

Here's what the title looks like in Arabic:

المنقذ من الضلال

That is, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*.

This translation is an extensively modified version of the one in Muhammad Ali Khalidi, *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge UP, 2005).

Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī *The Rescuer from Error*

Praise be to God, with whose praise every epistle and treatise begins, and blessings upon Muhammad, the chosen one, prophet, and messenger, and upon his kin and companions who guide one **from error**.

You have asked me, my brother in religion, to convey to you the aim and secrets of the sciences, as well as the confusing intricacies of creeds, and to relate what I have endured in extricating truth from the mayhem of factions, with their differing approaches and methods, and how I have ventured to raise myself from the depths of conformity to the heights of insight. You have also asked me to relate, first, what I gleaned from the science of theology ; second, what I gathered from the paths of **the Instructionists**, who hold that truth is apprehended solely by conforming to the instruction of the imam; third, what I criticized of the paths of philosophizing; and finally, what I endorsed of the path of **Sufism**. You have asked me to convey the nuggets of truth that I uncovered in the midst of my investigation into the doctrines of humanity, what diverted me from the spread of knowledge in Baghdad despite the large number of students, and what led me to resume teaching in Nishapur after a long absence. Therefore, I will hasten to comply with your demand, having determined the sincerity of your request, and will relate this to you, asking God for assistance, support, success, and refuge.

May God Almighty guide you and allow truth to lead you: you should know that the differences among people in sects and religions, and the differences among the masters of various creeds, factions, and paths, is a deep ocean in which many have drowned and from which only a few have been saved. Each faction claims that they are saved, and “each is content with what they have.” This was predicted by the **Prince of the Messengers** (the blessings of God be

“from error”: although this is a formulaic beginning, these words, in the context of the title, tells us who the “rescuer from error” is: it is God and God’s prophet, kin, and companions.

“the Instructionists”: these are the Ismā’īlīs, whom Ghazali also refers to as the Esoteri-cists. They follow the teaching of an infallible, divinely chosen religious leader (*imām*).

“Sufism”: This is a mystical form of Islam, which emphasizes the inward search for God. We will here more about this below.

Quran 23:53, 30:32

The “Prince of the Messengers” [from God] is Muhammad, the “seal of the prophets.”

upon him), for he is the truthful and sincere one, who said: “My community will be divided into seventy-three factions, one of which will be saved.” His prediction has almost come true.

I have persisted, ever since the prime of my youth and my tender years – all the way from my adolescence, before reaching the age of 20, until the present day, when I am over 50 – to plumb the depths of this ocean and to plunge into it boldly, not with diffident cowardice. I have attempted to penetrate every obscurity, grapple with every problem, tackle every predicament, examine the beliefs of every faction, and investigate the hidden creed of each sect. I have done so in order to distinguish the honest person from the liar, and the orthodox from the heretic. I never let an **esotericist** go by without wanting to ascertain his esotericism, nor do I pass up an **exotericist** without wanting to know the outcome of his exotericism. I never meet a philosopher without seeking to understand the underlying nature of his philosophy, a theologian without making an effort to become acquainted with the aim of his theology and dialectic, a Sufi without aspiring to find the secret of his Sufism, an ascetic without scrutinizing the aim of his ascetic worship, and a blasphemous atheist without prying into the reasons behind the audacity of his atheism.

The thirst for apprehending things as they really are has been my preoccupation and principle from a very early age. It is part of my God-given instinct and nature, a matter of temperament not of choice or invention. Hence, I was freed from the bonds of conformity and my inherited beliefs were shattered while I was just a boy, since I observed that Christian boys grew up only to be Christians, Jewish boys only to be Jewish, and Muslim boys only to be Muslim. I also heard the **hadith** attributed to the Prophet of God (may he be blessed by God) that states: “Every child is born in the natural state; his parents make him a Jew, Christian, or **Magian**.” I was therefore inwardly moved to seek out the reality of this original nature, as well as the reality of the beliefs

An esotericist is one who ascribes figurative meanings to certain Koranic passages, and an exotericist is one who insists on a literal reading.

“hadith”: the sayings of the Prophet, assembled in various collections, that have an authority within Islam second only to the authority of the Koran. The quotation at the top of this page is another hadith.

“Magian”: These are followers of a pre-Islamic religion in the Middle East, associated with the worship of fire.

acquired out of conformity to parents and teachers. I also sought to distinguish among these **conformist beliefs** about which there are disagreements in differentiating true from false, beginning with the instilled beliefs. I said to myself: “Since I seek to know things as they really are, I must first seek out the reality of knowledge itself.” It became apparent to me that certain knowledge is that in which what is known is laid bare in such a way as to leave no room for doubt, and is unaccompanied by the possibility of error or illusion, to the point that the mind cannot even conceive it. Rather, what is secure from error should be so closely associated with certainty, that if someone tried to show that it was false by turning stone into gold or a stick into a snake, for example, that would not make it doubtful or refute it. Thus, if I came to know that ten is greater than three, and someone said to me: “No, three is greater than ten, in proof of which I will turn this stick into a serpent,” then went on to do so in plain view, I would not as a result of that come to doubt what I was cognizant of. The only outcome would be wonderment at how he is able to perform such a feat. As to doubt concerning what I know, there is none. Thus, I knew that whatever I did not know in this manner and was not certain of with this kind of certainty was untrustworthy and insecure knowledge; and every knowledge that is insecure is not certain knowledge.

