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Virtue and the Law in al-Ghazālī's Ethics

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1. Introduction

Among al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) many enduring contributions to the Islamic intellectual tradition, one of the most outstanding was his role in crystallising a distinctive theological approach to the virtues. A project begun in his early treatise *The Scale of Action (Mizān al-'amal)*, it achieved consummate form in his magisterial work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn)*. There, over more than 3,000 pages of printed text, al-Ghazālī unfolded a complex vision of the religious life whose hallmark was an emphasis on the state of the heart as the focus of ethical attention. This was a vision with both Sufi and philosophical inspirations, and one of its key achievements was to integrate more firmly ethical ideas stemming from the Greek philosophical tradition into a scriptural framework. In doing so, it built on and took forward the efforts of earlier thinkers, such as the eleventh-century scholar al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī.

Despite its significance, many questions about al-Ghazālī's ethics of virtue remain open, and both its internal terrain and its external contexts and relations are in large part unmapped. My aim in this essay is to help advance this cartography by focusing on a question that is central for understanding the nature of al-Ghazālī's ethical project and its creative interleaving of philosophical and scriptural resources: the relation between virtue and the religious Law. It is a question that imposes itself naturally coming from contemporary moral philosophy, where the battle lines are often crisply drawn between theories that make virtue foundational and theories oriented around duty. Yet the question also rises organically from within the Islamic context itself. Although we may have moved on from narrow accounts of Islam as a nomocracy and of Islamic values as exhausted by behavioural stipulations, the importance of law for what we may call Islamic ethics is beyond dispute. The key concepts in the disciplines of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) were obligation and prohibition, and the concomitant focus was on action as an object of evaluative assessment. Al-Ghazālī himself was an eminent contributor to these disciplines and their partner genre, dialectical theology (*kalām*), and in those contexts, he engaged in high-level debates about what makes *actions* right or wrong, how we know they are right or wrong, how free we are to perform these actions, or what value they carry when God performs them. Looking across from one genre to the other, from works of jurisprudence and theology to works on the virtues, it will be natural to puzzle over how their ethical viewpoints cohere. In part, this is a

question—vexed, as students of Islamic intellectual history know—about how we unify Ghazālī’s perspective as expressed across different works and times. From another angle, it is also a question about how we understand the relations between these different genres and how we unify Islamic ethics as a discourse.

Approached philosophically, the sense of puzzlement can be distilled into a simple question. Just how does the evaluative focus on right action in theological and juridical works relate to the focus on right character in al-Ghazālī’s works on the virtues? Could we, for example, ask whether one of the two—action or character—is *primary*? To the extent that the focus on character reflects the concerns of Greek philosophical ethics, answering this question holds the key to a more fine-grained understanding of the Islamic reception of this ethics and to documenting how its distinctive concerns enter into conversation with the premises of the Islamic faith. Yet the answer to this question is a chapter in at least two other stories. Given the additional Sufi roots of the concern with character, it is equally a chapter in the parallel story about Sufi attitudes to the *shari‘a* and Sufi attempts to account for the relation between Sufi spirituality and the requirements of the Law. It is also, as will emerge, a chapter in the story of longstanding theological questions about the nature of the religious Law, and the role of reason in confronting revealed scripture. And of course, it is a chapter in our evolving understanding of al-Ghazālī’s specific relation to these different contexts and fields.

While al-Ghazālī’s attitude to philosophy has been a subject of debate, in questions of ethics his philosophical debts are clearer and less open to dispute.¹ This is reflected in the open if qualified welcome al-Ghazālī extends to ethics from among other philosophical subjects in his autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error (al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl)*.² These debts are visible on a number of levels, including al-Ghazālī’s understanding of human psychology and the constitutive powers of the soul, his account of how the virtues relate to these powers, and his identification and ordering of the specific virtues. They are evident in his general conceptualisation of virtue as a mean between extremes, as well as in his conceptualisation of human happiness, taken as the actualisation of intellectual capabilities that represent the distinctively human perfection. And they are also evident in the way he connects the two ideas, presenting virtue as necessary for happiness, in line with a familiar philosophical conception of *eudaimonia*.

Some of these debts are plainer to behold in the *Scale of Action* than in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, where they are embedded in a more composite intellectual mosaic

¹ At least at the present time, where scholarly opinion is more strongly inclined to acknowledge the continuity between the more philosophical *Scale of Action* and the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, along the lines suggested by Kenneth Garden in “Revisiting al-Ghazālī’s Crisis through his *Scale for Action (Mizān al-‘Amal)*,” in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī*, ed. Georges Tamer (Leiden: Brill, 2015) (see e.g. the concluding statement at p. 228) and also in *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and His Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). The same assumption shapes the helpful work of Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1975). For some context on earlier debates, and a particular take on them, see Muhammad Abul Quasem, “Al-Ghazālī’s Rejection of Philosophic Ethics,” *Islamic Studies* 13 (1974), 111-27.

² See the remarks in *The Deliverer from Error/al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, ed. Jamīl Ṣalībā and Kāmil ‘Ayyād (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1967, 7th ed.), 86-90. For an in-depth analysis of these remarks, see Taneli Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics,” *Numen* 63 (2016), 271-298; also Sherif, *Ghazālī’s Theory of Virtue*, 17-18, and Abul Quasem, “Al-Ghazālī’s Rejection of Philosophic Ethics.” For further discussion of al-Ghazālī’s relationship to philosophical ethics focusing on al-Ghazālī’s treatment of one specific ancient ideal of character, the virtue of greatness of soul, see also my *Virtues of Greatness in the Arabic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), part 1.

that imparts a different glaze to some of the philosophical elements. In this essay, my focus will chiefly fall on the *Revival*, as it is there that al-Ghazālī delivers the richest material for answering the question I outlined concerning the relation between virtue and the religious Law, or character and action. The Law commands certain modes of *acting*: it commands us to behave in certain ways and avoid others.³ Al-Ghazālī, in this book, commends certain modes of *being*: he commends that we think and feel in certain ways and avoid others. In the *Revival*, these modes of being include familiar philosophical virtues such as courage, temperance, and justice, as well as spiritual qualities foregrounded by the Sufis, such as hope, gratitude, patience, love, and trust in God. How do these two sets of values—actions and states of character—relate? Does one have *explanatory primacy* over the other, serving in a foundational role?

The answer to this question, to preview it, is unequivocal (a few interpretive wrinkles to the side). It is states of character, on al-Ghazālī’s view, that possess evaluative primacy. This ontological view is reflected in a particular understanding of the function of the religious Law. This function is pedagogical: the performance of the actions commanded by the Law serves to educate character. In setting out al-Ghazālī’s account, my aim will be twofold: to probe the content of his account (the task of sections 1-3); and to situate it in a broader context (the task of section 4). This is an aspect of al-Ghazālī’s ethical thought that again betrays important philosophical debts, evoking ideas that had currency both among ancient philosophers and among their successors in the Muslim world, including al-Fārābī (d. 950/951), Miskawayh (d. 1030), and Avicenna (d. 1037). The distinctive character of al-Ghazālī’s development of these ideas only emerges by setting it against this canvas.

2. Action and Character: A Question of Primacy

In philosophical circles, the notion of “explanatory primacy” was introduced by the philosopher Gary Watson to identify a claim that he took to be distinctive of an ethics of virtue. In an ethics of virtue, “how it is best or right or proper to conduct oneself is explained in terms of how it is best for a human being to be.”⁴ The value of action is grounded in the value of virtue, rather than the reverse. Watson’s distinction can be seen as a more rigorous restatement of the common observation that the central question in an ethics of virtue is not “What ought I to do?” but rather “What kind of person should I be?” It will be helpful to keep this distinction in mind in turning to consider al-Ghazālī. Among other things, it suggests that al-Ghazālī’s answer to the question of primacy will also determine the answer to another basic question: Is al-Ghazālī’s ethics in fact a type of virtue ethics?

To locate the relevant evidence, one has to cast one’s nets wide over the *Revival*, as this evidence only emerges piecemeal across different contexts. A normative work with a strong theoretical backbone, the *Revival* often broaches higher-level questions *ad hoc* as its normative exposition demands. And on a first hearing, the evidence for this particular

³ This phrasing may seem misleading if we take “Law” in an inclusive sense, where it designates the totality of norms indicated in scriptural texts, and not merely the rules elaborated in books of jurisprudence. Many writers on the virtues, including al-Ghazālī, considered their ideals of character to enjoy scriptural support (in addition to any support they found in extra-scriptural discourses). The hadith compilations on the topic of *makārim al-akhlāq* provide the readiest token of this. In this essay, “(religious) Law” will be generally used in the more restrictive sense.

