Al-Ghazali's Hermeneutics and Phenomenology

Muhammad Kamal

Professor Kamal approaches the issue of how to correctly understand a sacred text through an examination of the great Sufi mystic al-Ghazali's guidelines for understanding the Qur'an. Al-Ghazali advocated rending the Qur'an with devotion and with an open mind that is free of prejudices learned from traditional exegeses of philosophical schools. Professor Kamal suggests similarities between al-Ghazali's hermeneutics and aspects of several European philosophies, especially Husserl's phenomenology.

In the study of Islamic hermeneutics, the question whether the meaning of the Qur'an is clear, or else can only be understood via the methodology of a tradition, highlights two different points of view. The first holds that the Qur'an possesses clarity and that a reader can gain direct access to its meaning without relying on pre-given judgments and commentaries. The second is that the revelation testified to in the Qur'an cannot be correctly understood without the aid of pre-given exegeses, that is, the interpretations and commentaries that our predecessors have left us. These two points of view occupy distinct hermeneutic positions. The former insists on the sufficiency of the Qur'an and the immediacy of its meaning when it is read without presuppositions. The latter, in stressing the lack of clarity, relies on exegesis provided by tradition. This paper examines the first of these hermeneutic positions as developed by al-Ghazali, the great Sufi theologian (1057–1111). It also explores the similarity between al-Ghazali's hermeneutic position and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) with regard to understanding the meaning of a text.

Whatever precise definition may be given to the Qur'an, Muslims agree in considering it a text that was not written by a human being, as a novel or philosophical text. It was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad orally over a period of almost twenty-five years (from 610 to 632) and was memorized by his companions. The Prophet himself did not commit the Qur'an
to writing. It was only after his death that the Qur'an was compiled as a book, first by Zaid b. Thabit during the time of Abu Bakr (r.632–634), the first successor to the Prophet. Then, during the time of 'Uthman (r.644–656), the third successor, all the unofficial copies were destroyed, leaving the one in the Quraysh dialect to be recognized as the only authoritative and authentic version.'

As a spiritual agent, the author of a revealed text such as the Qur'an is substantially distinct from a human agent. The human is conditioned and limited by spatial and temporal circumstances and is in the world; in contrast, the author of a revealed book is detached from the influences of historic events, in the sense that space and time do not condition Him. The author of a revealed text also brings to the human mind a sense of magnification or immensity (al-takbir) and fear (al-khawf), not least through the idea of "presence." Believers find themselves powerless and submissive in their religious attitudes towards such an author, and, therefore, it is not possible for a pious believer to hold and read the Qur'an without emotional attunement and fear. Magnification is also the fundamental characteristic of the author of the revealed text and is the prerogative of God. Because this is so, the Qur'an even states that there is a danger in holding the divine text and reading it when the reader is not clean:

That this is indeed a Qur'an most honorable,
In a Book well-guarded,
Which none shall touch
But those who are clean,
A Revelation from the Lord
Of the Worlds.'

Does this mean that the revealed text, because it is distinct from other kinds of written texts, requires special understanding and a type of hermeneutics different from philosophical hermeneutics? Is it possible to read and understand the Qur'an in the way one reads and understands a book by a human author? Answers to these questions are the main theme of this paper. For those exegetes who advocate the traditional interpretation (Tafsir ilı Ma'thur), such as al-Tabari (d.923), Sainarqandi (d.983), al-Th'alabi (d.1035), Ibn Kathir (d.1373) and others, understanding the meaning of the Qur'an is conditioned by the Qur'an itself, by the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and by the opinions of the first and second Muslim generations. Against this hermeneutic position, al-Ghazali argued that the meaning of the Qur'an could be understood directly, and
he thus affirmed the sufficiency of intuitive experience without reliance on pregiven interpretations.