Then I searched the sum of my knowledge and found myself devoid of knowledge characterized by this attribute, apart from sensory beliefs and necessary beliefs. So I said: “Now, after despair has set in, I have no hope of solving problems except with regard to what is evident, which are sensory beliefs and necessary beliefs. Hence, I must safeguard them first to make certain of my confidence in sensory beliefs and my security from error when it comes to necessary beliefs. Is it of the same kind as my former trust in conformist beliefs and the trust that most people have in theoretical beliefs? Or is it a justified trust, which is neither deceptive nor confused?” I proceeded in real earnest to contemplate sensory beliefs and necessary beliefs, to see wheth-

“conformist beliefs” =

تقليد *taqlīd* pl. تقاليد *taqālid*² imitation; copying; blind, unquestioning adoption (of concepts or ideas); uncritical faith (e.g., in a source's authoritativeness); adoption of the legal decision of a *maḡhab* (Isl. Law); pl. tradition; convention, custom, usage

er I could make myself doubt them. After a lengthy process of doubt, my mind did not allow me to maintain my trust in sensory beliefs either, and began gradually to cast doubt on them, saying: “Where does this confidence in sensory beliefs come from? The strongest sense is vision, which looks at a shadow and sees that it is stationary, and judges that there is no motion. But then as a result of experience and observation, after an hour, it is cognizant that the shadow is indeed moving. Moreover, it finds that it did not move suddenly, all at once, but rather incrementally atom by atom, in such a way that it was never in a state of rest. Likewise, vision looks at a celestial body and sees that it is small, around the size of a dinar, but then geometrical proofs indicate that it is in fact larger than the earth in size. In this and other such sensory matters, sensory judgment makes its judgments, and intellectual judgment then judges it to be false and disproves it irrefutably.”

So I said: “My confidence in sensory beliefs has also been annulled. Perhaps one can only trust the intellectual beliefs that are among the first principles, such as the statements

Ten is greater than three;

Negation and affirmation cannot be together in the same thing; and

The same thing cannot be both generated and eternal, or existent and nonexistent, or necessary and impossible.”

The sensory beliefs then replied: “How can you be sure that your confidence in rational beliefs is not like that in sensory beliefs? You trusted in me, but intellectual judgment disproved me. Were it not for intellectual judgment, you would have continued to believe me. Perhaps behind intellect’s apprehension there is another judge who, if he were to manifest himself, would disprove the intellect in its judgments, just as intellectual judgment manifested itself to disprove the senses in their judgments. The fact that such an apprehension has not manifested itself does not prove that it is impossible.” My mind hesitated a while in responding to that.

This is simply the principle of non-contradiction: contradictory claims cannot be simultaneously true.

Meanwhile, sense perception underscored the problem by referring to dreams, saying: “Do you not believe things in dreams and imagine situations that you believe to be permanent and stable, never doubting them while you are in that state? And do you not then wake up and come to know that all your imaginings and beliefs were baseless and futile? Why are you so sure that everything that you believe in your waking state on the basis of the senses or reason is true in relation to your current state? A state may arise that bears the same relation to your waking state as your waking state does to your dream state. By comparison to that state your waking state would be like sleep! If such a state were to occur, you would become certain that all the things imagined by your reason were inconsequential imaginings. Perhaps that state is what the Sufis hold to be their state, when they claim to have a vision in those states in which they are immersed in themselves and lose awareness of their senses, states that conflict with these rational beliefs. Or perhaps that state is death, for the Prophet of God (blessings be upon him) said: “People are asleep, and when they die they wake up.” Thus, perhaps the temporal life is slumber by comparison with the afterlife, and when you die things will appear differently to you from the way they do now. At that point, you will be told: “We have removed your veil and your vision is now sharp.”

Quran 50:22

When these notions occurred to me and made an impression on my mind, I sought a cure but found none. For they could only be rebutted with a proof, and a proof can be constructed only by combining the first principles of knowledge. If these are no longer uncontested, then it is impossible to arrange a proof. This disease defied all cure and lasted for almost two months, during which I embraced the sophistical creed in actual fact, even if not in speech and expression. Eventually, God cured me of this disease and my mind was restored to health and balance. The necessary intellectual beliefs were once again accepted and trusted, both securely and certainly. This did not come about by composing a

Quran 6:125

These are hadith from various collections.

proof or by an arrangement of words, but rather by a light that God Almighty cast into my breast, a light that is the key to most of what is known. Whoever supposes that this unveiling depends upon explicit proofs has narrowed the expanse of God's mercy. The Prophet of God was asked about the meaning of 'opening' in the Qur'ānic verse: "Whomever God desires to guide, He opens his heart to Islam." He said: "It is a light that God Almighty casts into the heart." He was asked: "What is its sign?" He replied: "Aversion to the realm of conceit and devotion to the realm of eternity." He also said (blessings be upon him): "God Almighty created people in darkness then sprinkled them with his light." The veil's removal must be sought from that light, which flows from God's bounty at certain times and must be monitored closely. As the Prophet (peace be upon him) has said: "Your Lord sends breaths [of grace] in the days of your lifetime; put yourselves in their way." The intention behind these statements is that the utmost efforts should be made in one's search, up to the limit of seeking what cannot be sought. For first principles are not sought but are present, and if what is present is sought it may disappear. Moreover, whoever seeks what cannot be sought cannot be accused of falling short in seeking what can.

After God Almighty cured me of this disease by His grace and all-embracing generosity, I narrowed down the seekers of knowledge to four factions:

- Theologians, who claim that they are the party of good judgment and discernment;
- Esotericists, who claim that they are the party of teaching and are distinguished by their instruction from the infallible imām;
- Philosophers, who claim that they are the party of logic and proof;
- Sufis, who claim to be distinguished by the presence [of God] and are the party of vision and illumination.

I said to myself: Truth must not lie outside the purview of these four types, for they are the ones who follow the paths

This is a somewhat puzzling series of remarks, at the end of this paragraph, since al-Ghazali seems, on one hand, to be cautioning against seeking for things that "cannot be sought" (such as first-principles), and at the same time congratulating himself for having pursued his inquiry all the way to that point. In addition, strictly, he should say not that these things cannot be sought, but that they cannot be found through the methods in question.

