

AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE KING REFLECTIONS ON “CHINESE” AND “GREEK” KNOWLEDGE IN AL-GHAZALI’S ‘MARVELS OF THE HEART’

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ABSTRACT

In his *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) relays a parable about a competition between Greek and Chinese artisans, with each group decorating an opposing inner wall of a king’s portico. The explicit purpose of the analogy was to illustrate a point about the relation between discursive reason and the direct spiritual insight of the Sufis. In this paper, we will explore the use that can be made from this image, as an analogy for exploring the nature of intercultural dialogue, and the process by which diverse cultures influence each other in the course of their ongoing development. We will describe an epistemological problem that arises in considering the conditions for the possibility of such a process, and that seems to impose a dilemma between cultural chauvinism and cultural relativism. I take the position that both of these horns are false, and show how the parable of the artisans helps us understand why the problematic dilemma is a false one.

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The celebrated Muslim thinker, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) is perhaps best known in the Islamic tradition for his magnum opus, *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. In the chapter entitled, "Marvels of the Heart," he tells the following allegorical tale.

The story is told that once the Chinese and the Byzantine Greeks vied with one another before a certain king as to the beauty of their workmanship in decorating and painting. So the king decided to give over to them a portico so that the Chinese might decorate one side of it and the Byzantine Greeks the other side, and to let a curtain hang down between them so as to prevent either group from looking at the other. And he did so. The Byzantines gathered together numberless strange colors, but the Chinese entered without any color at all and began to polish their side and to furbish it. When the Byzantines had finished, the Chinese claimed that they had finished also. The king was astonished at their statement and the way in which they finished the decorating without any color at all. So they were asked, "How have you finished the work without any color?" They replied, "You are not responsible for us; lift the veil." So they lifted it, and behold on their side there shone forth the wonders of the Byzantine skill with added illumination and dazzling brilliance, since that side had become like unto a polished mirror by reason of much furbishing. Thus, the beauty of their side was increased by its added clearness.¹

Taken out of its context in this way, and on a first read, this story seems simply to express an eleventh century Muslim perspective on comparative Greek and Chinese styles of artwork and by extension, possibly, comparative Greek and Chinese culture and philosophy. And it may, indeed, express this, in view of the fact that Ghazali seems to imply, in saying that 'the story is told,' that it was already in circulation at the time of his writing, and not something of his own creation. I do not have any information on the context of the story's origin or its intended purpose before Ghazali's reference. But it would be interesting to know what this might tell us about medieval Islamic perceptions of the culture and thought of the Far East, which is a topic much less discussed than that of the interaction between Islamic and Greek thought.

Be that as it may, Ghazali's expressed intent here is to illustrate a difference between

two alternative modes of knowledge – that of discursive reasoning on the one hand, and of spiritual intuition on the other. "The care of the saints in cleansing, polishing, purifying, and clarifying the heart until the nature of the Real shines forth clearly therein with utmost illumination is like the work of the Chinese," he writes, "The care of the learned and the philosophers in acquiring and adorning knowledge, and the representation of this adornment in the heart are like the work of the Byzantine."²

Still, it is crystal clear why Ghazali would choose to represent discursive reasoning by the image of Greek artisans applying multi-colored paint to create ornate patterns and 'representations' on an opaque wall. It is a perfect analogy to the project of representing the structure of reality through highly developed systems of logic and conceptual schema, for which the Greek intellectual tradition was known. It is, therefore, very unlikely that it was by sheer accident that Ghazali chose the image of Chinese artisans in this way to symbolize the other form of knowing; and on my limited understanding of Taoism, at least, the image of clarifying and polishing the facing wall into a mirror – essentially emptying it of any of its own color and character to make it accessible to reception – does seem to be a suitable metaphor for the spirit of that tradition. But I will leave it to experts in Chinese philosophy to make the final judgment on that. However it stands, I think that the way Ghazali uses the allegory here provides good reason to believe that he had some idea of what he considered to be a Chinese approach to knowledge, and that he saw at least some sort parallel between it and the Sufi approach to knowledge which it is his aim to explain in this context.