Abu Hamid b. Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Taus Ahmed al-Tu known as al-Ghazali, was born in 1058 in Tus, a small town near the modern city of Meshhed in Iran. He studied under al-Juwaini, one of the most distinguished Ash'ari theologians in Nishapur, and became a disciple of the Sufi master Abu 'Ali al-Faradhi. In 1091, al-Ghazali was appointed the chair of theology in the Nizamiyyah Academy at Baghdad. After five years of teaching and spiritual travail, he collapsed mentally and physically. He left Baghdad and spent two years in solitude in the mosque of Ulumayyads in Damascus. Upon his recovery he returned to Nishapur. In 1105 Fakhr al-Mulk, the ruler of Khurasan, invited him to take a teaching position in Nizamiyyah Academy. Al-Ghazali accepted the invitation and resumed teaching and writing in Nishapur until his death in 1111.

Al-Ghazali may be compared with René Descartes (1596–1650), founder of modern Western philosophy, and with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Like Descartes, al-Ghazali employed the method of doubt in order to reach certainty and, like Kant, he adopted a critical approach towards contemporary philosophical trends and theological doctrines. Tahafut al-Falasifah (Inconsistency of the Philosophers), his polemical work against Muslim philosophers, he sought to combat the rational method of inquiry of thinkers such as al-Farabi (c. 870–950) and Ibn Sina (979–1037). In his al-Munqidh min al-Dalal (Our Deliverance from Error), al-Ghazali also examined critically the doctrines advocated by his predecessors and contemporaries in an exhaustive search for a new starting point:

*I poked into every dark recess and made an assault on every problem, I plunged into every abyss. I scrutinized the creed of every sect and I fathomed the mysteries of each doctrine. All this I did that I might distinguish between the true and the false. There was not a philosopher whose system I did not acquaint myself with, or a theologian whose doctrines I did not examine. If ever I met a Sufi, I coveted to probe into his secrets; if an ascetic, I investigated into the basis of his austerities; if one of the atheistic zindiks, I groped into the causes of his bold atheism.'

By accepting doubt, al-Ghazali emancipated his own mind from dogmatic doctrines of Muslim theologians and rationalist philosophers. His doubt, like the Cartesian doubt, was methodical and temporary, leading to the construction of knowledge. He identified three stages of doubt:
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The first stage entails the critical examination and study of every doctrine; the second rejects doctrines if they are found to be inadequate; and the third searches out a new starting point. From the outset, this skeptical approach was epistemological, in that it dealt with the problem of arriving at certainty, and in that it was directed towards empirical as well as rational knowledge in discussing the human ability to gain access to Ultimate Reality. Al-Ghazali believed that reason was not sufficient for knowing the truth, and he went beyond the rationalism of Cartesian philosophy and the negative conclusions of Kantian epistemology by relying on other cognitive sources. Unlike Kant, al-Ghazali did not consider that knowledge is possible through a blending of the faculties of sensibility and understanding. His rejection of rationalism and his disappointment with reason became grounds for his criticism of the philosophical doctrines of Aristotelian and Neo-Platonist Muslim thinkers. Finding reason to be incapable of reaching knowledge of Ultimate Reality, al-Ghazali argued that God is primarily will (al-iradah) rather than logos (reason). Since the human soul originates in God, the Cartesian cogito ergo sum, as a rational proposition, becomes groundless and should be replaced by volo ergo sum (I will, therefore I am), a mystic dictum through which true knowledge of the Ultimate Reality can be approached. Thus for him it was an experiential spiritual itinerary, rather than a set of rationalistic propositions, that could reveal the nature of Reality.

Al-Ghazali’s hermeneutic position can be summarized as follows:

1. It cominences with a presuppositionless beginning. It frees itself from all pregiven structures, rules and judgments for the understanding of the meaning of the Qur’an.
2. It stresses the unity of literal "external" and hidden "internal" meaning of the revealed text.
3. It relies on mystical intuition for understanding of the meaning of the text. This intuitive experience is significant for obtaining knowledge and apprehending the meaning of the Qur’an because in intuition, nothing stands between mind and its object.
4. It encourages emotional attunement to the text.

