

Modernity and the (Im)Possibility of Transcendence

A Cognitive Map for Liberation:

From Nietzsche and Modern Binaries to Ghazalian Noetics

by

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A thesis presented for the BA degree

with Honors in Philosophy

The Department of Philosophy

University of Michigan

Winter 2021

Advisors: Daniel Herwitz and Alexander Knysh

Acknowledgments

This thesis wouldn't have been possible without the continued support of my primary advisor, Dr. Daniel Herwitz, and my secondary advisor, Dr. Alexander Knysh. It is with their guidance, feedback, and encouragement that I was able to undertake what still seems to me a mammoth task. I would like to thank the Philosophy Department for being my first love at the University of Michigan and for housing a particularly astounding group of faculty who have allowed me the creative and intellectual freedom to critique, challenge, and wonder about the world and its meaning, especially David Baker, Laura Reutsche, James Joyce, Andreas Gailus, and again Daniel Herwitz. I also thank my professors Samer Ali, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, and Debotri Dhar for revolutionizing my understanding of Islam and/or liberation. My intellectual journey in my undergraduate career began with the particularly plucky group of young philosophers in the Society of Deontology (run by the inspirational Guus Duindam) whose conversations I will always remember fondly; and it led me all the way to Morocco where I met an Islamic environmentalist who set my life down a surprising and wonderful trajectory. For both, I am incredibly grateful. I thank my Muslim community at the University of Michigan and at home for reminding me where love and home truly is. And always, over and over, my parents and my siblings for anchoring me to the very best part of who I am.

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Introduction

My earliest brushes with revolutionary Islamic thought occurred in the most unexpected places, and much later than I would have liked.

I had to overcome my first inkling of some social consciousness in high school. The 2016 election powerfully shaped my social consciousness in my late teens. A hastily-developed worldliness due to the Trump era is a common experience for many people around my age who grew up in affluent American suburbs. Complex questions about race, gender, law, immigration were being packaged in bite-size Tweets and armed for war on the Twitter battleground by high school students. I stood among their ranks, proud, with a Twitter bio that read: “Sign me up for the next American revolution.”

My embarrassing lack of understanding of the complexities of Muslim and American identity doesn't discredit the fact that ever since I was a child, I felt a sort of aching alienation that I never knew how to fully articulate. The first time I saw a hijabi woman in a film was in my French class, where her hijab slips off and a white boy romantically drapes it back over her head. I felt the heat rise and pulse all around my face as my classmates made offhand remarks about the “romantic gesture.” I wish I could say that I believed it wasn't romantic— but I did believe it, and I continued, for a long time, to believe that if we work together and think critically about diversity and tolerance, we can envision a future in which we all belong.

The fetishization of Islam by the West— and indeed, Muslims' own obsession with authenticity and performing “real” Islam— has led to a subtlety of oppression which chokes out the ability of modern colonial and dispossessed subjects to truly formulate their own complexity. Forever enshrined in the panopticon of the oppressor, the modern Muslim squirms delicately

under intense microscopic scrutiny, surveillance (both literal and metaphorical), and internalized self-hatred, never able to overcome the binaries of modernity which constitute the totality of their— my, our— reality.

For years I oscillated between such binaries myself, at once proclaiming myself as an authentically practicing Muslim, and at others resolutely American and thus free to engage in any number of “Western” activities which still guilted my conscience. Raised in a South Asian Muslim community in the metro-Detroit area, I picked up on the glaring binary laid out to me by my parents and community: within the walls of the masjid and the home and sometimes school, you are safe; but outside these carefully-demarcated boundaries lies a world in which “the West” abides, where pleasure festers, where pure hearts go to waste, and where moral danger lurks on every corner. The guilt of existing in such a world is nothing compared to the radical inability to *imagine* anything beyond the bifurcation of science and religion, rationality and spirituality, sacred and profane, and a terrible perversion of the Islamic opposition of al-Din and al-Dunya.

Overcoming the internalization of only *two ways of thinking* is difficult because it requires deep self-consciousness and then radical imagination. It requires a kind of imagination that doesn't just seek to disprove its opposition, but which seeks to create something *new* and venture into uncharted territory. Without over-moralizing, without instrumentalizing, and without romanticizing the past or the future, such an imagination is at once practical and revolutionary. It's the work of thinkers like Sherman Jackson, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, Hamid Dabashi, Wael Hallaq, Edward Said, Haggag Ali, Malcolm X, Leila Abu-Lughod and many others that the broad contours of such an imagination is made possible. It is their legacy, creativity, criticality, and integrity which I seek to follow in my scholarship and in my praxis.

Frantz Fanon writes that discovering your humanity as a subject of intellectual dispossession (among other more violent forms of dispossession) is like feeling “in [your] soul as immense as the world”— but at the same time the alienation of bifurcated identity categories will leave you “straddling Nothingness and Infinity.” Fanon begins to weep. That is to say that discovering the deep nuance, history, beauty, terrifying reality of one’s identity is a weighty feeling, yet one which imparts a lightness of mind— but at the same time, there is a realization of the *totality* of historical systems of destruction and the *impossibility* of overcoming them. I feel this tension, palpably, in my heart and mind, and it weighs me down. But it also moves me. It is with this tension that I write, cautiously, every word in this thesis.

What follows is one account of imagination. I create a cognitive map of Western and Islamic intellectual history which I hope will provide clarity for Muslims, and perhaps non-Muslims alike, in overcoming modern binaries which are created for the sustenance of Western domination from multiple global centers. In his work *Mapping the Secular Mind*, Haggag Ali discusses how Italian missionary Matteo Ricci’s misshaped map of China offended and confused the Chinese. In the same way, misshaped, misinformed, and mis-historicized cognitive maps can be dangerous for the self-perception of Muslims, residue from histories of colonization and displacement. One way to engage with this cognitive dissonance is to draw new cognitive maps. This cannot be done by rejecting everything that is Western, nor by asking whether Islam is “compatible” with modernity, or even by attempting to return to something “traditional.” Aamir Mufti says: “The enormity of what has been ruined is not in doubt,” but that he is concerned instead “with the possibility of living with this crisis and coming to understand the social and ethical stakes in that struggle to live.” Similarly, I am deeply committed to engaging with this intellectual history, not to forget, but to remember and then remake.

In Chapter One, I introduce nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas of perspectivism and will to power and argue that they expedite the process to a new phase of modernity which Haggag Ali discusses in his work *Mapping the Secular Mind*. I then pose the question of whether this new phase of modernity could possibly hold some liberatory promise for intellectually dispossessed formerly colonized and/or oppressed communities. I articulate this question in order to open up the conversation for the next chapter.

In Chapter Two, I trace the historical creation of prominent modern binaries such as the sacred and profane, rational and spiritual, immanent and transcendent. I explore two responses to liquid modernity: existentialism and disembodied spirituality. I focus for most of the chapter on the latter, unraveling its entanglement with Romanticism and the Western obsession with mindfulness practices, yoga, tarot readings, ect, and argue that all forms of so-called "transcendence" in liquid modernity rely on either orientalism and cultural appropriation (if performed by white people) or self-orientalism and cultural essentialism (if performed by non-White people on their own cultures and identities). After exploring some literary works such as *Frankenstein* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, analyzing the Arab-American Mahjar poets, and critiquing the static marriage of rationality and spirituality in Mohammad Iqbal's thought, I argue that all avenues to transcendence have been closed in liquid modernity. In the end of the chapter, I wonder whether unironic, un-instrumentalized, and rhetorically transparent avenue to transcendence as a means of liberation is possible for the Muslim consciousness.

In the third and final chapter, I introduce Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and his metaphysics of the heart and mind in an effort to imagine beyond modern binaries, with the full cognizance that such imagination requires dynamic critical effort. I perform four major comparative analyses: I compare Ghazali's conception of the heart to modernity's disembodied spirituality and

pantheism; I explore Ghazali's conception of witnessing (mushahada) and experience (dhawq) as decentering liberalism and modern notions of meaning as purely communal, leveraging Wittgenstein's theory; I compare Ghazali's Sufi conception of absolving the ego and its relevance to the modern ego as the point of all pleasure with Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*. Finally, I return to a critical comparison between Nietzsche and Ghazali to argue that Ghazali adopts a plurality of meaning which allows one to at least imagine beyond the binary structure of modernity if one is willing to make the engaged cognitive map to do so.

This year-long research project has taught me more than I can imagine, and it has provided me some much-needed clarity into the contemporary Muslim consciousness. I hope it can be a source of clarity to others as well. Whatever discourses are written here have been crafted with care and sincere intention, and I can only hope— I pray— that my pen did not get the better of me.

Bismillahi al rahman al raheem.

Chapter One:

Nietzsche and Modernity

In the late nineteenth century, a German philosopher named Friedrich Nietzsche would go on to change the face of philosophy. He was known to be a quiet, polite, and witty person with acquaintances he made, but he never made many— after a stint as a professor in Switzerland’s University of Basel, he suffered greatly from illness and became fed up with his fellow academics, which forced him to move to the Swiss Alps to write his great works by himself. Troubled by family problems, undersold books, and general existential angst, Nietzsche had a mental breakdown about a decade after publishing his first few great works. He was a sensitive soul. The breakdown was a public one: when he saw a horse being beaten by its owner in the street, Nietzsche collapsed and held it, saying “I understand you.” He never fully recovered. However, Nietzsche’s philosophy claims the grand spectacle of life and makes scathing critiques on many other ways of thinking and organizing life, such as religion, Kantian metaphysics, and most relevant to this essay, post-enlightenment liberalism.¹ In this chapter, I will be exploring Nietzsche’s critiques of modernity and his relationship to truth and meaning. I will argue that though he critiques solid modernity, Nietzsche expedited the process to liquid modernity— and that ultimately, neither phase of modernity provides a liberatory framework for non-Western, and more specifically Muslim, people.

I. Nietzsche on Truth and Dogmatism

¹ Anderson, R. Lanier, "Friedrich Nietzsche," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition) 2-3, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/nietzsche/>

In his work *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), Nietzsche sets out for himself a project that can largely be considered a criticism of intellectual history and the state of philosophy. Nietzsche believes that Western philosophy has failed to fulfill the ideals it set out for itself at the outset of the Enlightenment, because metaphysics, “which aimed to fulfill these hopes, has been an abysmal failure, showing no signs of realizing its claim of attaining truth.”² In fact, Nietzsche opens BGE with the provocative question: “Supposing that truth is a woman— what then?” He then cheekily remarks that philosophers, “insofar as they have been dogmatists,” often fail to win over the hearts of women despite the “terrible seriousness” and “clumsy importunity” with which they seek to find truth.³ This tongue-in-cheek comparison between romantic conquest and philosophers’ grave quest for truth is, of course, one of the many ways that Nietzsche uses rhetoric to his advantage, something that has often stumped his readers through the ages, but the message here seems to be quite clear: isn’t truth importantly linked to these deeply human and social impulses of romance, grandeur, ego, and power? And wouldn’t it also be *dogmatic* to assume that grandeur, ego, and power *don’t* factor into our understanding of truth?

In BGE, part of Nietzsche’s project is to critique post-Enlightenment thought for being too dogmatic. Much of post-Enlightenment thinking, especially in the case of social contract theorists such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, as well as many French rationalist thinkers like Renee Descartes, posits that humans can arrive at real truth simply by examining the raw contents of our minds.⁴ By exercising our inherently ordained intellect as rational agents, we can come to objective, universal truth and create perfect systems of government, economics, and

² Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, “Beyond Good and Evil,” *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche* (2013): 305, 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199534647.013.0014

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1909-1913) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm>

⁴ Haggag Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind: Modernity’s Quest for a Godless Utopia* (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2013), 40

science. Nietzsche rejects this idea, arguing instead that our understanding of reality actively *shapes* that reality, giving us only a vague notion— if at all— of metaphysical truth.

Nietzsche makes his argument against metaphysical truth clearly in his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” where he argues that we invent “binding designations” for things, and these designations establish “the first laws of truth.”⁵ Our most foundational understandings of truth are not in truth itself but rather in our designations and representations of the world around us; in other words, in *language*. This is where the first divergence between truth and falsehood takes place. Despite the arbitrariness of truth, humans think of themselves as having real knowledge when in fact they have simply internalized the facts of language. Thus, they don’t really know the truth, but rather cast the world in their anthropomorphic understanding of language. Humans think they see the world *as it is* when in fact they are only referring to the language they invented that *represents* the world. Here, Nietzsche interestingly defines truth as a belief structure formed by humans through language, as opposed to other forms of authority that may construct belief, such as social power or rationality.

If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare “look, a mammal” I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value. That is to say, it is a thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be “true in itself” or really and universally valid apart from man. At bottom, what the investigator of such truths is seeking is only the metamorphosis of the world into man. He strives to

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” Edited by: Medina, Jose and Wood, David. *Truth: Engagements across Philosophical Traditions* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.), 15

understand the world as something analogous to man, and at best he achieves by his struggles the feeling of assimilation.⁶

In this conception, Nietzsche thus argues that logic simply becomes the complex residue of metaphor. Human beings aren't satisfied with pure tautology— that is, truths like “all bachelors are unmarried”— and so they must invent tricks of language, or “illusions,” in order to avoid the social taboo of being considered a “liar” and follow the social convention of being “truthful.”⁷ Our need for truth, then, has a social component as well. A liar in a society is one who exploits the straightforward and correct use of language. He may say that he is tall when he is short, or that he is rich when he is poor. If these tricks of language are harmful or selfish to society, the liar will no longer be trusted, he will be excluded, and seen as a threat. Thus, people crave the “pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth.”⁸ But the irony is that though human beings crave the *idea* of truth, they are happy when they satisfy merely the social conventions of truth— namely, to not be a liar— even if they fail to reach real metaphysical truth. Thus, according to Nietzsche, people happily delude themselves into believing they have knowledge when they're only referring to things, in the same way that creating a definition for “a mammal” and then pointing out a camel as “a mammal” is technically a truth but one of “limited value.” Nietzsche claims that if most people were ever met with *real* metaphysical truth, or things-as-they-are, it would destroy their whole “self-consciousness.”⁹

In BGE, Nietzsche argues that this complex and en-masse act of social delusion is what has caused the failure of Western philosophy. He scoffs at the foundational post-Enlightenment idea that people can reach objective knowledge by exercising their raw rationality; no, Nietzsche

⁶ Ibid., 18-19

⁷ Ibid., 18

⁸ Ibid., 16

⁹ Ibid., 19

thinks the inability to recognize one's deep subjectivity has led to the dogmatism of rationality *itself*. This is one of his major critiques of post-Enlightenment thought.

The problem with dogmatism isn't that it prevents us from reaching metaphysical truth (with Nietzsche ultimately rejects anyway, something we will explore shortly), but that the dogmatism of rationalism, by postulating that we can reach objective truth when in fact it is only a truth of "limited value," makes society content with delusion. We seek comfort in the *feeling* of being moral and truthful insofar as those are societally worthwhile values. We become "accustomed to lying to ourselves."¹⁰ Nietzsche criticizes structures like religion, morality, and sometimes even science for feeding into this societally-constructed delusion. Nietzsche is worried about the way dogmatism breeds stupidity and mediocrity in Europeans, how it stunts progress, and how Christian morals sedate and squander the powerful minds of his time. This need to be comfortable, feel good, lie to oneself and to others, has produced a "ludicrous species... a gregarious animal, something obliging, sickly, mediocre, *the European of the present day*" (emphasis mine).¹¹ It's worth noting that dogmatism and claims to exclusivity aren't just in religion or culture or science or rationality, but in practically every system of thought or ideology— and that is because it fails to critique *itself*. Abu Bakr al-Razi, an Islamic physician in the ninth and tenth centuries says as much, but al-Razi believes that philosophy is free from this dogmatism.¹² Nietzsche doesn't even believe philosophy is free. Thus, Nietzsche's great critique of modern intellectual history in *Beyond Good and Evil* is that the dogmatism of rationality has led to the mediocrity of Europeans and the failure of Western philosophy.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, para. 192

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 62

¹² Knysh, *Islam in Historical Perspective*, 254

II. Bauman's Critique of the Dogmatism of Rationality

Born in 1925 in Poland, Jewish philosopher and intellectual historian Zygmunt Bauman left to the Soviet occupied zone with his family, following the Nazi invasion of Poland. His earliest work reflected his inclination to Marxist humanism and his rejection of Israeli nationalism, along with all other kinds of nationalism; by the 1950s, he was thinking critically of the Holocaust as a way to understand the logic of modernity.¹³ The interesting point of connection to Nietzsche is that Bauman's commentary also bemoans the dogmatism of rationality in post-Enlightenment thought, but for very different reasons than Nietzsche. I will be exploring Bauman's critique of modernity as presented in Haggag Ali's work *Mapping the Secular Mind*.

Bauman provides an interesting metaphor to ideate post-enlightenment thought, called the "garden metaphor," something recycled many times after the Enlightenment by a number of thinkers.¹⁴ In it, he posits that the previous role of human beings in pre-modern times was as a gamekeeper and their new role in post-Enlightenment is as *gardener*. Gardeners decide what plants are weeds, where things must be planted, what deserves life and what must be destroyed. In a solid modern, post-Enlightenment conception, human beings are not stewards upon the earth, but rather the arbiters of its life and death, and we manipulate the world as we see fit for *us*. This includes deciding which people/objects/ideas are considered "weeds" that must be destroyed, and which people/objects/ideas must be cultivated to flourish. The interesting thing about the garden metaphor is that it is both an act of preservation—that is, aiding certain plants

¹³ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 16

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42-44

and species to thrive— and also an act of imperialism— by taking land, plotting its course, and deciding its will and future.