⁴ Gary Watson, “On the Primacy of Character,” in *Identity, Character, and Morality*, ed. Owen J. Flanagan and Amélie O. Rorty (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 451.

question appears to tip the balance in one very specific direction: it is action that carries explanatory primacy. This is the obvious import of a statement that appears at a nodal juncture of the *Revival*, in the book titled *Discipline of the Soul (Kitāb Riyāḍat al-naḥs)*, where al-Ghazālī lays out his core concepts and offers to define them. The term “character trait” (*khuluq*) is then defined as follows: it is “a stable disposition (*hay’a rāsikha*) of the soul which causes actions to issue with facility and ease, without need for study and reflection. *If the disposition is such that it issues in fine actions praised by . . . the Law (shar’an), it is called a good character trait (khuluq ḥasan)*”⁵—or as al-Ghazālī elsewhere couches it, a virtue (*fadīla*). The message seems clear: whether we call a state of character a virtue depends on first considering the actions to which it leads. If these actions conform with the Law, then it is a virtue, otherwise a vice. The Archimedean point, on this model, is the value of actions, which we know through the services of the revealed Law. If we wished to give this model a name, we might call it “virtue legalism,” on analogy with “virtue consequentialism” in its philosophical usage, which grounds the status of a trait as a virtue or vice in its tendency to produce certain kinds of consequences.⁶

This understanding is reinforced in several other places of al-Ghazālī’s work, where the emphasis appears to fall squarely on action as the locus of value. It is actions that are named as the causes of reward and punishment in the book *On Knowledge (Kitāb al-’ilm)*, and that feature in al-Ghazālī’s account of posthumous reckoning in *The Remembrance of Death (Kitāb Dhikr al-mawt)*, where deeds are presented as transferrable capital that can be used to settle moral accounts.⁷ In the vertiginously moralised picture of daily life set out in *Vigilance and Self-Judgement (Kitāb al-Murāqaba wa’l-muḥāsaba)*, where al-Ghazālī shows his reader how to call the seconds and minutes of his day to account, it is actions that feature as the object of ever-watchful attention. The present is never neutral: at every moment a person will be confronted with an obligatory action he must perform, a prohibited action he must abstain from, a recommended action he has been encouraged to perform, or a permissible action that benefits his body or mind—so let him keep passing his actions through these sieves. Going over one’s day when present has become past, vigilance ceding to self-judgement, it is one’s actions one must pass in review.⁸

Much of this perspective reflects, and is articulated by reference to, important bodies of scriptural evidence. The Qur’an promises that anyone who has “*done (ya’malu) an atom’s weight of good*” or “*atom’s weight of evil*” shall see it requited (Q 99:7). The Qur’an and hadith speak of a scale (*mīzān*) to be brought out on the Day of Judgement, on which good deeds and bad deeds (*ḥasanāt, sayyi’āt*) will be weighed.⁹ This perspective, as already mentioned, also meshes with the one expressed by al-Ghazālī in many other works, notably in legal theory

⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences/Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Lajnat Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1356–57 AH [1937–38]), 8:1434, emphasis added. The word dropped from the quote text is reason (*’aql*), which introduces a different set of gnarled questions that are beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶ See Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter 4, for a prominent statement of this view, and for a more recent account, Ben Bradley, “Contemporary Consequentialist Theories of Virtue,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). If conformity with law is included in the scope of “consequences,” this model of course becomes a subset of the consequentialist one.

⁷ See respectively *Iḥyā’*, 1: 126 (*tā’āt/thawāb, ma’āṣi’/iqāb*), and 16:2161 ff. (16:2963: *yas’aluhu . . . ’an qalīl ’amalihi wa-kathīrihi*; cf. 2969–70 for the point about transferrable credit). Cf. 15:2917, emphasising the beneficial and harmful nature of actions (*mā yaḍurruhu wa-yanfa’uhu min ḥasanātihi wa-sayyi’ātihi*).

⁸ For the former point, see *Iḥyā’*, 15:2754–55, and for the stage of self-judgement, 2759–60.

⁹ *Iḥyā’*, 1:158–9.

and dialectical theology. It is a question about the status of *actions* (*aḥkām al-af'āl*) that focuses al-Ghazālī's energies in his work on legal theory, the *Quintessence of the Principles of Law* (*al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*), and a question about what we mean when we call *actions* "good," "bad" or "obligatory" (*ḥasan, qabīḥ, wājib*) that preoccupies him in his *kalām* work, *Moderation in Belief* (*al-Iqtisād fi'l-i'tiqād*). A few pages down from the passage of the *Discipline of the Soul* quoted above, al-Ghazālī restates the key point: "salvation is only obtained through righteous works (*a'māl ṣāliḥa*), and righteous works only issue from fine character traits."¹⁰ The message, again, rings clear: the main bearer of value is action, and inner states are only valued insofar as they lead to its performance.

Part of the interest of this model lies in the historical parallels it evokes with other religious contexts. Arguing against a common narrative about the historical development of the virtues, the intellectual historian Jerome Schneewind has suggested that during the formative period of modern European philosophy, the virtues were not so much neglected as filtered through a Christian viewpoint that carried a strong legalistic emphasis. The resulting conception of virtue found paradigmatic expression in John Locke's statement that the "rectitude or obliquity" of the virtues and vices respectively "consists in the agreement with those patterns prescribed by some law," and again in the definition of virtue given by one seventeenth-century scholar commenting on the *Nicomachean Ethics*: it is "a constant disposition of the soul to live according to law." Schneewind concludes: "The assumption almost universally made is that if the virtues are important it is precisely because they are the habits . . . of obeying the moral laws."¹¹

Yet however things may stand with Christian authors theorising the relation of virtue and the Law, a wider sweep of the evidence makes clear that "virtue legalism" does not represent al-Ghazālī's considered view in the *Revival*. The evidence surveyed above is itself far from decisive. Al-Ghazālī's discussion of vigilance and self-judgement, for example, does not *entirely* leave mental states out of view.¹² Similarly, al-Ghazālī elsewhere draws a distinction between salvation (*najāt*) and happiness (*sa'āda*) in the next life, with the latter representing a higher state than the former, and it is not impossible that this distinction conditions and serves to relativize the significance of his last-quoted remark.¹³ No less importantly, the posthumous scale was explicitly reported by the Prophet to measure not only a person's actions but their character.¹⁴ In a sign of the delicacy of these interpretive questions, in fact, a number of scholars, including al-Ghazālī himself, take the term *'amal*, which I have translated as "work," to *include* "character" in its semantic scope.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Iḥyā'*, 8:1453.

¹¹ "The Misfortunes of Virtue," in his *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 180.

¹² At the stage of vigilance, for example, al-Ghazālī also applies a virtue-themed sieve to the present moment: at every moment one will *either* have cause to exercise the virtue of gratitude *or* that of patience (*Iḥyā'*, 15:2754). And at the self-judgement stage, he also refers to the need to review one's inner states (*khawāṭiruhu wa-afkāruhu*) and to attend to acts of disobedience perpetrated by the heart (*ma'ṣiyatuhu bi'l-qalb*) (ibid, 2759-60). Al-Ghazālī's use of *ma'ṣiyya* to refer to violations of a mental kind also means this term cannot be automatically taken as a reference to actions in a simple bodily sense.

¹³ *Iḥyā'*, 1:90.

¹⁴ In one of its versions, cited by al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā'*, 8:1428: "The heaviest things that will be placed on the Scale on the Day of Judgement are fear of God and good character."

¹⁵ This is a pervasive pattern, but it is exemplified, indicatively, in the remark opening the *Discipline of the Soul* that "good character (*al-khuluq al-ḥasan*) is . . . the most excellent work (*afḍal a'māl*) of the righteous" (*Iḥyā'*, 8:1426). Even more directly: ". . . faith and good character . . . by which I mean knowledge (*'ilm*) and action (*'amal*)" (ibid, 12:2236). This equation is also on display in the very title of al-Ghazālī's treatise, *The Scale of*

Thankfully, the evidence al-Ghazālī provides elsewhere in the *Revival* is definite enough that we need not rely on an unpicking of such delicate points in order to distil his position. The clearest expression of his understanding is given in a series of remarks appearing in the book *On Patience and Gratitude* (*Kitāb al-Ṣabr wa'l-shukr*), in the context of a discussion of the relative merits of patience and gratitude as “stations” (*maqāmāt*) of the spiritual life. “Stations” is al-Ghazālī’s Sufi term of choice, which, in the fourth quarter of the *Revival*, dedicated to the spiritual virtues, mostly supplants other ways of speaking about character, notably through the vocabulary of “virtue” (*faḍīla*) or even “character (trait)” (*khuluq*). His more philosophical perspective on character in *Discipline of the Soul*, as a stable disposition that manifests in action, here yields to a different scheme involving three structural elements: cognitions or beliefs (*ma’ārif*), states (*ahwāl*), and actions (*a’māl*). “Stations” are formed out of (*tantaẓimu*) these three elements.¹⁶ There are interesting and somewhat difficult questions about how this scheme relates to the more philosophical scheme presented earlier in the *Revival*. The hardest question here is whether, if we wished to identify one of these three elements with the “stable disposition” named earlier (hence with the concept of “character trait” or “virtue”), we should settle on “station” or “state” as the most immediate correlate. For our purposes, we are best off treating both of these as potential correlates, and hearing al-Ghazālī’s ensuing comments about the relation of states and actions as a direct contribution to our question about the relation of virtue and action.

One important observation is that there is not a *single* way of characterising this relation, or a single direction in which this relation moves. One way, or direction, is picked out by al-Ghazālī at the opening of *Patience and Gratitude*, where he observes that among these three items, “cognitions are the foundation (*uṣūl*); these produce states; and states generate actions.”¹⁷ The characterisation here is one of causal and temporal priority: A leads to B, which leads to C. It is difficult to say more about this characterisation without broaching the difficult question just mentioned, but the simplest way of illustrating what al-Ghazālī has in mind in broad brushstrokes is through the examples of love (*maḥabba*) and renunciation (*zuhd*), both discussed at length in the last quarter of the *Revival*. To love God (a state), one must first know God (cognition); and this love is then expressed in a host of devotional and contemplative activities (action). Similarly, a cognition of the relative superiority of the next world over the present world results in the turning-away of desire from the present world (a state) and thereby in the (act of) abstaining from it. If we rolled “states” and “cognitions” into one as dispositions, we would recognise as the kernel the familiar insight that virtue manifests in action.¹⁸

Yet it is another way of characterising the relation that engrosses al-Ghazālī’s attention later in the book, in that section on the relative merits of patience and gratitude. There, his main focus is not on the question of what comes first *causally*, but what comes first *evaluatively*. And his answer to that question rings out with crystalline clarity.

Action, an otherwise strange choice of title for a work dealing mainly with questions of character. Would a better translation of the title be *The Scale of Character*?

¹⁶ *Iḥyā’*, 12:2171.

¹⁷ *Iḥyā’*, 12:2171. This type of causal characterisation here and elsewhere may invite tantalising questions about the deeper ontological commitments that underpin it, given the extensive debate that al-Ghazālī’s understanding of causality has provoked among commentators. This is not a debate I can enter into (al-Ghazālī himself calls little attention to higher-order metaphysical questions in this practical context), but for a good starting point, see Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ A philosophical insight that al-Ghazālī himself formulates clearly elsewhere: *al-af’āl natā’ij al-akhlāq*. E.g. *The Scale of Action/Mīzān al-’amal*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1964), 247.