The parable is also a very appropriate symbol of the writer, himself; for if there is one thing that Ghazali is known for in the Islamic tradition, it is his accomplishment in re-articulating the ultimate unity and relationship between the experiential Sufi tradition and the discursive traditions of Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy as a coherent whole, just as the two walls of the portico compliment one another in forming a single architectural masterpiece at the entrance to the King's palace. Illustrating this relationship is the explicitly stated purpose of the parable. Yet, as is the case in many places where Ghazali treats more subtle topics, my feeling is that there is even more here which he intends for the reflective reader to understand. For this reason, I will take some liberty in what follows, to speculate as to what other insights this allegory may lead us.

Let us begin by considering the allegory from a somewhat less esoteric perspective, and take the interpretation of this portico straightforwardly as representing two distinct cultural

¹ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111). "Kitāb sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb (The marvels of the heart)", book 21 of the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), trans. Walter James Skellie (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), 71-72.

² Ibid, 72.

paradigms. At this level, the portico itself represents the interactive relation between cultural paradigms. This introduces the question, at the center of much of the current discussion about multiculturalism, of how such a relation is possible. Contemporary discourse here has returned to a perennial dilemma, which is really the epistemological 'problem of the criterion' as it emerges in the discourse on culture, and appears to force on us a choice between cultural chauvinism and cultural relativism.

We can find our way into the problem via a politicized argument - currently being advanced by representatives of what might be called a school of European Enlightenment revivalists - that amounts to the assertion that one must either acknowledge the values and ideas of the European Enlightenment as uniquely, absolutely and universally valid, or adopt cultural relativism. At least, this is the dilemma entailed by their argument in its usual form, that is: cultural relativism is false; therefore, the Enlightenment paradigm alone is absolute and universally valid.

But let us lay aside the clearly false dilemma of this politicized rhetoric, and consider the genuine philosophical question underlying it. The dilemma then confronting us is that either cultural relativism is true, or there is *some* cultural paradigm that is absolute. In this case, if cultural relativism is false, then there is some cultural paradigm that must be taken as absolutely superior to all others, and which represents the single ultimate standard against which all others are to be understood and evaluated. A common argument for cultural relativism indeed depends, in reverse to that of the Enlightenment revivalists, on just this dilemma.

This argument begins with the proposition that any rational comparison between two things requires an independent standard of judgment. Any such standard represents a specific axiological-conceptual paradigm. So, any claim that one paradigm is superior to another assumes some specific paradigm under which the judgment is made. But, the claim, that one paradigm is absolutely superior and universally valid, must assume *that* paradigm as the standard of judgment. That, however, amounts to a circular argument - every measure measures up to itself better than any other. Therefore, one can never rationally judge one culture as superior to any other. Every culture is, therefore, equally valid, because values across cultures are incommensurate (there is no common measure between them), and can only be judged against themselves. Thus, to judge a feature (practice, idea, or value) of a culture as superior to a feature of another is always brute chauvinism, and leads to imperialism, tyranny, and other evils.

Consider, then, the following three sorts of responses by opponents of cultural relativism. One is a bad argument that goes something like this: If cultural relativism were true, then our culture is not superior to others. But our culture is superior to others. Therefore, cultural relativism is false. Obviously, that is bald, question-begging chauvinism. But two other arguments deserve serious consideration.

The first is that cultural relativism precludes the logical possibility of growth and transformation. This is because growth and transformation within a culture involve modifying the paradigm in ways that are judged to be improvements, and such a modification clearly entails a judgment of the paradigm itself. But according to cultural relativism, such a judgment, even if possible, is always invalid, since it involves the application of a separate, specific, and incommensurate paradigm. It follows that real 'change for the better' is logically impossible. In fact, it seems to follow that any change in a culture must always be an illegitimate imposition of an alien set of values.