“conformism”: Compare the earlier discussion (page 2) where al-Ghazali described himself as being, from an early age, “freed from the bonds of conformity.”

of truth-seeking. If the truth eludes them, then I have no **hope** of apprehending it, for there is no hope of reverting to **conformism** once one has left it behind. It is a precondition of being a conformist that the conformist not know that he is a conformist. Once he comes to know that, the glass of his conformity is fractured and the damage is irreparable. It cannot be reassembled using the techniques of restoration and renovation, but must rather be melted down in the fire and refashioned by some other new art.

Accordingly, I hastened to go down these paths, and to study these factions in detail, beginning with the science of theology, then second the path of philosophy, third esoteric teaching, and fourth the path of Sufism.

[I. The Theologians]

I began with the science of theology, which I acquired and grasped intellectually by reading the works of the reputable authorities among the theologians and by writing some works of my own. I found it to be a science that fulfilled its purpose but not mine. Its purpose was to preserve the creed of the orthodox and to protect them from the misinformation of the heretics. By means of His messenger, God Almighty handed down to His worshippers a true creed that contains what is needed for their well-being in both religious and temporal matters, a grasp of which is set down in the Qur’ān and hadith. Then the devil insinuated to the heretics certain things that were contrary to orthodoxy, which they eagerly embraced, nearly confounding in people their true creed. So God Almighty gave rise to the theologians and motivated them to advocate orthodoxy with **systematic discourse** that revealed the deceptions of the heretical innovators and their departures from accepted orthodoxy. That is how the science of theology and its practitioners arose.

Some of the theologians have carried out what God Almighty appointed them to do and have defended orthodoxy admirably. They have fought on behalf of the creed

“hope”: Here and in the previous clause, the word translated as ‘hope’ might also be translated as ‘desire,’ and really needs to stand for both of these things if the inference is to be valid: there’s no hope of apprehending the truth, because there’s no desire to return to conformity with one’s societal traditions, once one has broken away from them. (And, tacit premise, if these four paths don’t yield the truth, then such conformity would be the only remaining alternative.)

“systematic discourse”: the word is ‘kalām,’ which is the same word that elsewhere is simply translated as “theology.” The scholars that pursue this path are known as the *mutakallimūn*, a word based on the same root word for discourse.

received through the acceptance of prophecy and have corrected the innovations of the heretics. However, in doing so, they have relied on premises that they took over from their opponents, which their opponents are required to acknowledge either on the basis of conformity [to tradition], or consensus of the community, or mere acceptance of the Qur'ān and hadith. Most of their endeavors consist in exposing the contradictions of their opponents and in criticizing the implications of their tenets. This was of little use for someone who accepts only necessary truths. Thus, theology was not sufficient for my needs and did not provide a cure for my disease.

To be sure, as the art of theology developed and was practiced abundantly over a long period of time, the theologians aspired to defend orthodoxy by investigating the reality of things, and examined substances, accidents, and their principles. However, since that was not the main purpose of their science, their discourse did not attain the ultimate goal in this regard and did not achieve the total elimination of the obscure perplexities to be found in the disagreements among humanity. I am not ruling out the possibility that this may have been achieved for others – indeed, I do not doubt that it was achieved for some – but the achievement will have been tainted by conformity to tradition with respect to certain things that are not first principles. In any case, my purpose now is to set out my own case, not to deny that others have been cured by theology. Medications differ depending on the disease, and there are many medications that benefit one patient and harm another.

[II. The Philosophers]

After finishing with the science of theology, I moved on to the science of philosophy. I knew with certainty that one cannot understand the defects of a certain type of science unless one reaches the limits of that science, so as to become equal with the most knowledgeable of its practitioners as

regards its foundations, then exceed them and surpass their level. One thus becomes aware of the depths and dangers that even the practitioners themselves are not aware of. Only then is it possible to take someone's claims about its defects to be true.

I found, however, that none of the religious scholars of Islam had devoted their concerted efforts to that end. The discourses in the books of the theologians where they busied themselves with responding to the philosophers consisted of nothing but some stray convoluted statements that were clearly contradictory and defective. No person of ordinary intellect would be duped by them, much less someone who claims mastery of the subtleties of the sciences. I knew that refuting the creed before understanding it and becoming acquainted with its underlying nature was like taking a shot in the dark. Therefore, I forged ahead in earnest and exerted myself to acquire that science from the books [of the philosophers], simply by reading on my own without the help of an instructor. I did so during my free time, when I was not engaged in writing and teaching the sciences of **Islamic law**, for at that time I was charged with teaching and advising three hundred students in Baghdad. Thanks to God Almighty, I was able merely by reading during these stolen hours to reach the limits of the philosophers' science in less than two years. Then I devoted another year to further reflecting upon it after having understood it, returning to it, poring over it again, and reexamining its dangerous depths. In this way, I became aware of its ruses, deceptions, justifications, and illusions, and my awareness left no room for doubt.

Let me give you an account of the philosophers and the end result of the philosophical sciences. I found the philosophers to be divided into a number of categories, and the philosophical sciences to be split into a number of divisions. Despite their many subdivisions, they all carry the stigma of blasphemy and apostasy. Nevertheless, there are vast variations among the philosophers – most ancient, ancient, later,

“Islamic law”: = Shar‘īya, the Islamic code of conduct that has become notorious because of its abuses at the hands of some Islamic fundamentalists, but that in ordinary contexts refers simply to the teachings of Islam. Al-Ghazali was at this time, in other words, teaching religion rather than philosophy or the systematic theology of kalām.

and more recent – in terms of their distance from and proximity to the truth. You should know that, despite differences among the philosophers and the variety of their creeds, they may be classified into three categories: materialists, naturalists, and theists.

The first type, **the materialists**, are an ancient faction who renounced the Creator, Governor, Knower, and Almighty. They claimed that the universe has always existed as it is on its own, without a creator, and that animals come from seed and seed from animals, and that this has always occurred and will occur forever. These are the atheists.