This is, of course, the central backbone of that post-Enlightenment that Nietzsche also recognizes: that people discovered the ways logic, a complex iterative process from the foundations of mere language, can be used to create a world of perfect societal systems in a decidedly empirical fashion:

... the construction of a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees, the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries— a new world, one which now confronts that other vivid world of first impressions *as more solid, more universal, better known, and more human than the immediately perceived world, and thus as the regulative and imperative world.*¹⁵

(emphasis mine)

Thus, Nietzsche and Bauman largely agree that part of the project of the post-Enlightenment is attempting to create a semi-utopian society using science and rationality, but where Nietzsche bemoans Europe for largely having failed at this project, Bauman is more worried that the project itself is misinformed. Bauman posits the garden metaphor as a way to show man's total and objective dominance over nature in the post-Enlightenment— to this point, however, I think Nietzsche has less to say, and we begin to see where Bauman's critique begins to stand apart from Nietzsche's, though they fundamentally agree about the foundational project of the post-Enlightenment.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," 18

Bauman argues that the garden metaphor, which embodies the core of the post-Enlightenment, is a particularly dangerous idea. It is an enlargement of John Locke's notion of *tabula rasa*, or the mind as a "blank slate," into a socio-political Western project: both "scientists and intellectuals conceived of the society as a 'free, unoccupied space,' 'a sort of a political no man's land' and an empty land to be colonized, given laws, knitted into a selected pattern."¹⁶ Enlightenment ideals, however, are tied to whiteness because to believe that they were starting on a "blank slate" is an erasure of all existing history except for history that benefits the Western project. Thus, the genocide of other indigenous peoples and histories of colonialism and imperialism are not seen as pillage and plunder, but as a saving grace.

Ideas of rationality play a central role in this project: if people can position themselves as having direct access to universal truth through their god-given individuality, then they can patronize and marginalize others for "not exercising their rational faculties." At first glance, the post-Enlightenment vision seems like the perfect pluralistic vision of society, where people can democratically exercise their inherent reason and pursue boundless freedom. The problem is that the culture of the post-Enlightenment insists that this is the only way to freedom— people who are seen as being outside this system of reasoning are often cast as being backwards, savages, or ignorant.

The "ultimate point of freedom"¹⁷ is that every person, in this system of reasoning, can arrive at truth; and if they don't, they either simply haven't been exposed to their own power, or they are sub-human. In a twist of crude irony and hypocrisy, post-Enlightenment thought simultaneously justifies colonialism, imperialism, and slavery for two broad reasons: 1) Colonial ventures can be seen as endowing "others" with progress, reason, and freedom, and/or, 2) Some

¹⁶ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 45

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 100

people truly are sub-human (because they haven't arrived at reason in the same way white Europeans have) and thus can be removed as easily as weeds. Thus, Bauman argues that atrocities such as the Holocaust aren't exceptions to post-Enlightenment thought, as many people often describe it as being one large "mistake"; rather, they are part and parcel of its psychology.

Bauman stresses that Reason was embraced by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment in order to promote human emancipation and to eliminate prejudice, ignorance, superstition and dogmatism. The saddest irony is that it has led, in the final analysis, to "a new bondage," "terror," and "monopolistic knowledge."¹⁸

Thus, what we see is that the result of dogmatism in solid modernity, for Bauman, is the comprehensive intellectual encroachment and imperialism by Western posturing of rationalism and objectivity.

The main difference between Bauman's critique and Nietzsche's critique of the post-Enlightenment is that Nietzsche isn't worried about the effects of intellectual imperialism on non-Western people— in fact, he is worried that dogmatism harms the Western philosophical enterprise in itself, reduces it to mediocrity, and stunts the possibility of more progress. Though Bauman and Nietzsche both agree that the dogmatism of rationality is indeed destructive, Nietzsche laments the way it has ruined Europeans into delusion and proposes an alternate philosophy, revealing that he still fundamentally believes in the Western project; for Bauman, on the other hand, the dogmatism of rationality has lead to a system of reasoning so seemingly objective, impenetrable, and utopian that it has intellectually imperialized all other systems of reasoning in its wake, making it not only *delusional*, but *tyrannical*. Thus, whereas Bauman and

¹⁸ Ibid., 46

Nietzsche wholly reject post-Enlightenment modernity, Nietzsche suggests a new mode of modernity, one that he believes may escape its former sins.

III. Haggag Ali & the Possibilities of Liquid Modernity

In his work *Mapping the Secular Mind*, Ali draws a distinction between what he calls “solid modernity” and “liquid modernity.” For the purposes of this essay, what I have been labeling “post Enlightenment thought/modernity” is functionally synonymous with Haggag Ali’s definition of “solid modernity.” Ali defines solid modernity as a period characterized by man’s conception of himself as dominating over nature (Bauman’s garden metaphor), his discovery of rationality and subsequently the scientific method, and using both of the former to construct perfect systems of government, economics, and society at large.

We have discussed the ways in which Bauman and Nietzsche critique solid modernity in the end of the last section, and Nietzsche’s much account precedes Bauman’s in history. In fact, many people believe that Nietzsche made arguments way ahead of his time, proposing new ways of thinking and seeing the world that most people— including philosophers— were not keen to pick up on at the time. His scathing critique of solid modernity, moreover, marked a significant shift in Western thought, one that would slowly begin the process of the movement from solid to liquid modernity.

Before we delve into Nietzsche’s positive stances on knowledge, truth, and life, I want to further press the divergence between Bauman and Nietzsche’s critiques, particularly in the ways that solid modernity has encroached on and crippled systems of reasonings from people other

than white Europeans, the supposed keepers of post-Enlightenment thought. Because of Nietzsche's critique on solid modernity— which, we should remember, deplored the transgression of Western thought from rationality to dogmatism and delusion— many groups in the Global South saw the possibility of leveraging Nietzsche's criticism, and its subsequent tradition of twentieth-century existentialism, as a means of liberation. The possibility of liberation in this new liquid modernity, which was spurred by Nietzsche's critiques, did not fail to capture the attention of colonized and oppressed people all over the world. From India to the Middle East to South America, Nietzsche's ideas created tremors of possibility: could it be possible, they asked, that this new mode of modernity could be less imperialistic, less hypocritical, more individualistic, and *freer* than the one that came before?

The best example of this is the movement of Arab existentialism that gripped Arab intellectuals and youth as the dominant philosophical tradition for over a decade, especially centered around the existential humanist philosophy of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre enjoyed great popularity among Arabs in the mid twentieth century, especially due to his prominent role in the struggle against French colonization of Algeria. Sartre's idea of "engagement" or "commitment," which is the idea that a free person will be committed to engaging with the world, or willing to "die for a cause," was incredibly important to Arab anti-colonialists and proved to be the most operational, because it allowed for a direct connection to the actualized liberation of colonized people.

Existentialism, a direct product of Nietzsche's critique of solid modernity and his movement to liquid modernity, changed the primary philosophical question from "What is human nature?" to "What is the human condition?" This was appealing to Arab thinkers because the question was no longer about a fixed and "natural" self (as it would be in solid modernity),

but a model of the self that reacted and acted in a changing material world. The colonized person wouldn't be interested in a philosophy that was made only for white Europeans, so what made existentialism relevant to them? It was precisely its freedom to ground in the personal liberation of the self. The colonized could now reject the Cartesian dictum "I think, therefore I am" and its entailed separation between the self and the physical world. Yoan Di-Capua, the author of *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization*, concisely writes:

The meaning of the shift from "essence" to "existence" in the lives of Middle Easterners becomes more concrete once we realize that, since the 'primary ontological condition for humans is freedom,' existentialism suggested itself as the foremost philosophy that explains, safeguards, and works to advance the spread of human freedom.¹⁹

My central question in the next part of this chapter is to motivate this question: is it really the case that liquid modernity, through Nietzsche's critique of solid modernity, is really enough to create the possibility of intellectual liberation for non-Western and historically oppressed groups? Is the project of Arab existentialism one worth pursuing? Would the marriage of Nietzschean philosophy and the possibilities provided by liquid modernity be sufficient to escape the history of intellectual imperialism wreaked by solid modernity? In order to answer these questions, I will be delving deeper into Nietzsche's ideas of truth and power, and Ali's conception of liquid modernity. However, it is not difficult to see that there is already something of a conflation here: Bauman's critique of solid modernity, situated in a decolonial moment, included the lamentation of intellectual imperialism—Nietzsche's certainly didn't.

¹⁹ Yoan Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9

IV. Nietzsche's Perspectivism & Will to Power

Given Nietzsche's denunciation of the dogmatism of rationality in solid modernity, it would follow that he would theorize a version of truth that is less "objective" and more attuned to the way human consciousness affects their construction of truths. After arguing that even logic is simply a reiteration of language and not a tool to understand things-in-themselves,²⁰ Nietzsche turns to a view of truth that is much more psychological: he asks not if something is true (also not whether it is true-in-itself), but rather *why* we think it is true or not true. This isn't an epistemological question so much as a one about the underlying motivations, goals, and needs of human beings that cause them to accept or reject "truths." And when we are able to have a more mature guiding question— one that hopefully won't fall into the solid modern trap of hypocrisy and delusions of grandeur— then hopefully we will see the world not in dichotomies of truth and falsehood, but as constantly nuanced and shaped by our psyche. Hopefully, a new framework that recognizes the deep subjectivity of the human mind— that recognizes, as Nietzsche says, "untruth as a condition of life"— can allow us to rise above truth and falsehood, beyond good and evil.²¹ Thus, Nietzsche's stances of perspectivism and will to power, which we will explore shortly, ask questions about the place of interpretation and judgements of ideas we consider to be fixed. Paul Kirkland summarizes Nietzsche's project in *Beyond Good and Evil* quite well:

His critique of objectivity not only raises questions about the possibility or desirability of truthfulness and demonstrates the self-contradiction of the enlightenment: it calls for a new responsibility for the effects of

²⁰ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," 19

²¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, para. 4

offering interpretations... Sarah Kofman shows that for Nietzsche judgement is not between truth and falsehood, nor truth and mere appearance, but among appearances, recognized metaphors that are not guises for truth that is more fundamental, but part of a presentation that does not resort to metaphysics.²²

Thus, if we are to interpret Nietzsche's ideas charitably, it is necessary to consider that his project is largely psychological— of course not *only* psychological, however; it is to be skeptical, to cast down on intellectual convention, to consider the underlying forces of our consciousness. Thus is borne his idea of the will to power, a concept I have been skirting around for some time, but it is simply the idea that “that which allowed us to know the world,” as Kirkland writes, “and provide interpretations, is necessarily colored by the preferences and drives of our actions in the world, and these are driven by the quest to make powerful the way we live.”²³ In other words, the will to power is a polished version of a concept introduced by Nietzsche in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”: namely, that we arbitrarily designate truth as representations in the world around us, but these designations are simply extensions of our own consciousness, not fixed or essentially true facts; and, moreover, that the underlying motivation for our actions and designations are power— for example, being “honest” in order to have more social capital than a liar. Nietzsche wouldn't say that ordinary and obvious facts can be changed by our will— we can't, obviously, will fire to be less hot and then stick our hands in it. But that is precisely the point when it comes to our idea of truth— these “wills” cannot be so easily disregarded as irrational or irrelevant to truth— Nietzsche argues that “supposing that nothing else is ‘given’ as

²² Paul Kirkland, “Nietzsche's Honest Masks: From Truth to Nobility Beyond Good and Evil.” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 66, no. 4, (2004), 575, doi:10.1017/S0034670500039899.

²³ *Ibid.*, 585

real but out world of desires and passion,” we cannot “sink or rise to any other ‘reality’ but just that of our impulses.” He goes as far to say, in fact, that “we *must* make the attempt to posit hypothetically the causality of the will as the only causality.”²⁴

Nietzsche discusses in length the sister concept of the will to power, which is perspectivism. This is often where Nietzsche is critiqued as being incoherent. Nietzsche’s perspectivism isn’t the idea that having more people look at something will help uncover the truth. It is the idea that no matter how many people look at it, objectivity can never be reached. Our cognition works by social forces that are all connected to power in some way. We can’t extricate ourselves from the will to power to get to some “logical” truth. Thus, truth is perspectival, and humans may never be able to fully reach metaphysical truth because their will to power and their arbitrary linguistic logics, along with a number of other limited faculties, make it impossible (and if it does so happen that our understanding of truth *is* the truth-in-itself, it is coincidental).²⁵ In his biggest break away from solid modernity, Nietzsche rejects absolute truth.

The problem with perspectivism lies in the paradox that comes when we consider that Nietzsche’s view *itself* is a perspective. Songsuk Susan Hahn describes the paradox as such:

Given the likeness of perspectivism to a skeptical epistemology, how can Nietzsche prefer his own theory of truth to others? His preferences seem to come into conflict with his own leveling perspectivism, on which no one perspective should enjoy epistemic privilege over all others. This tension, between his skeptical commitments and the

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, para. 36

²⁵ Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 304-5

substantive content of the very statements he uses to put for perspectivism, are absolutely fundamental...²⁶

This is a problem that has puzzled many philosophers and neo-Nietzscheans, and many answers have been given: that contradiction is a neat technique Nietzsche uses to prove his own point that “untruth is a condition of life”; that Nietzsche’s rhetorical flair demonstrates his own will to power in an ingenious way; that though Nietzsche rejects metaphysical conceptions of truth, his acceptance of a more practical conception of truth render any possibility of contradiction truly moot. Because this essay is focused on Nietzsche’s impact on intellectual history, I will be adopting the fairly simple idea put forward by Kirkland that Nietzsche’s criterion for his own theory of perspectivism isn’t truth but rather whether something is life-preserving, whether it is psychologically strong, whether it is grounded in the “health of one’s disposition toward life.”²⁷ Nietzsche says this himself in BGE:

The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating.²⁸

The idea that we should accept the perspective that is more life-preserving bears some weight on Nietzsche’s existential ideas and the meaning of life. The total decentralization of truth from absolute to perspectival, from metaphysical to psychological, is quite significant to the meaning and worth of life. If we cannot really know things as they are, then how can we find

²⁶ Songsuk Susan Hahn, “Perspectivism,” *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* (2015), 627, 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199696543.013.0032

²⁷ Kirkland, “Nietzsche’s Honest Masks,” 579

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, para. 4

meaning? Nietzsche must say that “the measure of what is life-promoting will make possible judgements among illusions,”²⁹ a move from idealism to the path to “that mature freedom of the spirit which is fully as much self-mastery and discipline of the heart.”³⁰ Thus, as much as Nietzsche rejects metaphysical truth, he embraces the life-affirming value of living without delusion, of pursuing one’s will to power in a way that is deeply self-conscious, brave, and sublimated.

V. The Failure of Liquid Modernity

Nietzsche’s ideas of the will to power and perspectivism are indicative of a massive shift from solid modernity to postmodernity and liquid modernity. His similarities with Bauman, namely their shared deploration of dogmatism in solid modernity, do not continue into his ideas of liquid modernity. But indeed, in all fairness to Nietzsche, it would be difficult to critique a cultural moment that you yourself are beginning to mold. I will now be investigating how Nietzsche’s psychological approach to knowledge and rejection of metaphysics bear on Haggag Ali’s cognitive map of liquid modernity.

The first distinction is between postmodernity and liquid modernity; the former, Bauman designates as mainly a transitional period from solid to liquid modernity, one where confusion, disillusionment, and relativism reign supreme. When Western society realizes how its uncompromising belief in the objectivity of their rationality has led to the horrific reversal of the utopia they’d hoped for, following such atrocities as the World Wars and the Holocaust, they

²⁹ Kirkland, “Nietzsche’s Honest Masks,” 579

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 576

then become totally disenchanted. The rise of existentialism in the twentieth century is no mistake: it is asking the crucial question, “Who are we, if we can be capable of such evil? Is there even such a thing as good, as truth? Are we bound to it in any way— *what* binds us?” Very little, if we look at Nietzsche: truth is decentralized and our ultimate point of reference is only our own psychology. Liquid modernity, thus, is a “casino-like culture,” where life is transformed into isolated “games” of “‘self-enclosed, self-referential and self-centred episodes,’ a ‘series of new beginnings’ or a ‘collection of short stories.’”³¹ The consequences of Nietzsche’s ideas on Western intellectual history— even before the disastrous awakenings of the twentieth century— set the stage for existentialism, the isolation of the individual mind into “self-referential” episodes, and the decentralization of ideals characteristic of intellectual traditions such as post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and new historicism. Moreover, Nietzsche’s ideas pave the way for the total fragmentation of ideals. Bauman says that postmodern modernity “is neither relativistic nor nihilistic”— yet!— “but it opposes the monopoly of ethical authority.”³² This is precisely Nietzsche’s project— and once it has taken hold, it will be fodder for Sartre’s radical freedom³³, which has no ontological basis, Camus’ “limitless lust for experience,” which proves to be quite static, and a number of other ideas that cannot find solid foundations due to the liquefaction of all ideals.³⁴ We can see these ideas here, in Ali’s analysis:

In an attempt to trace the most decisive difference between modernity and postmodernity as understood by Bauman, Peter Beilharz argues that the postmodern worldview gives priority to localism, relativism,

³¹ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 120-1

³² *Ibid.*, 115

³³ Jonathan Webber, “Existentialism,” *The Routledge Companion to Ethics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 234-5

³⁴ Julian Young, “Nihilism and the Meaning of Life,” *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy* (2008), 468-472, 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199234097.003.0014

plurality of models, communities of meaning and hermeneutic interpretation over the universalistic ambitions of intellectuals, the obsession with mastery over nature and social engineering. According to this explanation, postmodernity can be seen as *a critique of culture* rather than a new vision that entirely breaks with modernity; and therefore, the nature and the contours of postmodernity cannot be fully determined, giving rise to a state of confusion, ambiguity and *ambivalence that can be expressed only in metaphors*.³⁵ (emphasis mine)

We can argue that Nietzsche's rhetorical flair is actually indicative of an ideological "ambivalence" that cannot express itself other than in "metaphor." Despite Maudemarie Clarke's efforts to show Nietzsche's rejecting only *metaphysical* truth, not truth *itself*³⁶, it seems as though the former functioned to stop wholesale confusion and disorientation (Nietzsche would agree, in fact). However, it must be noted that whether or not metaphysical truth exists, the sins of solid modernity, especially those of the possibly fascist and tyrannical state, are being examined with fresh eyes. Will this revision amount to anything for historically oppressed people? Postmodernity is a petulant repudiation of perfection and utopia of the state, going from solid modernity's trinity of "nation, blood, and territory," to "liberty, diversity, and tolerance."³⁷ Could this critique of solid modernity and the more "intellectually democratic" logic of liquid modernity provide more hope for marginalized groups? Is there a path to liberation, given the dignification of supposedly *all* refined judgements and perspectives?