The second objection to consider is that cultural relativism contradicts itself by assuming a specific paradigm of judgment in making its claims, at a number of levels. First, against the inessential, but usually connected claim, that cultural chauvinism is wrong and leads to certain evils, one of course may object that this is to impose a specific cultural paradigm, according to which chauvinism, imperialism, tyranny and the like are evils, onto other cultures with different standards according to which these may not be evils. To condemn cultural chauvinism is itself an instance of cultural chauvinism.

Secondly, the claim that cultures are 'equally valid' presupposes a common measure of validity that applies to all of them - the very thing that the relativist denies. Otherwise it is a meaningless statement. Perhaps all cultures are equally invalid. If there is no difference between the two, then they are both meaningless propositions. But if there is, then there must be some standard of validity being applied to all of them, and that standard may be different from the standard applied within the cultures themselves; if not, then all cultures would be the same rather than diverse.

A third possible contradiction involves the premise that a 'rational' (as opposed to chauvinistic) judgment requires an independent standard. This, it may be argued, assumes a paradigm and concept of 'rationality' that, according to cultural relativism, may only be valid for specific cultures. Of course, the relativist might respond that to fault their position because it contradicts itself is, just again, to invalidly apply a specific paradigm according to which self-contradictions are false. Once it has gone this far, however, it is clear to see

how the very possibility of interactive relation is called into question (and not just across cultures).

Let us consider these objections to cultural relativism in turn. As for the argument that cultural relativism precludes growth and transformation, we should first notice that this argument is commonly confused with, or collapses into, simple Euro-chauvinism. An indicator that this is happening is that the importance of allowing the possibility of growth and transformation ('progress') is brought home with reminders of historical instances of social 'progress', all of which happen to be features of post-Enlightenment European history (or the effects of its influence on other cultures). So we end up with an argument like the following: If there is no such thing as progress, then our cultural accomplishments cannot be the measure of progress. But our cultural accomplishments are the measure of progress. Therefore, there is such a thing as progress.

Once again here, the political rhetoric is separable from the real philosophical consideration, for aside from the chauvinistic obfuscation, it nevertheless remains clear that growth and transformation is a factor of the life history of cultures, and as something that can be observed and measured from within the culture itself, without necessarily measuring it against the external standard of some other single culture's accomplishments (Western or otherwise).

Secondly, it is undeniable that such transformation is driven by the aspirations of the people, and informed by the interaction between people across cultures, and that these transformations include changes, not only in the means of fulfilling these aspirations, but also in the very nature of the aspirations – the values and ideals of a culture, or at least the articulation of those at any given point in its history. Lastly, the fact that aspirational transformations can occur in a culture entails the possibility of aspirational evaluation, that is, selective judgment as to the basic values and ideals (even if conceived as merely 'natural' selection), and hence, comparison and the ultimate commensurability between diverse aspiration-paradigmatic options.

Then the question is: how is this possible except on the basis of some kind of meta-paradigm – some articulated set of values and ideals, external to the measured set, which serves as their measure? And if there is such a paradigm, then how does it avoid the circularity or brute chauvinism that it apparently must entail? How does one measure the measure? Well, the Euro-Enlightenment revivalists will claim that their measure of measures avoids circularity and chauvinistic brutality simply because it is not the paradigm of a specific culture, but Reason itself, understood as transcending any culture.

Now, I do think that, at one time, this term, 'Reason' – as it was used by certain Enlightenment thinkers – did have a transcendent connotation, expressing an aspiration to reach out beyond the confines of a specific culture to something understood as the very condition of possibility for cultural transformation, and giving birth to their faith in the 'infinite perfectibility of man'. The vast difference, however, in the case of today's Euro-Enlightenment revivalists is evident in the fact that the chauvinistic argument against cultural relativism itself implies that any further 'perfection' for humanity is impossible. For if, indeed, the European Enlightenment represents the very measure of progress, than any advancement beyond that is nothing less than absurd.