When these three elements are measured against each other, people who attend solely to the outer aspect of things (*ẓawāhir*) imagine that cognitions are desired for the sake of states and states are desired for the sake of actions, actions having the greatest value (*afḍal*). People of insight, however, take the opposite view. Actions are desired for the sake of states, and states are desired for the sake of cognitions. So cognitions have the greatest value, then states, then actions; because when something is desired for the sake of something else, the latter inevitably has greater value than the former.¹⁹

Adumbrated here is an understanding of the importance of character that receives pervasive expression throughout the *Revival*, as also the *Scale*. The value of improving one's character—or in a-Ghazālī's more Sufi idiom, the state of one's heart—is not intrinsic but instrumental. It is to be understood under its description as a means for attaining the end that *does* carry intrinsic value, namely knowledge. The dignity and perfection of human beings lies in their ability to know, and the highest knowledge is knowledge of God. What prevents us from realising this natural tendency of our being, in which our true happiness (*'ayn al-sa'āda*) lies, are the desires and attachments that cloud the soul.²⁰ In one important sense, virtuous character simply consists in the mastery of these desires and the removal of these attachments.²¹

Between character and action, then, it is the former that possesses explanatory primacy.²² But *absolute* explanatory primacy is carried by a cognitive status that is distinct from both. In light of this, how we answer the related question—"Is al-Ghazālī's ethics a type of virtue ethics?"—will partly depend on whether we think this cognitive status can be articulated, not, as al-Ghazālī generally invites us, in terms of the possession of a set of correct beliefs or determinate mental content (*'ulūm* or *ma'ārif*), but in dispositional terms, as an intellectual virtue.²³ The resulting view would be familiar to philosophers: moral virtue is subservient to intellectual virtue and its value lies in facilitating the latter.

Bracketing this point, it is the ramifications of this core idea that should engage us. I said that al-Ghazālī's emphasis is on what comes first evaluatively rather than causally. Yet in fact a concern with causal relations is not absent from his discussion. This may already have been evident from the statement already quoted, but it becomes even clearer elsewhere. "The purpose (or benefit: *fā'ida*) of improving the state of the heart (*ḥāl al-qalb*)," he writes close on the heels of the passage quoted above, "is that the majesty of God be revealed to one in His essence, attributes, and actions." And "the purpose of improving action is to

¹⁹ *Iḥyā'*, 12:2297-98.

²⁰ These ideas receive expression in the lines that immediately follow the quoted passage: *Iḥyā'*, 12: 2298. Al-Ghazālī's instrumental view of virtue is expressed in many other locations. See e.g. *Mizān*, 194-97, and even more clearly 217-221 (220: ethical refinement is *mā urīda li-ghayrihi*, knowledge is *mā urīda li-nafsihi*). Cf. *Iḥyā'*, 15:2806: it would be a waste of one's life if one spent it in pursuit of self-improvement (*iṣlāḥ nafsihi*) and never got to the real point (*maṭlab*), which is self-forgetful contemplation of God's majesty and beauty.

²¹ E.g. *Mizān*, 218-19: "what is meant by 'action' (*'amal*=ethical refinement) is the breaking of the power of the appetites . . . so that the malignant dispositions and the vicious attachments that bind the soul to the lowly region are effaced from it."

²² This conclusion is also supported from a different direction by al-Ghazālī's discussion of inner beauty as a cause of love in the book *On Love*. It is a person's qualities of character, not the acts she performs (though this is how her character will be manifested externally), that forms the true bearer of beauty and object of love. See *Iḥyā'*, 14:2586.

²³ Al-Ghazālī certainly brings up the virtue of wisdom (*ḥikma*) in various contexts, and especially in the *Mizān* he has plenty to say about the intellectual virtues, but this emphasis does not shape the Gestalt.

improve the state of the heart.”²⁴ In one respect, this merely restates the understanding of the evaluative relations between the three elements (action, virtue, cognition) just sketched out. Yet it does so by drawing sharper attention to a point about action that is logically distinct from the claim of evaluative primacy taken in its simplest form. It is not simply that action is inferior in value to a person’s character or inner state. It is that it serves as a means of improving one’s character or state. Unlike the former, the latter is a factual claim about cause and effect. The causal sequence at stake, it may be noted, is the very reverse of the one outlined above (cognitions lead to states which lead to actions), which I suggested may be understood most intuitively via the simple idea that virtue manifests in action. Yet the idea conveyed by the present sequence will seem no less intuitive. It is a basic educational insight associated most strongly with Aristotle: we acquire virtue *through* action. In a familiar lapidary formulation: we become by doing. As Aristotle put in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, just as “we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it,” so that “we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp,” similarly “we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (1103a32-1103b2).²⁵

This pedagogical insight can be found widely among Muslim authors familiar with Aristotle’s philosophy, such as al-Fārābī and Miskawayh.²⁶ This insight underpins al-Ghazālī’s understanding of character education in the *Revival*, receiving programmatic expression in the book *Discipline of the Soul* and mobilised in many of the subsequent books that treat the individual virtues and vices. It is often couched using the medical analogy that forms of a staple of philosophical writing on ethics, as can be seen from a key statement from the *Discipline of the Soul*.

Just as the cause that disturbs the balance of the body and induces malady is treated through its opposite—heat through cold, for example, and cold through heat—likewise vice, which is the malady of the heart, is treated through its opposite. Thus, the malady of ignorance is treated by learning, the malady of miserliness by deliberately acting generously (*tasakhkhī*), the malady of pride by deliberately acting humbly (*tawāḍuʿ*), and the malady of gluttony by effortfully abstaining from the object of desire.²⁷

Even faith (*īmān*) can be viewed from this perspective, so that actions serve to confirm and increase it.²⁸ Actions, al-Ghazālī pithily puts it in *Patience and Gratitude*, are a form of medicine: they are “a way of treating the malady of human hearts.”²⁹ Just how seriously al-Ghazālī takes Aristotle’s insight about action as a means of effecting character change is made startlingly clear in the book *On Fear and Hope* (*Kitāb al-Khawf wa’l-rajāʿ*). The reason our character can no longer be modified after we die, al-Ghazālī observes there, is because

²⁴ *Iḥyāʿ*, 12: 2298.

²⁵ I draw on the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999).

²⁶ See e.g. al-Fārābī, *Aphorisms of the Statesman/Fuṣūl muntazaʿa*, ed. Fauzi M. Najjar (Beirut: Dar El-Mashreq, 1971), 30, and see below for some of Miskawayh’s relevant ideas.

²⁷ *Iḥyāʿ*, 8:1448; and see the concentrated discussion of this principle at pp. 1443-47. This approach does not exhaust al-Ghazālī’s view of the methods of character reform, as this includes a more cognitive type of therapy.

²⁸ *Iḥyāʿ*, 2:211-12. This is also a contribution to a larger theological debate about whether faith can increase and decrease.

²⁹ *Iḥyāʿ*, 12:2300.

character is modified through action, hence through the body, and our bodily parts cease to exist upon death.³⁰

3. Law and the Education of Character

Action, then, is not only evaluatively secondary to virtue, but serves as a means for cultivating it. Yet to fill out this picture, and to bring into view some of its bolder implications for the relation between virtue and the religious Law, we need to take a further step. Above, we heard al-Ghazālī speak of the improvement of the heart as the “purpose” or “benefit” of improving action, and of action as something that is “desired” (*murād*) for the sake of action.³¹ The reference, here, would seem to be to the reasons that human agents might have for choosing particular actions—as a means for reforming their character. Yet the more audacious part of al-Ghazālī’s claim involves transposing this intentional language from human beings to the divine Law. The education of character is the purpose of the Law in mandating the performance and avoidance of particular actions. This is a claim that al-Ghazālī puts clearly in a number of places, as at a juncture of the *Discipline of the Soul*, where he frames it relative to ritual observances or acts of worship (*ibādāt*). “The larger the number of acts of worship one performs over one’s lifetime,” he writes,

the greater one’s reward, the purer and more righteous one’s heart, and the firmer and more established one’s traits of character. For the intended aim (*maqṣūd*) of acts of worship is that they impact on the heart, and this effect is reinforced the more assiduously one practises them.³²

This is also the context of al-Ghazālī’s description of actions as a “way of treating the malady of human hearts,” which comes precisely in response to an objector who points out the enormous interest taken by the *shari‘a* in actions. How can al-Ghazālī’s account of the primacy of virtue be squared with this obvious fact? “When a doctor extols a particular medication,” al-Ghazālī counters, “this does not indicate that the medication is desired for its own sake, or that it is better than the state of health and the healing it results in.” His continuation is interesting in implicitly acknowledging the need to explain the gap between the surface message of the scriptural texts and their underlying aim, the apparent order of values and the true one. Often a person will be sick and be unaware of it, so that if you were to recommend a treatment point-blank they would refuse it. Take a person with a skin condition on her face where she cannot see it. The only way to get her to wash with the type of water that would cure her condition would be to sing the praises of washing with that water—without, that is, mentioning the real purpose (*maqṣūd*). (Maybe you tell her it will make her smell nice, or that washing relieves stress). Similarly, the real aim served by the Law’s injunction that we feed the poor is not simply that the poor be fed and benefited. The beggar who takes your money helps remove the “evil of miserliness and the love of the

³⁰ *Iḥyā’*, 13:2364.

³¹ Cf. the use of the term *maqṣūd* at 12:2298: “*bi-sabab al-qurb min al-maqṣūd . . .*”

³² *Iḥyā’*, 8:1444. Cf. 8:1364: “the point (*murād*) of all acts of obedience and bodily actions is the purification of the heart.”

present world” from your soul. Thus, “almsgiving purifies one’s interior (*al-ṣadaqāt tuṭahhiru al-bawāṭin*).”³³

So the real aim of the *shari‘a* may not be the one written on its sleeve. When the *shari‘a* commands particular acts, its true concern is not with these acts as ends in themselves, but as agents of inner transformation—a result they may effectuate even unbeknownst to us.³⁴

In *Patience and Gratitude*, the understanding of the religious Law just limned is set out programmatically but succinctly. To see it unfold more fully, it is to a different part of the *Revival* that one must turn: the first quarter of the book, which al-Ghazālī dedicates to acts of worship. In the introduction to the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī offers his reader a neat compass to the structure of the book. Its focus will be on the science of praxis (*mu‘āmalā*) to the exclusion of the science of disclosure (*mukāshafa*). The science of praxis divides into the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric (*bāṭin*), which respectively concern the actions of the body and the actions of the mind. The exoteric in turn divides into (1) acts of worship (*‘ibādāt*) and (2) customary acts (*‘ādāt*), while the esoteric divides into (3) blameworthy or deleterious qualities (*muhlika*) and (4) praiseworthy or salvific ones (*munjiya*).³⁵ These four subjects represent the themes of each of the four quarters of the *Revival*.