³⁵ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 112

³⁶ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 21

³⁷ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 113

This is the question I posed in the last section about the project of Arab existentialism as a liberation philosophy, and it is one that Bauman has a clear answer to: *yes*. Though Bauman is aware of the challenges of liquid modernity, especially its “tendency to challenge all foundations and any points of referentiality,”³⁸ he still believes that it can present a more culturally pluralistic and tolerant vision of the world than what solid modernity offered. If the individuality of a person is valued to the point that the will to power is posited as the “*only* causality,” then maybe there is a possibility that such individuality can lead to real, tangible liberation of historically oppressed groups. Many of the liberation and anti-colonial movements that swept the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa in the mid- and late-twentieth century follow this path of invested hope in a new democracy. Bauman believes liquid modernity could make it possible.

However, another thinker that Haggag Ali analyzes in his work disagrees with Bauman. His name is Abdelwahab Elmessiri, an Egyptian Muslim thinker who theorized about modernity, Islamic humanism, and Judaism and Zionism. Though he agrees with Bauman on his analysis of liquid modernity as being dissolved of all points of reference, Elmessiri doesn't see either postmodernity or liquid modernity as a possible route to liberation, because he thinks they are simply extensions of the same logic of solid modernity. Elmessiri presents the metaphor of liquid modernity as a rhizome, an underground stem that continuously grows horizontally, giving out lateral shoots, like ginger or turmeric. The metaphor is fitting because the top-down, utopian promises of solid modernity are now flattered into a messy web of roots all on the same plane, equally as knotted as the one beside it. It represents both the confusion and apparent parity of liquid modernity. Bauman and Elmessiri both agree that the rhizome is a metaphor for liquid modernity, but where Bauman imagines its laterality as “a possibility for openness and

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 108

transcendence,” Elmessiri argues that it signals the “absence of all notions of origins, centers, and solid causality.”³⁹ Elmessiri does not see liquid modernity as an open system in the way Bauman does; he sees it as a closed system with no possibility of transcendence. Where solid modernity presented a *false* vision of transcendence which allowed for a number of atrocities, liquid modernity offers no transcendence at all. Transcendence becomes simply immanence, resulting in total physical and psychological determinism. Thus, according to Elmessiri, liquid modernity operates on much the same logic as solid modernity: they are determined to push and pleasure the human form, one in an organismic model, where man dominates over nature, and the other a mechanistic one, where man *becomes* nature:

In other words, the transition to a postmodern world of pluralism, multiculturalism and alternative modernities is virtually absent, and it is merely a new phase that witnesses a radicalization or even a universalization of the consequences of modernity, one that has reached its climax, as Fredric Jameson suggests, in the ‘colonization and commercialization of the Unconscious’ in the form of mass culture and the culture industry.⁴⁰

Ali postulates Bauman’s inability to recognize this parallel operational logic between solid and liquid modernity as being rooted in a bias that makes it “extremely difficult for a European intellectual to abandon the legacy of Western modernity.”⁴¹ Elmessiri sees the total disintegration of values and truth as being a product of and the producer for a hyper-consumerist, hedonistic, and body-fascinated society, one where the supreme rulers are science and celebrities.

³⁹ Ibid., 130

⁴⁰ Ibid., 129-130

⁴¹ Ibid., 129

With only the possibility of immanence and lateral movement in the rhizome, the divine *becomes* the body, the product, the pleasure, no longer a transcendent aspirational feature of human life. Elmessiry calls this “monistic materialism,” or “liquid non-rational materialism (body, sex, global market and consumption).”⁴² This will not result in any more freedom than solid modernity— in fact, the belief in its freedom could result in just as much dogma as in solid modernity because of a psychological fragmentation that could undo the very fabric of human existence. This concept of moral and epistemological fragmentation is the liquefaction of ideals such as truth, goodness, justice, and freedom starting with Nietzsche’s will to power, perspectivism, and existentialism.

Thus, the final verdict remains: will liquid modernity fundamentally provide any opportunity for liberation of historically oppressed people, those who faced intellectual, social, and political imperialization and displacement by the West during solid modernity? If we are to take Elmessiri’s critique and view the parallels between the logic of solid and liquid modernity— namely, that one provides a false center to the other, while the other provides none at all— it seems like liquid modernity will be just as hypocritical as its predecessor. In it, we have after all seen the resurgence of neoliberalism, and also fundamentalism, something Bauman argues is threaded in the fabric of liquid modernity. This crisis of unification bears especially heavy on the case of intellectual liberation for believing Muslims across the world, and it is even more clear in their case that finding solace in liquid modernity won’t work. The structure doesn’t allow for a truly transcendent vision of God that isn’t watered-down, anthropomorphized, or commodified. This is the point I will be pressing in the rest of my thesis: given the facts of liquid modernity, what are ways that believing Muslims can still position themselves in the world with great

⁴² Ibid., 106

intellectual clarity and agency? I will be pressing this question in greater detail by exploring the works of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali in Chapter Three.

For the case of the Arab existentialists who hoped to use Sartre's existential humanism as a liberation philosophy, things did not turn out quite as planned. Arab existentialism didn't rest entirely on Sartre's philosophy, as it had its roots in the Islamic tradition of *wahdat-al-wujud* or Ibn Sina's philosophy. However, there was a coordinated attempt to bring Sartre and Simone de Beauvoire to the Middle East, specifically for him to support the liberation of Palestine and denounce Israeli occupation and colonization. Given his existentialist stances of freedom for the self, wouldn't he support Palestinian liberation? This became a point of intense contingency for many Arab thinkers, students, and youth. However, Sartre spectacularly failed to deliver: first, he was ambivalent about Israeli occupation, and after the *nakba*, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homes, he supported it. Arabs felt shocked and betrayed. The entire enterprise of Arab existentialism— something that had been the dominant cultural and intellectual movement for nearly two decades— crumbled entirely, not entirely because of Sartre's dismissal of Israeli occupation, but it was certainly the straw that broke the camel's back.⁴³ After many other attempts and subsequent failures at creating an Arab intellectual foundation with Western thought, the tide slowly turned: given political unrest and Western aid, power vacuums, and the desperation for some unifying force, Islamic fundamentalism became a prominent ideological basis in many parts of the Muslim world. This, too, is a byproduct of liquid modernity, and as Elmessiri says, "the failure of modernity and its bankruptcy."⁴⁴

⁴³ Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization*, 7

⁴⁴ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 130

Chapter Two:

The Inescapability of Modern Binaries

I. Binary Responses to Modernity

The nineteenth and twentieth century were characterized by humanity's shifting relationship with God and meaning. Nietzsche wrote, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" Camus claimed that "God is the solitude of man." Even Kierkegaard, as a believer in God, conceded that faith is a leap into the irrational. Part of coming to grips with modernity— both the transition from solid to liquid modernity, and the latter on its own— is realizing that there is no longer a strong unifying force for ideals such as truth, goodness, justice, and beauty as God would have provided. As I have argued in the last chapter, the decentralization of meaning is a feature inherent to the logic of liquid modernity, because it is a direct reaction to the disasters encountered when a particular method of unification (that is, solid modernity's "nation, blood and territory"¹) fail spectacularly. This shifted liquid modernity into a new trinity: one of "liberty, diversity and tolerance,"² flattening the hierarchical structure of solid modernity from a distant God, the powerful elite, and the anti-rational commoners to a rhizomic, highly lateral structure where anyone could find meaning in anything if they so wished. The body increasingly becomes the site of this free-for-all meaning-making, and, as Fredrick Jameson suggests, we all equally participate in the "colonization and commercialization of the Unconscious."³

¹ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 113

² Ibid. 113

³ Ibid. 130

It is precisely this transformation of the consciousness that preoccupies me in this chapter. How does the mind process and cope with this shift in meaning, and in the relation to God? What are the cultural narratives that are constructed to aid or resist the modern consciousness? We already explored one response to the fact of modernity that simultaneously catapulted us intellectually into its new phase: Nietzsche's perspectivism and will to power, which indeed paved the way for existentialism. The existentialist impulse— or perhaps more accurately, the impulse to optimistic nihilism— is an attempt to sculpt meaning out of this godlessness in a way that is life-affirming, just as we've seen Nietzsche try to do in the last chapter, and Camus as well in the twentieth century.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, French existentialist Albert Camus expounds on the absurdity of a world in which God does not exist. He argues that absurdity arises from the definite realization that everything we do, upon closer examination, appears to be totally irrational. This absurdity is directly caused by the "death of god," for "god is maintained only through the negation of human reason."⁴ Once we use our reason to destroy the idea of god, we simultaneously must confront the inherent irrationality of existence itself, as well: "This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."⁵ Here, we can see something of a domino effect: our reason leads us to conclude that god is dead, which leads us to conclude that existence is absurd and meaningless, which leads to conclude that existence is irrational. This strange circularity Camus sums up by saying:

Thus *the absurd becomes god* (in the broadest meaning of this word)
and that inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, 14

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7

everything. Nothing logically prepares this reasoning. I can call it a leap. And paradoxically can be understood Jasper's insistence, his infinite patience devoted to *making the experience of the transcendent impossible to realize*.⁶

Camus is brushing up against the major problem of liquid modernity: the exercise of reason itself simply breaks down and leads to absurd conclusions. Everything becomes simultaneously atomized and essentially similar, where god is both the bulwark against absurdity, but god *is* also absurdity; if we exercise our reason, we rationalize the irrationality of our existence.

Julian Young posits two paths that Camus can take in the face of this realization about absurdity: 1) the death of god does not entail nihilism *about meaning*; ie, life can still be meaningful without god, or, 2) life is meaningless but it can still be wonderful; ie, the death of meaning does not entail nihilism about *life's worth*.⁷ Camus eventually chooses the second. In the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus concludes that a person who successfully accepts that life is meaningless is committed to a "limitless lust for experience."⁸ Camus gives examples of the absurd heroes like Don Juan, actors, and his childhood Algerian friends who were fun-loving and enjoyed the present moment fully— for him, these are people who look at the absurdity of life and can still enjoy it. In the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus even paints Sisyphus out to be an absurd hero. He writes:

Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the

⁶ Ibid., 11

⁷ Young, "Nihilism and the Meaning of Life," 467 (emphasis mine)

⁸ Ibid., 468

heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus
happy.⁹

Camus' ideas have formed the basis for today's wildly popular idea of "optimistic nihilism" which posits that life is meaningless besides what we make of it. This existentialist or optimistic nihilist encounter with liquid modernity is certainly one way to respond to its decentralization of meaning, but it is equally exhausting to simply and continually "imagine [oneself] happy."¹⁰ After a sprawling philosophical investigation, it is somewhat dissatisfying that Camus ultimately lands on a greeting-card slogan like "enjoy the journey, not the destination." Another response to liquid modernity, then, is the exact opposite of the existentialist response: to believe adamantly that the world is in fact saturated and pulsing with meaning, wholly abandoning the rationalistic stance that meaning is only perspectival. This is most obviously evident in the contemporary obsession with yoga, mindfulness and self-care discourse, popularization of tarot readings and other easily commercializable mystic artifacts, and other forms of disembodied spirituality. There is also a third category of responses that I will examine in Chapter Three, in which we see thinkers like Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein (and many other twentieth-century philosophers) construct a communal worldview and grand narrative of immanent meaning to combat the hyper-individualism of the liberal-capitalist-democratic state, and who believe that meaning is collectively constructed as a human society. This third category importantly combines features of the first two, and I will discuss it more in the next chapter— so for now, I will focus on the first two responses to liquid modernity.

⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 24 (emphasis mine)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24

Both responses— either the existentialist or the disembodied spiritualistic one— constitute an operative binary that is deeply entrenched in liquid modernity. This binary is a cultural and intellectual response, reeling from the transformations in the relationship between God and man, between man and meaning. What does this tension *mean*? And moreover, what does it mean for the interiority of the Muslim consciousness? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to look more closely at one of the most complicated features of liquid modernity: secularism. In this chapter, I will explore various approaches to the sacred, profane, religion, god, and open a discourse around the politics of belief in liquid modernity in an attempt to articulate the intellectual and spiritual alienation experienced by Muslims as a result of ongoing colonial violence. I will then use those discoveries to question what this discourse around secularism does to the interiority of the Muslim consciousness, and extend this inquiry to an analysis of 20th century thinker and reformer Mohammad Iqbal.

II. The Sacred, The Profane, and Other Binaries

Elmessiri argues that there is no avenue for *transcendence* in liquid modernity. All “transcendence” is false transcendence. Haggag Ali writes that “the major metaphor of transcendence” has “reversed its direction... thus transforming transcendence into gnosticism (the worship of knowledge). Vertical or otherworldly transcendence is renounced whereas horizontal transcendence or worldly salvific doctrines are proclaimed as the ultimate truth.”¹¹ This transformation of transcendence into other seemingly “sublime” forms of experience such as the pursuit of pure knowledge, the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and sex, or the worship of science and celebrity are all indicative of a certain polarizing binary that mutually reinforces

¹¹ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 67

itself from both directions: the absence of a divinity, and the desperation to recreate it by sheer human effort.

In his groundbreaking book *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad tracks the anthropology of belief and the construction of certain binaries, such as “belief and knowledge, reason and imagination, history and fiction, symbol and allegory, natural and supernatural, [and] sacred and profane”¹² whose operation constructs the secular. Exploring the evolution of these binaries will be useful in uncovering the two reactions— optimistic nihilism and disembodied spirituality— to liquid modernity I’ve outlined, and help unpack the case of false transcendence.

Asad begins by saying that the “supposedly universal opposition” in polemics between the sacred and the profane¹³ can’t be observed in premodern writing, because the opposition in medieval times was between either “the divine and the satanic” — both transcendent— or “the spiritual and the temporal” — both worldly. The opposition between “the sacred” and “the profane,” however, mixes both the transcendent and worldly into a singular binary.¹⁴ Asad claims that this change is indicative of and itself constitutes a particular shift in the secular. The profane becomes associated with social interest, politics, and those important worldly affairs that make societal flourishing possible. The sacred, on the other hand, becomes essentialized into a stagnant, distant force that is seen to be removed from worldly reality. It is at once “a transcendent force that imposed itself on the subject” — a hierarchical imposition by God on people, vaguely reminiscent of solid modernity’s recreation of a hierarchy in its trinity of “nation, blood, and territory” — and “a space that must never, under dire threat of consequence, be violated— that is, *profaned*.”¹⁵

¹² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 22

¹³ *Ibid.* 31

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 32

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 33

This top-down, impregnable quality of the sacred eventually led to its essentialization into a static force, especially in comparison to the profane, which increasingly came to be seen as a site of flourishing human engagement and dynamism. In fact, the sacred/profane binary, in juxtaposing the transcendent and the worldly into a single opposition, transforms the sacred into *the mythic*: that which is unreachable while simultaneously being divorced from reality, and transforms the profane into *the rational*:

It may therefore be suggested that “*profanation*” is a kind of forcible emancipation from error and despotism. Reason requires that false things be either proscribed and eliminated, or transcribed and re-sited as objects to be seen, heard, and touched by the properly educated senses. By successfully unmasking pretended power (profaning it) universal reason displays its own status as legitimate power.¹⁶

Two concepts are working in tandem here: the sacred is being altered into the mythic, while the profane is being altered into a “legitimate power” for dispelling “myths” via reason. Profanation as a rhetorical tool is powerful, an example of which we can see in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, where he “demystifies” Christianity as simply being a tool for the weaker to cast the strong as essentially evil. Nietzsche writes that “[Nothing equals the] intoxicating, overwhelming, and undermining power of that symbol of the ‘holy cross’... and self-crucifixion of God for the salvation of man.”¹⁷ The sacred, scripture, religion— it is all at once mythic and irrational.

Asad questions why the sacred becomes essentialized into an “external, transcendent power.” His tentative answer is that “new theorizations of the sacred were connected with

¹⁶ Ibid. 35 (emphasis mine)

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18

European encounters with the non-European world.”¹⁸ In other words, the essentialization of the sacred works hand-in-hand with the colonial and orientalist stereotyping of non-white people as being less rational and more connected to “the spiritual,” and the stereotyping simultaneously *constructs* the sacred as myth. This mutually reinforcing structure of orientalism and mythicism positions the profane as the commonsensical, the rational, the *normal*— and of course, associates it with whiteness. Thus, the sacred/profane binary is crucial to the establishment of certain modern projects such as demystifying religion, establishing science as the highest authority, orientalism, and racism, all layers which I will unpack in the proceeding sections. However, all of these reactions constitute the typical solid modern response to God: cut oneself off, flourish using raw grit and human ingenuity, create paradise on earth.

The sacred/profane binary is not a unique feature of European instrumental reason, as a similar opposition can be seen in traditional Islamic thought between al-Din and al-Dunya. Al-Dunya can loosely be defined as the ordinary world, “this world,” which encompasses the mundane and worldly activity of human life, such things as “money, food, drink, clothing, houseroom and, some say, life itself.”¹⁹ The Din, on the other hand, are those things relegated to the space of religion, spirituality, and the attainment of transcendent and otherworldly thought, truth, being, etc. At first glance, there seems to be an obvious similarity between the opposition of al-Din and al-Dunya and the sacred and the profane. However, the unique quality of the Islamic opposition is that transcendence is not impossible, even if we are only operating in the world realm (al-Dunya) because it is *through the world*, al-Dunya, that we can reach al-Din. M. Laoust writes: “Religion (Din) is intimately bound up with the temporal (Dunya).”²⁰ However,

¹⁸ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 35

¹⁹ A.S Tritton, “Dunyā.” ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, paragraph 1

²⁰ L. Gardet, “Dīn.” ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, paragraph 13

we see that in the sacred/profane binary in modernity, both worlds— this one, and the “other,” supernatural, sacred realm— increasingly drift apart from one another until transcendence becomes totally unreachable.