The second type, **the naturalists**, are a group of people who actively investigated the natural world, including the wonders of animals and plants. They delved deeply into the science of anatomy, dissecting the organs of animals and discovering there the marvels created by God Almighty and the wonders of His wisdom. This obliged them to admit the existence of a wise Creator who is apprised of the goals of things and their purposes. No one can become acquainted with anatomy and the marvelous uses of organs without acquiring necessary knowledge of the perfection bestowed by the Artisan on the structures of animals, especially the structure of human beings.

However, as a result of their many investigations into nature, it became clear to these philosophers how efficacious a balanced temperament was in sustaining the animal faculties. They assumed that the rational faculty in humans was also dependent upon such a temperament, and that it would be extinguished when its temperament expired and so ceased to exist. Since, as they claim, it cannot be thought that what ceases to exist returns to life, they held the view that the soul dies and does not return. Thus, they denied the afterlife, heaven and hell, judgment and restoration, and resurrection and reckoning, and their view left no reward for obedience or punishment for transgression. Unfettered by that, they proceeded to indulge themselves in sensual pleasures, as if they were grazing sheep.

“The materialists” = *Al-dahrūn*. These folk are indeed materialists, but the term also bears the implication of atheism, as al-Ghazali goes on to make explicit.

“The naturalists”: The word here is the same as the word used for talking about the science of physics, and so fits neatly with our modern category of the naturalistic philosopher. Inasmuch as it was standard (for instance, in Aristotle) to think that physics can prove the existence of a first mover, the naturalists, unlike the materialists, accept the existence of God.

They too are atheists, since the foundation of faith is faith in God and the Day of Judgment, and even though they do have faith in God and God's attributes, they renounce the Day of Judgment.

The third category, the theists, consists of the less ancient of the three groups of philosophers, including Socrates, who was the teacher of Plato, Plato the teacher of Aristotle, and Aristotle himself. It was Aristotle who systematized logic for them, organized the sciences, rendered accurate what had been imprecise, and brought to maturity those of their sciences that were still in their infancy. The theists as a group responded to the first two categories of philosophers, the materialists and naturalists, and in exposing their shortcomings relieved others of the task. "God spared the faithful from combat" through the in-fighting of their opponents. Moreover, Aristotle refuted Plato, Socrates, and the other theists before them in such a thoroughgoing fashion that he distanced himself from all of them. But he also retained remnants of their blasphemous and heretical vices, which he was not able to shed. Accordingly, it is necessary to judge them all blasphemous, and to judge as blasphemous their followers among the Islamic philosophers, such as Ibn Sīnā, al-Fārābī, and others. None of the other Islamic philosophers transmitted the teaching of Aristotle as did these two men. What was transmitted by others is so full of commotion and confusion as to bewilder the heart of readers and prevent them from understanding. And how can what is not understood be rejected or accepted?

Quran 33:25

The sum total of what we take to be Aristotle's genuine philosophy, as transmitted by these two men, can be divided into three parts: what must be considered blasphemous, what must be considered heretical, and what need not be denied at all. Let us set this out in detail.

You should know that, for present purpose, their sciences have six branches: mathematical, logical, metaphysical, physical, political, and ethical. [1] The mathematical sciences pertain to the sciences of arithmetic, geometry, and

astronomy, and none of them is relevant to religious matters, either by way of negation or affirmation. Rather, these are demonstrative matters that one cannot deny once one has understood them and become cognizant of them.

Nevertheless, mathematics has given rise to two types of harm. The first is that a person who examines mathematics comes to marvel at its precise details and the clarity of its demonstrations, and because of this he takes on a favorable attitude towards the philosophers. He supposes that all their sciences are as clear as this science and that all their demonstrations are just as firm. Then, since he has heard of the philosophers' blasphemy, atheism, and slackness when it comes to the Law, he becomes blasphemous merely by pure conformity. He says: "If religion were true, it could not have escaped these mathematicians, given the precision they bring to this science." Moreover, if he is aware of what people say about the philosophers' blasphemy and renunciation of religion, he infers that truth lies in the renunciation and denial of religion. I have seen so many stray from the truth solely on this pretext without having any other grounds for doing so. One may say to such a person: "It does not follow that someone who is proficient in one art is proficient in every art. Thus, it does not follow that someone who is proficient in jurisprudence and theology will be proficient in medicine, nor that someone ignorant of rational science will be ignorant of grammar. On the contrary, each art has its practitioners who have attained a degree of skill and distinction in that particular art, even if they are obtuse and ignorant in other arts. So it is that the discourse of the ancient philosophers in mathematics is demonstrative, whereas in metaphysics it is conjectural. This can be recognized only by someone who has experienced it and delved into it." However, if this argument is conveyed to the person who becomes an apostate by conforming to [this] tradition he will not accept it. Instead, he will be moved by the dominance of passion, vain desires, and a penchant for appearing clever to insist on his favorable attitude towards the philosophers in all the sciences.

Because of this great harm, everyone who delve into these sciences ought to be restrained. Even though the mathematical sciences are not concerned with religious matters, they are among the principal philosophical sciences, and the evil and malevolence of the philosophers infects those who study them. Few delve into them without losing their religion and slipping off the bonds of piety.

The second harm originates with an ignorant friend of Islam, who supposes that religion ought be defended by denying every science attributed to the philosophers. And so he denies all their sciences and accuses them of ignorance, to the point that he denies what they say about the solar and lunar eclipses and alleges that what they say is contrary to religious law. When this comes to the attention of those who have become cognizant of these things by way of absolute demonstrations, they do not come to doubt their demonstrations, but rather come to believe that Islam is based on ignorance and a denial of absolute demonstrations, which just increases their love of philosophy and their aversion to Islam. Anyone who supposes that religion is to be defended by denying these sciences has committed a great offense against Islam. There is nothing in the religious law that either negates or affirms these sciences, nor is there anything in these sciences that concerns religious matters. The Prophet (blessings upon him) said: “The sun and the moon are two of the signs of God, and they are not eclipsed for anyone’s death or life. If you see an eclipse, recollect God Almighty and pray to him in fear.” There is nothing in this to deny specifically the science of arithmetic, which makes known the orbits of the sun and the moon and their conjunction or opposition. (As for the saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him, “But when God manifests Himself to something, it submits to Him,” this further addition to the above saying is not found at all in the **authentic** tradition.) That is the correct judgment concerning mathematics and its harm.

