

Ghazali and the Question of the Decline of Science in the Muslim World

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The claim that al-Ghazali was responsible for the decline of science in the Muslim world continues to appear in discussions of Islamic intellectual history. This article examines that claim by considering the complex relationship between science and religion in Muslim societies and by studying al-Ghazali's views on doubt, the limits of reason, and causality. It argues that The Incoherence of the Philosophers was directed at particular metaphysical claims and at the certainty philosophers attached to them. Al-Ghazali did not reject mathematics, natural science, or rational inquiry in general. Comparisons with Descartes and Hume also show that similar questions concerning inherited knowledge and necessary causation have received different treatment in histories of Western philosophy. His influence on Islamic thought was considerable, but one philosophical critique cannot explain changes that occurred unevenly across different disciplines, institutions, and regions. His role in the decline of science has therefore been greatly exaggerated.

1. Introduction

When we talk about the decline of science in the Muslim world, certain facts are given to strengthen the argument. Such as the fact that the Islamic Golden Age ended a thousand years ago and in the current situation, the Muslim world's combined contribution to science is less than 1%.ⁱ Such a decline is hard to fathom because during its early years, Islamic civilization contributed greatly to the cause of Science and produced a vast amount of knowledge that was later utilized by the European world to develop science as a dominant episteme. That the decline occurred is obvious to many by the current state of scientific endeavors in the Muslim world. For this reason, it is imperative to point out the right causes of failure if the Muslim world is to review the mistakes that led to their downfall.

A cursory glance at recurring explanations for the decline of science in Muslim societies finds al-Ghazali among the usual suspects. This attribution, however, must be separated from Muhammad Iqbal's account of intellectual stagnation in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Iqbal identifies three developments that contributed to the growing immobility of Islamic legal and intellectual life. These were the conservative reaction to Rationalism during the Abbasid period, the rise of ascetic Sufism, and the destruction of Baghdad in the thirteenth century (Iqbal 2013, 118–21). His discussion concerns the decline of *ijtihad* and the effort of conservative thinkers to preserve social order during periods of political and intellectual instability. He does not identify al-Ghazali as one of the causes and does not blame him for the decline of science.

Iqbal's discussion of the Rationalist movement also concerns the early Abbasid controversy over the eternity of the Quran. The Rationalists rejected the conservative belief that the Quran was eternal, while their opponents came to regard Rationalism as a threat to the stability of Muslim society. This controversy should not be confused with al-Ghazali's later criticism of the philosophers' belief in the eternity of the world. The two debates involved different questions and arose within different intellectual contexts.

A clearer example of the place assigned to al-Ghazali in decline narratives appears in Muzaffar Iqbal's *Islam and Science*. Muzaffar Iqbal observes that the decline of science has been variously attributed to opposition from Islamic orthodoxy, al-Ghazali's book against the philosophers, the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, the absence of institutional support, and even an alleged incompatibility between Islam and science (Iqbal 2002, 136). His account does not necessarily endorse these explanations. It records the different causes that have been proposed. The presence of al-Ghazali's book in a list that also includes military destruction shows the disproportionate historical weight that has been placed upon one philosophical text.

The repeated appearance of al-Ghazali in such explanations places him as a thinker who blocked the Islamic path toward scientific revolution. His critique in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* is presented as a decisive setback, as if one book changed the intellectual direction of an entire civilization. However, in recent scholarship, this interpretation of al-Ghazali's legacy

has come under closer examination. His responsibility for the decline of Islamic science has been questioned and sometimes described as a myth. Greater attention has also been given to those aspects of his thought that affirm doubt and the practical uses of scientific discourses.

2. The Complex Relationship Between Islam and Science:

Before commenting on and questioning al-Ghazali's role in the decline of science in Islam, it is important to understand what Alnoor Dhanani describes in his essay *Islam*; that the relationship between science and Islam has always been "complex." During early Islamic period, science was also used as an instrument for religious purposes, and the relationship between the two heavily relied on "political authority, patronage, and competition among elites" (Dhanani, 2017, 80). The practical utility of scientific knowledge was widely recognized, although what counted as practical remained open to disagreement. There is, therefore, no absolute way of describing where the fault lies when it comes to analyzing the decline of science in Islam. This complex phenomenon cannot be accurately evaluated through the lens of the European scientific revolution alone.