It is for this very reason that the false dilemma – between the Enlightenment and cultural relativism – is imposed in most of the contemporary western discussion. It is the defensive posture of a culture that, having once upon a time framed itself on openness to possibility, has now closed itself around a set of possibilities that it had framed once upon a time. Thus, we are told that history has ended, and that now, any attempt to add a chapter is a threat to humanity itself. Meanwhile, the climate warms, global disparity increases, and violent conflict spreads – markedly between the governments of the wealthy nations and the people of poor nations, either directly or through proxies. So much for the infinite perfectibility of man.

'Reason', then, in the sense in which it is used in the assertion of the absolute superiority of the Enlightenment, is the expression of a specific, concretized cultural paradigm. Thus, this insistence that all cultural transformation be measured against it does entail brute circularity. And, as we have noted, such chauvinism precludes the possibility of growth as effectively as relativism. But, there must be some 'ground' of commensurability, as the condition of possibility of such a process. So, if 'Reason' is something that someone else has already gotten to the bottom of, then perhaps we just have to go beyond it in order to find that ground.

This brings us to the last argument, that cultural relativism entails contradictions. And that it does. Indeed, you will have sensed by now that I am going to flatly agree that cultural relativism is false. Growth and transformative interaction between cultures occurs. Therefore, the basic values of various cultures are not ultimately incommensurate. Therefore, just as it is conceivable that a culture can do better at one time in its history than at another (which is what cultural aspiration itself entails), so it is that a culture at some time in its history can be doing better or worse than another culture at a time. And I want to contend that we can admit this possibility without assuming to have in hand any absolute standard by which this is measured, and perhaps without even assuming that it is possible to have such a measure 'in hand.'

In the first instance, this follows from the fact that cultural relativism does entail fatal contradictions, as the argument has it. And despite the obvious objection, this is not to arbitrarily impose on the view a specific paradigm of rationality that prohibits self-contradiction. A position that entails self-contradictions does not require the imposition of an external paradigm in order to be negated. It negates itself by its own self. All we are doing here is pointing out that it does so.

To see what Ghazali's allegory can teach us about cultural interaction, we must first note something of its context. The central aim of the text in which it appears is self-knowledge, in line with the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, to which Ghazali frequently refers, that to know oneself is to know one's Lord; that is Allah, who is also *al-Haq* ('the Reality'). Self-knowledge is the key to reality. Here, the 'heart' (*qalb*), is taken as referring to the self, and its nature is compared, by analogy, to that of a mirror, as the process of purifying the heart is compared that that of polishing a mirror. The aim of polishing the heart is to facilitate its purpose in reflecting the 'true nature of the real' by removing from its surface any obstruction by the stain of anything other than its original nature. In this case, however, its true nature is, in a sense, that it has no specific nature of its own other than its receptivity and capacity to reflect the true nature of another. There is some similarity here to Aristotle's notion that the intellect must have no specific form of its own, so that it can take on the form of its object without distorting it.

I understand a clear connection between this idea and that expressed in the opening statement of the *Tao Te Ching*, that "The Tao that can be named is not the Tao." To name is to specify a nature - a quiddity, or *mahiyya* ('whatness') in the terminology of ibn Sina, as a dimension of every *thing*, and which is conceptually distinct from its dimension of *wujud* (existence). Existence as such, however, cannot be positively conceived. And this is the key issue behind certain criticisms of ibn Sina's concept of *al-Wajib al-Wujud* (the 'Necessary Existent') on the part of Ghazali, which he expressed in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. The crux of this criticism can actually be illustrated by use of the portico analogy. Framing the concept of the 'Necessary Existent' in the way ibn Sina had it, would be something like the Greek artists attempting to *represent*, through colored paint on an opaque wall, the intrinsic nature of the Chinese 'mirror' wall, facing it.

So the Greek wall now represents *mahiyya*, quiddity, essence, determinate, actualized being, or perhaps, as the *Tao Te Ching* has it, the 'ten thousand things'. The facing Chinese wall, on the other hand, represents *wujud*, existence, indeterminate and non-delimited possibility,

and – at the risk of doing violence in interpretation – what is referred to as Tao. Another useful analogy here, frequently used by Ghazali and other Islamic Philosophers and Sufis, drawing from the text of the Qur'an itself, is *Nur* (light). Light is discussed at length as that which is not itself seen, except through its being that which makes manifest all that is seen. In this sense it is precisely like the mirror. When you look into the mirror, you do not see the mirror as such. You see only the reflection of things other than the mirror; which are yet *none other* than the mirror. *Wujud* is not *a thing* among other things, as might be conceptualized as a 'Necessary Existent.' It is 'that by which' (and here language reaches its limit) all things are; the light by which all things are manifest, or the mirror in which all things are reflected.