[2] The logical sciences are in no way tied to religion, neither negatively nor affirmatively. Rather, they in-

Here Ghazali is questioning whether a traditional hadith is “authentic,” but it is not really clear why this parenthetical remark matters to his argument.

volve theorizing the methods of argument and syllogism, the conditions on the premises of a demonstration and how they are to be combined, as well as the conditions on valid definitions and their manner of construction. They treat knowledge as either a concept grasped by means of a definition, or as an assent grasped by means of a demonstration. There is nothing here that ought to be denied. Rather, what the logicians say is of the same kind as what has been said about proofs by the theologians and other theoreticians, though the logicians differ in the expressions and terms they use, and they go much further in their characterizations and distinctions. An example of their discourse in logic would be the statement:

If it is affirmed that every A is B, then this entails that some B is A.

For instance,

If it is affirmed that every human is an animal, then this entails that some animal is a human.

They express this by saying that the converse of a universal affirmative proposition is a particular affirmative proposition.

What connection does this have to the requirements of religion, that it should be renounced or denied? If it is denied, this will only make logicians take a dim view of the intellect of the person who denies it, and indeed of the religion that is thought to depend on such a denial. To be sure, the logicians are guilty of a kind of injustice in this science, in that they assemble the conditions that are known to endow a demonstration with undoubted certainty but then are ultimately unable to satisfy these conditions when it comes to religious matters, at which point they relax them considerably. Then, as with the previous case, those who examine logic may think it a fine thing and observe its clarity, and may then suppose that the blasphemies reported of logicians are supported by similar demonstrations. They might then promptly blaspheme before attaining the metaphysical sciences. So this harm afflicts logic as well.

[3] The science of physics is the investigation of the celestial realm and the planets, as well as what lies beneath them: the simple bodies, such as water, air, earth, and fire, and the composite bodies, such as animals, plants, and minerals. It also investigates the causes of their changes, transformations, and mixtures. As such, it is comparable to medicine, which investigates the human body, its principal and subsidiary organs, and the causes of the transformation of its temperament. Just as it is not one of the provisions of religion to deny the science of medicine, so it is not one of its provisions to deny the science of physics. The exception is the specific issues mentioned in our book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. All other issues that should be opposed turn out on further contemplation to be subsumed under these. The foundation of our opposition in all these cases is the knowledge that nature is subject to God Almighty. It does not function by itself, but is rather an instrument for its Creator. The sun, moon, stars, and [all] natural entities are subject to His command and none of them acts in and of itself.

[4] Metaphysics contains most of the errors of the philosophers, for they are not able to fulfill the conditions on demonstrations that are set down in logic, and they therefore disagree considerably among themselves about metaphysical questions. Even so, Aristotle's position in metaphysics is close to those of the Islamic philosophers, as transmitted by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. The sum total of their errors can be reduced to twenty foundational ones. They should be considered blasphemous with regard to three of these and heretical with regard to seventeen. We have composed *The Incoherence* in order to refute their positions on these twenty issues. The three issues on which they have opposed all Muslims are as follows.

- First, they state that bodies are not resurrected in the afterlife, but rather that reward and punishment are meted out simply to souls and that punishments are spiritual, not corporeal. They are right to affirm the spiritual punishments,

Quran 34:3

which are indeed present, but they are wrong to deny corporeal punishments, and have blasphemed against the religious law with this utterance.

- Second, they state that God Almighty knows universals not particulars, which is also clear blasphemy. Rather, the truth is: “An atom’s weight does not escape Him in the heavens nor on earth.”
- Third, they assert that the world is preeternal and has always existed. No Muslim has ventured to make any of these pronouncements.

As for the other seventeen points besides these, such as their denial of God’s attributes, their statement that God knows by His essence not by what is added to His essence, and similar things, their position is close to that of **the Mu‘tazilites**, who ought not to be considered blasphemous for such things. In our book *Criterion of the Difference between Islam and Atheism* we have made clear that it is a corrupt opinion that rushes to consider blasphemous any creed that is contrary to one’s own.

[5] Their entire discourse in the political sciences is derived from the beneficial maxims relating to temporal matters and monarchical rule. They simply took them from the books of God that were revealed to the prophets and the maxims handed down by the precursors of prophets.

[6] In ethics, their entire discourse comes down to the enumeration of the attributes of the soul and its character, the genera and species of souls, and how to treat and tame souls. This is simply taken from the discourse of the Sufis. They are godly men who diligently strive to invoke God, oppose passion, and tread the path to God by avoiding worldly pleasures. In the course of their exertions they have uncovered the soul’s ethical characteristics and defects, and its pernicious actions, and they set these things out clearly. The philosophers then took this and intermingled it with their own discourse, in a bid to revamp and promote their falsehoods. Such godly people, who are preoccupied with the divine, existed in the era of the philosophers, as indeed in

“the Mu‘tazilites”: An important Islamic philosophical and theological movement that originated in the eighth century, which aimed to provide a rationalistic account of Islamic doctrine.

all other eras, since God does not allow the world to be empty of them, for they are the pillars of the earth. Mercy descends upon the people of the earth thanks to their blessings, as has been reported in the hadith of the Prophet (blessings upon him): “By virtue of them you will have rain, thanks to them you will have prosperity, and from them were drawn the people of the Cave.” They have been present in all previous eras, as mentioned in the Qur’ān.

Two harms have resulted from the philosophers’ blending of prophetic discourse and Sufi discourse in their books, one pertaining to its acceptance and the other to its rejection.