Ahmed S. Dallal in his essay *Early Islam*, points out that there was no conflict between the two as scientific institutions like medical schools were "inaugurated by religious authorities" and "attracted many religious scholars as students." He also believes that the education of science was widespread and part of intellectual life in Muslim societies till at least the sixteenth century (Dallal, 2011, 133-134). This history complicates the idea that religion and science existed in a permanent state of conflict. Therefore, understanding the complexity of the relationship between Islam and science is important if one is to avoid the mistake of vast generalizations such as blaming the entirety of the decline of science in Islam on the shoulders of al-Ghazali, as has been done historically.

Dhanani argues that the relationship between science and Islam can only be understood properly if we consider that Islam is not only a religion but also an empire and civilization (2017, 73-80). As an empire, Islam's geographical territories extended from the Indus valley to Spain. Naturally, such a vast territory included various cultures, knowledge styles, languages, and socio-political systems. Rulers in the administrative offices during the Abbasid dynasty, particularly Harun al-Rashid and al-Mamun, generously funded and encouraged scientific endeavors. "House of Wisdom" and "House of Knowledge" promoted science and intellectuals of the age were interested in acquiring knowledge disregarding racial, religious, cultural, and national differences. Public and private libraries were also established. These early developments, especially during the Abbasid dynasty, serve as evidence that Islam was not inhospitable to science and there was no essential conflict between the two.

Why, then, did the Islamic science decline? And more importantly, was there any role al-Ghazali played in its downfall? Syed Nomanul Haq describes as a myth the claim that medieval Islamic culture was inhospitable to science. In order to debunk this myth, he says that Islam, unlike Christianity, does not have a "centralized authority" or an "institutionalized religious order" (2009,

40). Al-Ghazali was a Sunni thinker who belonged to a certain sect, the Shafi'i school of religious law. His influence extended far beyond one legal school. His position, however, could not function as a binding decree issued by a centralized religious institution. So, his critique can only be representative of one sect of Islam. In other words, he cannot represent the religious order in general. Moreover, science continued to thrive, and Islam saw remarkable achievements in the centuries following al-Ghazali's critique. If his intervention had been as destructive and powerful as decline narratives suggest, Muslim societies would not have witnessed, as George Saliba argues, a very flourishing activity in "mechanics, with the works of Jazari (1205); or in logic, mathematics, and astronomy ... or in optics ... or in pharmacology ... or in medicine ..."ii, all of which took place "well after the death of Ghazali and his attack on the philosophers" (2007, 21).

The continuation of scientific activity after al-Ghazali weakens the claim that his critique brought Islamic science to an end. His approval of arithmetic, medicine, and other practical sciences provides a separate reason for questioning his portrayal as an enemy of science. Al-Ghazali's disapproval of metaphysics and the influence of Greek deductive thought on Islam cannot be studied in isolation from his endorsement of "a utilitarian position which is approving of 'practical sciences' such as arithmetic and medicine" (Dhanani, 82). Furthermore al-Ghazali, especially during the later phase of his life, gave doubt an important place in the search for certainty.

2. Debunking al-Ghazali's role in the decline of science in Islam:

Al-Ghazali in his autobiographical work *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, translated in English by Claud Field as *The Confessions of al-Ghazali*, wrote, "I have interrogated the beliefs of each sect and scrutinized the mysteries of each doctrine, in order to disentangle truth from error and orthodoxy from heresy ... There is no philosopher whose system I have not fathomed, nor theologian the intricacies of whose doctrine I have not followed out" (1909, 12-13). Al-Ghazali's stress on scrutiny and investigation shows that he believed doubt to be a key element in philosophical inquiry. Saeed Sheikh while commenting on al-Ghazali's *courage to know* depicted through his *method of doubt* argues that he was free from the narrowness of the dogmatic theologians of his time and he was prepared "to listen to every creed and doctrine, he would accept none and doubt all" (1963, 588).

It is interesting to see the similarities between Descartes and al-Ghazali. Both philosophers stress the need to be skeptical about the knowledge that one inherits from tradition to build knowledge that is free from prejudice and partiality. Catherine Wilson believes that al-Ghazali's parallel with "Descartes' *Discourse on Method* and the first two books of the *Meditations* is unmistakable" (2001, 1022). Doubt is a key for knowing oneself and the world around oneself in Descartes' Cartesian philosophy. Descartes starts *Meditation One: Concerning Those Things That Can Be Called into Doubt* with the words, "several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them" (1998, 59). Here, Descartes has

pointed out that when the foundations of knowledge are weak, the resulting body of traditionally accepted knowledge can become a tower of falsity.