Thus, it’s possible to already see the fertile ground that is created for false notions of transcendence when the sacred/profane binary operates successfully in a society. The sacred becoming crystallized into myth means that human beings can’t actually access the transcendent because it simply isn’t “*real*.” Romanticism as a movement in the nineteenth century thus lamented the loss of the transcendent. Its quixotic power rested on a deep mourning for the death of god, childhood, and innocence which the Romantics believed to be in direct contrast to the stale, robotic, and apathetically industrialized and increasingly capitalistic world. For the Romantics, the sacred was the past, it was the limitless wonder and innocence of childhood. But their rhetorical power doesn’t come from evoking transcendent literature, like the Bible or scripture— but it is in essence a reactionary movement that romanticized the *idea* of the transcendent while itself operating in “the profane.” Asad writes that because “inspiration was no longer to be thought of as direct divine communication, romantic poets identified it *in a way that could be accepted by skeptics and believers alike*.”²¹ That is to say, the Romantic movement was more concerned with profaning industrialization than in constructing (or as they would speculate, re-constructing) a meaningful relationship with the transcendent, which made them palatable to possibly both the rationalist and the pseudo-mystic. The vaguely hypocritical aspect of Romanticism is that it fetishizes the idea of transcendence without ever questioning the sacred/profane binary— in fact, it benefits from and reproduces the binary. This fetishization isn’t purely abstract, either: its praxis is orientalism and romanticized racism.

²¹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 43 (emphasis mine)

III. A Short Digression on Romantic Literature

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, an emotionally bankrupt Victor Frankenstein gets swept up in a "civilized" world of rationality and science. He attempts to bring life to a new being with the scraps of other bodies. Victor's foil is the actual monster he creates— where Victor is cold and calculating, the monster is deeply feeling; where Victor manufactures life, Frankenstein yearns to *live*. The monster possesses the childish wonder and wisdom that is symbolic of Romantic thought. Yet at the same time this romanticization of the monster's innocence is paralleled by his voyeuristic encounter with "Safie," the daughter of a Christian Arab and Turkish merchant known for her beauty, innocence, and eventual marriage to a white man in Paris. She is described as possessing an "independence of spirit forbidden to the female followers of Muhammad" and as feeling "sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia and being immured within the walls of the harem, allowed only to occupy herself with the infantile amusements, ill-suited to the temper of her soul..."²²

Here, interestingly enough, the monster and Safie have slightly opposite trajectories: they both share the feature of being marginalized and perceived as naive, but the monster— a resolutely "Western" creature— yearns for "the sacred" in order to prove his humanity, while Safie— an Arab woman— must reach for "the profane" (in the form of marrying a white man and moving to the West) in order to prove hers. We can see here that the romanticization of spirituality is an amusement, or even a redemption from the modern world, afforded only to white people. The politics of spirituality or religious practice are in stark contrast when performed by different people: for the white person, it is a legitimate escape from the modern world, but for the colonial subject, it is an indication of their irrationality and backwardness which can only be redeemed through contact with "the West."

²² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 77

Similarly, Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* suffers from a similar fate in Romantic rereadings. As the only character indigenous to the island but subsequently enslaved by Prospero, Caliban is given language by his master, portrayed repeatedly as being a childish brute, but utters some of the most heartbreakingly poetic lines to offset Prospero's colonization of magic in the island: "The clouds methought would open and show riches/ Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked/ I cried to dream again."²³ Caliban is at once the center of essentialist fascination and romantic escapism. He is the symbol of what has been lost and what will never again be regained: pure, unadulterated innocence which is now cast— like Victor Frankenstein's creation— as monstrous. Romanticism and its unique way of approaching transcendence are thus heavily dependent on colonization, cultural appropriation, and orientalist tropes.

Romantic sentiments have made all notions of transcendence, spirituality, and the sacred into sites of momentary escape from the modern world while still enjoying the life-affirming worldview of "rationality." I will thus call efforts toward transcendence in the modern world "disembodied spirituality" — which is to say that they are constituted by and benefit from the sacred/profane binary and don't meaningfully address the decentralization of meaning in modernity. However, my main preoccupation in this chapter isn't to track the ways that white Europeans and North Americans approach disembodied spirituality, but rather to ask a much more interesting question: How exactly does this disembodiment track onto the cultural consciousness of colonized people, and especially Muslims? To open this question, I'll be briefly examining the case of the Mahjar poets.

The Mahjar poets are one of the earliest groups of Arab-American poets who left an indelible legacy for the Arab-American literary canon in the early twentieth century.

²³ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman. First Edition ed. (New York, London, USA: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), 50

Thematically, the Mahjars' work was characterized by "admiration for American vitality and hatred of American materialism, acute concern about international politics and the political survival of the homeland, an obsessive interest in East/West relations, and a desire to play the role of cultural intermediary."²⁴ For the first Arab immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century, Romantic thought was quite gripping, especially a highly industrialized and mechanical space like New York City. Any impulse they had of their past lives became amplified with emotion and memory. For example, in Ameen Rihani's poem "I Dreamt I Was a Donkey Boy Again," the poem starts off as a dream in Lebanon, where "Out of on the sun-swept roads of Baalbek, [he] tramps behind [his] burro, trailing [his] mulayah" and "At noon, [he] passes by a green redolent of mystic scents and tarries awhile." In this, there is an immediate attention to the natural world and a beautiful recalling of "the daisies, the anemones, and the cyclamens," the daisies kiss him in the "eyes and lips," everything is "complacent and serene." This poem is associating the purity of the narrator's past and his homeland with the natural world— a Romantic conflation. At the end of the first section of the poem, Rihany writes, "No sentinels hath Nature, no police."

For both their thematic interest and the influence of romantic poets such as Emerson, Shelley, and Tolstoy on their poetry, the Mahjar poets are considered Romantics themselves, drawing from the European Romantic tradition and American transcendentalism. My question is: where does this place the Mahjar poets, exactly? As I've noted, the conventions of Romanticism give them some literary structure to resist American materialism and challenge "progress" as simply a scientific conquest. On the other hand, however, they end up inadvertently mythicizing their own cultures as being pure and unspoilt, something that feeds into orientalist

²⁴ Tanyss Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature." MELUS 31, no. 4 (2006), 97

representations. Romanticism also allows them to place their own feelings as central, pronouncing their deep subjectivity and cosmopolitan status in the world. However, this liberal outlook hardly takes into account the real politics and rhetoric of marginalization; through the process of romantic self-orientalization, the Mahjar poets reinforce global imperialism and capitalist modernity. The irony is that European and American Romanticism continues to estrange and orientalize Arabs, and early Arab American writers attempt to wield that same Romanticism as a tool of resistance.

IV.

In his book chapter “From Romanticism to Pan-Islamism to Transcendentalism,” Hamid Dabashi argues that cultural movements such as Romanticism aren’t simply produced by “the West” and passively absorbed and internalized by “the Rest.” Rather, they are first appropriated by a reactionary fascination with “the Orient” — think, for instance, of Safie’s “oriental” beauty and the white man’s immediate liking for her “treasures”²⁵—; folded into an essentialist package of romanticism, escapism, or disembodied spirituality as a way to “profane” the facts of industrialized modernity; but, then, because these tropes superficially “celebrate” (read: *fetishize*) the eternal beauty of “the Orient” and “critique” modernity, many non-white people thus assimilate it in their own discourses as a means of resistance, such as in Iranian Romanticism, Mahjar Romanticism, or even the rhetoric of famous Pakistani poet and philosopher Mohammad Iqbal. Dabashi argues that this nuanced interaction is entirely ignored when Romanticism, or any other major cultural moment, is read as purely “Western.” In my attempt to unpack the precise work that Mahjar Romanticism is doing, I must remember that the “center” is not simply an abstract European or North American authority that produces orientalist stereotypes to be

²⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 76

passively received by non-white people, but rather an active and dangerously dynamic process in which both oppressed and oppressor produce and reproduce such stereotypes in a constantly expanding global empire. As Dabashi writes, “We will not have a critical awareness of the rise and demise of modernity (as a European imperialist project) as long as we relegate the condition of coloniality to a peripheral status.”²⁶

In his work, Dabashi outlines the transformations of Romanticism and what he calls “Persophilia,” or the ever-present Western fascination with Persian culture and art. He begins by describing the ways in which Enlightenment thinkers found in Persian poetry a “universalizing humanism” and a “refuge from the ravages of instrumental reason.”²⁷ This was especially true with towering figures like Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Percy B. Shelley. Curiously enough, a critical edition of Hafez’s poetry reached Frau Cosima Wagner, which was then imparted to Nietzsche, and then showed up in his section 370 of his *The Gay Science* to compare the romanticism of Schopenhauer and Hafez, which was then absorbed into Muhammad Iqbal’s ideas in the critical time of India’s independence movement.²⁸ These transmissions cycle over and over across periods to the same imperialistic project: “The contribution of Persian poets to the eventual transmutation of European romanticism into a nascent and dangerous mysticism [as] a chief staple of German Orientalism in the wake of a particularly acute ascendancy in European colonialism.”²⁹

I believe one more link in this chain of transfers is the Romanticism of the Mahjar poets. This Romanticism— marked by their essentialization of their homelands, self-orientalization, and perception of themselves as mediators between the “East and West— can be viewed as a

²⁶ Hamid Dabashi, “From Romanticism to Pan- Islamism to Transcendentalism.” In *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 104

²⁷ *Ibid.* 107

²⁸ *Ibid.* 108

²⁹ *Ibid.* 108

particular strand that “collapses the hermetic seal of a rhetoric of *authenticity* and an analytic of *nativism*.”³⁰ For the Mahjar Romantics— and indeed for a number of contemporary “ethnic” poets, novelists, and artists— a rehearsal of the same few edifying verses about the “the daisies, the anemones, and the cyclamens”³¹ while tasting the honey or dates snuck out from the busy women gathered in the kitchen is enough to qualify as a form of aesthetic resistance. It is indeed comfortable, and in a way even dignifying, but why is it always so *easy* to imagine in a space of recycled tropes about “authenticity” and “nativism”?

What the Mahjars are doing is re-instantiating the same hand-me-down transmission that circulated from Hafez to the American transcendentalists to German orientalist to Muhammad Iqbal: reproducing and reinforcing the imperialistic project from multiple global centers. Similarly, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon worries about the Negritude movement, a French literary movement inspired by the Harlem Renaissance to assert black intellectual independence and pride. However, it draws on a number of oft-repeated orientalist and racist romantic stereotypes:

... that the mystic warmth of African life, gaining strength from its closeness to nature and its constant contact with ancestors, should be continually placed in proper perspective against the soullessness and materialism of Western culture; that Africans must look to their own cultural heritage to determine the values and traditions that are most useful in the modern world; that committed writers should use African subject matter and poetic traditions and should excite a desire for political freedom; that Negritude itself encompasses the whole of African cultural, economic, social, and political

³⁰ Ibid. 105

³¹ Ameen Rihani. “I Dreamt I Was a Donkey-Boy Again” / Ameen Rihani, line 5

values; and that, above all, the value and dignity of African traditions and peoples must be asserted.³²

Fanon reacts to this movement with caustic sarcasm: “Had I read that right?... From the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro culture was hailing me. Negro sculpture! I began to flush with pride. *Was this our salvation?*”³³ There is no authenticity that exists outside of the reality of global imperialism, no ethnic nativism that isn’t reactionary, no romantic notion of “salvation” without looking directly at the staggering lack of imagination of both the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed, because both always choose “the method of regression.” About Negritude, Fanon ironically writes: “Here I am at home; I am made of the irrational; I wade in the irrational. Up to the neck in the irrational. And now how my voice vibrates!”³⁴

Fanon is here directing us back to the exact binary that Camus also pointed out when he said “this world in itself is not reasonable”: the sacred and the profane as the operative mechanism by which modernity simultaneously worships reason while fetishizing disembodied spirituality and orientalism. The deepest layer is in the ways this binary is internalized by non-white people and even spun as a method of resistance. I have been dancing around this exact intersection of the binary, trying to tease it apart in a cultural sense, and we can see that it often relies on self-orientalization and essentialization, as in the cases of the Mahjar Romantics and the Negritude movement.

But for the instantiation of the sacred/profane in the case of Islam, a particularly explosive and fascinating thing happens: because the binary resides at the paradoxical point of

³² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Negritude.” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (September 26, 2020), paragraph 4

³³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Vol. New ed. Get Political. London: Pluto Press, 2008), 93 (emphasis mine)

³⁴ *Ibid.* 93

enshrining reason while lamenting the loss of spirituality, thus giving rise to disembodied spirituality and false notions of transcendence, Islam as a site of *true* transcendence gets systematically mutilated. “In combative conversation with ‘the West’ (the code-name for European colonialism that culminated in American imperialism),” writes Dabashi, “‘Islam’ was systematically mutated (more than by anyone else by Muslims themselves) into a singular site of ideological resistance to foreign domination in Muslim lands.”³⁵ In other words, Islam becomes flattened to accommodate the reform efforts of progressive Arab nation-states, of the Indian subcontinent’s partition, of militant Islamism, of Wahhabism, of Islamic liberalism and socialism, of Islamic Marxism, and of so many other projects in its combative discourse with “the West” — all of which is, in effect, the destructive and simplifying project of secularization. Many of these projects are embedded in Romanticism— which I will henceforth be using as a broad category, one that clearly stretches across time and place in the post-Enlightenment.

In his book chapter “Liberation Theodicy,” Dabashi is interested in what happens when binaries adjacent to the sacred/profane are created in the realm of *global politics*, such as the binary between “the West” and “the Rest” or the one between “militant Islamism” and “US military adventurism.” He argues that the West/ the Rest binary has “finally exhausted its historical calamities and conceptually imploded,”³⁶ thus leading to the recursion into new binaries in order to “sustain the selfsame relation of domination.”³⁷ Examples of this are:

The rhetorical use of the term “crusades,” by both President Bush and Osama bin Laden, or the narration of a tale of (women’s) emancipation...
or the persistence of global polling, most recently by the BBC, asking

³⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 196

³⁶ *Ibid.* 197

³⁷ *Ibid.* 199

Muslims and “Westerners” (as they call themselves) how they feel about each other, all come together to generate and sustain a phantom force field in which a binary opposition that has long since lost its generative disposition will go on manufacturing Manichean dualities where none exists.³⁸

Dabashi gives another, much more scathing example: Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr who wrote *Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, a pamphlet that was published a few years into the US invasion of Iraq while he was employed by the US navy. In it, Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr aims to shift the debate from being about “Islam” and its confrontation with “the West,” and into the “internal rivalries within Islam itself,”³⁹ in the context of the sectarian conflict that arose after the US occupation. Reza Nasr’s core thesis, that Shi’is are now staging a comeback against the Sunnis, disregards the real problem— US invasion and occupation of Iraq— and directs it toward a “rather cliched history of Shi’ism and the Sunni-Shi’i sectarian bifurcation from the earlier Islamic history.”⁴⁰ The problem isn’t that this historical tension isn’t real, but rather its revivification is a diversionary tactic to fuel the narrative of his very own employer— the US military.

In the same way that we’ve seen Romanticism is reinforced by both the colonial “center” and its periphery, constantly expanding the reach of global imperialism, Dabashi argues that ceremonial violence is celebrated by both as well— one as a form of “rational” military adventurism, for example in the case of the US invasion in Iraq (the profane), and the other in the form of militant Islamism, for example in the case of the 9/11 attacks (the sacred). The sacred as the truly transcendent no longer *exists*— it is rather the sacred as a deep lamentation of loss of a

³⁸ Ibid. 199-200

³⁹ Ibid. 201

⁴⁰ Ibid. 201

more perfect and more beautiful past that Islamic fundamentalists attempt to recreate, resonating deeply of early Romanticism. In fact, Dabashi writes that “German fascism put to the same political use the mystical dimensions of German Romanticism that militant Islamic would find useful in Khomeini’s mystical asceticism.”⁴¹ To further explore these recursive binaries that knot together over and over— from Hafez, to European Romanticism, to American transcendentalism, to German orientalism, to Nietzsche, to the Mahjar poets, to German fascism, to militant Islamism— I will will exploring their instantiation in the work of Mohammad Iqbal.

V. Mohammad Iqbal & Superficial Syntheses

Born to a religious middle-class family in present-day Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal was exposed to history, philosophy, and literature in his youth by his esteemed tutor, who quickly recognized his literary talent as a thinker and poet. Iqbal became locally famous for his poetry readings in his early adulthood. For his higher education, he traveled to England and Germany where he studied law as well as philosophy, studying much of the Western canon under the influence of his mentor and good friend, eminent orientalist Sir Thomas Arnold.⁴² When he returned to the subcontinent, Iqbal became embroiled in Indian politics under British colonial rule and began formulating his Islamic discourse in light of “the Western” influence. In 1930, he proposed a partition in light of “fundamental religious and cultural differences between the country’s Hindu and Muslim communities.”⁴³ He grew in prominence both in the subcontinent as well as in its colonial epicenter; he was invited to the Round Table Conference in London to discuss matters of Indian authority, was knighted by the British Crown, and even personally

⁴¹ Dabashi, “From Romanticism to Pan- Islamism to Transcendentalism,” 107

⁴² Muntasir Mir, “Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938): The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam.” ed. by Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, 607

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 608

sought out by Mussolini for a meeting (for, perhaps, his separatist sensibilities). However, Iqbal is known most prominently as a poet as well as an important figure in the history of twentieth-century Islamic reformist thought. For his particular formulation of the connection between what he calls “mystic consciousness” and “the real,” I believe it would be illuminating to map Iqbal on this ongoing exploration of the sacred/profane binary.