Yet this schema in many ways misrepresents the character of al-Ghazālī’s discussion in the first half of the book. In approaching acts of worship, and to a large extent customary acts, his concern is not with purely external or bodily action. The chief ground, after all, for his provocative characterisation of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) as a *mundane* science (*‘ilm al-dunyā*) concerned with merely mundane interests (*maṣāliḥ al-dunyā*), in the book *On Knowledge*, is that its scope is confined to externals. The jurist asks whether you have uttered the testimony of faith—not whether you truly believe it in your heart or rather spoke it for fear of the sword. He asks whether you bowed or prostrated correctly—not whether your mind was busily toting up the profits from your latest business deal. He checks whether you have followed the forms for the *zakat*—not whether you twisted the legal forms so far that you upheld the letter of the Law but thwarted its spirit. And it is the spirit in which we do things, the state of the heart, that makes action effective for the afterlife.³⁶ “External” action cannot be separated from its internal conditions.

This credo comes to life in al-Ghazālī’s treatment of acts of worship. Taking them up one by one—moving from purification to prayer, from *zakat* to fasting and then to the *hajj*—his concern is to show how the outer actions prescribed by the Law must be inhabited from the inside and populated with spiritual significance. For the pilgrim embarking on the *hajj*, for example, each and every one of the concrete activities that enter the experience can be approached as a metaphor pointing to a deeper spiritual meaning. Having secured a mount for his journey, the pilgrim should recall how he will be carried to the next world on the day of his funeral. Upon purchasing his garments for the pilgrimage, he should be reminded of

³³ See *Ihyā’*, 12:2299-2301, for all the above. The two examples are not entirely analogous of course (unless perhaps the therapeutic water really *does* relieve stress, etc), as the Law *also* aims at benefiting the receiver and not just the giver of alms, as al-Ghazālī himself points out elsewhere (see below).

³⁴ This last point is in overt tension with al-Ghazālī’s emphasis on the importance of knowing the purposes of the Law in other parts of his discussion (see below). I hope to explore this interpretive-cum-philosophical puzzle elsewhere.

³⁵ *Ihyā’*, 1:5.

³⁶ See *Ihyā’*, 1:30-34. A more accurate representation of al-Ghazālī’s task in the first half of the book comes on 1:29, where he describes it as “the knowledge of how the qualities of the heart percolate to the body in the performance of acts of worship and customary acts.”

the shroud in which he will be wrapped. Entering the desert and embarking on the long road to the holy precincts, he should be reminded of the arduous journey between death and the Day of Judgement. Physical acts and events serve as reminders (*tadhkira*), admonitions (*'ibra*), and pointers (*ishāra*).³⁷

Elsewhere, this metaphorical cognition gives way to a richer concern with the emotional attitudes and spiritual states that ought to accompany the performance of ritual observances. Prayer forms a case in point. It is only properly executed when a person realises a number of internal conditions (*ma'ānin bāṭina*) during its performance. These include, above all, undivided attention and presence of mind, a sense of veneration (*ta'zīm*), awe (*hayba*), and shame (*ḥayā'*) balanced by hope (*rajā'*). Departing from a view common among jurists, al-Ghazālī in fact declares the mind's presence in prayer a condition for its validity.³⁸

The aspects of al-Ghazālī's account just outlined tie in with an approach to legal requirements taken by a number of his Sufi predecessors. In articulating their distinctive attitude to the *shari'a*, prominent Sufis had on the one hand emphasised the importance of full adherence to its precepts. As al-Qushayrī (d. 1074) put it in his *Epistle (al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya)*: "Every *shari'a* which is not supported by truth is not accepted. Every truth which is not bound by the *shari'a* is not accepted." The Sufi pathway or *ṭarīqa* is an offshoot of the broader highway of the Law and thus presupposes it.³⁹ The distinctiveness of the Sufi approach rather lay in "interiorising" or "spiritualising" legal obligations, ensuring they were carried out in the right spirit and with the right attitudes. This approach finds its reflection in the prominent work of the Sufi author Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996), the *Nourishment of the Hearts (Qūt al-qulūb)*, which, as we know, exerted a strong influence on al-Ghazālī. Discussing prayer, al-Makkī emphasises the importance of humility and sincerity; the person who says "God is great" must be fully behind their words and hold nothing greater than God in their heart of hearts. Discussing the *zakat*, he highlights the need to give cheerfully, out of a desire for God rather than praise or renown, free from any feelings of superiority toward the recipient, and rather nursing a sense of love and even reverence toward them as the enabling condition for one's piety. The person performing the pilgrimage must do so in a spirit of awe and single-minded dedication to God, their heart empty of competing desires and concerns.⁴⁰

In calling attention to the importance of fulfilling certain interior conditions in carrying out the directives of the Law, al-Ghazālī thus evokes lines of thinking cultivated by several other Sufi writers before him. The actions commanded by the Law must be accompanied by certain kinds of inner states and attitudes. The more distinctive aspect of al-Ghazālī's account of ritual observances in this part of the *Revival* emerges when he resumes the language of "aims" and "purposes" we saw in *Patience and Gratitude* to frame the last point as a claim

³⁷ The last point is from *Iḥyā'*, 3:482; and see 485-86 for the other points.

³⁸ *Iḥyā'*, 2:285-92.

³⁹ Abu'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd ibn al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1972), 1:296. My phrasing here reflects Anne-Marie Schimmel's remarks about the relationship between the Sufi *ṭarīqa* and the *shari'a* in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 98-99. For more on this relation, see also Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Law and Grace in Islam: Ṣūfi Attitudes toward the Sharī'a," in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Edwin Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss, and John W. Welch (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990). And see Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), 64-65, for a comment on the Sufi "allegorization" of religious rites and a widely discussed example of this tendency.

⁴⁰ These points appear *passim* in al-Makkī's discussion of the five pillars of Islam in the 33rd chapter of the *Nourishment of the Heart/Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Maḥmūd bin Ibrāhīm bin Muḥammad al-Raḍwānī (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 2001), 3: 1171-1268.

about the reasons why these actions were instituted by the Law. This intentional focus is already flagged by the terms al-Ghazālī uses to caption his discussion in this part of the *Revival*, where the titles of individual books refer to the “Secrets” or “Mysteries” (*asrār*) of the various ritual observances. It becomes far clearer in the body of his discussion of the individual observances, and nowhere more so than in a fascinating set of programmatic remarks he offers early in the book on *The Mysteries of Zakat* (*Kitāb Asrār al-zakāt*). There, he distinguishes between three kinds of duties established by the Law. First, there are duties that were instituted purely as a means for human beings to express their servitude to God, and where the aim of the Law (*maqṣūd al-sharʿ*) is to test human beings for their obedience (*imtiḥān, ibtilāʾ*). A second class of duties was instituted for the sake of some human interest (*ḥaẓẓ*). Yet a third is a class that represents a mixture of the first two, with God’s claims and the claims of human beings combining.⁴¹

This positioning view packs a wealth of insights that here I will have to leave unmined, apart from observing that the boundaries between the three classes seem to be drawn a little too sharply. As other jurists would sometimes note, all commanded acts contain a divine claim insofar as they have been commanded, and all commanded acts contain a human claim (impacting on human interests) insofar as obedience to God’s command will be rewarded.⁴² I will return to this point shortly from a different direction. Be that as it may, this view forms the backdrop of al-Ghazālī’s approach to *zakat*, which he places in the third class. As an act of charitable giving that benefits the poor, it serves human interests. But the specific rules that must be followed also involve a kind of difficulty (*taʿab*) that range it with duties intended to test and express servitude.⁴³

A few pages down, this general outline of the purposes of *zakat* is succeeded by a more detailed exposition which both nuances and in certain respects modifies the first, while also illuminating the role that an understanding of these purposes is expected to play in the inner life of the individual. The very first task for a person interested in the proper fulfilment of the Law—that is, with a view to the hereafter—is in fact to acquire a clear conception of the purposes of *zakat*, grasping “its meaning, the type of test (*imtiḥān*) it involves, and the reason it was made a pillar of Islam.” Al-Ghazālī picks out three key meanings in this context. Firstly, *zakat* was legislated in order to test the testimony of faith, which affirms God as the sole object of worship and therefore love, by forcing us to part with money and worldly possessions. The second point of *zakat* is to express gratitude for the blessing of wealth. It is the third that will seem especially interesting to us, which is to “purify people from the quality of miserliness (*bukhl*).” For “the way to eliminate the quality of miserliness is to habituate oneself to giving out money; our love of something is only uprooted by forcing ourselves to part with it until it becomes a habit.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Iḥyāʾ*, 2:385-86.

⁴² The later Mālikite jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 1285) provides an emblematic expression of the first point: “God’s claim consists in his command and prohibition,” hence “there is no human claim that does not contain a divine claim, which is God’s command that this claim be discharged.” *The Book of Distinctions: Bright Bolts on Distinctions in their Various Sorts/Kitāb al-Furūq: Anwār al-burūq fī anwāʾ al-furūq*, ed. Muḥammad ʿUthmān (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2009), 1:312. Al-Ghazālī himself calls attention to the latter point when he observes, apropos *zakat*, that the giver should feel grateful to the receiver for benefitting him by enabling him to fulfil God’s claim and *thus* obtain salvation (=further his own good). The person who gives alms should in fact realise that in doing so he is ultimately benefitting himself (*muḥsin . . . ilā nafsihi*). *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:393.

⁴³ *Iḥyāʾ*, 2:385-86.

⁴⁴ *Iḥyāʾ*, 2:387-89; I have slightly altered al-Ghazālī’s order of presentation.