The analogy we are considering here, however, is not light or a mirror, but a portico inseparably joining two walls – one which has been made *like* a mirror facing another, opaque, and effaced with an elaborate, fixed, representational design. Two walls arranged in such a way that each fulfills the *telos* of the other: one to reflect and the other to be reflected. Standing at the entrance of this hallway, how can one tell which wall is which?

So we are not talking about Being, but a specific, determinate being of a special sort; a structure of clay joined with the *Ruh* ('Breath') of God; a being that *reflects itself*. By no means without its determination and consequent limitation as a being with a specific nature, but notably such that, essential to its nature is its capacity to reflect - its own nature and that of others. And this includes the capacity to reflect on the reflective dimension of its nature (and thus, to know its Lord through knowing itself). In parallel terms it is an actualized locus of de-limited possibility – a *thrown projection*, to borrow from Heidegger.

But this discussion could go on, and what has it to do with the more clear-cut problem of how cultural inter-relation is possible? It starts with the fact that the dilemma between cultural relativism and cultural chauvinism was imposed on us by the idea that the commensuration between distinct axiological – conceptual paradigms, necessary for the possibility of fruitful cultural interaction and transformation, requires as a ground some specific 'meta-paradigm' which is given the privileged status of trans-cultural universal validity. Any rationale for such a status would necessarily be circular, equally applicable to any paradigm, and therefore chauvinistic, the alternative being relativism.

But any idea of a specific cultural paradigm is 'opaque' in the terminology of our allegory; it is a representation painted on the 'Greek' wall. As such, it does not fully represent the nature of a culture, since it does not fully represent the nature of the human being, for whom culture is a dimension. It is a kind of objectification of what is in fact a living manifestation of a

process of reflection, which constitutes the essence of being human. A human culture, like its human members, has both its reflective and opaque dimensions – its dimension of reflection and openness to possibility, along with its definable, concrete, actuality. And, though an essential part of the process of self-understanding is the representation of the human as a reflective locus of possibility, the representation of that dimension of humanity is a necessarily 'opaque', misrepresentation (as are these very sentences); a description of 'that which is without description,' and cannot, therefore, be anticipated or limited by any specific, concrete paradigm.

That being said, cultural paradigms may or may not make room, in their conceptions of the world and human nature, for this non-limitable and hence, ineffable dimension. The space for this is commonly indicated in the 'opaque' representation through analogy, poetry, and other means of indication, where the ability of straightforward expression in language breaks down. A noteworthy example of such a mechanism is the Zen *koan*, which aims to lead the mind to the limits of its representational capacity. These are cultural paradigms that acknowledge an element that may be variously described as the Divine, the Transcendent, the Beyond-Being, or the Tao. I am by no means trying to say that such paradigms are all fundamentally equivalent in some sense. On the contrary, they are very diverse. What they do share in is acknowledgment of that which, in principle, cannot be contained by any paradigm as within a closed, thoroughly thinkable system. This entails the acknowledgment of an element of possibility that is ultimately inexplicable by means of any concretized actuality (including any actual projection of a determinate possibility).

From such an acknowledgement, it follows, for instance, that the possibility of real intercultural relation, and that of fundamental growth and transformation within cultures, does not require the existence of an actualized 'meta-paradigm' as the common measure, or ground of commensurability. Cultural paradigms that do acknowledge this dimension are therefore not faced with the dilemma of chauvinism or relativism. From the paradigm of a thoroughgoing rationalism, it would be asked, from where do we find the means of escape from this dilemma? And from within such a paradigm, the answer can only be: from out of nowhere.