The similarities between Descartes' method of doubt and that of al-Ghazali are evident, and surprising when one comes to know that al-Ghazali said something not so different from Descartes only a few centuries before him. On the necessity of doubt al-Ghazali said,

“The search after truth being the aim which I propose to myself, I ought in the first place to ascertain what are the bases of certitude. In the next place, I recognized that certitude is the clear and complete knowledge of things, such knowledge as leaves no room for doubt nor the possibility of error and conjecture” (al-Ghazali 1909, 14).

One can see that for al-Ghazali, just like Descartes after him, doubt remains an essential philosophical step towards attaining certitude. One doubt may lead towards another, but certitude without criticism leads only to dogmatism. Because of the preference of doubt over dogmatism, Descartes was later celebrated as the father of modern philosophy. Al-Ghazali, because of his critique of the philosophers, came to be remembered by many as an opponent of philosophy and science. This contrast tells us something about the different ways in which the two thinkers have been represented in philosophical history.

It is not just in one book that al-Ghazali highlights the need for investigation and doubt. In *Mizan al-Amal*, al-Ghazali says, “for doubt leads to truth. Whoever has no doubts of any kind does not reflect, and he who does not reflect cannot see clearly, and he who cannot see clearly remains in a state of blindness and in error” (qtd. in Siddiqi, 131). Thus, al-Ghazali was neither unappreciative of scientific doubt nor hated skepticism in general. This treatment of reflection and doubt complicates the familiar portrayal of al-Ghazali as an enemy of inquiry. However, since he has been seen as such by people around the world, especially those who blame him for the decline of science in the Muslim world, it could be argued that they did not see this side of al-Ghazali as important enough to discuss. C. A. Qadir in his book *Philosophy and Science in the Islamic World* writes, “it is very unfortunate that the Muslims took no note of al-Ghazali's scientific and rational methodology and were impressed only by his denunciation of rational thinking and repudiation of philosophical enterprises” (Qadir, 1988, 126). Moreover, when we blame al-Ghazali for the decline of science, we also overlook the significance that Ibn Rushd's *Tahafat al-Tahafat* (Critique of the Critique) carried. Ibn Rushd's response to al-Ghazali was an important event in Muslim philosophy. The existence of this response shows that al-Ghazali's critique did not remain unchallenged.

Some historians believe that Ibn Rushd's exposition of the defects in al-Ghazali's critique went as unnoticed as al-Ghazali's thought in general except the latter's critique of the philosophers. Qadir believes, “had Ibn Rushd's *Tahafat al-Tahafat* come to the notice of the Muslims in the East and been properly appreciated, the decline in rational thinking among the Muslims would not have

been so steep” (1988, 126). However, the problem with this argument is that Ibn Rushd, or Averroes as he is known in the West, was not an insignificant figure. His work received considerable attention in Latin Europe. His reception differed across regions, but he cannot be treated as a thinker whose response to al-Ghazali disappeared entirely. Blaming al-Ghazali for the decline is an outcome of misunderstanding one aspect of his thought while overlooking most of what he believed. The misunderstanding stems from the fact that al-Ghazali’s critique was directed at deductive tendencies of the Muslim philosophy which were an outcome of overriding influences of Greek thought on Muslim minds.

An oft-quoted phrase of Mohammad Iqbal is “the birth of Islam ... is the birth of inductive intellect” (2013, 101). It is important to mention here that properly understood, al-Ghazali’s critique is seen by some as a revolt against the deductive method of the Greeks which was gaining more and more ground in the Islamic thought during its Golden age of science. The achievements of early Muslim science were an outcome of their emphasis on inductive intellect inspired by the Quran which directs believers to examine and contemplate nature. (Iqbal, 2013, 100-105; Qadir, 127). As mentioned above, Muslim thought was a *product of* and the supposed *producer of* inductive thought. Al-Ghazali’s critique was a protest to revive the inductive tradition in Muslim thought. It was the deductive thought of Greeks he considered problematic. Al-Ghazali was not simply opposed to deduction. He used logic and accepted demonstrative reasoning in matters where he believed demonstration was possible. His criticism was directed at the certainty assigned to deductive reasoning when it was extended beyond its proper field and applied to metaphysical and theological questions.

The influence of Greeks, particularly Plato and Aristotle’s abstract thought on Muslims had resulted in the abandonment of inductive thought which was the original mode of inquiry in the Islamic world. Besides, al-Ghazali’s revolt against the Greeks is neither uncommon nor unusually unique. Had such a thing stopped the progress of science or caused its decline, Europe would not have produced science in the first place. Bacon, for example, criticized deduction and abstraction, and favored induction over it. Bacon asserted that philosophy and the intellectual sciences become a “completely dead thing” when they are separated from particulars and practical results (Bacon 2000, 7). He felt the need to introduce a new method based on the promotion of knowledge verified by experience.