If we wished to relate this scheme to the previous one, we would most naturally align the first point with the expression of servitude and the last with the promotion of human interests.⁴⁵ Unlike the first scheme, however, whose focus was on the benefit reaped by the recipient of alms, here the focus is on the benefit reaped by the *giver*. And while the previous scheme touched on a type of well-being involving the satisfaction of worldly or material needs, the focus in this one is on a type of ethical or spiritual well-being functional for the higher ends of the next life. The intention of the Law here is to promote the ethical health of the believer, removing vice and instilling virtue. The structural role played by the Aristotelian maxim “we become by doing” in grounding this idea will be evident. Repeated often enough, the act of giving will loosen the attachment we feel toward our possessions and cure us of the vice of miserliness.

This core idea finds expression in al-Ghazālī’s treatment of the other ritual observances. The observance of fasting, thus, can be linked to the aim of learning to control physical appetites, helping cure people of gluttony (*shahwat al-baṭn*).⁴⁶ Elsewhere al-Ghazālī frames the point by reference to the ideal of godlikeness that ought to orient the spiritual efforts of the believer. “The purpose of fasting is to acquire one of the character traits of God, namely self-subsistence (*ṣamadiyya*), and to emulate the angels in abstaining from the appetites as far as possible.”⁴⁷ The most intuitive name for the virtue cultivated by this observance, taken as a disposition concerned with the regulation of physical appetites and pleasures, would be temperance or self-control, for which the most common Arabic expressions are *iffa* and *ṣabr*. It is thus relevant to note the clear links established by some of the scriptural sources cited by al-Ghazālī between fasting and the latter concept. As one well-known prophetic tradition has it, “fasting is one half of temperance (*al-ṣawm niṣf al-ṣabr*).”⁴⁸

Yet in al-Ghazālī’s work, this particular term carries a far wider range of meanings, with important implications for how we understand the relation between religious commands and moral virtue. As a virtue, *ṣabr* can be translated in at least two different ways: as “patience” or “fortitude,” and as “temperance” or “self-control.” This double profile mirrors the duplicity of the domains over which it presides: the endurance of evils and the regulation of pleasures. This in turn reflects the grammatical possibilities of the Arabic: “to endure” (*ṣabara ‘alā*), “to refrain from” (*ṣabara ‘an*).⁴⁹ Taken in the second sense, it is a quality that al-Ghazālī conceptualises in more inclusive terms that transcend the narrower domain picked out above—the regulation of physical appetites and pleasures, such as food and sex—tying it to the mastery of passions and desires more broadly. In this capacity, it arguably serves as the master virtue of his ethics, and indeed presents itself as effectively co-extensive with the concept of virtuous character. This reflects one of the key features of al-Ghazālī’s ethics, which is its tendency to conceptualise good character as fundamentally concerned with, and

⁴⁵ It would also seem reasonable to range the second point, which concerns gratitude, with the third; gratitude is after all one of the praiseworthy/salvific qualities included in the last quarter of the *Revival*. Yet al-Ghazālī does not emphasise the character-forming intention of the Law in this case. Perhaps because it is less plausible to view the promotion of gratitude as a direct pedagogical effect of the act of giving?

⁴⁶ *Iḥyā’*, 12:2299.

⁴⁷ *Iḥyā’*, 3:429. This seems a reasonable translation of *ṣamadiyya* in the context, though the term has a somewhat more complex and ambiguous reach. Compare e.g. al-Ghazālī’s remarks in *The Most Exalted Aim in Expounding God’s Beautiful Names/al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ ma’ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1971), 144.

⁴⁸ Quoted by al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā’*, 3:420.

⁴⁹ This simplifies what is a rather complex (and at times downright complicated) discussion. For the full detail of al-Ghazālī’s account of *ṣabr*, see *Iḥyā’*, 12:2171ff, and compare *Mizān*, 323-25.

manifested in, the subjugation of bodily drives and desires and by extension worldly attachments.

In one place of *Patience and Gratitude*, thus, the chief component of good character (*ḥusn al-khuluq*) is simply named as “refraining from following the demands of the appetites and the irascible drive (*tark muqtaḍā al-shahawāt wa'l-ghaḍab*).” The virtue term that al-Ghazālī uses to designate this component in this context is *’iffa*.⁵⁰ Elsewhere in the book it is *ṣabr* that is enthroned in this capacity. Temperance or self-control is the quality that enables us to resist our appetites and desires and act as we ought. “Acting as we ought” is here understood most immediately in terms of acting as the religious Law commands. Self-control is thus presented as the quality that enables “the motive of religion” (*bā’ith al-dīn*) to triumph over the “motive of wanton desire” (*bā’ith al-hawā*).⁵¹

The basic opposition between the commands of the Law and wanton desire is reflected in al-Ghazālī’s remarks about the aim of fasting. Its purpose (*maqṣūd*), he writes in *The Mysteries of Fasting (Kitāb Asrār al-ṣawm)*, is “to break down wanton desire (*hawā*) so that the soul can become capable of righteousness.”⁵² The same emphasis shapes al-Ghazālī’s discussion of the *hajj* in the relevant book. The only means of reaching God is to “free oneself from the appetites and abstain from pleasures” and devote oneself wholly to God. This is a goal that the ascetics of earlier religions (*rahbāniyyūn*) had pursued by making a wholesale break with society and worldly pleasures and fleeing to the wilderness. It is this same spiritual possibility, in a gentler form, that God sought to rekindle by instituting the *hajj* with all the rigour of its constituent rites. It was part of God’s wisdom “to make human salvation contingent on their acting in ways that oppose the wanton desire of their nature (*’alā khilāf hawā ṭibā’ihim*).”⁵³

Whether the command of the religious Law must *always* conflict with our desires is an interesting and (very) large question. Yet in many places, including the focused remarks in *On Patience and Gratitude*, this is the emphasis that shapes al-Ghazālī’s thinking; and in one place, he goes so far as to indicate one of the deepest reasons why. Acts of obedience (*tā’a*), he observes, “require self-control (*ṣabr*); and it is difficult to endure acts of obedience, for the soul naturally recoils from the state of servitude (*’ubūdiyya*) and covets the state of lordship (*rubūbiyya*).”⁵⁴ Part of the importance of this remark lies in the delicate qualification it introduces to al-Ghazālī’s earlier account of the different types of religious duties. *All* duties, this suggests, to the extent that they are instituted and upheld through a command, express God’s status as master and demand an expression of the human status as bondsman. One of the most powerful reasons why we experience such an expression as onerous is because it is in our nature as human beings to resist governance by another. This may change as one’s character is remoulded through conformity to the Law across one’s lifetime; whether it can be uprooted entirely is another question.

To the extent that the Law requires us to perform actions that oppose our desires—a point that al-Ghazālī underscores in his account of the purposes of ritual acts⁵⁵—most if not all of its commands can be seen as requiring, and by the same token inculcating, a virtue. At

⁵⁰ *Iḥyā’*, 12:2240. The other component is observing a just measure in so doing, which philosophically would seem to be inseparable from, if not implicit in, the first, to the extent that the first is a virtue.

⁵¹ *Iḥyā’*, 12:2173.

⁵² *Iḥyā’*, 3:428.

⁵³ *Iḥyā’*, 3:482-83.

⁵⁴ *Iḥyā’*, 12:2184. For another comment on the human yearning for lordship, see Vasalou, *Virtues of Greatness*, pp. 37-40.

⁵⁵ An interesting exception to this precept is prayer: see al-Ghazālī’s discussion at *Iḥyā’*, 2:285-6.

the most fundamental level, in fact, we could say that the acts commanded by the Law serve to cultivate one *single* virtue, namely the virtue of self-control in the inclusive sense outlined above. Most of the other virtues (and vices) could be said to reduce, with some analysis, to this master attribute. This includes temperance in the narrower sense and its opposite vice, gluttony, mentioned by al-Ghazālī in connection with fasting. It also includes generosity and its opposite, the vice of miserliness, mentioned by al-Ghazālī in connection with *zakat*. Both virtue-vice pairs can be reduced to a successful or defective mastery of desire (for physical pleasures and wealth respectively).

This characterisation opens out to larger questions about the structure of al-Ghazālī's ethics, and in particular how we should understand the status of individual virtues in his scheme given his overwhelming focus on the mastery of bodily desires and the removal of worldly attachments as the paradigm of virtuous character. *Can* individual virtues such as temperance or generosity be reduced to the master virtue of self-control without remainder? Although this is an interpretive question, it would be hard to settle it without engaging with philosophical approaches to the question how we individuate the virtues.⁵⁶ I won't try to resolve this question here; but I would argue that even if, on al-Ghazālī's terms, the domains of individual virtues such as temperance or generosity were to collapse into the domain of self-control, there is one distinction that it would still be important to preserve in approaching his account of the pedagogical function of the religious Law.

Because there are, it may be noticed, at least two ways of parsing the desire opposed by the religious Law in the various cases considered above—two kinds of desires that we have as human beings, which might be respectively characterised as first-order and second-order in kind. On the one hand, as human beings we desire specific goods such as physical pleasures, or wealth, or honour. (These goods, on a more traditional view, carve out the domains of the different individual virtues, whose task it is to regulate our attitude to them.) On the other hand, as human beings we desire to make our decisions about which desires we satisfy, to govern ourselves and determine our own actions. This drive to self-determination partly manifests as a need to make choices on the basis of intelligible reasons—to know *why* we do the things we do.

Though the Law's command, qua command, will always oppose the latter desire and often also a desire of the first type, in some cases its opposition to the desire for self-determination will be felt more strongly than in others; the command will be felt more openly *as* a command. These are cases in which precisely the purposes of the religious Law, the reasons why we are being commanded to a course of action, elude our understanding. Among the ritual observances al-Ghazālī discusses, it is the *hajj* that he singles out as the prime exemplar. Contrary to other ritual observances, many of the acts that comprise the *hajj* seem unintelligible to us. Why did the Law command us to run between the hills of Safa and Marwa? Why did it command us to throw stones at a particular pillar—a specified number of stones at that? Yet our incomprehension, our failure to uncover reasons, is here of the essence. For “the purpose of the law (*maqṣūd al-sharʿ*) in this,” al-Ghazālī explains, “is to test a person by means of action, so that he should exhibit his bondage and servitude by performing an act in which he cannot discern an intelligible meaning (*li-yuḥira al-ʿabd riqqahu wa-ʿubūdiyyatahu bi-fiʿl mā lā yaʿqilu lahu maʿnan*).”⁵⁷ The moment our minds identify a reason or purpose behind a command, our desire for self-determination receives a kind of satisfaction, and we

⁵⁶ For a recent engagement with this question, see Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009) chap. 6.