The structure of al-Ghazali’s hermeneutics, as it is described in his Jawahir al-Qur’an (Jewels of the Qur’an), can be said to be derived from his skepticism, which, like the Cartesian doubt, leads to a rejection of previous knowledge and hence a rejection of pregiven interpretations of the Qur’an. This presuppositionless beginning— which corresponds, as we will see, to the first phenomenological step in Edmund Husserl’'s philosophy—
is described by al-Ghazali in his *Ihya Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of Religious Sciences) as one of the internal rules for recitation and understanding of the meaning of the Qur'an. According to al-Ghazali, the reader must isolate his or her mind from all extraneous influences when reading the Qur'an, and he or she must focus directly and intuitively on the text. This preliminary stage, which is the first step of the list given above, has four functions:

1. To free the mind from the dogmas of theological schools and from pregiven rules, interpretations and commentaries that limit and condition our understanding of the meaning of the Qur'an. Following an authority, for example a theological school, might be correct, but it can also be an obstacle to understanding.
2. To reject all outward exegeses of the Qur'an and literal meanings of the verses.
3. To free the mind from worldly purposes and from the desire for material benefits, as worldly purposes weaken spiritual strength.
4. To free the soul from sin, as sinners will be unable to understand the meaning of the Qur'an. (As mentioned earlier, this point is based on one of the fundamental characteristics of a divine text and its authorship.)

If phenomenology is thought of as a method relying on a presuppositionless beginning for an understanding of the essence of an object, then it may be argued that al-Ghazali laid the foundation of phenomenology several centuries before Husserl. A brief explanation of the main features of Husserl's phenomenology may be useful here in illuminating al-Ghazali's method.

Husserl belonged to the Cartesian philosophical tradition, which is aimed at establishing a new foundation for knowledge. To accomplish this, Husserl began to understand human consciousness phenomenologically. He employed phenomenology as a method for reaching the "essences" of phenomena intended by consciousness intuitively and prior to any presuppositions and prejudgments. In his *Sixth Logical Investigation*, he described categorical intuition as an immediate insight into the essence of each entity or into the unchangeable structure of phenomena, which he called "eidos," or "idea."

The question that arises here is how we can reach the essence of phenomena. In Husserl's phenomenology, there are two necessary stages that lead to these essences or to the discovery of ideas: "natural standpoint" and "phenomenological reduction." Natural standpoint refers to a "bracketing"
of the object intended by consciousness; it is the most basic attitude of the cognitive relationship between the human mind and its object, and is considered free of all presuppositions (voraussetzungslos). Operating from a presuppositionless ground is similar to what Descartes describes in the First Meditation, except that it is clear that Husserl does not begin with doubt. Instead, he suspends all kinds of preknowledge and judgments regardless of whether they may be true or false.

"Phenomenological reduction" is then a transition by consciousness from empirical facts to the unchangeable aspects of the intended object. This reduction detects the persistent parts of a phenomenon and discovers a "ground" on which empirical facts stand and present themselves to consciousness. In phenomenological reduction, which is also called "eidetic reduction," the experience of a particular phenomenon is transformed into categorical intuition in order to discover the essence or meaning of the object.

With this summary of Husserl's phenomenological method, we may be able to see to what extent al-Ghazali's hermeneutic position with regard to understanding the meaning of the Qur'an is itself phenomenological. Al-Ghazali's method of doubt, as described in *Jewels of the Qur'an* and *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, led him to reject all the theories and theological doctrines of his predecessors and contemporaries. Apart from the ground of doubt or initial skepticism itself, he refused to rely on preestablished conjectures and pregiven judgments in studying reality. (Here al-Ghazali is closer to Descartes than to Husserl because, as mentioned earlier, Husserl does not commence from the basis of skepticism but suspends all judgments at the first stage of his phenomenological method). However, al-Ghazali's stress on absence of presupposition is reflected in Husserl's concepts of the natural standpoint or the bracketing of the object intended by consciousness. This principle seems to be necessary for both thinkers, as consciousness attempts to achieve a clear description of a phenomenon and aims to be attentive only to what is given intuitively. Accordingly, the immediacy of the meaning of the Qur'anic text supersedes all pregiven ideas and judgments. This bracketing implies not only that tradition should be put aside but also that distortion and multiple interpretations by different traditions should be excluded in favor of direct and fresh insight into the meaning of the text. Thus al-Ghazali's approach is phenomenological in the sense that consciousness has a direct relationship with the object without relying on pregiven ideas or theories. In al-Ghazali's view, the reader of the Qur'an should abandon adherence to a particular theological school.
or to all presuppositions in order to apprehend the meaning of the Qur'anic text directly. In this way, al-Ghazali's radical, bold method of inquiry sheds the straitjacket of tradition.