[i] The harm pertaining to its rejection is considerable, since feeble people suppose that the claims set down in their books, which is mixed with their falsehoods, ought to be shunned altogether and not repeated, but rather denounced to everyone who repeats it. Since they heard these claims originally from the philosophers, their weak intellects jumped to the conclusion that it was false simply because those who professed it were dishonest. It is as though someone hears a Christian say, “There is no God but God, and Jesus is God’s prophet,” and then that person denies it, saying: “This is a **Christian claim**.” Such a person does not pause long enough to consider whether the Christian is blasphemous in virtue of this statement or in virtue of his denial of the prophecy of Muhammad (blessings and peace be upon him). If he is blasphemous only with regard to this denial, he ought not to be opposed when it comes to a claim that is true in itself and distinct from his blasphemy, even though that claim is true even according to him.

This is a habit of feeble intellects, to know the truth based on the man, rather than to know the man based on the truth. Instead, a rational person emulates the supremely rational **‘Alī** ibn Abī Ṭālib (may God be pleased with him) who said: “Do not know the truth based on men; rather, know the truth and then you will know those who possess the truth.” Thus, the knowledgeable rational person knows

This hadith refers to Quran Sura 18, which relates the story of a small group of righteous men who sought refuge from persecution in a cave and were saved from their pursuers by God.

“Christian claim”: The pattern of reasoning is meant to be obviously absurd because the Christian’s claim is also a tenet of the Muslim faith.

The ‘Alī referred to here is one of the most important figures in Islam: the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, fourth caliph of Sunni Muslims, and first imam of Shii Muslims.

the truth, and then examines the statement itself. If it is true, he accepts it regardless of whether the person who made the statement is a liar or truthful. Indeed, he may even strive to extract the truth from the statements of those who are in error, knowing that gold is mined among dirt and sand. The moneychanger is none the worse for having put his hand into the counterfeiter's bag and extracting pure gold from among the fakes and forgeries, so long as his eyesight is to be trusted. However, the counterfeiter is to be prevented from doing business with the rustic villager, not with the sharp-eyed moneychanger; the clumsy beginner is to be barred from the seashore, not the proficient swimmer; and the boy is to be stopped from touching the snake, not the skilled snake charmer. Since the assumption that predominates in most people is that of their own proficiency, skill, soundness of intellect, and perfect ability to distinguish truth from falsehood and guidance from error, it is necessary to shut the door to restrict the multitude from reading the books of those in error as far as possible. For they will not be safe from the **second harm** to be mentioned, even if they escape this first one.

Some of the claims set down in our works on the secrets of the religious sciences have elicited objections from a group of those who have not inwardly mastered the sciences and have not penetrated the furthest goals of creeds. They have held that these claims are taken from the claims of the ancient philosophers, even though some of them are the innovations of my mind (for it is not unlikely for two footprints to coincide), whereas others are to be found in books of religious law. As for most of them, their meaning is found in the books of the Sufis. Still, even if these claims could be found only in the books of the ancient philosophers, why should they be shunned and discarded, if they are rational in themselves, supported by demonstration, and not contrary to the Qur'ān and hadith? If we were to set the precedent that all truths that had ever occurred to those who lie were to be shunned, then it would follow that much of the truth would

“second harm”: [That is, the harm of acceptance, discussed three paragraphs below.](#)

have to be shunned, including all the verses of the Qur’ān, the sayings of the Prophet, the narratives of our ancestors, and the claims of sages and Sufis. All these would have to be shunned simply because the author of the work *The Brethren of Purity* mentioned them in his book, citing them in order to win over the hearts of the simple-minded to his falsehoods. This would also enable those who lie to wrest the truth from our hands simply by setting it down in their own books.

One who has knowledge, even to the least degree, is distinct from a common ignorant person. Accordingly, he does not eschew honey, even if it is found in the **cupping glass**, once he verifies that the cupping glass does not change the essence of honey. The natural distaste that one feels towards it is based on a widespread misconception arising from the fact that the cupping glass is made for unclean blood. For so it is believed that the blood is unclean because it is in the cupping glass, not that it is unclean due to an attribute of its essence. If this attribute does not exist in honey, its presence in that container will not endow it with that attribute, and there is no need to treat it as unclean. This is a false imagination that prevails among most human beings. So, if you pass on some claim, attributing it to someone they think highly of, they will accept it, even if it is false; and if you attribute it to someone they hold in disregard, they will reject it, even if it is true. And so they always know the truth by the men rather than the men by the truth, and that is the height of error. This is the harm of **rejection**.

[ii] The second harm is that of acceptance. Those who examine the books of *The Brethren of Purity* and others, on finding that they mix their own claims with prophetic wisdom and Sufi doctrines, may approve of them, accept them, and adopt a favorable stance towards them. They will then also hasten to accept the falsehoods that are intermingled with them, due to the favorable stance adopted towards what they have seen and approved of. This amounts to a kind of enticement to falsehood.

On account of this harm, access to their books must

This work is a compilation of the teachings of a group of Islamic scholars in the tenth and eleventh centuries

“cupping glass”: A device used in the notorious premodern medical practice of bloodletting.

“rejection”: that is, as the preceding discussion makes clear, the harm of *total* rejection of philodophy.

be restricted because of the deceit and danger that they contain. Just as one must protect unskilled swimmers from perilous shores, people must be shielded from reading philosophical books. And just as boys must be held back from touching snakes, people must be guarded against hearing the muddled claims of the philosophers. And just as the snake charmer must not handle the snake in front of his young son, if he knows that he will emulate him and suppose that he is like him, but instead he must urge his son to be wary of the snake by being cautious himself and by refraining from touching it while in the boy's presence, so too those with secure knowledge should proceed in a similar fashion. Similarly, the proficient snake charmer who can handle the snake and distinguish between the antidote and the poison, extracting the antidote and neutralizing the poison, should not withhold the antidote from someone who needs it. So too, the astute and sharp-eyed moneychanger who puts his hand into the counterfeiter's bag, withdrawing the pure gold and rejecting the fakes and forgeries, should not deny the good and acceptable coins to those in need. So too for one with knowledge. And if someone in need of the antidote finds it repugnant once he knows that it is extracted from the snake that is itself the source of the poison, he must be made to recognize his mistake. And a poor person in need of money, if he snubs the gold withdrawn from the counterfeiter's bag, he must likewise be alerted to the fact that his distaste for it is pure ignorance and will be the cause of his being denied the benefit that he seeks. He must be made aware of the fact that proximity between the fake and the genuine does not render the genuine fake, just as it does not render the fake genuine. In the same way, proximity between truth and falsehood does not render the true false, just as it does not render the false true.