⁵⁷ *Ihyāʾ*, 2:385; cf. 3:483.

cease to act purely *because we were commanded*, in order to exhibit our servitude and fulfil God's right to be worshipped and obeyed. In other words, it is essential to obedience that it be blind.

This is the insight reflected in al-Ghazālī's account of religious duties, and his claim that only some of them were instituted with the pure aim of testing human obedience. Al-Ghazālī himself doesn't invite us to think of obedience as a *virtue*, but given the emphasis that shapes his account, it would not be a stretch to frame his point in these terms. The Law's distinctive character-forming effect in this subset of duties, we could then say, is to cultivate the virtue of obedience. Yet to the extent that all commands *qua* commands engage our desire for self-determination to varying degrees, as mentioned above, the same could be said of all commands. Obedience and self-control then stand out as the two master virtues inculcated by the religious Law.

4. Al-Ghazālī's Account in Context: Between Jurisprudence and Philosophy

Beginning from a question about the relation between virtue and action, I sought to reconstruct al-Ghazālī's response to this question as it unfolds in the *Revival*. It is virtue, we saw, that carries indisputable primacy over action. This evaluative claim finds its complement in a distinctive pedagogical vision of the religious Law. The purpose of the Law in instituting a number of key requirements—on one argument, *all* its requirements—is to educate human character.⁵⁸ In piecing together this account, I drew on al-Ghazālī's direct pronouncements on the topic, while also spinning out some of their less obvious implications using a stronger interpretive yarn.

This is an account, it must be said, that is not free from questions, or indeed difficulties. Some of these are philosophical, bearing on the cogency of al-Ghazālī's account, while others concern its relation to the broader economy of al-Ghazālī's views and commitments. Without trying to address these here, I will only mention one of the largest—and most incendiary—questions, which flows logically from al-Ghazālī's answer to the question of explanatory primacy. Al-Ghazālī's answer, as we saw, involves a rejection of the thesis that what makes a disposition is praiseworthy (i.e., a virtue) is that it leads us to perform particular actions whose value is identified through other means, notably through the Law commanding them. Rather, an action is praiseworthy if it manifests a virtuous disposition, or leads to its formation. Yet in *Patience and Gratitude*, he takes this point one step further through a delicate yet telling shift in vocabulary.

Any given action either leads to a state that impedes disclosure (*mukāshafa*) and serves to darken the heart . . . or to a state that is amenable to disclosure, serves to purify the heart, and severs worldly attachments. The first is called 'an act of disobedience' (*ma'ṣiyya*) and the latter 'an act of obedience' (*ṭā'a*).⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The therapeutic view of ritual acts is also expressed in other works, including the *Deliverer from Error*. For further discussion and a particular interpretation of the context of this view, see Kukkonen, "Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics," esp. 283-91. See also Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī: A Composite Ethics in Islam* (Petaling Jaya: Muhammad Abul Quasem, 1976), chapter 6.

⁵⁹ *Ihyā'*, 12:2298.

In this statement, the subordinate status of action is made startlingly plain. Right action simply *is* whatever promotes a good state of the heart. Yet al-Ghazālī does not simply speak of “right action,” but of acts of obedience and disobedience. These are terms that belong to a religious frame of reference, and are inextricably linked to the concept of the divine Law. Obedience consists in conformity with a command. As such, they crystallise a natural question: If ethical judgements on action can be derived directly from consideration of their impact on character—which, as al-Ghazālī crucially highlights in the same context, will vary from person to person—where does this leave the unconditional judgements of the religious Law? If in a given case an action would promote ethical health but violate the strict letter of the Law, would a person be licenced to choose it?

This question revives an old spectre that has sometimes haunted Sufi approaches to the Law—its antinomian potential. Without confronting this spectre, our picture of al-Ghazālī’s attitude to virtue and the Law will remain incomplete.⁶⁰ Leaving this confrontation to another occasion, here my concern is to finally begin scaffolding al-Ghazālī’s account with a broader context.

Considered from one perspective, part of the interest of his account lies in the way it engages longstanding questions about the foundations of the religious Law and the relation between reason and the Law, which were commonly fought out in the corridors of theology and legal theory. What is the nature and basis of God’s commands? Do they track objective features of actions, or are they untethered from our ordinary sense of what matters? To what extent can the human mind plumb God’s reasons for instituting the laws he did? Al-Ghazālī’s contribution to these questions across his works of theology and legal theory was far-reaching, and was unified by an emphasis on utility or human welfare (*maṣlaḥa*) as the foundational evaluative concept. His works on legal theory played a critical role in crystallising the mature theory of the aims of the Law (*maqāṣid al-sharī’a*), which identified a set of key human interests that the Law seeks to promote (namely religion, reason, life, property, and progeny). To the extent that God’s laws serve our interests, they coincide with “our ordinary sense of what matters” in a significant sense.⁶¹ A claim of the intelligibility of the Law, similarly, was enshrined in the use of analogy (*qiyās*) as a tool of legal reasoning among the majority of legal schools, and was especially strongly reflected in the use of suitability (*munāsaba*) as a means of identifying legal causes.

In one regard, the account presented in the *Revival* will seem continuous with this perspective insofar as the purpose of legal observances is linked to the promotion of human ethical health, which in turn facilitates the intellectual condition in which the distinctive perfection and happiness of human beings lies. The thicker ethical concepts of virtue and perfection mark an important extension of the minimalist utilitarian currency foregrounded by al-Ghazālī elsewhere. At the same time, unlike the five interests picked out in al-Ghazālī’s legal works, which represent *worldly* interests, the type of human well-being at stake in the *Revival* speaks to the otherworldly domain, in which our truest wellbeing is vested.

More striking than these comparisons, however, will be another point, which concerns the rational claims imported by al-Ghazālī’s account in the *Revival*. Legal scholars often

⁶⁰ We would certainly need to tackle this question before we could evaluate Kukkonen’s interesting suggestion that al-Ghazālī’s aim in offering his account of the character-forming effect of ritual law was to affirm its importance in the face of the antinomian tendencies of the views of religious ordinances expounded by the likes of al-Fārābī and Avicenna. See his “Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics,” 283-91.

⁶¹ For a more nuanced discussion of this point, see my *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chapter 4.

distinguished between two types of laws, those which concerned human transactions (*mu'āmalāt*)—such as buying and selling, lending and borrowing, or matters of marriage and inheritance—and ritual observances (*ibādāt*). From an epistemological perspective, one of the most important differences between these categories lay in how amenable they were to rational understanding, as reflected in the ability to use analogy for extending the Law in each case. The former, which revolved around human interests, offered fertile ground for rational investigation. Faced with the latter, human reason came up short against its limits.⁶² Al-Ghazālī's treatment of the purposes of the Law in the *Revival* broaches precisely this dark continent, offering a bold account of the reasons that underlie the acts of worship commanded by the Law. It is not simply that we *can* know these reasons, but that we *must* know them in order to properly carry out the Law's command, aligning our minds with the Law's intentions. Al-Ghazālī made a special exception, as we saw, for one subset of ritual acts, exemplified by the *hajj*, where the realisation of the divine purpose depends on the limits of intelligibility having been reached. Yet a closer analysis (which I will not try to offer here) would raise questions as to whether even this is a limit that al-Ghazālī ultimately manages to observe. The lure of intelligibility—the power of the human drive to self-determination—is too great.

Al-Ghazālī's approach, to be sure, was not entirely unexampled in the development of the legal sciences. As Kevin Reinhart has shown, there was a vanguard of early jurists, including ones belonging to al-Ghazālī's own school, who had pursued a similar project. The best example is the tenth-century Shafi'ite jurist al-Qaffāl al-Shāshī (d. 976), who had offered a daring rationalist analysis of the purposes served by ritual law. His analysis, Reinhart comments, struck al-Qaffāl's fellow-jurists as “too flimsily grounded” to take root.⁶³ Against this backdrop, al-Ghazālī's articulation of related ideas stands out both for its greater depth and intellectual power, and also for the broad range of intellectual paradigms he brings into conversation in offering it. His distinctive account emerges through the synergy of at least three intellectual perspectives, welding together an emphasis on legal purpose at home in legal theory, an emphasis on the inner life of the mind at home in Sufism, and a concern with virtue and its pedagogy at home in philosophical texts.

So on the one hand, al-Ghazālī's account of the relation between virtue and the religious Law represents an important chapter in the unfolding of large-print questions negotiated in the disciplines of theology and legal theory, which thus provide a crucial context for situating its significance. Yet even more important, especially for the purposes of this volume, will be another context; and this is the one provided by works of philosophical ethics. Some of al-Ghazālī's philosophical debts already came up for comment earlier. One of the most important debts, here, was the fundamental Aristotelian idea about how virtue is acquired and character formed. Yet there are other natural comparisons to be drawn that drive even deeper into the heart of al-Ghazālī's account.

Modern philosophers, I noted at the start, tend to think of virtue and duty—and by extension law—as evaluative concepts that are at some level antagonistic. Yet the idea that the two are not just related but necessarily related is as old as the idea that ethics cannot get

⁶² For a deeper exploration of these issues and the relation between these two domains of law, see Kevin A. Reinhart, “Ritual Action and Practical Action: The Incomprehensibility of Muslim Devotional Action,” in *Islamic Law in Theory: Studies in Jurisprudence in Honor of Bernard Weiss*, ed. Robert Gleave and Kevin Reinhart (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 55–103.