Al-Ghazali was also not the only Muslim thinker to question the authority of Greek philosophy. Ibn Taimiyyah, writing almost two hundred years after al-Ghazali’s death, gave a comprehensive critique of Aristotelian deductive logic, which for him was flawed. Ibn Taimiyyah criticized the Muslim philosophers for being subservient to the Greek traditions. He called out Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi for being stuck in the illusionary world of their Master’s defective philosophy. “Look at the followers of Aristotle! They are following him blindly, while many of them know full well that their master’s theories are wrong. Still, it is their pious belief which prevents them from refuting him in spite of the fact that many wise men have proved that there are undeniable

and indubitable errors in his logical system” (qtd. in Haq, Serajul 805).ⁱⁱⁱ Ibn Taimiyyah believed that Muslim philosophers like to be associated with “Aristotle’s name” and thereby avoid exposing the obvious flaws apparent in his system.

An important point to note here is that the argument that al-Ghazali was responsible for scientific decline becomes even more difficult to maintain when one comes to know that al-Ghazzali endorsed mathematics and natural science. Except for slight variations, al-Ghazali’s classification of mathematics and natural sciences is not much different from his predecessors in Muslim philosophy. Osman Bakar believes that “the difference between al-Ghazali and the philosopher–scientists in their classifications of mathematics and natural science is insignificant, as similar variations can also be found among the philosopher–scientists themselves” (2001, 938). Al-Ghazali’s dispute with the philosophers is not over the issue of the validity and utility of science. He accepted scientific methodology within its proper field while reminding philosophers that its authority had boundaries, especially in matters of metaphysical and religious truth. This reminder of limitation is akin to Immanuel Kant’s critique of reason. Kant called metaphysics a “battlefield of endless controversies” based on the argument that reason has boundaries. In this way, Kant tried to keep the limits of knowledge in check.

Al-Ghazali never called metaphysics a battlefield but his critique of the philosophers is also, in a way, a critique of the unchecked use of reason without limits. As discussed above, his critique of a certain class of philosophers cannot be considered the rejection of science as a knowledge discourse. In fact, “al-Ghazali reproached those Muslims who opposed science just because it has been ascribed to the philosophers” (Bakar, 2001; 939).

3. Al-Ghazali on Causality

Another aspect of al-Ghazali’s thought because of which he has been labeled anti-science is his view regarding causality. This problem has been widely discussed and greatly misinterpreted. It is often assumed that al-Ghazali denied the existence of natural causation. Al-Ghazali only denied the existence of a necessary connection between cause and effect. Under the section “Causality and Miracle” in his book *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, al-Ghazali says,

“the connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary, according to us. But [with] any two things, where ‘this’ is not ‘that’ and ‘that’ is not ‘this’ and where neither the affirmation of the one entails the affirmation of the other nor the negation of the one entails the negation of the other, it is not a necessity of the existence of the one that the other should exist, and it is not a necessity of the nonexistence of the one that the other should not exist” (2000, 166).

When we were reading al-Ghazali’s views on causality in *Tahafat*, we were immediately reminded of the similarities it carried with David Hume’s views on the same subject. For al-Ghazali, the regular succession of two events does not prove that one contains a necessary power that independently produces the other. It is the “past habits” and the continuity of “custom” and not the

necessary connection that links the two together. My view is validated by Massimo Campanini, who in his chapter on al-Ghazali in the book *History of Islamic Philosophy* writes, “it is well known that al-Ghazali precedes David Hume in his theory that the nexus of causality is only apparent and is the effect of the human custom of linking together two occurrences which are happening uniformly in nature” (2001, 263). Campanini calls it a well-known fact. I, however, believe that it is not a commonly held belief except for those in academic circles who have read al-Ghazali in detail. The few commentaries we have come across on Hume and Descartes, written by Western authors, do not mention al-Ghazali as the person who preceded, these great names in their respective inquiries.^{iv} The chronological priority and philosophical similarity do not necessarily prove that al-Ghazali directly influenced Hume. But If Hume’s criticism of necessary causation did not destroy science in Europe, the claim that a comparable criticism by al-Ghazali destroyed science in Muslim societies requires further evidence. Besides, al-Ghazali did not intend his attack on causality as an attack towards science. He sought to show that God creates events in regular conjunction and that the connection between cause and effect does not possess an independent necessity.