It is noteworthy that, as a Sufi, al-Ghazali does not use the term "consciousness," which occupies a central position in Husserl's phenomenological investigation. Instead he refers to "spiritual insight" and "mystical intuition," which is distinct from the concept of "consciousness" in his hermeneutics. All individuals are conscious and have the categorical intuition that Husserl describes, but they may not have mystical intuition. As a consequence, although every reader is conscious, he or she will not necessarily be capable of understanding the meaning of the Qur'an because not all readers are capable of mystical intuition.

From this presuppositionless departure, al-Ghazali outlines another rule of his hermeneutics, namely that the literal meaning of the text should not be held separate from the hidden meaning. He says in Jewels of the Qur'an:

> Then, know that the realities we hinted at have secrets and jewels; [but also] they have seashells, and the shell is that which appears first. Some people who reach the seashells know [only] these, while others break the shells and carefully examine the pearls [inside them]."

Elsewhere in Jewels of the Qur'an, al-Ghazali argues against those who rely on the external meanings of the Qur'anic verses:

> Near to the science of reading is the science of the outward exegesis of the Qur'an. This is the inner surface of the shell of the Qur'an, which is next to the pearl. This is the reason why its resemblance with the pearl has become strong so that some people imagine that it is the pearl [itself] and that beyond it there is nothing more valuable than it. It is with it that most people are content. How great are their deception and deprivation, for they have imagined that there is no rank beyond theirs! However, in relation to those who possess the knowledge of [other] sciences of the shell, they are at a rank high and noble, since the science of exegesis is mighty when compared to other sciences of the shell, because it is not meant for them while they are meant for it."

Al-Ghazali did not intend to curtail an interpretation of the external meaning of the Qur'an; rather he insisted on the connection between external and internal meanings, that is, between the pearl and the shell. He
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only disagrees with those exegetes who focus on the shell without dealing with the internal meaning of revelation. Besides, in approaching the meaning of the Qur'an intuitively, he does not preach batiniyyah, the tendency to search for the hidden meaning of the verses. He believes that understanding of the inner meaning of a verse is possible only through understanding of its outward parts; that is, only inside the shell can one find the pearl.

A seashell has a face towards its inward part, and this face encounters the pearl face to face and nearly resembles it because of the proximity of its neighborhood and continuance of its contact with the pearl; the seashell has also a face towards its outward part, and this face nearly resembles all other stones because of the remoteness of its neighborhood and its lack of contact with the pearl. Likewise is the shell of the Qur'an. Its outward face is the sound, and the man who is entrusted with the knowledge of correcting its outlets in transmission and pronunciation is a man who possesses knowledge of letters. Thus he is the possessor of the knowledge of the outward rind which is removed from the inward part of the shell, let alone the pearl itself.

Al-Ghazali gave two sets of rules for reading and for understanding the meaning of the revealed text: the external rules and the mental, or internal, rules. The external rules describe the physical conditions of the reader for correct reading of the Qur'an. The external rules are concerned with:

• performing the ritual of ablution;
• how much of the text should be read over how many days;
• dividing the text into several parts for the convenience of recitation;
• writing or printing the text;
• the style of reading;
• weeping;
• honoring the right of the Qur'anic verses to be recited;
• reading loudly;
• reciting the Qur'an without changing the prose order.