⁶³ Reinhart, “Ritual Action and Practical Action,” 74–76. For further context on al-Qaffāl's project, see Ahmed El Shamsy, “The Wisdom of God's Law: Two Theories,” in *Islamic Law in Theory*, ed. Gleave and Reinhart, 19–37.

off the ground without politics. Virtue can only flourish when the right political provisions are made for it. As Robert George observes in *Making Men Moral*, there was a key consensus in what he calls “the central pre-liberal tradition” of thought about morality, politics, and law that laws have an important role to playing in helping people “establish and preserve a virtuous character.”⁶⁴

The idea that law can and should educate character is pervasive in Plato’s work, arguably in the *Republic* but especially in his last work, the *Laws*.⁶⁵ It is also found in Aristotle, both in the *Politics* and also in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. “The city-state,” as he puts it in the *Politics*, “must be concerned with virtue,” and law be “such as to make the citizens good and just” (1280b6-8, 1280b12).⁶⁶ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is a point that shapes Aristotle’s concluding remarks, where he raises the difficult question just how successful the kinds of philosophical arguments he has been offering can be in changing people for the better. In fact, it is hard for them to have such an effect unless people have already acquired a love of the noble, which means acquiring the right kinds of habits. And how can such habits be formed? It is here, Aristotle suggests, that the laws can play a role:

It is difficult . . . for someone to be trained correctly for virtue from his youth if he has not been brought up under correct laws,⁶⁷ for the many, especially the young, do not find it pleasant to live in a temperate and resistant way. That is why laws must prescribe their upbringing and practices; for they will not find these things painful when they get used to them (NE 1179b31-1180a1).

As he puts it elsewhere—in the significant context of formulating the pedagogical maxim that virtue is acquired through the performance of virtuous actions, and as evidence of the truth of that maxim—“the legislator makes the citizens good by habituating them” (1103b3-4).⁶⁸

These ideas would be taken up in the Islamic world by a number of thinkers engaging with the Greek philosophical tradition. This includes al-Fārābī, whose political ideals are deeply informed by the belief that a key task of the statesman is to foster the virtues among the members of the *polis*—healing their souls the way physicians heal their bodies, as the *Aphorisms of the Statesman* (*Fuṣūl muntaza‘a*) puts it—and to thereby enable them to achieve happiness.⁶⁹ Al-Fārābī is also known to have produced a summary of Plato’s *Laws*⁷⁰ in which the connection between law and the cultivation of virtue is distinctly enunciated.

It also includes Miskawayh, whose debt to Aristotelian lines of thinking stands out especially clearly at this juncture. In the *Refinement of Character* (*Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*), he reprises a point Aristotle had made in the chapter on justice of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE 1129b19–23), albeit with a telling twist. “The Law (*sharī‘a*) commands praiseworthy things

⁶⁴ Robert P. George, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1.

⁶⁵ For an excellent discussion of Plato’s account of the relation between law and virtue focusing on both texts, see Julia Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶⁶ I draw on the translation by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998).

⁶⁷ Or as Christopher Rowe translates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): “laws that aim at that effect.”

⁶⁸ Cf. more epigrammatically at 1180b25: “. . . laws are a means to make us good.”

⁶⁹ *Fuṣūl muntaza‘a*, 24-45. This is also an important theme in the *Book of Religion* (*Kitāb al-Milla*) and a number of other works.

⁷⁰ Or possibly a summary of Galen’s summary. For a defence of this view see Dimitri Gutas, “Galen’s *Synopsis* of Plato’s *Laws* and Fārābī’s *Talḥīs*,” in *The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism*, ed. Gerhard Endress and Remke Kruk (Leiden: Research School CNWS 1997), 101-119. Contrast Therese-Anne Druart, “Le Sommaire du Livre des ‘Lois’ de Platon (Ġawāmi‘ Kitāb al-Nawāmīs li-Aflāṭūn),” *Bulletin d’Etudes Orientales* 50 (1998), 112.

(*maḥmūda*) because it comes from God; it only commands the good (*khayr*) . . . it commands all of the virtues and prohibits all the vices.”⁷¹ The term *sharīʿa* delicately broadens the perspective from the manmade law of the *polis* which Aristotle had in mind to the religious Law. It will be hard not to hear in this statement an echo of the well-known Qurʿanic verse: “Surely God commands justice and good-doing” (*inna Allāha yaʿmuru biʿl-ʿadl waʿl-iḥsān*, Q 16:90). This was verse, we may observe, that had served as crucial ammunition for Muʿtazilite theologians defending the claim that the Law commands what is objectively good—understood, in their framework, in terms of right actions rather than virtuous traits.

Drawing on Aristotle, Miskawayh thus puts out a claim about the conformity of the *sharīʿa*’s commands to objective goodness. Even more relevant to our line of inquiry, he also puts out a claim concerning the pedagogical effect of these commands in cultivating goodness. Taken most simply, the Law features as part of a two-stage developmental model in which habituation forms the first stage and philosophical understanding the second. In the first instance, young people acquire good habits by performing the actions required by the religious Law. “It is the *sharīʿa*,” Miskawayh states, “that puts the young straight and habituates them to appropriate acts.”⁷² At this stage, behavioural compliance is grounded in non-virtuous motives of reward and punishment. Once they have acquired these good habits, as adults they can go on to achieve a deeper rational understanding of their evaluative foundations (*al-asbāb waʿl-ʿilal*).⁷³ The Aristotelian resonance will be evident: knowing the *that*, we can ask questions about the *why* (NE 1095b6-7). Philosophical insight comes to fortify the principles acquired through religion, revealing the confluence of reason and scripture. Thus, the happy man is “one fortunate enough to be brought up as a child under the discipline (*adab*) of the Law and held to its requirements and provisions until he grows habituated to them, and who later on consults books of ethics and finds those principles of conduct and fine qualities reinforced in his soul through demonstrative proofs.”⁷⁴

The affinities of these philosophical accounts with al-Ghazālī’s model as we reviewed it will be suggestive. The core idea is the same: a key function of law is to educate character, which it does by first securing the performance of certain kinds of actions. For both al-Ghazālī and Miskawayh, this pedagogical purpose is transparent, at a basic level at least, to human reason. Both, in their respective works, seek to educate their readers’ moral cognition, deepening their grasp of the purpose and meaning of the things they (have learned to) do. Although the evidence is not strong that al-Ghazālī read Greek ethical texts in translation directly, his acquaintance with the works of Muslim philosophers was wide-ranging, and his ethical writings leave no room for doubting that he was familiar with works of philosophical ethics more specifically, including those of Miskawayh. Was it these philosophical sparks that stimulated the development of his own account of the relation between virtue and the religious Law? It is possible; certainly, the affinities are too suggestive to leave these philosophical precedents out when one seeks to build an intellectual context for al-Ghazālī’s ideas. At the same time, these very affinities throw into relief a number of important differences that separate al-Ghazālī’s account from its philosophical analogues. These

⁷¹ Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character/Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, ed. Constantine Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1966), 117. Note that Aristotle had more specifically stated that the law commands the *actions* corresponding to the virtues. Yet Miskawayh’s developmental model (see below) clearly aligns itself with that specification of the idea.

⁷² *Ibid*, 35.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 129.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 49.

differences give part of the reason why one might be led to doubt the philosophical paternity of al-Ghazālī's ideas. Yet in either case, they train a spotlight on the distinctive character of his account, and as such it is important to briefly pick them out.

Coming from the ancient context, the deepest difference concerns the kinds of laws at issue, and what this reveals about the larger horizon in which the life of virtue is located. Thematising the connection between law and virtue in a key passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle had illustrated it through a number of examples. The law, thus, "instructs us to do the actions of a brave person—for instance, not to leave the battle-line, or to flee, or to throw away our weapons; of a temperate person—not to commit adultery or wanton aggression; of a mild person—not to strike or revile another; and similarly requires actions in accord with the other virtues" (1129b19-23). One element that unifies these examples is that they concern actions that affect others. In this regard, they derive their significance from a social context. The same focus is reflected in some of the Muslim authors taking up philosophical ideas about virtue and the law and seeking to adapt them to a religious framework. Discussing the religious determination (*taqdīr*) of actions in *The Book of Religion (Kitāb al-Milla)*, thus, al-Fārābī singles out "actions by which the mutual dealings of the inhabitants of the cities are regulated."⁷⁵

This calls attention to a point that may already have stood out in my above survey of al-Ghazālī's account of the religious Law and its pedagogical effect. In documenting this effect, my analysis focused exclusively on one specific class of actions, namely ritual observances or acts of worship (*'ibādāt*). Yet legal scholars, as noted earlier, distinguished between two categories of legal actions, acts of worship and human transactions (*mu'āmalāt*). Unlike the former, which speaks to the relation between man and God, the latter category speaks to the social context of the human community. So why my monocular focus on the former?

Now one of the most memorable sequences of the first book of the *Revival* is al-Ghazālī's treatment of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which, as briefly mentioned earlier, he labels a "worldly science" concerned with merely mundane interests. The only reason jurisprudence is needed, he explains elsewhere in the book *On Knowledge*, is on account of our bodily needs. Human beings are not self-sufficient, so they are forced to live in communities in order to meet these needs. Human nature being what it is, human association would naturally descend to anarchy and strife as people conflicted over objects of desire. This was why jurisprudence is necessary: to supply a principle of just arbitration (*al-siyāsa wa'l-'adl*) for ordering human transactions (*mu'āmalāt*).⁷⁶

This rather saturnine view provides an important context for al-Ghazālī's attitude to the laws governing human transactions. Yet this domain is by no means wholly overlooked in the *Revival*; that, after all, would have been inconsistent with al-Ghazālī's aim of reclaiming the outer and spiritualising it in the best way possible (as also with his evident aspiration to offer a comprehensive guide to life). In the second quarter of the *Revival*, dedicated to "customs" (*'ādāt*), many of the themes of al-Ghazālī's discussion overlap with the types of topics addressed in books of jurisprudence under the heading of *mu'āmalāt*. Entire books, for example, are dedicated to marriage and economic activity. Al-Ghazālī's treatment of these topics reflects his broader agenda in the *Revival*, to filter all activity *sub specie aeternitatis* and to ensure we have the right motivations and spiritual priorities in all we do. Addressing the person who makes a living as a trader in the book *The Etiquette of Earning a Living (Kitāb*

⁷⁵ *Alfarabi, The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 96. The Arabic term is *mu'āmalāt*.