As his most famous work which was delivered as six lectures throughout India, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought* demands “a scientific form of religious knowledge” “by attempting to reconstruct Muslim religious philosophy with due regard to the philosophical traditions of Islam and the more recent developments in the various domains of human knowledge.”⁴⁴ Iqbal’s main project is centered right on the intellectual tension upon which colonial rhetoric against the colonized festers: between rationality (and the supposed lack thereof in non-white people) and spirituality. This is a more crude version of the delineated binary between the sacred and the profane. In response to the inferiority complex by the colonized when encountering “Western” science and rationality, Iqbal makes an interesting move. Rather than “regressing” into the a mystic past or romanticizing some essential quality that brings ethnic pride like in the case of the Negritude movement or the Mahjar poets, Iqbal tries to empericize Islam. He notes:

The most remarkable phenomenon of modern history, however, is the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West. There is nothing wrong in this movement, for European culture, on its intellectual side, is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 609

⁴⁵ Muhammad Iqbal, and M. Saeed Sheikh, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Encountering Traditions*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 6

Iqbal performs a bit of a mind-whirling reversal here. He argues that Islam’s “spiritual movement towards the West” is in fact quite indigenous to Islam, for the Qur’an’s emphasis on knowledge and understanding things “as they are” made Muslims the “founders of modern science.”⁴⁶ What is interesting is that Iqbal recognizes— very poignantly— the colonial dichotomy between orientalist spirituality and “Western” rationality and attempts to overcome it *categorically* through a synthesis of reason and mysticism, real and ideal. In fact, Iqbal explicitly criticizes Ghazali for basing “religion on philosophical skepticism”⁴⁷ and Sufism. Iqbal claims that Ghazali failed to see the union between thought and intuition. “The idea that thought is essentially finite, and for this reason unable to capture the Infinite,” writes Iqbal, “is based on a mistaken notion of the movement of thought in knowledge... In its deeper movement, thought is capable of reaching an imminent Infinite.”⁴⁸ Iqbal is arguing that we can capture the true transcendent *through* the imminent— here we can formulate it in any combination of the schemas that we’ve used to far: in Elmessiri’s view, this would mean leveraging rationalist modernity and science to understand the transcendent; it would mean tying the projects of solid and liquid modernity together in a way that creates a form of transcendence even in a rhizomatic structure; it could mean using the profane to *reach* the sacred. It is unclear exactly how this could be possible except in rhetoric (and this is not like the al-Din and al-Dunya opposition that is indigenous to Islam, because Iqbal does not invoke that opposition, but the Western sacred/profane binary, which plays by an essentially different playbook). Iqbal seems to be employing a very simplistic rhetorical reversal: he notices a binary, and tries to unite both sides in a sort of liberal celebration of science and religion.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5

The second half of Iqbal's first lecture focuses on (very amateurly) pinning down a psychological explanation for the "mystic state." He claims that "all states, whether their content is religious or non-religious, are organically determined."⁴⁹ In doing so, he eventually crystallizes a sort of synthetic "rationalistic spiritualism" which only calls to attention the sacred/profane binary in a rather garish way, ultimately rendering its praxis in his preoccupation with the partition of India and Pakistan.

Iqbal had, as we can see, a static notion of religion, so he couldn't see a political pluralism emerging from fundamentally different Hindu and Muslim alterities. He argues in his 1930 Presidential Address to the 25th Session of the All-India Muslim League that Sind has nothing in common with the "Bombay Presidency" and that he finds it "more akin to Mesopotamia and Arabia than India."⁵⁰ He says that the Hindus, though "anxious to become a nation" must overhaul their whole "social structure" in order to do so— but Muslims are closer to progress on that end because of their rational and spiritual synthesis.⁵¹ This is a "gift" Islam has given the Muslims and should be manifested.⁵² Though Iqbal believed in the Muslims of India overthrowing all forms of oppression and imperialism— not only those of the West, but also those from "Arabia" (which hails its Islamic authenticity over other Muslim groups)— he fails to recognize the way in which the British-constructed intensification of bad relations between Muslims and Hindus is, in fact, constructed, and must also be overthrown as such.

Dabashi says *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is where Iqbal finally offers his conception of Islam— radically politicized, essentialized, and stripped of all its inner dimensions— as the blueprint of a new plan for

⁴⁹ Ibid. 18

⁵⁰ Muhammad Iqbal, ed. Frances Pritchett, *Presidential Address, Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League, Allahabad, December 1930, by Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, section 8c

⁵¹ Ibid., section 9b

⁵² Ibid., section 9b

the formation of a Muslim state. The road to the absolutist propensities of the nightmare of political Islamism was paved with every good intention.⁵³

Dabashi is acute in his observation: Iqbal was heavily influenced by Hafez, Rumi, and Romantic readings of both. “The copy of Hafez in Iqbal’s hand, as a result,” writes Dabashi, “directly linked a founding figure of political pan-Islamism to German Romanticism and British colonialism.”⁵⁴ What is interesting is how Iqbal tries to step *out* of an enduring binary by creating a real political partition between two religions who share a truly pluralistic history— Hinduism and Islam, instead of “engaging with and absorbing their alterities,” which were themselves constructed *by* the British colonial project in order to rule India.⁵⁵

This brings us back to an extremist version of what is essentially the same response: militant Islamism. In “Liberation Theodicy,” Dabashi is questioning as to why something like militant Islamism “degenerated into militant but futile adventurism, lacking any grass-roots popular support, economic agenda, political ideology, or social cohesion.”⁵⁶ Dabashi criticizes the contemporary Muslim reaction— or perhaps more accurately, the defense— to Islamic fundamentalism as being the same it has always been, from the very onset of Western domination: to perform the profane in the form of assimilation, scientific achievement, and western conformity; or to perform the sacred in the form of ethnic nativism, self-orientalism, or in idealogizing Islam as a political tool; or to perform some absurd combination of both of these which is particularly characteristic of Muslims living in Europe or North America (think of the oft-repeated liberal slogan, “I am a proud Muslim *and* a proud American”). Dabashi writes that the “end of militant Islamism” begins a new recourse back into

⁵³ Dabashi, “From Romanticism to Pan- Islamism to Transcendentalism,” 113

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 115

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 112

⁵⁶ Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, 212

a superannuated and yawning mysticism now best represented by a bizarre amalgamation that ranges from Seyyed Hossein Nasr's tireless but tiring beautification of "Islam," particularly perambulated into soothing nursery rhymes since 9/11, to Deepak Chopra and his therapeutic industry of Hollywood spirituality, which partakes heavily in the recent American giddiness with Coleman Bark's trying Rumi's patience in his grave.⁵⁷

Akeel Bilgrami explores this inability of "moderate Muslims" (as he calls them— I think there is likely better terminology, but I will use it here) to vehemently denounce militant Islamism as a conflict of values between their commitment to the tenets of Islam and their inability to move past the colonial and imperialistic framework. "Moderate Muslims" know that they are defensive, they know that they must push into new imaginaries, but they constantly make reference to historical systems of oppression which shape their superficial responses. Identity is complex, and it is a process of self-avowal— but when that self-avowal only makes recourse to the same structures of oppression, then we see that all responses are simply indications of internalized colonization and internalized inferiority complexes. Bilgrami writes, elegantly:

A failure to overcome the defensiveness, a failure to acquire the first-person perspective, will prove a point of the bitterest irony. A failure to come out of the neurotic obsession with the Western and colonial determination of their present condition will only prove that that determination was utterly comprehensive in the destruction it wrought. That is to say, it will prove to be the final victory for imperialism that after all the other humiliations it has visited on Muslims, it lingered in our psyches in the form of *genuine*

⁵⁷ Ibid. 213

self-understanding to make self-criticism and free, unreactive agency impossible.⁵⁸

The problem that we've seen over and over again throughout an exploration of the sacred/profane and its adjacent binaries is that there seems to be no meaningful way to escape them. Like running from one side of a scale to the other, the Muslim consciousness has been oscillating precariously between two bifurcated beams. All the reactions we've seen have been painfully myopic and apologetic. They lack intentionality, dynamism, and fail to look outside the boundaries of the global imperial context— and, indeed, how is that possible when this imperialist project is an ever-expanding, all-consuming, eternally unsatiated beast whose terror has been fundamentally drilled into the colonial subject? Fanon lands on this exact problem, and even despite recognizing his own *personal* power, beauty, despite feeling “in [himself] a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the rivers,” he still straddles “Nothingness and Infinity.”⁵⁹ There is no creative imagination when these binaries are constantly operating.

But still I want to revisit one point in the sacred/profane binary. As I argued earlier in the chapter, the sacred is predicated on lamenting the loss of the truly transcendent in liquid modernity, and patching this over with a string of false transcendences: Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, mindfulness practices, yoga, etc etc. I've shown that the reason reactionary movements created by non-white people that are based on asserting their “essential” cultural or ethnic personhood don't work is precisely because they invoke this Romantic and orientalized notion of the sacred. In other words, these movements are again another form of false transcendence, or disembodied spirituality. But to all this, especially for believing Muslims, the solution must be *true* transcendence— a real, *entirely embodied* notion of spirituality. I am

⁵⁸ Akeel Bilgrami, “What Is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity,” (Critical Inquiry Vol. 18, no. No. 4 1992), 841

⁵⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 108

positing that perhaps the only way to combat the complete decentralization of meaning in liquid modernity is not disembodied spirituality, but an organized unification of ideals, not something mythic or romantic, but an *unironic, un-instrumentalized*, and rhetorically *transparent* avenue to transcendence as a means of liberation from the innermost part of the human consciousness.

Is this possible? Does this position inadvertently and lazily fall right back into all the attempts at reform and reaction that came before? Does it continue to play into the hands of the sacred/profane binary? These are questions that are worth pursuing. In fact, these are the questions that arrest me, that torture me, that keep me wondering: *is it possible to be anything more than what I have been made out to be?* Amir Mufti writes, “The enormity of what has been ruined is not in doubt, and evidence of the destruction is everywhere to be seen. I am concerned instead with the possibilities of living with this crisis and coming to understand the social and ethical stakes in the struggle to live.”⁶⁰ To pursue this normative edge of the question, as well as question methodology and approach to it, I will be turning to medieval Islamic philosopher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who is similarly grappling with binaries and who posits a true transcendentalist view as a comfort, refuge, and ultimate inspiration.

⁶⁰ Amir Mufti, “The Aura of Authenticity,” (Social Text 18, no. 3, 2000), 96

Chapter Three:

Ghazali, Transcendence, and Theorizing Liberation

I. Categorizing Responses to Modernity

The modern Muslim consciousness has, for some centuries now, been imbricated by the binaries produced and reproduced by the global project of Western domination in liquid modernity. This project, as we've seen, requires many global centers that mutually reinforce each other to make possible such all-consuming domination, including those within places that have been colonized, occupied, or displaced. Several binaries make this hegemony of Western domination possible; here, the particular *binary structure* is an important one because the “swinging of the pendulum,” as it were, encourages constant oscillation between extremes—either of coherent or decentralized meaning, rationality or irrationality, objectivity or total subjectivity— and thus makes *escape* from the modern liquid project very difficult. Mohammad Iqbal tries to escape by attempting to formulate a synthesis between the rational and spiritual or “psychological” aspects of Islam, but in doing so, he again invokes the instantiated binaries. Simply tying together two ends of a string will not eradicate the string. Simply combining two binaries will not diffuse their extremities— but may make them doubly worse (or result in lukewarm liberalism).

These binaries, as we've seen, are many: we have the sacred/profane, in which the profane is intimately connected to colonial notions of rationality as profaning the false pretenses of religion, and in which the sacred is the unreachable. The Romantics capitalize on the latter, making Romanticism a movement that laments the loss of transcendence while operating in the secular, giving rise to disembodied spirituality that is so indicative of liquid modernity's

rhizomatic structure, which of course also depends heavily on orientalism and racism. The sacred/profane binary is arguably the elemental binary in a secular world, its rudimentary offspring being binaries such as rationality vs spirituality, reason vs imagination, logic vs mythic, etc. All of these ultimately annul the possibility of transcendence.

In this chapter, I want to explore eleventh-century Islamic scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's understanding of knowledge, rationality, and his metaphysics of the heart and intellect (what I will hereby refer to as *Ghazalian noetics*). I hope that this exploration—however merely introductory—will be helpful in theorizing something liberatory for Muslims, and nuancing the terms of liquid modernity's binaries. In doing so, I attempt to contextualize Ghazali's work with some binaries that he himself is dealing with, especially between different modes of knowledge such as theology, philosophy, and sufism. I hope that this discussion will be useful in beginning to theorize a useful cognitive map of liberation from forms of intellectual dispossession for Muslims, which usually take the shape of imbibing the binaries that were discussed in the previous chapter.

However, I am also aware that this attempt at reaching back into Islamic history, and especially in invoking a famous and fairly orthodox—though revolutionary—Islamic figure, is reminiscent of performing “authentic” Islam as a means of escaping the problems of modernity. In his brilliant essay “The Aura of Authenticity,” Amir Mufti begins by comparing the ideas of Ashis Nandy, who, Mufti argues, inscribes an “auratic quality” to Hinduism as the spirit of Indian authenticity, and Talal Asad as articulating “the West” as a collection of convincing liberal narratives. These are both highly reminiscent of the act of polarizing “traditions,” similar to how Dabashi criticizes Seyyed Hossein Nasr for romanticizing Islam. Though Mufti vehemently adds that Nandy and Asad's *critiques* of modernity are complex and intelligent, he nonetheless asserts

that their formulation of a unique and authentic alterity is shortsighted.¹ Mufti argues that the equation of modernity with “Western” and the nonmodern with “religiosity” leads people to find an authentic “Archimedean point” *outside* or *before* modernity. Simply put, this is not possible, because, as we’ve seen, the project and all the baggage associated with liquid modernity is global. Mufti says that the “failure to recognize that there is now no recourse to an outside, leads to an implicit, albeit unwilling, affirmation of some of the most violently exclusionary political contexts in contemporary society.”² (or example, the historical partition of India, and the country’s contemporary problem with Hindu fundamentalism to the exclusion of a Muslim minority).

As I bring Ghazali into the conversation about knowledge, rationality, and transcendence, I am painfully aware of the limitations— and perhaps even harmful consequences— of suggesting that accepting Ghazali’s noetics will alleviate the problems of intellectual dispossession, orientalism, and general confusion faced by Muslims. However, my aim is not to explore Ghazali’s noetics as a means of simply ameliorating this problem, but *engaging* with it. I hope to do this by deeply contextualizing both Ghazali in the moment of his writings, as well as charting the moments of resonance with the history of modernity, which has been discussed in length in Chapter One. I also hope to return to Nietzsche, who will serve as a good resting point in this discussion. I don’t suggest that Ghazali’s noetics and ideas of transcendence will provide a framework *outside* of modern binaries and the fact of Western domination, but an analysis of them will, I believe, be extremely useful in elucidating and nuancing possible frameworks for theorizing liberation.

¹ Mufti, “The Aura of Authenticity,” 92 (emphasis mine)

² *Ibid.*, 96

In order to do this contextual analysis later in the chapter, I will begin here by recapitulating the broad contours of the various responses to modernity, some of which we have already observed thus far. I will present here five broad responses: Firstly, there is the response of life-affirming existentialism, optimistic nihilism, or outright nihilism. This is what we've encountered with Sartre, Camus, and to some extent Nietzsche, who posit that life's meaning arises from the existential fact of life itself; it is through living well and affirming the self that meaning is made— if it is made at all. The second response is disembodied spirituality, which is a reaction to the perceived futility and dissatisfaction of existentialism. This is where people seek meaning through false notions of spirituality that inevitably call on orientalism or cultural appropriation by white people, or self-orientalism or cultural essentialism by non-white people. The first and second are responses that I covered extensively in the last chapter.

In this chapter, I will be focusing on three others: Firstly, there is the response to modernity where people posit democratic secularization of liquid modernity as opening the possibility for a plurality of meaning and increased possibilities for transcendence. Bauman gives us one such perspective, which I mentioned in Chapter One, and which Elmessiri critiques for being immanent and pantheistic. Secondly, there is the liquid modern response where meaning is seen as a communal and societal construction; this is the view upheld by Marx and Hegel, as well as Wittgenstein, as we'll explore in this chapter. And lastly, there is the response where individuality, the self, and/or the ego is viewed as the ultimate site of pleasure and fulfillment, an idea I'll explore in this chapter using the work of Sigmund Freud. All these responses help to construct the “liberty, diversity, tolerance” trinity of modern democratic-capitalist societies

Something that is undergirding all of these binaries, however, is the question of *authority*. What I mean by this is the following: we especially see that the reason the sacred gets separated

from the world into a static and distant and fairly useless category is because authority on earth is given to the role of human rationality. But it's not just human rationality— it's also human *resourcefulness*, the trust in people to be able to build systems of power, politics, institutions and systems to support an exponentially progressing society. This resonates with a figure who dealt with a similar binary— definitely not in the context of modernity— but still thinking about rational and non-rational means of attaining real knowledge and the question of authority: Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali.

II. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali was born in Tus, current-day Iran, in the year 1058. He and his brother Ahmed, who would later become a prominent Sufi, were orphaned at a young age and sent away to study under the notable theologian and jurist al-Juwayni as well as several other lesser-known teachers. Ghazali was noted to have a brilliant penchant for his studies, being able to memorize long passages of text and consume incredible amounts of material; in fact, by the time he was only twenty, he was considered one of the “foremost ulama of his age.”³ The turn of the millenia was also a time of intense change for the mainland Muslim world, because the Seljuk Turks were seizing power from the Arab rulers of the Abbasid Dynasty, leading to a pervasive sense of anxiety. Highways were no longer safe, banditry was common, and poverty became rampant due to the Turk's reckless invasion and plundering of crops and cities.⁴ However, towards the end of the eleventh century, a Persian leader named Nizam al-Mulk was working with the Seljuks and Mamluks to unite the Arabs, Turks, and Persians to prosper in the

³ Tamim Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes*, (New York, NY: PublicAffairs), 110

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124

sciences, arts and intellectual works, and military prowess.⁵ In 1085, when Ghazali's teacher al-Juwayni passed away, he moved to Nishapur in Nizam al-Mulk's court for intellectuals and artists. Ghazali was esteemed in the court as a revolutionary scholar and eventually promoted to the post of the director of one of the most prestigious universities in the Islamic world: Nizamiya University in Baghdad.⁶ There, he taught Islamic jurisprudence and theology to crowds of three hundred students.