Interestingly, the term translated as science in this context carries the broader meaning of *‘ilm*, or knowledge and should not be reduced to the modern meaning of natural science. The word “science” in this sense means “the knowledge of God and His attributes” (Campanini, 264). And because al-Ghazali was a practicing Muslim, attributing science as the knowledge of God could mean anything for him except belittling of the word. However, since he considers himself a mystic and not a scientist, for him there are higher stages of knowledge that can be attained through mystical practice. It is therefore understandable that he criticized those who trusted reason blindly or treated it as the only possible source of knowledge.

The point of discussing all these various thoughts above is that philosophers from around the globe, centuries after al-Ghazali, continued to criticize Greek influences on the thoughts of their respective traditions on the one hand, and like him criticized the fundamental scientific concepts such as causality on the other. Al-Ghazali was not the first, and certainly not the last to do so. His denunciation of philosophy and the Greek roots in it, or the way he saw causality cannot be blamed for the decline of science in the Muslim world. Moreover, it is absurd to blame the decline of Islamic science on a philosopher who lived most of his life in the eleventh century while the progress of science in Islam continued for centuries afterwards. Naturally, al-Ghazali could not foresee what shape science in Europe would take place later. Blaming him for Islam’s failure to redirect its science under the modern standards defined through the European lens is even more absurd.

4. Conclusion

The discussion above has centered around the question why al-Ghazali cannot reasonably be made responsible for the decline of science in the Muslim world. His critique was directed at particular claims made by the philosophers, especially their views concerning metaphysics, the

eternity of the world, and necessary causation. He questioned the certainty attached to these claims, but he did not reject mathematics, natural science, or rational inquiry in general. His approval of practical sciences and his use of doubt as a method in the search for certainty make the familiar image of an enemy of science difficult to sustain.

The continuation of scientific activity after his death also creates a serious problem for the decline argument. Important work in optics, pharmacology, and medicine continued for several centuries. This does not mean that al-Ghazali had no influence on the intellectual direction of Muslim societies. His influence was extensive, but his critique was centered on only a particular kind of deductive and abstract scientific inquiries. This critique cannot reasonably be used as an excuse to justify the decline of science in a vast and culturally diverse civilization. A serious account of scientific decline must move beyond the search for one convenient cause and examine the wider historical conditions through which scientific knowledge was supported, transformed, and weakened.

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Notes

ⁱ “India and Spain together produce more research articles than the Muslim world which constitutes of more than fifty countries.” These facts are described in various articles. The source we are using here is: Aydin, Nuh. “Did Al-Ghazali Kill the Science in Islam?” *The Fountain*, May 2012, fountainmagazine.com/2012/issue-87-may-june-2012/did-al-ghazali-kill-the-science-in-islam-may-june-2012.

ⁱⁱ George Saliba names several mathematicians, opticians, logicians, astronomers, and pharmacologists, who worked in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries (from Jazari (1205) in mechanics to Shams al-Din al-Khafri in optics)- the time when al-Ghazali’s effect is supposed to have taken place. He is also extensively cited by Haq for his essay in Galileo Goes to Jail. See, Saliba, George. *Islamic Science and the Making of European Renaissance*. The MIT Press, 2007. p.21.

ⁱⁱⁱ We could not find an English translation of Ibn Taimiyyah’s *Kitab al-'Aql w-al-Naq*. Not an authority on Arabic myself, we had to rely on Serajul Haq chapter on Ibn Taimiyyah in History of Muslim Philosophy Volume Two. Serajul Haq is considered an authority on Ibn Taimiyyah and was part of the Pakistan Philosophical Congress before the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. For the reference mentioned see, Haq, Serajul. “Ibn Taimiyyah.” *A History of Muslim Philosophy: Volume Two*, edited by M. M. Sharif, Harrassowitz, 1966, pp. 796–819. Pages 804-812 are recommended in which Haq discusses Ibn Taimiyyah’s masterful work to expose the fallacies inherent in Aristotle’s deductive logic.

^{iv} See, for example, “Hume.” *A History of Philosophy*, by Frederick Copleston, Doubleday, 1994, pp. 258–394; Hume’s chapter in Weber, Alfred. *History of Philosophy*. Translated by Frank Thilly, Scribner's, 1897, pp. 417-433; two chapters on Hume in Brown, Stuart, editor. *Routledge History of Philosophy Volume 5*. Routledge, 1996, pp. 123-165; three sections on Hume in Kenny, Sir Anthony. *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*. Blackwell, 2006, pp. 256-265. There is no mention of al-Ghazali as a comparison, or as a probable influence in any of these recognized histories of Western philosophy texts.