⁷⁶ *Ihyā'*, 1:92; cf. *Mizān*, 359.

Ādāb al-kasb wa'l-ma'āsh), he couches him on how to ensure his activity accords with justice and beneficence and is ordered by an awareness of his true spiritual telos.⁷⁷ Even mundane activities such as these can be inhabited in better and worse ways.

Yet missing, from these discussions, is the purposive emphasis of the books dealing with the ritual observances—the idea that the commands of the Law in this domain were *instituted* with particular ethical and pedagogical ends. It seems highly telling that, in the classification of religious duties we saw, al-Ghazālī declares the intention with which the action is performed irrelevant to successful fulfilment of one's legal obligation in the case of the second class of duties, which was the one connected to the promotion of human interests and was illustrated precisely through examples filed under the heading of “transactions,” such as repaying debts or returning usurped objects. To fulfil the basic aims of the Law here, all that matters is *that* you do these things, not *how* you do them.⁷⁸ The implication, overall, appears to be that these kinds of laws have little formative importance. The most important ethical and spiritual formation happens not in the transactions between human beings but in the transactions between human beings and God—in the domain, thus, of ritual acts.⁷⁹

This reflects a larger point, and larger difference with the philosophical perspectives just outlined. Going through the *Revival*, the human community appears to recede into the background as a location in which virtue is acquired and practiced. Human society in fact often registers as a source of grave moral danger rather than improvement and edification. It is the source of one of the greatest moral temptations, to which the *Revival* keeps dizzily returning like a moth to a flame: the concern with status and appearance, which poisons the deepest foundations of the spiritual life. Far from fostering virtue, human society antagonises it. Al-Ghazālī's broader view of society as a scene of internecine conflict between appetite-driven agents has a Hobbesian quality to it. Unlike Aristotle, he seems to think we need society to live, not to live well;⁸⁰ we are contingently forced into communities to meet our physical needs, not our higher—intellectual or spiritual—ones. His more positive discussion of human relations in the book devoted to brotherhood (*ukhuwwa*) and companionship (*ṣuḥba*) does little to mitigate this overall impression, though more could be said about this. One of the most astonishing features of that discussion is the almost complete absence of any reference to the ways in which other human beings may intentionally further our moral (as against intellectual) education and help us move toward a virtuous character.⁸¹ If, as has been

⁷⁷ See the discussion in *Iḥyā'*, 4:775-5:801.

⁷⁸ This is how I understand the relevant passage in *Iḥyā'*, 2:385, though there is an aspect of al-Ghazālī's framing of the point I find opaque. This, of course, does not mean that it doesn't matter, on another level, if one carries out these actions angrily or spitefully or wishing one could keep the money. This is where Sufi morality becomes, as Paul Heck puts it, hypernomian, finding the special context of its exercise in the domain of discretion e or *ibāḥa*. Heck, “Mysticism as Morality: The Case of Sufism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34 (2006), 253-86.

⁷⁹ Though of course it may be noted that one of these acts has an other-regarding aspect, namely *zakat*.

⁸⁰ Aristotle draws this distinction in various places in the *Politics*, e.g. 1252b29-30; cf. 1280b39-1281a2.

⁸¹ The operative word is *intentionally*; al-Ghazālī has far more to say about how human society may unintentionally help us cultivate virtue by forcing us to endure hardships and evils. This, for example, is the emphasis in the only section that brings up moral education as a benefit of human association in the book *On the Etiquette of Seclusion*, 6:1067-68; the fleeting reference to the spiritual direction provided by a Sufi master on p. 1068 is as far as I'm aware the only occasion on which he brings up this relation in the two books devoted to the topics of companionship and seclusion. Outside this context, there are a few isolated remarks on the Sufi master's ethical guidance e.g. in *Discipline of the Soul* (e.g. 8:1449-50, 1454), though they are cushioned in deeply pessimistic statements about the availability of true masters. In this regard, I find it very hard to agree with the reading of spiritual friendship as a locus for character-training offered by Paul E. Heck in “*Adab* in the Thought of Ghazālī (d. 505/1111): In the Service of Mystical Insight,” in *Spirituality and Ethics in Islam: Sufi Adab*, ed.

recently argued, al-Ghazālī's project in the *Revival* had a this-worldly political dimension, this is not something that can be easily read off the body of the text itself. In the body of the text, ethics and politics seem to come apart.⁸²

This is a very different picture of the relationship between the individual and the community from the one that emerges from the work of many of the ancient philosophers, and also of philosophers operating in al-Ghazālī's own context. Al-Fārābī is the most brilliant example, but the same holds true of Miskawayh. The ethical vision he presents in the *Refinement of Character* is threaded through the basic Aristotelian insight that human beings are political animals. We need others not only to fulfil our material needs but to achieve our proper perfection: "we cannot perfect ourselves through our own resources" (*lā yaktafī bi-nafsihi fī takmīl dhātihī*).⁸³ The virtues can only be acquired in a community; and they can only be exercised in a community. In fact, the moral virtues take their *point* from human relations and transactions.⁸⁴ This is the basis of Miskawayh's condemnation of the practice of withdrawing from society among ascetics, who thereby give up an essential part of the human good. Taking up Aristotle's preoccupation with friendship, he emphasises that human happiness is only completed among friends (*tamām sa'ādatihi al-insāniyya 'inda aṣḍiqā'ihī*). The highest form of friendship is the one that is grounded in a desire for the good and the pursuit for virtue (*qaṣd al-khayr wa-iltimās al-faḍīla*). Perhaps even more openly than Aristotle, Miskawayh highlights that the highest form of friendship, character friendship, is a school for virtue.⁸⁵

There couldn't be a more telling difference in this regard than Miskawayh's striking analysis of the purpose of a pair of key ritual observances, communal prayer and the *hajj*, which he grounds in their tendency to nourish *human* bonds of love (*maḥabba*) by forcing people to come together on progressively larger scales.⁸⁶ If conflict occurs among human beings in the way al-Ghazālī took to be endemic to human society, this, Miskawayh would say, is the result of a shortfall of love.⁸⁷ Were there enough virtue to go around, coercive laws would not be needed. And although coercive laws will always be needed given human imperfection, we should not simply accept such imperfection as a fact but make it our goal to cultivate the social virtues that would temper it.

Francesco Chiabotti, Eve Feuillebois-Pierunek, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, and Luca Patrizi (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 298-324. Al-Ghazālī has far more to say about relationships built on the (intentional) aim of cultivating and transmitting knowledge.

⁸² This is the view of Kenneth Garden, who recommends that we revise our understanding of al-Ghazālī as a "reclusive, inward-directed spiritual seeker" and view him instead as "an engaged, outward-directed campaigner for a religious agenda" with an interest in promoting a particular "social and religious order for Muslims in this world" (*The First Islamic Reviver*, 11, 28). Al-Ghazālī often counsels his reader to forget about the well-being of the community and look to his own salvation. "Look to your own soul!" (Or "Save your own skin!" *Unju bi-nafsika*). See *Iḥyā'*, 6:1051, for a good example, in a context that conveys a strong sense of despair about the possibility of reforming society and significantly shows al-Ghazālī blunting the force of the moral imperative to command right and forbid wrong.

⁸³ Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, 29.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 167: *inna al-faḍā'il al-khuluqiyya innamā wuḍi'at min ajl al-mu'āmalāt wa'l-mu'āsharāt allatī lā yatimmu al-wujūd al-insānī illā bihā*.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, respectively 155 and 144.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 140-41. By contrast, Avicenna's analysis of ritual observances in the *Book of the Healing* is rather closer to al-Ghazālī's in emphasising their role (at least for the elite) in helping one master the animal/bodily powers, producing ethical dispositions that prepare one for liberation from the body and the attainment of happiness in the next life. Avicenna, *The Book of the Healing/Kitāb al-Shifā': Al-Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā, Sulaymān Dunyā, Sa'īd Zāyid (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Āmma li-Shu'ūn al-Maṭābi' al-Amirīyya, 1960), 2: 445-46.

⁸⁷ *Tahdhīb*, 133. *Justice* is needed only because of a shortfall in love; cf. Aristotle's point at *NE* 1155a26-27.

5. Conclusion

Writing about the development of what he calls “Islamic humanism,” Lenn Goodman suggested that the transition from Miskawayh to al-Ghazālī presented a Faustian bargain to the values of Greek civilization, buying them influence at the price of diluting their content almost beyond recognition. “Their pietist colorations mask the foreign origin and structure of the underlying Greek ideas about the mean and the good life and deeply penetrate the ethical thinking of generations of Muslim thinkers of orthodox stamp. The ancient structure is strikingly preserved—Aristotle’s profound and profoundly original conceptualization of the virtues. But, like the mosaics in the Byzantine basilicas, the faces are erased or plastered over.” Goodman speaks of the “poignant sense of loss” one may experience moving from Miskawayh’s humanistic ethics to al-Ghazālī’s Sufi recasting of it.⁸⁸

Goodman’s emphasis on the “courtly” character of Miskawayh’s ethics seems to me overstated. Yet in the above, I suggested that important shifts did indeed occur in the passage from philosophical ethics to the novel brand of scripturally-grounded ethics of virtue forged by al-Ghazālī. Drawing on a number of key philosophical ideas—notably the Aristotelian pedagogical insight that we become by doing, and arguably the widely articulated idea that law is and ought to be a means of educating character—al-Ghazālī takes the project of a scripturally-grounded ethics of virtue forward by offering a distinctive and intellectually complex account of the relation between virtue and the religious Law. Within its framework, states of character are accorded primacy over action, and the intelligible function of the Law is tied to the promotion of virtue. This account creates a rich network of links to the concerns of Islamic law, theology, and Sufism, and contributes new chapters to their intellectual development. Al-Ghazālī executes this project with a breadth of vision, depth of thought, moral seriousness, and power of religious feeling that set him apart from many writers on the topic, past and present. The history of ideas isn’t settled on Faustian terms, but the price for these merits is one that many would think worth paying.

⁸⁸ Lenn E. Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 119, 121.