From a young age, Ghazali was inundated with Asharite theological thought from his teacher al-Juwayni,⁷ where he theologized against the Mu'tazilites, the more philosophically-motivated theological group that argued for a strong sense of human free will and that God's actions were bound by his mercy for humankind.⁸ Ghazali, as an Asharite scholar, equally believed in reason as a means of understanding theology, free will, and the problem of suffering, but ultimately privileged God's power over his mercy, siding with the idea that though human beings has free will (of choice), humans ultimately don't *create* their own actions. He supported this with his critique of causation, which I will return to shortly.

During his time teaching in the Nizamiya, however, Ghazali worked privately in attempting to understand philosophy, which at the time usually meant his contemporaries who were deeply inspired by the works of Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and other Greek philosophers, such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. Ghazali wrote several treatises summarizing the works of these philosophers with such succinctness that people began to believe that Ghazali himself was a philosopher. However, in his famous volume *Incoherence of the Philosophers*,

⁵ Ibid., 128-129

⁶ Montgomery W. Watt, "Al-Ghazālī," ed. by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, *Encyclopaedia of Islam Second Edition*, paragraph 2

⁷ Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) Incoherence of the Philosophers," ed. By Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford, 2016), 192

⁸ Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2009), 76-78

Ghazali fiercely refuted synthetic philosophical reasoning as a whole. This is a fairly important point, and I will unpack some of the broad contours of his orientation here (and will not get too deep into the specifics of his refutation of philosophy, both for the sake of brevity and irrelevance to the topic of noetics).

The overall strategy that Ghazali uses in refuting the philosophers is to use their own stringent criteria of logic to show that it can never actually lead to synthetic truth. He says that the philosophers don't even satisfy their own requirements for their conclusions. Frank Griffel breaks down his arguments for this in three broad categories: discussions against the world's eternity, bodily resurrection and God's knowledge of particulars, and a legal condemnation of the philosophers' teachings. I will go through an overview of the first argument to demonstrate Ghazali's style of refutation and his use of logic in this context.

For the first, Ghazali refutes Ibn Sina when the latter posits that the world has no beginning and no end, because he doesn't view God as *creating* the world, but as its *essential cause*. That is to say, God necessarily coexists as a cause with the world he creates due to his nature. For example, if there is light cast by a fire in a room, Ibn Sina would say fire is the *essential cause* of light in that room, and light is not *created* by fire— it is a contingent causation. Ibn Sina claims that this is God's relationship to the world— “The world exists as long as God exists and God cannot exist alone without the world, just as there is no fire in that room without light.”⁹ In Ghazali's estimation, however, the problem with this is that God then has no control over his creation— creation follows him necessarily, outside the bounds of his will. God becomes a “creation-automat.”¹⁰

⁹ Griffel, “Al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) Incoherence of the Philosophers,” 200

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 200

Ibn Sina's argument about the eternity of the world relies partly on a discussion on "modalities" (i.e. that which is necessary, possible, impossible). The world, says Ibn Sina, continuing with his account of causation, is *possible* with regard to itself, and *necessary* with regard to god, meaning it follows from God's existence. Following Aristotle, Ibn Sina says God is the "being necessary by virtue of itself" and requires a substratum of possibility and necessity. And since the world has always been possible, the substrate of this possibility— God, or the prime matter— has and will always exist. Thus, the universe is eternal.

Ghazali radically dissents to these Aristotelian formulations of modalities. He says that "possibility" is just a judgement people make based on the limits of their understanding: "Anything whose existence the mind supposes, [nothing] preventing its supposing it possible, we call 'possible,' and if it is prevented we call it 'impossible.' If [the mind] is unable to suppose its nonexistence, we name it 'necessary.'"¹¹

Ibn Sina, however, attempts to show the eternity of the world demonstratively (i.e., analytically). Ghazali's most sweeping move of this particular argument against the philosophers' supposition of an eternal world is when he tries to also show demonstratively that the world is *created* (non-eternal). Ghazali uses the same strategy that Immanuel Kant will use almost seven centuries later: he tries to show that the world is both created and not created in time. Ghazali's ultimate aim is to show, using the same logic that the philosophers use, that a careful employment of logic cannot result in a real understanding of the world as it is, i.e., it cannot give us synthetic truth. Logic can indeed help us understand mathematics and important proofs, and in a particular sense can be naturally imbibed into scientific discovery, but it cannot give us knowledge into the deepest realities of existence.

¹¹ Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) Incoherence of the Philosophers," 201

Ghazali's refutation of philosophy has now, for almost over a millenia, defined Muslim public opinion about the irrelevance of philosophy as a means of attaining true knowledge, overturning a prior reverence of philosophers like Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd out of the mainstream. Public opinion "rarely believes or disbelieves anything based on proof,"¹² as Tameem Ansary says, because Ghazali's argument also comes at a time of pervasive anxiety about the potential fragility of Muslim society and its political turmoil. In other words, he lived in a "world in which trusting to reason could easily seem unreasonable."¹³ Ghazali's *Incoherence* signified an important cultural turning point in understanding the role and limits of rationality.

In his position in Nizamiya, Ghazali came to be a well-known and illustrious scholar, but starting at around 1095, Ghazali suffered first from an intense episode of skepticism and then a nervous breakdown.¹⁴ In his *Deliverance from Error*, which is considered his "autobiography" or a personal narration of his intellectual journey, Ghazali outlines what we might today call an "existential crisis." He begins the *Deliverance* with some of his personal proclivities:

I have poked into every dark recess, I have made an assault on every problem, I have plunged into every abyss, I have scrutinized the creed of every sect, I have tried to lay bare the inmost doctrines of every community. All this have I done that I might distinguish between true and false, between sound tradition and heretical innovation. Whenever I meet one of the Batiniyah, I like to study his creed; whenever I meet one of the Zahiriyah, I want to know the essentials of his belief... To thirst after comprehension of things as they really are was my habit and custom from a very early age. It was instinctive with me, a part

¹² Destiny Disrupted 113

¹³ Ibid. 132

¹⁴ Montgomery W. Watt, "Al-Ghazālī," ed. by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, P.J. Bearman, *Encyclopedia of Islam Second Edition*, paragraph 2

of my God-given nature, a matter of temperament and not of my choice or contriving.¹⁵

Ghazali says that he noticed that naturally, a Muslim child would become Muslim, a Christian child would become Christian, a Jewish child would become Jewish, and so on. Paired with his erudition in a wide variety of subjects, this motivated his skepticism about how the truth could actually be reached. Ghazali is looking for “knowledge of what things really are, and thus he says he “must undoubtedly try to find what knowledge really is.”¹⁶

In a fashion very similar to Descartes in his *Meditations* where he experimentally disposes of every belief which he can doubt, Ghazali begins to systematically question the certainty of ordinary pieces of knowledge. He wants to find a solid foundation for his knowledge. After disposing of many beliefs, Ghazali discovered that he can't rely on anything besides sense perception and analytical/demonstrative proofs, like the simple sum ‘two is greater than one.’ But even these, he eventually concedes, are dubious because he considers the prospect of being in a dream, where both sense perception and intellectual faculty can't be trusted to reveal that one is indeed in a dream. This is where Descartes makes the move that the only thing he knows for certain is *cogito ergo sum*: I think therefore I am, meaning that he knows that he is a thinking thing, and that he is having thoughts. Ghazali however, doesn't make this move. Ghazali says he was unwell with these doubts for some months, and explains that his way out wasn't through some intellectual understanding, but a light God gave him. “Whoever thinks that the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs,” says Ghazali, “has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God's mercy.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, n.d. *Deliverance from Error*, trans. Montgomery Watt (London, UK: GEORGE ALLEN AND UNWIN LTD), 4-5

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6

Eventually, Ghazali realizes the problems with many other forms of the knowledge that he has attained. He sees philosophy as useless for attaining real synthetic truths. He also sees theology as a practice for purely debating other theologians about disagreements about the interpretation of God's anthropomorphism or the technicalities of his bestowal of free will without arriving at real knowledge; for Ghazali, theology becomes a form of orthodoxy simply to defend the religion operating in the realm of rationalized opinion. Ghazali also vehemently refutes a group called the Batinis, who were a group of Shi'a Muslims who "emphasized the role of a divinely guided authority and required esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet."¹⁸ Though Ghazali didn't expel the Batinis from the fold of faith, he did severely rebuke their lack of reasoning; in Ghazali's estimation, it isn't necessary to have a figure of direct religious authority like the Imam when ordinary sense perception and intellect, working in tandem, can lead to reasonable interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah. This is an important point because in many ways, Ghazali's employment of sense perception and intellect is quite ordinary for worldly matters, and when investigating deeper truths as for philosophy, theology, or noetics, Ghazali invokes a more complex system of reasoning, which we will discuss shortly.

By this time, Ghazali basically has narrowed down four different avenues to gaining knowledge: 1) the philosophers, 2) the theologians, 3) the Batinis, and 4) the mystics. We can see that he has critiqued the first three of these, but there is no doubt that Ghazali is deeply influenced by at least the first and second in his scholarship. In fact, Ghazali's great contribution to Islamic thought and praxis is the marriage of rationality and spirituality into a coherent noetical framework.

¹⁸ Ahmet Hadi Adanali, "Dialectical Methodology and its Critique: Ghazali as a Case Study," (Order No. 9542672, The University of Chicago, 1995), 29

Despite the positive reception of his work, however, Ghazali felt increasingly dissatisfied with his life in the University. Tameem Ansary writes:

Ghazali had a problem... he was an authentically religious man, and somehow, amid all the status and applause, he knew he didn't have the real treasure. He believed in the revelations, he revered the Prophet and the Book, he was devoted to the shari'ah, but he wasn't feeling the palpable presence of God—the very same dissatisfaction that had given rise to Sufism. Ghazali had a sudden spiritual crisis, resigned all his posts, gave away all his possessions, abandoned all his friends, and went into seclusion.¹⁹

The reasons for Ghazali's retreat into a life of seclusion is still debated to this day.

Ghazali himself claims that he was disenchanted with corruption of the ulama of his time and was seeking spiritual solace. At the time of his leaving, a group of assassins who had “used murder for propoganda value”²⁰ managed to murder Nizam al-Mulk, in whose court Ghazali worked, and some, mostly Western readings, suggest that Ghazali left due to the political consequences. However, even if this were the case, it could only have been one factor.²¹

During his time of seclusion and travel, Ghazali wrote his greatest work: *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, or *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, and synthesized rational and spiritual frameworks into one. In the next section, I will be focusing directly on his noetics and directly compare it to the modern binaries I introduced in the beginning of this chapter.

III. Ghazalian Noetics & Modern Binaries

¹⁹ Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted*, 112

²⁰ Ibid. 130

²¹ Watt, “Al-Ghazālī,” paragraph 2

Noetics is the study of the metaphysics of the heart and the intellect. I believe studying Ghazalian noetics is where we will get the deepest kernel of Ghazali's superstructure of several topics pertinent to the study at hand: the multitudes and limits of rationality, the intersection and dynamic interplay between reason and spirituality, the attainment or impossibility of knowledge, the psychology of belief, and the interiority of the Muslim consciousness. These are complex structures, and doubtlessly follow from the previous discussion about Ghazali's infatuation with philosophy and theology, both of whose influence can be seen in his noetics. In the following section, I will explore some key aspects of Ghazalian noetics, drawing heavily from Alexander Treiger's work, *The Science of Divine Disclosure: Ghazali's Higher Theology and Its Philosophical Underpinnings* from his chapter "Key Terms of Ghazali's Epistemology and Noetics," and leverage Ghazali's noetics to present three critiques on a few modern binaries that were presented earlier: Firstly, Democratic secularization of meaning-making (Bauman) where everything is transcendent (pantheism); secondly, Meaning as a communal and societal construction (Wittgenstein); and thirdly, individuality/the self/ego as the ultimate site of pleasure and fulfillment (Freud).

III. a) Ghazali's Conception of the Heart and its Implications for Pantheism & Disembodied Spirituality

The heart is the most fundamental aspect of Ghazalian noetics. Qalb is the Arabic word for the heart, and here we are referring to it as the "locus of cognition particular to humans,"²² not simply as the physical heart. The heart plays an important role in Sufi terminology, which draws directly from the Quran's oft-repeated invocation thereof. al-Qalb is said to be the place

²² Alexander Treiger, *The Science of Divine Disclosure: Ġazālī's Higher Theology and its Philosophical Underpinnings* (Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global 2008), 151

from which man “understands”²³ and also the place from which ignorance is seated: the Quran often refers to God “sealing” the hearts of “those who do not know,” or those who are “haughty tyrants.”²⁴ Moreover, the Quran made the heart the basis of knowledge and conscience,²⁵ from which human beings will truly understand the ultimate reality of themselves, the world, and its divine origins. This emphasis on the heart, however, is not an emotionalization of an ambiguous concept, but rather a technical term about intellection in religious metaphysics,²⁶ and is an “experimentally-based anthropology in which *understanding and will are united* in an existential mode of behavior.”²⁷ This marriage between understanding and will, or understanding and human proclivities toward reason and other modes of acquiring knowledge, is what is especially fascinating about Ghazali’s conception— and in many ways, also the Quranic and Sufi conception— of the heart. Ghazali is also inspired by Aristotelian and Platonic categories of the soul— in fact, the Greek notion of the “rational soul” is very much something Ghazali draws on and uses to ethicize his own account in the *Ihya*.²⁸

To describe the role of the heart in understanding reality, Ghazali gives a metaphor of a mirror, an object (or form) in front of the mirror, and the reflection of the object’s form onto the mirror. Ghazali likens the mirror to the heart, the form to some aspect of reality, and the reflection as the reflection of the reality on the heart.²⁹ The clarity and quality of reflection depends on the state of the heart, in the same way that it would for a mirror: the surface of the mirror, its cleanliness, and its orientation are all imperative features that affect the quality of

²³ L. Gardet, and J.-C. Vadet, “Kalb,” paragraph 2

²⁴ *Ibid.*, paragraph 2

²⁵ *Ibid.*, paragraph 4

²⁶ Treiger, *The Science of Divine Disclosure*, 153

²⁷ Gardet and Vadet, “Kalb,” paragraph 6

²⁸ Treiger, *The Science of Divine Disclosure*, 153

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 155-56

reflection. Ghazali eventually makes an ethical case about the necessity of purifying the heart in order to truly understand reality.

The most noteworthy idea here is that Ghazali doesn't say the object of knowledge itself is reflected in the heart, but rather that its "*intelligible form*" is.³⁰ This is to say that "the object of knowledge cannot be said to become *united* or *identical* with the heart, nor can it be said to *indwell* in it; it is *merely reflected* in it."³¹ This becomes especially interesting when we consider the case of God as the object before the mirror, or as the reality before the heart. The "radical impossibility" of being "indwelled" by the object of knowledge becomes especially pertinent here,³² because though the heart reflects the object of knowledge— God, in this case— it can never *become* that object, i.e., the heart or individual can never himself be divine. Though God may "descend to the hearts of the Believers," their hearts do not contain God himself.³³

In Chapter One and Two, we discussed at length the response to liquid modernity in which people like Bauman believed that the new phase of modernity would prompt a more democratic outlook towards meaning-making because it moved away from the universal rationality of solid modernity. Because meaning becomes so deeply subjectivized, and in Nietzsche's view, perspectivized, transcendence is flattened into immanence where everything is divine, and therefore nothing is divine. I've been calling this a rhizomatic structure of meaning, like the roots of a rhizome that can never lead to a truly transcendent source of meaning; for all intents and purposes, it is a semi-pantheistic view. Thus, we see two things happening here: firstly, God is totally out of the picture because privilege is given to a secularized view of human activity as the ultimate— and only— source of meaning, but secondly, and simultaneously, all

³⁰ Ibid., 157 (emphasis mine)

³¹ Ibid., 157

³² Ibid., 159

³³ Gardet and Vadet, "Kalb," paragraph 3

human activity becomes godly *because* of the absence of God. God is unreachable because he *doesn't exist* as a separate entity, but also divinity is everywhere.

Ghazali's mirror metaphor powerfully straddles the intersection of unreachability and direct knowledge of the transcendent. Whereas in the rhizomatic model of liquid modernity, transcendence becomes *diffused* throughout discourse around subjectivity, fulfillment of individual pleasure, and the commercialization of the unconscious, which then ultimately "seals" the ceiling of a transcendent reality, Ghazali's structure posits the unquestionable existence of a separate God along with the strict impossibility of ever becoming God or having God reside within the heart of a person. Moreover, though God exists separately from the individual, the latter can still know God in a truly intimate way. This is quite different from the modern view, in which "knowing God" is irrelevant at best, and downright stupid at worst— or, in the disembodied spiritual Romantic perspective, it is veiled rhetoric for simply "knowing yourself." Ghazali is suggesting here that we can actually *know* God— or at least a *real* reflection of God within the inmost part of our consciousness, the part that is the seat of our conscience and intelligence (as we will discuss briefly)— the heart. This knowledge of God doesn't mean that everything becomes godly, as the modern binary would suggest by way of its rhizomatic structure, because Ghazali still draws a distinction between this world (*al-dunya*) as being separate from the transcendent divine reality.³⁴ Thus, for Ghazali, true transcendence is possible through the inner dimensions of the heart, by purifying and cultivating the heart as the divine entrypoint into the self. This is an absolutely fascinating way in which Ghazalian noetics decenters the modern binary of pantheism and disembodied spirituality.