The mental rules are concerned with internal or mental conditions of the reader. These rules are concerned with:

understanding the magnification of the divine speech;
• understanding the magnification of the Speaker;
• abandoning the inner utterances of the soul;
• pondering over the text;
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- understanding the meaning of the text recited;
- getting rid of obstacles to understanding the text;
- feeling the text;
- reaching the state in which the reader feels that he or she is hearing the speech of God;
- abandoning pride and then viewing one’s own self as a humble believer.¹⁶

When Al-Ghazali talks about "feeling the text" in the seventh internal rule for recitation, his concern is with the emotional impact of the revealed text on the mind of the reader, who should feel that he or she is standing before God and hearing the voice of God. This emotional experience and attunement to the text means that the mind of the reader will be affected by different feelings according to the verses being recited, and will experience feelings such as grief, fear and hope:

A man, then, is affected by Qur’an recitation by being characterized by the quality of the verse recited. Thus when reading a verse which warns and which restricts divine forgiveness to those who fulfill certain stipulations, [a reader] will make himself so small as if for fear that he is about to die. When a verse on promise of forgiveness is recited, he will rejoice as if he flies for joy.”¹⁷

The sixth external rule states that "the method of forcing oneself to weep consists in bringing grief to the mind. From this grief will be produced weeping.”¹⁸ Thus, in addition to apprehending the meaning of the text, the reader of the Qur’an is emotionally attuned to the meaning and is affected passionately. The experience of the emotional impact of the verses transcends the grammatical rules and the structure of the text, creating a nexus between the text and the feelings of the reader. For this reason, Al-Ghazali suggests that the Qur’an should be read aloud; in fact, this became a rule for correct ritual prayer:

There is no doubt that it is necessary to read the Qur’an loud enough so that the reader can hear it himself because reading means distinguishing clearly between sounds; thus sound is necessary, and the smallest degree of it is that which he can hear himself. If he cannot hear himself in a ritual prayer (salat), his prayer is not correct.¹⁹

Thus recitation of the Qur’an involves different but interconnected activities. Correct pronunciation in a slow and distinct manner is also essential.
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The intellect explains the meanings and the mind accepts the exhortation, making the emotional connection with the contents of the verses."

Returning to the phenomenological method in al-Ghazali's hermeneutics, four obstacles to understanding the meaning of the revealed text are identified. The first is incorrect pronunciation of the letters.21 The second obstacle, which is important for our discussion, is dogmatism. It is defined as following of a school of thought and authority. Al-Ghazali believed that following a school could be beneficial but that it is nevertheless an obstacle to understanding the meaning of the revealed text. The third obstacle is human pride and worldly passion, and the fourth is understanding the outward or external meaning of the text only, as it has come down by tradition."

It is apparent that al-Ghazali prescribed a complex activity for reading the text, but it would nevertheless be wrong to conclude that in his hermeneutics the meaning of the text will be open to the minds of readers if they fulfill all the external and mental conditions set by him. Here remains the point that his approach to understanding the Qur'an is essentially opposed to rationalistic interpretation in its rejection of the authority of reason and in its reliance upon emotion and personal attunement.

There are some difficulties with al-Ghazali's hermeneutics. Since the revelation of the meaning of the Qur'anic verses relies on emotional attunement and since emotion is subjective, interpretation may be at risk of caprice. Readers might have a different understanding of the meaning of the revealed text even at different times. Did al-Ghazali realize the seriousness of this problem, particularly in interpreting a revealed text? In order to avoid the caprices of subjectivity, he set certain additional rules for interpretation. According to him, although a presuppositionless beginning is a requirement for understanding and interpreting a revealed text, an individual Qur'an reader should not rely entirely on his or her subjective ability. At certain stages reliance on pregiven interpretations becomes necessary because at some places the revealed text resists personal opinion and understanding. For al-Ghazali, the degrees of textual interpretation are parallel to five degrees of existence: essential, sensory, imaginative, mental and, finally, analogical.23

1. Essential existence, as the highest degree of existence, corresponds to the entities beyond the domain of sensory experience and human understanding. The human mind can only comprehend this in images. The concept in the Qur'an of "Seven Heavens," for example, signifies entities that exist regardless of whether they are perceived or
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conceived by the human mind. These as stated by al-Ghazali should not be interpreted but accepted as they are because they are inaccessible to the human mind.

2. Sensory existence, which includes all sorts of images produced by the mind while dreaming or daydreaming.

3. Imaginative existence, which is the image of an object when it is absent from the senses or when it is not perceived directly by sense experience.