That is all that we wanted to say concerning the harms of philosophy and its confusions.

[III. Esotericists]

This section has been omitted.

[...]

[IV. The Sufis]

When I was done with these sciences, I turned my energies to the way of Sufism and came to know that their method is brought about by a combination of knowledge and practice. The objective of their knowledge is to overcome the obstacles found in the soul. They free the soul of blame-worthy characteristics and malicious attributes in order to cleanse the heart of everything but God Almighty and adorn it with the recollection of God.

The knowledge associated with Sufism was easier for me than the practice. I began to acquire their knowledge by reading their books, such as Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's *Nourishment for the Heart*, the works of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, and the selections handed down to us from al-Junayd, al-Shiblī, and Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (may God sanctify their souls), as well as other masters. I did so until I had ascertained the underlying purpose of their science and had acquired what could be acquired of their way through teaching and oral instruction. It became apparent to me that what was most distinctive about them and specific to them was what could not be attained through teaching but rather through "tasting," the "state" [of ecstasy], and a "transformation of attributes." There is a world of difference between knowing the definitions of health and satiety, their causes, and their preconditions, and actually being healthy and sated. Likewise, there is a world of difference between being cognizant of the definition of inebriation, which denotes a state that comes about as a result of vapors rising from the stomach and overwhelming the sources of thought, and actually being inebriated. Indeed, the inebriated person is not cognizant of the definition of inebriation, for his knowledge while he is inebriated is nonexistent. By contrast, the sober person knows the definition of inebriation and its basis, although he

bears no trace of inebriation. Furthermore, a doctor who is in a diseased state knows the definition of health, its causes, and remedies, even though he is lacking in health. There is a similar difference between knowing the reality of asceticism, its preconditions, and its causes, and the soul's actually being in a state of asceticism and renunciation of the world.

I came to know with certainty that the Sufis were the masters of states rather than statements, and that I had acquired what I could by way of knowledge. All that remained was what could not be attained through oral instruction and teaching, but only through tasting and following the path. Thanks to the sciences that I had practiced and the various approaches I had taken in the course of my investigation into both the religious and rational sciences, I had acquired certain faith in God Almighty, prophecy, and the Day of Judgment. These three foundations of faith had become entrenched in my soul not as a result of a specific and explicit proof, but rather due to reasons, indications, and experiences, the details of which do not lend themselves to a brief summary. It had also become apparent to me that I had no hope of achieving happiness in the afterlife except through piety and by barring the soul from passion. The first step is to sever the heart's attachment to this world, by means of aversion to the realm of conceit, devotion to eternal life, and exertion of one's utmost efforts to God Almighty. This can come about only by turning away from fame and wealth, as well as by releasing oneself from all preoccupations and attachments. When I took note of my own situation, I found myself immersed in attachments, which closed in on me from all sides. Then I pondered my professional duties, the best of which were tutoring and teaching, and found that I was engaged in inconsequential sciences, which were of no benefit when it came to the pursuit of the afterlife. After that, I reflected upon the intention behind my teaching and found that it was not done in the service of God Almighty, but rather that its entire motivation was the pursuit of fame and the impetus behind it was the enhancement of reputation. I became cer-

tain that I was on the edge of a dangerous precipice and on the verge of hellfire, if I did not devote myself to rectify my situation.

I reflected on the matter for some time, while I was still in a position to make a choice. One day, I would be determined to leave Baghdad and walk out on my whole situation, and the next I would lose my determination entirely. I put one step forward then took another back. My desire to pursue the afterlife would take hold one morning, only to be dispersed by the forces of appetite by evening. The temptations of the temporal world enchained me and tugged at me to remain, while the voice of faith cried out: “Depart! Depart! You have only a short time left to live, you have a long journey ahead, and your knowledge and practice are all hypocrisy and illusion. If not now, when will you prepare for the afterlife? If you do not sever these attachments now, when will you do so?” At that point, my resolve would be renewed and I would become determined once again to escape and take flight. But then the devil would reappear, saying: “This is a passing phase. Do not succumb to it whatever you do, because it will be quick to lapse. If you give in to it and leave behind this extensive fame, this carefree prestigious position, and a settled situation that is uncontested by opponents, you may look back one day and find that it is not easy to return.”

For almost six months, starting in the month of **Rajab 488**, I swung between the temptations of the temporal world and the call of the afterlife. Finally, by the sixth month, it ceased to be a matter of choice and became one of necessity, for God locked up my tongue and I became incapable of teaching. I would exert myself to lecture for even one day to satisfy the hearts of those around me, but my tongue would not utter a single word, and I would be completely incapable of doing so. Obstruction of the tongue eventually led to desolation of the heart, which in turn brought with it a breakdown of the faculty that digests and assimilates food and drink; I could not even keep down broth or digest a sin-

“Rajab 488”: That’s the Islamic calendar, equivalent to July 1095. At this time, in Europe, Anselm was the archbishop of Canterbury.

gle bite. This led to a weakening of all my faculties and the doctors lost hope for a cure. They said: “This is an affliction of the heart that has spread to his bodily humors, so the only way to cure it is by revival of the heart and removal of the derangement.”