We've discussed how a rhizomatic structure of immanence, which posits that everything is sacred, makes true transcendence impossible. In Ghazali's view, transcendence belongs to God

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 157

and his divine reality— and this is precisely what allows for a real sense of transcendence: there is a holistic and submissive acceptance of humanity enough to simultaneously accept divinity. In this way, transcendence is possible. The rhizomatic flattening in liquid modernity makes it impossible to find true meaning, and rather than making it supposedly democratic, it totally decentralizes and chaoticizes meaning.

III. b) Ghazali's Conception of Witnessing (mushahada) and Experience (dhawq) as Decentering Liberalism and Modern Notions of Meaning as Purely Communal

Ghazali continues on from the heart to sketch a picture of intelligence. In Arabic, in this context, 'aql can be roughly translated as intelligence or intellect. In his conception, the heart is the "seat of 'aql," or the "faculty of knowledge."³⁵ This distinction between the heart and the intelligence is not a binary distinction, but rather one where the intellect and the heart are always working together and are parts of which constitute the human wholeness. There are four tiers of intelligence, according to Ghazali: firstly, the intelligence which principally separates us from animals; secondly, intelligence which allows us to understand analytical or demonstrative proofs, such as "two is greater than one," or "all bachelors are unmarried;" thirdly, there is the intelligence which comes from experience; and fourthly, a particular intelligence that is enacted when a person is able to withhold instant gratification of their immediate desires or impulses.

Here, we see Ghazali's view of intelligence being intricately linked to logic, praxis, and ethics, and though Ghazali categorizes them, the fluidity of intelligence comes from its abode in the seat of the heart, giving intelligence close proximity to the conscience and transcendence. Ghazali also distinguishes intelligence from opinion (i'tiqad) which is what he believes the

³⁵ Gardet and Vadet, "Kalb," paragraph 12

theologians employ in their polemics. Ghazali has a rather restrained opinion of theology, because it is essentially dialectical reasoning in which a party engages with another in order to refute, defend, and succeed— not necessarily to investigate the truth as it is. To Ghazali, all this is the construction of *i'tiqad*. Moreover, Ghazali traces the way in which definitions for certain, unassailable knowledge (in Arabic, *yaqeen*) compare between the theologians and other scholars. The theologians define *yaqeen* as the total “absence of doubt,”³⁶ whereas other scholars describe *yaqeen* as a conviction that holds *power* over the psychological being. Ghazali adopts the latter view. I find this important because there is certainly a psychological dimension to Ghazali’s cosmology of belief: it contains power and sway over the consciousness, not simply a rational assent to proofs or opinions beyond doubt.

Ghazali further divides intelligence into two categories: witnessing (*mushahada*) and experience (*dhawq*). Let’s say a person heard from someone else that Zayd is in his house. This type of knowledge is based on authority. If the person heard Zayd’s voice in his house, then this would be inferential knowledge, based on reasonably linking Zayd’s voice to his presence. But if a person *saw* Zayd— this is the knowledge of witnessing. The knowledge of witnessing is the “light of certainty,”³⁷ and Ghazali gives the example that a person who possesses this kind of knowledge or intelligence doesn’t just infer God’s existence from other things (like the beauty of a sunset), but someone who knows “all things through God,” and thus has perfection of knowledge.³⁸ The example here with Zayd is simply a physical, practical example of the knowledge of witnessing; the innermost kernel of this is where Ghazali argues that the knowledge of witnessing can occur for things which the physical eye cannot witness, but only which the inner eye can.

³⁶ Treiger, *The Science of Divine Disclosure*, 189

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 198

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 196

For instance, say I am looking at a cat in front of me. When I close my eyes, I can still conjure the image of the cat, but it is not the perfect image which I see when I actually open my eyes. Similarly, Ghazali extends this to an argument about the inner dimension of intellection for non-physical objects: there is firstly the intellect, where practical reasoning and analytical logic and experience operates, is analogous to the closed eye which can still conjure an image of the object before it; and secondly, *witnessing*, in which one perfectly sees “an intelligible concept” clearly and more distinctly than in through mere intellection.³⁹ Writes Traiger: “Just as the physical eye has to be open in order for vision to occur similarly the eye of the mind has to be open to render witnessing possible.”⁴⁰ According to Ghazali, this opening of the inner eye happens by detaching oneself from the world and the body in general, because “this life [as a whole] is a veil necessarily [concealing such objects], just as eyelids are a veil [obstructing] physical vision.”⁴¹ Witnessing, or *mushahada*, is thus the perfection of intellection.

Next, Ghazali distinguishes witnessing from experience (*dhawq*). Ghazali argues that it is through direct experience and realization that a person gains inner understanding. No matter how much a person describes the taste of a strawberry, another person will never understand it without actually tasting it. Cheekily, Ghazali exclaims, “For there is a difference between a sick person’s knowledge of health and a healthy person’s knowledge of the same!”⁴² Traiger describes knowledge of experience in his web of other categories as follows:

The perfection of philosophical knowledge [is] achieved when that knowledge is internalized, reaches the level of the inner state of certitude and assurance (*yaqeen*), becomes a psychological state and ceases being mediated and

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 201

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 201

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 201-02

⁴² *Ibid.*, 209

discursive; when it becomes a direct and incommunicable experience (dawq)— as an ailing person’s experience of his disease and a healthy’s of his health— and a face-to-face encounter with, and an intellectual vision or witnessing of, objects of intellection (musahada).⁴³

To have this experience of a “face-to-face” encounter with witnessing “an intellectual vision” is no small feat. Interestingly, however, it doesn’t require philosophical knowledge, even though it is the perfect practical embodiment of it— Ghazali says that in the same way “a sober person [may know] the definition of inebriation” there may be a person “who does not know the definition of inebriation but is himself in the state of inebriation.”⁴⁴ Here is where the rupture in theoretical knowledge occurs: it doesn’t matter if a person intellectually or rationally knows a truth to Ghazali, but only if this truth becomes *dhawq*, i.e., it is manifested as a transformative inner experience which carries psychological power over the individual.

This is a powerful formulation of knowledge for a number of reasons. Firstly, it decenters the liberal notion that knowledge is objective and can be arrived at regardless of the inner state of the rational agent. For Ghazali, the individual’s heart needs to be cultivated to even bear the weight of knowledge— both in terms of witnessing and experiencing the perfection of intellectual reality. That knowledge is neither subjective *nor* objective, but 1) independently true, and 2) personally attainable through purification of the heart and its ethics. I would like to point out that contextualizing Ghazali’s position is a radical way to decenter liberal thought because it straddles the border of objectivity (philosophical knowledge) and subjectivity (personal experience) and yet categorically rejects both as the linchpin of knowledge, and rather gives a nuanced cosmology of the inner dimensions of both the psychology of belief (certainty (yaqeen)

⁴³ Ibid., 212

⁴⁴ Ibid., 215

as holding power over being) and the deepest kernel of intuition which allows the individual to bear the reflection of the truth in their hearts.

I believe another idea is worth exploring here, which is the twentieth century philosophical fad of concluding that meaning isn't purely perspectival as Nietzsche suggested, but rather *communally constructed*. For the sake of this discussion, I will be drawing from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in which he enquires into the superstructure of language.

Wittgenstein begins by exploring the kinks of Augustine's definition of language acquisition, which posited that language is a series of associations between a thing and a word. I point to a brick and say, "brick." Wittgenstein presents Augustine's notion of language through the example of a builder and his assistant using certain words to refer to some objects to aid the process of building. The "primitive language" as Wittgenstein calls it is associative and symbolic; I point to a brick and say "brick" and then the word is associated with the object. However, language isn't purely referential or symbolic— in our normal language, there is a difference between saying something like, "brick!" (which could mean "bring me a brick") or "brick?" (like, "you mean this brick?").⁴⁵ Wittgenstein's critique of Augustine seems to be that the conception of primitive language is limited because in isolation, this symbolic/ associative/ referential quality of language isn't what helps us understand a concept. Wittgenstein brings up the example of giving a grocer the note "five red apples." In order for him to carry this out, he needs to have a conceptual understanding of colors and numbers and even fruit. This doesn't come from purely understanding the associative meaning of words, but it comes through training, exploration, and experience that gives language a vivacious quality.

⁴⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Revised Fourth edition ed. N.p.: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd), 9

In a way, Augustine’s definition of language as a referent or associative exercise only works if we are considering someone who is acquiring a *second* language, because in their heads they will associate something like “blue” with “azraq” if they are Arabic speakers or “bleu” if they are French speakers. But what about the fundamentals of language? Acquiring language in the beginning without a prior conceptual understanding means that language is both the referent *and* the acquisition of concept— and in order for this to be the case, I would posit that there might be something even more fundamental in the human consciousness that allows this to happen.

But this is not the move that Wittgenstein makes. In all this mind-numbing puzzlement about *how on earth do we understand each other*, Wittgenstein doesn’t concede that there is something primordial in our functioning, as perhaps Ghazali would. Wittgenstein concludes that universal or normative logic is a poor answer (which Ghazali would agree with). Wittgenstein says cheekily, “But here the word ‘ideal’ is liable to mislead, for it sounds as if these languages were better, more perfect, than our everyday language; and *as if it took a logician to show people at last what a sentence looks like.*”⁴⁶ But what does allow us to use everyday language and make infinite meaning together through speech? To Wittgenstein, it is simply a process without foundation— he doesn’t appeal to logic, or personal perspective, or God, or science: he appeals rather to the power of communal meaning-making, the power of what comes together when human beings live and work and speak to one another.

The reason I bring up Wittgenstein’s viewpoint is because it is an important response to modernity that we haven’t covered yet. It’s quite compelling to suggest that meaning is indeed made, and though we can’t wrap our heads around it, it is always happening, and we’re always *doing and understanding* it, in the same way that Ghazali suggests an inebriated person doesn’t

⁴⁶ Ibid., 43 (emphasis mine)

need to understand the definition of inebriation in order to be drunk. Franz Kafka once wrote a very short story titled “The Top” in which a philosopher believes that if he can understand the smallest and most fundamental detail of how the top worked, then it would be “sufficient for the understanding of all things.”⁴⁷ But then the philosopher sees children playing with the top, and he feels suddenly nauseated by them. The moral, of course, is that the philosopher can never know the top in the way the children know the top because they have a practical, conceptual, and functional understanding of the top which the philosopher utterly lacks. In trying to isolate the top, he removes it from its source of ultimate meaning: people, community, and usefulness. For Wittgenstein, language is very much the same: meaning is created by people playing language games and spontaneously creating new concepts and ideas.

Whether or not Wittgenstein is right is not exactly my objective, but I want to show one way in which Ghazali and a modern perspective coalesce. However, we can see here that though Ghazali believes in the power of experience as the perfection of knowledge (and in fact, he says it is greater than both knowledge as such and belief⁴⁸), he places this within a larger superstructure and cosmology of the heart. For Wittgenstein, meaning is created in a vacuum where human beings exist. In a way, it seems as though something needs to precede this: either intuition that would allow them to recognize and play language-games, or something that grounds social interaction, or at the very least a psychological framework in which language reception is present. But he falls back on none of these. Language is a social construct, *meaning* is a social construct. Again, modern binaries rely on the primacy of either objectivity or subjectivity for meaning, and this falls into the category of the latter. Ghazali’s framework in which experience is a practical method of perfect knowledge would, again, reject both

⁴⁷ Franz Kafka, n.d. “The Top.” Biblioklept.

⁴⁸ Treiger, *The Science of Divine Disclosure*, 214

objectivity and subjectivity in favor of a nuanced view: meaning can be social, communal, practical, but it also has an ultimate source which can be discovered in the innermost dimensions of the heart.

III. c) Ghazali's Sufi Conception of Absolving the Ego and its Relevance to the Modern Ego as the Point of All Pleasure

Thus far, we have created a rudimentary sketch of Ghazali's noetics, his cartography of the mind and heart. We have discussed how both man's 'aql (intelligence) and his qalb (heart) — and its constituent parts, like mushahada (witnessing), dhawq (experience), and yaqeen (certainty) — work in tandem to illuminate the perfect intellection which reveals reality to the inner dimension of a person's existence. The practical application of this inner illumination, however, doesn't occur simply through a knowledge of this cartography of noetics, and Ghazali himself would learn that later in his life, after he left his teaching post and began reflecting even more. He writes in the *Deliverance from Error*:

It became clear to me, however, that what is most distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience (dhawq— literally 'tasting'), by ecstasy and by a moral change. What a difference there is between knowing the definition of health and satiety, together with their causes and presuppositions, and being healthy and satisfied!... Similarly there is a difference between knowing the true nature and causes and conditions of the ascetic life and actually leading such a life and forsaking the world... I apprehended clearly that the mystics were men

who had real experiences, not men of words, and that *I had already progressed as far as was possible by way of intellectual apprehension.*⁴⁹

This threshold— so to speak— of the value of theoretical knowledge is really important to Ghazali. He exhausted every major study of knowledge in his time (perhaps besides the technicalities of science) and yet there was a part of him that was deeply dissatisfied with the way *meaning* and *purpose* were theorized in philosophy, theology, or elsewhere. If we want to attain the inner sanctum of perfect intellection, how do we do that? How do we enact dhawq (experience) into our lives in order to gain not just sight, but insight?

Ghazali gives a fascinating parable to explain the nuanced interaction between theoretical and inspirational/mystical knowledge in our hearts. It goes as follows: the Byzantine and Chinese empires are having a door-decorating competition to see who can create the most beautiful door in the presence of a king. The Byzantines create a beautifully engraved and colorful door. The Chinese, on the other hand, polish theirs until it resembles a reflective mirror. When the veil separating the two doors is lifted, the Byzantine door is reflected onto the polished Chinese door, and in fact “the mirror was so perfect that the reflection surpassed the original painting [on the Byzantine door] in beauty and splendor.”⁵⁰

Ghazali gives this parable for the heart as two mirrors facing each other. One mirror can be likened to the door of the Byzantines, which contains theological and theoretical knowledge of the world that can be attained through dedicated study, or through the preserved tablet of God’s will; the second mirror, is, of course, the part of the heart that seeks divine inspiration—and when it finds that divine inspiration, it reflects it even more beautifully than the theoretical understanding of divine reality. For Ghazali, this *inspiration* comes from the perfect attainment

⁴⁹ Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 13 (emphasis mine)

⁵⁰ Treiger, *Science of Divine Disclosure*, 241

of dhawq (experience) and a beautiful, illuminating force in the heart— but it must be paired with theoretical knowledge for the reflection to be perfect.

This is an analogy for the knowledge of the theoreticians and the sufis. Both are absolutely important, and in fact Ghazali says that this is the way the heart works: like these two doors facing each other, one reflecting the other. Ghazali says in his *Deliverance from Error* that he reached a point in which he didn't think theoretical knowledge was illuminating his heart, and he had exhausted philosophical study. It was the way of the sufis that pulled him out of this crisis.

Sufis perform acts of worship, remembrance of God, and try to purify their hearts in order to experience divine inspiration (which shouldn't be confused with divine revelation, which is reserved solely for Prophets). One of the main characteristics they try to instill in themselves is a sense of true humility for other people, the world around them, but most importantly, towards God. Ghazali realized that one of his problems was that in his teaching of the Islamic sciences in Nizamiya University, he was not in it because of “a pure desire for the things of God, but that the impulse moving [him] was the desire for an influential position and public recognition.”⁵¹ Ghazali, in other words, is recognizing he didn't always operate out of love for God, but love for his own *ego*. Sufism is a complex and diverse doctrine, but one of its main tenets is precisely the cultivation of love for God and absolvment of the ego. I would like to explore this briefly here.

In *The Garden of Truth*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr details this aspect of Sufism in which the human ego “must realize its full servanthood before the Lord,” and, as discussed previously, must realize that it “can never become the Lord.” If we don't realize this “perfect servitude,” our

⁵¹ Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 13

egos will continue attempting to assert independence from God.⁵² This constant assertion of independence is precisely why transcendence becomes impossible— because the human ego oppresses the divinely ordained part of its heart from uniting with its creator. When human beings recognize that they are ultimately reliant for all things on God, when they realize that they are ultimately “poor” and God is “rich,”⁵³ when they totally submit themselves to the divine reality which they could never have attained themselves (the heart would otherwise be like the Byzantine door with no true, inspirational knowledge) — it is only then that they see reality as it is, that they become, in fact, fully human.

Though this radical submission may seem quite extreme to the modern reader, it follows naturally from the cartography of the heart that Ghazali has detailed up till now. As discussed in the previous section critiquing liberalism and Wittgenstein, Ghazali doesn't see true knowledge as either objective or subjective, but divine and transcendent. Though there can be knowledge that exists purely in the realm of the ordinary world, the knowledge of transcendent reality puts all knowledge into perspective and saturates it with meaning, beauty, love, mercy. This is because he posits that 1) there *is* an ultimate reality, and that 2) human beings *can* truly access that reality through the cultivation and purification of the heart, and the ultimate praxis of such purification is abolishing the ego. The ego does not allow itself to concede that it does not know, or that it cannot find meaning by itself, or that it relies even for its mere breath on systems infinitely beyond its control: no, the ego says, I can do it. I can understand. I can be perfect. And Ghazali, and the Sufis, say this foolhardy and extraordinarily damaging assertion of independence will lead the heart to be heavy, it will lead the heart to suffer privation from transcendent meaning, and ultimately, it will kill not only the aspect of the human being that it

⁵² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York, NY: Harper Collins 2007), 12

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13

divinely ordained, but also the aspect that is *human*. Transcendence and attainment of true meaning and reality is possible only by dropping our pretenses of human independence. The ego must be obliterated, and submit itself to its ultimate source, and the source of all things.

