Mighty to make us among those He has preferred and chosen, led to the truth and guided; inspired to remember Him so that they do not forget Him; protected from the evil of their own selves so that they prefer nothing to Him; and taken wholly for Himself so that they worship none but Him. May God bless our master Muhammad, his family and his companions, and grant them peace.