Quran 27:62

When I became aware of my incapacity and the choice was really out of my hands, I sought refuge in God Almighty in dire need and utter desperation, and was answered by Him “who responds to the one in need when he calls upon him.” He made it easier for me to turn away from fame and wealth, as well as from family, children, and friends. Outwardly, I expressed my resolution to go to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage, while arranging silently to travel to Syria, so that the caliph and all my friends would not be apprised of my decision to take up residence in Syria. To this end, I resorted to all manner of subterfuge when I left Baghdad, resolved never to return to it again. All the imāms of Iraq assailed me, since none of them would allow that there could be a religious reason for my leaving everything behind. They assumed that I had reached the highest religious position. “That is the sum of their knowledge.” After that, people were caught up in conjectures concerning my decision. Those who were far from Iraq assumed that I had received word that I was out of favor with the authorities. However, those close to the authorities noted that they were attached to me and pursued me, while I avoided them and was impervious to their words. Thus, they concluded: “This is a supernatural matter. Its cause can only be a spell cast upon the people of Islam and the community of religious scholars.”

Quran 53:30

Finally, I left Baghdad, distributing what wealth I had and preserving only a small amount for my subsistence and the sustenance of my children. I was aided in this by the fact that a portion of the wealth of Iraq is earmarked for social welfare in the form of a religious endowment for Muslims. Nowhere else in the world have I seen such abundant wealth for scholars to draw upon to support their families.

Then I entered Syria and resided there for almost two years, occupying myself exclusively with isolation, solitude, spiritual exercises, and Sufi devotion. I was engaged in purifying my soul, the cultivation of virtues, and cleansing my heart for the recollection of God Almighty, in accordance with what I had read in the books of the Sufis. Each day, I would withdraw to the Mosque of Damascus, ascend the minaret, and lock myself up there for the duration of the day. From there, I made my way to Jerusalem, where I would enter the Dome of the Rock every day and sequester myself. Then I was moved by the call to fulfill the duty of pilgrimage, derive blessings from Mecca and Medina, and pay my respects to the tomb of the Prophet (God's blessings be upon him). But first, I stopped to visit the Mosque of Abraham in Hebron (God's blessings be upon him) before proceeding to the **Hejaz**.

Eventually, certain concerns and my children's pleas to return pulled me back to the homeland, though I thought that I would never go back. There, I also opted for isolation in an attempt to preserve my secluded state and to keep my heart pure for the recollection of God. Various eventualities, family duties, and the need for subsistence tended to affect the nature of my goal and intrude upon my undisturbed solitude. But even though I could attain the pure state only from time to time, that did not extinguish my hope of achieving it. Obstacles would impede me, but I would always go back to it.

I remained in this state for ten years, and things were revealed to me during my solitary retreats that cannot be enumerated or detailed. This much I will mention, since it may be of benefit to others: I came to know with certainty that the Sufis are exclusively the ones who pursue the course that leads to God Almighty. Their conduct is the best, their way is the most correct, and their characters are the most morally refined. Indeed, if one were to gather together the intellect of all rational persons, the wisdom of the sages, and the knowledge of those religious scholars apprised of the

“Hejaz”: The region of the Saudi peninsula where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located.

secrets of religious law, they would be unable to find anything in the conduct and character of the Sufis that could be changed for the better. All their activity, whether outward or inward, is obtained from the light of the lantern of prophecy, in comparison with which no light on earth is capable of illuminating.

On the whole, what can one say about their way? Purity, which is its first precondition, is the complete purification of the heart from everything but God Almighty. The key to their way, which is analogous to the beginning of **the Prayer**, is the complete absorption of the heart in the recollection of God. The final step is complete obliteration in God. Or rather, that is the final step relative to these first steps, which can almost be considered matters of choice and acquisition. But upon closer inspection, this is just the beginning of the Sufi way and what precedes it is just an entryway for those who pursue the way. From the very first step of the Sufi way, enlightenment and visions begin. The Sufis even see the angels and the spirits of the prophets when they are awake, hearing their voices and deriving benefit from them. Then the Sufi state progresses from the level of visions of images and similitudes to levels about which it is difficult to speak. Any interpreter who has tried to articulate such a state has inevitably committed a clear error of expression, which cannot be avoided. On the whole, it all concludes with a kind of proximity to God, which one group represents imaginatively almost as transfiguration, whereas another group represents it as union, and yet a third group as attainment. But all these are erroneous representations, whose errors we have exposed in the work *The Radiant Goal*. Rather, whoever has managed to attain that state must not say more than the following: “I do not remember what happened, So assume the best, and do not ask for a report!”

Generally speaking, anyone who has not been granted the taste of this state apprehends the reality of prophecy in name alone. Upon verification, it transpires that the exalted states of those who are close to God are in fact the beginning

“the Prayer”: This refers to is the famous opening words of the Islamic call to prayer, Allāhu akbar, “God is greater,” i.e., greater than everything else.

This is a line from the poet Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 908).

of prophecy. That was the initial state of the Prophet (the blessings of God upon him) when he first approached Mount Hira, where he would isolate himself and worship so devotedly that the Arabs said: “Muhammad has fallen in love with his Lord.”

This state can be verified by anyone through direct tasting once they have pursued the Sufi road. As for those who have not been granted the taste of it, they can become certain of it through experience and testimony if they frequent the company of the Sufis, and they will come to a certain understanding of these states by means of evidence. Those who frequent their company will acquire faith from them – for they are the group whose companions will never be damned. As for those who are not granted their companionship, they can come to know of the possibility of this state with certainty by means of demonstrative indications, as we have mentioned in our book *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, in the section entitled “The Wonders of the Heart.”

Verification by means of demonstration is knowledge. Taking on the state itself is tasting. Acceptance based on testimony and experience of others is faith. These are three degrees, for “God ranks in degrees those of you who have faith and those to whom knowledge is granted.”

Behind these Sufis is a group of ignorant people, who deny the basis of this and wonder at these words. They listen, mock, and say: “How strange, they’re babbling deliriously!” They are the ones of whom God Almighty said: “Some of them will listen to you and after they leave you, they will say to those to whom knowledge has been granted: ‘What did he just say?’ They are the ones whose hearts God has sealed and they have followed their passions,” for he has made them deaf and blind.

Quran 58:11

Quran 47:16