This is a particularly radical view if you consider that the ego is basically the point of praxis of all of modernity, both in solid and liquid modernity. In solid modernity, the unique discovery of human rationality lead people to posit their independence from God, and in liquid modernity, when they realized individuality's conceptual failure, they turned to a pluralistic, "communal" — though simultaneously fragmented— view of the world in which the the unconscious is commercialized and the self is commodified for pleasure, pantheistic meaning, and disembodied spirituality. Thus, in both solid and liquid modernity, the "self," or the "individual," or the "ego" — whatever you want to call it— is the central point of meaning-making and there is no recourse to ultimate meaning *outside* the self, thus rendering transcendence— and in fact truth, as we'll see in the next section— basically marginal at best and unattainable at worst. Here, I would like to invite a short analysis of Freud's conception of the ego from his work *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia*.

Freud is interested in the difference between "mourning" — that is, the sadness that ensues from the loss of a loved one— and "melancholia," which can today be defined as an early conception of depression. The reason I believe this piece is useful to our discussion is because it gives a fascinating psychoanalytical perspective on the ego and the way the ego projects suffering on its attachments, thereby subsuming a person's whole worldview into the ego's self-obsession. By analyzing Freud's text as a period piece from the early twentieth century and considering it to be a prototype of later developments in the modern understanding of the self, psyche, and ego, I think it will be useful to compare with Ghazali's/Sufi conceptions of the ego.

Freud asserts that both mourning and melancholia are both characterized by a profound sense of loss, disinterest in the world except for the matters that concern the loss of the love object (which can be a person, or perhaps some other intense attachment), and a general inability to go about daily life. However, melancholia in particular is marked by one important distinction: namely, it is the “disorder of self-esteem.”⁵⁴ That is, something is almost pathological about the way the ego regards *itself*. Something is indeed lost for the melancholic, but it’s not clear what is lost in the way it’s clear for the mourner to know what it lost. For the mourner, the consciousness knows clearly that some love-object has been lost, but for the melancholic, the loss is more abstract: sometimes the love object is not dead, but no longer an object of love; sometimes the subject cannot know what is consciously lost; sometimes they know who the love object is, but not why they feel a sense of loss about them. This sense of loss is disorienting because it is abstract.

Firstly, there is a love object, but through some “real slight” or disappointment from or by beloved, the “object relation has been subjected to a shock.”⁵⁵ The subject then *internalizes* this shock into their egos. There, it has no purpose except to recreate “an identification of the ego with the abandoned object.”⁵⁶ Freud argues that the subject reproduces an image of the love object into the ego itself, either in order to preserve the ideal image of the love object, or simply because it is not possible to break attachment from the love object entirely. In his chapter “The Ego and its Forms of Dependence,” Freud describes how this shattering of the love object’s image festers a type of “guilt-feeling” on the “basis of the tension between the ego and ego-ideal.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud n.d. trans. Shaun Whiteside, *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia* (Penguin Books) 204

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 209

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 209

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 138

Freud says that this internalization and reproduction of the love object within the ego results in a self-obsession because the love object is “within” the ego. It is an outward obsession now turned inward rather than healthy detachment. Freud writes: “[The ego] may assimilate this object, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libido development, may do so by eating it.”⁵⁸ In other words, the ego devours the love object due to its own narcissism. An example of this can be seen in a person whose partner treats them poorly. The slight by the person’s partner puts them into a shock, and they internalize that pain and identify it with their ego. Because the person did not outright express their grievance to their partner (perhaps due to intense dependency), the ego then recreates an image of the partner within itself and the person becomes obsessed with the reflection of the partner within their ego. Ultimately, this is a destructive self-obsession (as all self-obsessions necessarily are) because the ego cannibalizes *itself*.

The reason I think this is a fascinating and relevant idea is because I believe the Sufis and Ghazali would largely agree with this analysis of a non-transcendent person who is deeply attached to the world, so much so that their psyches compensate by narcissistic self-sabotage. In many ways, I think they may say that Freud has it right— the person’s attachment to the world (or something in the world) and their inability to truly admit their reliance on a higher power makes them suffer and self-obsessed. Ghazali would probably have suggested that the person renounce attachment to the world, submit to what they could not control (someone else’s behavior or opinion of them), and focus instead on humbling rather than sanctifying their egos. More recently, this would be qualified under the newly emerging field of Islamic psychology.

It is important to point out that Freud is writing at a time when the concept of “the self” is changing rapidly into a highly psychological and clinical perspective. The self can be broken

⁵⁸ Ibid., 209

down, scientized, categorized neatly, and in a way, explains itself. The liquid modern ego emerges as a thing that can be studied in this way, and then commodified. In *Mapping the Secular Mind*, Haggag Ali says, “In the modern liquid era, the cognitive map of prospective consumers is manipulated by seductive commodity symbols: (1) the authority of celebrities (public personalities, great athletes, popular actors and singers) and (2) the authority of science (authority of scientific surveys, numbers and algebraic formulae).”⁵⁹ I believe the psychologized *self* stands in-between the scientized ego and the commercialized ego, and it ultimately leads to either devastating self-obsession, as Freud argues, or total estrangement.

Ghazalian noetics gives us an alternative model of the inner experience of the human, one in which the only recourse out of the self isn’t back into an intensification of the ego, but rather a real possibility of relinquishing the ego to reach for the transcendent. I think this is incredibly compelling. We’ve discussed the rhizomatic structure of meaning-making at a societal level in liquid modernity, but it is alarming to see that this rhizomatic structure is also paralleled in the self: with nowhere to go except itself, the ego’s narcissism chokes itself out like a snake wrapping around its prey. Ghazali’s noetics obviously won’t relieve this universal experience (Ghazali did, after all, have his own ego problems)— but they do show us a way out of modern binaries that provide poor avenues for meaning-making. I will discuss the consequences of this on the politics of belief and authority in the next section.

IV. Ghazali & Nietzsche

What brought me to the main study of this thesis isn’t just an interest in modernity and transcendence, but more importantly a fascination with the point of connection— and subsequent divergence— between Freidrich Nietzsche and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. At first, this seemed to be

⁵⁹ Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind*, 120

a far-fetched comparison, maybe superficial at best. But upon closer inspection of their philosophies and theories, I was compelled to explore their connections and pinpoint the exact rupture between their views on truth and meaning with a careful eye towards historical developments in modernity. Nietzsche and Ghazali are concerned with some very similar things: they both saw themselves as reviving a static tradition, they both disliked the dogmatic and dialectical knowledge that was being produced in their time, they were deeply concerned about the possibility of meeting truth and reality (this is precisely where they diverge— one celebrates the ego, the other abolishes it), they were curious about the way psychology informs an individual's relationship to truth, and they cared about making meaning out of our lives. In this section, I would like to briefly compare these preoccupations and locate the point of divergence between them. I believe putting pressure on this point can leverage some insights into the idea of engaging with and subsequently overcoming some modern binaries, and ultimately be useful for theorizing liberation.

Firstly, both Nietzsche and Ghazali were deeply dissatisfied with the dogmatism of the knowledge that was being produced at their time— and in fact, they were both worried about the dogmatism of rationality. Ghazali is dissatisfied with the way theologians use dialectical reasoning to defend orthodox Islamic practice, and also with philosophers who believe analytical truth can lead to synthetic truth. Nietzsche has an entire section in *Beyond Good and Evil* dedicated to “The Prejudices of the Philosophers” where he critiques the way scientific and philosophical knowledge has been passed down from thinker to young thinker with the myth of objective truth. What a thinker leaves behind is nothing more than “involuntary and unconscious autobiography,”⁶⁰ in Nietzsche's view. For Ghazali, too, philosophy is the posturing of objectivity where there is none. However, Ghazali has both a stronger trust in

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, para 6

analytical/demonstrative truth (such as the sum $2+2=4$, and “pure logic”) and in the ability for humans to reach truth about things-in-themselves in this world (with the knowledge that, of course, there exists other worlds beyond their comprehension).

Nietzsche, on the other hand seems to think that though there is a world that exists— that is to say, he is a realist and not an idealist (who would say only ideas exist)— and that truth itself isn’t *relative* based on who perceives it,⁶¹ he does seem to suggest that it is perspectival.

Nietzsche rejects a worldview in which rational beings can have a real, accurate perception of the world-as-it-is, as a thing-in-itself. Though Ghazali would say that the distractions of the ordinary world and the heart’s attachments to it do indeed make it difficult to perceive reality, that perception is still possible, and it is beautiful, purposeful, meaningful; but for Nietzsche, it doesn’t even matter— what matters is that we recognize that our psychologies are constantly shaping our understanding of truth, and then sublimate our will to power in order to find a vision of life that is life-affirming to us. In other words, Nietzsche doesn’t think the truth will set us free— the truth is *terrifying*. It is like staring into an abyss and having the abyss stare back.⁶² Once we realize this, we should get comfortable with the fact that our psychologies are our greatest points of deliverance. As I said in the first chapter, Kirkland argues that that Nietzsche’s criterion for his own theory of perspectivism isn’t truth but rather whether something is life-preserving, whether it is psychologically strong, whether it is grounded in the “health of one’s disposition toward life.”⁶³

I believe that to some extent, Nietzsche and Ghazali both decenter the conversation around objectivity, but Nietzsche simply creates the new binary of subjectivity to escape the

⁶¹ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press), 43

⁶² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, para 146

⁶³ Kirkland, “Nietzsche’s Honest Masks,” 579

dogmatism of rationality. I think Ghazali does something else: he validates both objectivity and subjectivity and gives them certain spheres of influence— objectivity, for example, can be seen in his trust in analytical logic and sense perception, and subjectivity can be seen in the way an individual heart perceives the world and constructs beliefs. In fact, Ghazali goes so far as to posit that *yaqeen* (certainty) is a belief having psychological power over a person's heart— in some ways, this can even be likened to Nietzsche's conception of the will to power actively shaping our perception of reality and constructing out beliefs. But for Ghazali, ultimate truth doesn't come from either objectivity or subjectivity— it comes rather from the transcendent. This vision of transcendence powerfully shifts the conversation about modernity's rhizomatic structure of the self.

The exact point of rupture between Nietzsche and Ghazali is when they both consider that things are not as they appear. As discussed in the first chapter, Nietzsche believes language veils reality, which is just another way of saying that our perspective veils reality. For Ghazali, too, truth is veiled by the distractions of the world (this is, of course, a much more *moral* argument than the one Nietzsche is making). For both of them, the ego is positioned in a unique place where it casts the world in its own image; the ego sees what it wants, shapes the vision of the world as it wants, believes what it wants. Nietzsche calls this the "will to power" and he says there is no use in moralizing the ego, or oppressing it, or minimizing its impulses, but it is through *sublimating* (i.e., refining) the ego that one gains self-knowledge, which will create a vision of life that is more life-affirming— it will impart the ability to stare into the abyss and no longer be afraid of one's reflection. The ego, thus, is basically enshrined in the Nietzschean view as the ultimate point of praxis, the ultimate point of meaning.

For Ghazali, however, as we've seen, the ego must be eradicated in order to let in the light of divine reality. This difference is because Ghazali and Nietzsche have different conceptions of truth— it follows that if you believe, like Nietzsche, that reality ultimately can't be reached and the only thing that exists is human *perspectives* about reality, then you would adopt a view which sanctifies the human psychology, self, ego. But if, like Ghazali, you believe that there is a truly transcendent reality that is *separate* from the ego and can be reached by submitting the ego to that reality, then the ego becomes something to be eradicated, or at least humbled in the face of the transcendent.

Throughout this thesis, I have never made a normative claim about which belief or viewpoint is actually *true* or *correct*, but rather have attempted to track the intellectual trajectories of various thinkers in order to create a cognitive map that I hope will be useful for some Muslims to locate the intellectual— and in fact spiritual— point in which their belief system may be positioned in modernity. It seems to me that Ghazali's view is particularly useful for Muslims grappling with their belief in the modern world, because it allows for a plurality of meaning which Nietzsche's view simply doesn't. Because Ghazali is deeply entrenched in theological, philosophical, mystical, and very practical approaches to life, reality, and knowledge, he is able to create a fascinating and truly pluralistic map of meaning; he holds a space for analytical and demonstrative truth, for theological and orthodox argumentation, for social reality based on practical living (from his juridical career, which we didn't touch on), and for individual spiritual communion with God. This type of diversity in meaning-making is precisely what is necessary for Muslims to understand their own faith and overcome modern binaries, which ceaselessly purport the inviolable, violently singular nature of meaning as one thing (sacred) or the other (profane, rational), or a gross combination of both.

Nietzsche believes that he is overcoming dogmatism, and in fact, I do indeed think he points to one of the great curses of solid modernity: the belief that objectivity and rationality are enough basis to build a robust society and framework for human life and its meaningfulness. But his focus on the self as the entity which remakes meaning in the world unravels another singularity which destroys the possibility of accessing meaning through other means. This is to say that while solid modernity— and its social contract theories, rationalists, les philosophes, Renaissance thinkers, and early modern philosophers— formulated the one end of the binary, Nietzsche formulated the other. Surely, he thinks he is overcoming this by positioning the self and its perspective as powerfully *constructive*, but in the process, he renders analytical, social, spiritual, and moral truth basically irrelevant.

This calls to a question of authority and the politics of belief. Ghazali gives us multiple centers of authority, creating a pluralistic patchwork from which Muslims can create different sorts of meaning that intersect, diverge, and are ultimately *dynamic*. But both because of the contemporary Western fetishization of Islam and because of Muslims' own myopic and bifurcated understanding of Islam, the politics of belief as modern binaries have entirely flooded the modern bias, making it nearly impossible to see beyond them. Authority of belief lies in the dominant system of reasoning, which at the moment happens to be whatever can be produced through the system of modern binary oppositions, created in order to sustain the selfsame image of Western domination everywhere throughout the world. In the next section, I will be tracing the consequences of this chapter's findings on our earlier question about engaging with modern binaries in order to theorize liberation for Muslims, who are reckoning with centuries of sometimes violent intellectual dispossession.

V. Conclusion: Transcendence & Liberation

The most degrading thing about intellectual dispossession is to look in the mirror, and not see a reflection. It is to be fundamentally estranged from the self. Frantz Fanon wrote, “Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to to ask the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’”⁶⁴

We have seen throughout this thesis that this question of *who am I?* is something Muslims return to time and again, either directly or subtly in response to colonialism, imperialism, or other forms of Western domination and oppression. They come up with myriad responses, but almost always make recourse back to the binaries that solid or liquid liberal-capitalist-democracy modernity constructs, painting themselves as progressive Muslims, or trying to synthesize Islam and the West, or denouncing any connection with the West and returning to some authentic, romantic, stripped-down version of Islam— and the last doesn’t just include religious extremism, but all form of romantic self-orientalization. These binaries are not constructed by Muslims themselves— they are the binaries produced originally from the beginnings of the Enlightenment project, ascribed onto colonized and oppressed people, and then globalized and reinforced from multiple global centers.

As Aamir Mufti noted, it is no use trying to ignore these binaries. They are ubiquitous and have fundamentally shaped our modern consciousness. People cannot discuss religion without bringing up discourse around atheism, or evolution, or fundamentalism; they cannot discuss spirituality without bringing up psychology or attempts at rationalizing the supernatural; they cannot discuss liberation without counter-arguing for meritocracy, liberalism, or a post-race society. This is all to say that the thorniest parts of true liberation will be contested by people

⁶⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (N.p.: Diana Publishing 1961), 182

who are subsumed by the binaries of modernity, who cannot imagine a world beyond the one we live in now. And that is precisely what these binaries are supposed to do: they operate in order to kill imagination. They operate so that the consciousness swings robotically between two magnetic poles, never straying beyond, never critical; because it believes that its pendulation *is* movement, *is* dynamism, *is*, indeed, progress. For me, the lack of imagination is the most startling and terrifying aspect of intellectual dispossession: when oppression reaches so deep that the subject cannot even see or know or imagine himself in any way beyond how the oppressor has imagined him. Fanon says, “With his back to the wall, the knife at his throat, or to be more exact the electrode to his genitals, the colonized subject is bound to stop telling stories.”⁶⁵

What I have attempted to do here is to try and imagine—cautiously, of course, with the knowledge that I am stepping into uncharted territory. What I have attempted to do in this thesis is to motivate the problem of dispossession and chart the binaries in modernity in order to create an entry-point for a thinker like Ghazali, who—given the contextual scaffolding of the first two chapters—disrupts the bifurcation of binaries like the one between the sacred and profane, rationality and spirituality, objectivity and subjectivity, the mythical and factual. Ghazali creates a noetical system whereby the heart and intelligence work in tandem to illuminate divine truth, which can only enter the heart if the ego is wrested and humbled to God and his creation. By decentering the ego, synthesizing the heart and the intellect, and proposing the transcendent as a means of attaining true purpose, meaning, and clarity, we can position Ghazali’s view as radically imaginative, thinking outside of the categories of modern binaries.

I have to point out that Ghazali’s idea of transcendence isn’t intrinsically liberating. It goes without saying that any person who accepts it isn’t going to automatically find themselves free of oppressive systems of power. But I believe that it makes it *possible* to imagine something

⁶⁵ Ibid., 20

beyond those systems while also acknowledging that they are real. In other words, Ghazlian noetics— and its particular formulation of Islamic metaphysics of the heart and mind— can be dynamic, relevant, and engaged if the subject is willing to do the critical work of articulating such a connection.

So much of twentieth century philosophy is spelling out the sins of modernity, analytic philosophy, or other errors in enlightenment conceptions of politics, economics, and power. The dispossession Muslims from their intellectual history is only one example of many— from Judaism to Hinduism to indigenous religions, there has been a systematic process of obliteration and forced amnesia. And then, of course, white, Western philosophers have spent much of the last century theorizing a way of life that they made their colonial or oppressed subjects forget. I don't want to forget. Throughout this thesis, if there's any moral verdict I can call out, it is forgetting: a selective amnesia about history, modernity, and identity is dangerous and devastating. I want to do what Aamir Mufti suggests, which is remembering and remaking. This thesis presents only one such cognitive map to do that work of imaginative remaking— and I hope, with every part of me that cares for the wellness of my community and the world they inhabit, that we can make many, many more.

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