4. Mental or intellectual existence, which is able to represent the essence of an object. For example, the human hand can be experienced by the senses, but it also has a meaning that stands for its essence, that is, its ability to make tools or function as a tool.

5. Analogical existence, which is something that does not exist in the senses, imagination or intellect but exists as a property of something or an attribute, such as mercy or anger, which are used in relation to God.

Al-Ghazali narrows the scope of Qur’anic interpretation into the sensory, imaginative, mental and analogical degrees of existence. The first degree of existence, namely that which has essential existence, is not subject to interpretation simply because its realm transcends human understanding. Qur’anic verses referring to this realm should retain their apparent meaning unless there is apodictic proof of the impossibility of accessing that meaning. For the rest of the hierarchy of existence, interpretation will be required because the human mind has been given the power to reach these realms.

Al-Ghazali takes a pragmatic approach in safeguarding interpretation from the risk of caprice. He believes that the possibility of interpretation is related to its decisiveness, which is also determined by its practical application and its usefulness in society. If an interpretation is seen to be harmful to religious belief and the community of the believers, the interpreter should be taxed with infidelity."

A second problem with al-Ghazali’s hermeneutics is that, for those who are not endowed with mystical intuition, the task of understanding of the meaning of the Qur’anic text becomes problematic. As noted earlier, the aim of al-Ghazali’s methodology, as with Husserl’s phenomenology, is to reach the essence of the text. For al-Ghazali, however, the discovery of essence is achieved by mystical intuition rather than by categorical intuition, as it is with Husserl. At the same time, he believed that only those individuals who seek the spiritual path are gifted with the faculty of mystical intuition. Here al-Ghazali is in agreement with Plato in saying that not
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every human being is capable of having knowledge of this essence or truth. Therefore, it is not possible for every person to understand the meaning of the Qur'an:

*Just as every hand is not fit for touching the leather of mushaf, so also every tongue is not fit to recite its letters, nor every mind fit to understand its meanings.*

Third, with the notion of the presuppositionless beginning, the reader's mindset can be ahistorical, detached from the past. This detachment will eventually lead to isolating the newly grasped meaning of the text from the Islamic heritage and from interpretations grounded in history. As a consequence, the tradition becomes insignificant and the pre-given theories futile beside the individual's unguided ability to apprehend the meaning or the essence of the text. The phenomenological approach rejects the idea that our present perspective and understanding require a relationship to the past. The text is also thereby considered to have its own meaning as an end in itself rather than being in constant reference to social, historical and cultural contexts.

In the end, in spite of these limitations and problems in al-Ghazali's methodology, the idea of presuppositionless beginning in his hermeneutics had a significant impact. While it is difficult to trace his influence on the adherents of traditional interpretation of the revealed text, his hermeneutic position was important to the development of Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an. His hermeneutics influenced in particular the approach taken by those who advocated the philosophy of illumination, such as al-Suhrawardi (1153–1171) and his followers, and even to some extent the opponents of illuminationism, such as Mulla Sadra (1571–1640). The significance of al-Ghazali's hermeneutics lay above all in two of its aspects: its rejection of tradition, which had made access to the essence of the Qur'an to some extent more difficult and complex; and, second, the encouragement it gave readers to apprehend the meaning of the Qur'an on their own, unfettered by dogmatic adherence to a particular school, and to arrive at an independent understanding of its rulings. 26

Notes

1. The written Qur'an is not arranged chronologically. It has 114 chapters (surah) unequal in length, some of which were revealed in Mecca and others in Medina. Each chapter is also divided into verses (ayah). The shortest chapter has three verses, while the longest consists of 285 verses.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ihya Ulum al-Din, Book 8, p. 70.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 36.
15. Ibid., pp. 34–53.
16. Ibid., p. 56–85.
17. Ibid., p. 76.
18. Ibid., p. 43.
19. Ibid., p. 49.
20. Ibid., p. 80.
21. Ibid., p. 69.
22. Ibid., pp. 69–72.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 184.
27. Ibid.
28. Ihya Ulum al-Din, Book 8, p. 60.
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