

Theological Anthropology in Interreligious Perspective

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Sapientia Islamica

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Mohr Siebeck

Sapientia Islamica

Studies in Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism

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ISBN 978-3-16-161777-5 / eISBN 978-3-16-161778-2

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-161778-2

ISSN 2625-672X / eISSN 2625-6738 (Sapientia Islamica)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset by Martin Fischer using Minion typeface, printed on non-aging paper by Gulde Druck in Tübingen, and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

In memoriam

Christoph Schwöbel
19 February 1955–18 September 2021

Paul Hardy
5 December 1944–6 April 2022

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Multiplex Human Ontology and Multiplex Self

An Alternative Understanding of Human Behaviour

RECEP ŞENTÜRK¹

Human ontology, self, and human action, I argue, have multiple layers. By demonstrating this, I aim to offer an alternative to the presently dominant uniplex or reductionist approaches in philosophy, theology and the social sciences to human ontology, self and action. In this multiplexity, I argue that we must make a distinction between mind and soul following the long traditions of sufi thought. The mind is part of the empirical world and thus subject to empirical study, while the soul is part of the metaphysical world and thus it can be a subject of empirical study only with respect to its impact on moral qualities, attitudes and behavioural outcomes. This paper addresses four interrelated questions from the perspective of Islamic theological anthropology, deriving mainly from Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), with the purpose of demonstrating that it is characterised by multiplexity. What is a human being? What is the self? What is human action? How can we explain the cause of social action from the perspective of a multiplex human ontology and the self? I argue that the answers from the perspective of Islamic anthropology to the above questions reflect a multiplex approach to human existence, the self and action, which offers us a potentially more fecund understanding of human behaviour as a result of the changing configuration of conflictual relations among these layers.

What is a Human Being?

The search for self-knowledge in human beings has given rise to an unending quest and debate since the early history of philosophy, religion, and the social sciences. Until the rise of modern and postmodern versions of materialism and

¹ I thank Lejla Demiri from Tübingen University and the members of the Istanbul Circle at Ibn Haldun University for inspiring me to write this paper. My special thanks go to Harun Jeroen Vlug and Maria Taiai from the Alliance of Civilizations Institute at Ibn Haldun University for their comments on this article.

positivism, the usual answer, which was accepted by the majority of world religions and civilisations, was a multiplex one. This was based on the acceptance that human beings had a body and a soul, although they differed on their understanding of them and the roles they assigned to them. However, materialists, since ancient times, have rejected this dualism and have argued that it is only the body that makes a human being what he is. Idealists, on the other hand, have argued the opposite, because for them what truly makes a human being is the soul or mind. Some, like René Descartes (d. 1650), accepted the existence of the dualism of body and mind.

This primordial and well-known debate still goes on between idealists, materialists and those who accept the dualism of body and mind.² Philosopher of mind Colin McGinn acknowledges that the problem defies our scientific and philosophical efforts:

We have been trying for a long time to solve the mind-body problem. It has stubbornly resisted our best efforts. The mystery persists. I think the time has come to admit candidly that we cannot resolve the mystery. But I also think that this very insolubility – or the reason for it – removes the philosophical problem.³

McGinn humbly confesses how limited our progress has been even in formulating the mind-body problem, quite apart from understanding and solving it:

One of the peculiarities of the mind-body problem is the difficulty of formulating it in a rigorous way. We have a sense of the problem that outruns our capacity to articulate it clearly. Thus, we quickly find ourselves resorting to invitations to look inward, instead of specifying precisely *what* it is about consciousness that makes it inexplicable in terms of ordinary physical properties. And this can make it seem that the problem is spurious. A creature without consciousness would not properly appreciate the problem (assuming such a creature could appreciate other problems). I think an adequate treatment of the mind-body problem should explain why it is so hard to state the problem explicitly. My treatment locates our difficulty in our inadequate conceptions of the nature of brain and consciousness. In fact, if we knew their natures fully, we would already have solved the problem.⁴

My purpose here is not to analyse these standpoints and their limitations, but to argue that we need to go beyond the mind-body dualism by adopting a multiplex

² ‘The mind-body problem has its origins in Plato, its continuing importance in Cartesian philosophy, its psychological ramifications in behaviourism and cognitivism, its novel twists in artificial intelligence, and its scientific demystification in functional brain-imaging technology.’ Morton Wagman, *Cognitive Science and the Mind-Body Problem. From Philosophy to Psychology to Artificial Intelligence to Imaging of the Brain*, Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998, p. 11. Wagman seems to be unaware of the debates in Islamic philosophy and the sufi literature which I will be exploring in this paper.

³ Colin McGinn, ‘Can we Solve the Mind-Body Problem?’, *Mind*, 98/391 (1989), pp. 349–66, at p. 349.

⁴ *Ibid.*

approach.⁵ Here I offer such a multiplex approach which derives from Islamic theological anthropology, which is open to integrating the empirically proven or philosophically well-grounded insights of materialists, idealists and dualists, but goes beyond them by rejecting their reductionism and also by refuting the dichotomies they create. A great thinker to turn to for a different perspective, which goes beyond this dualism, is Ghazālī, whose answer to this question establishes that there are three levels in human ontology: body, mind and soul.⁶ This view has been commonly shared by most Muslim scholars over the centuries and across diverse schools of thought.⁷ If Ghazālī, and other Muslim scholars, as I will demonstrate below, conceptualised human ontology as consisting of three levels, then this brings to mind the following questions: What are body, mind and soul? And what are their interrelations? How do their relations translate into human action? These are grand questions. Yet, within the limits of this paper, I will try to briefly address them.

The complexity of the issue is well illustrated by the Turkish Ottoman sufi scholar and philosopher Erzurumlu İbrahim Hakki (d. 1194/1780) who writes as follows:

A human being has two souls. Muslim philosophers called one of them the animal soul and the other human soul. What they call the animal soul is an essence, a subtle vapour which carries on life in the body, sense perception and in voluntary motions. We (sufis) call this soul the appetitive or animal soul (*nafs*). This soul is an essence born into the bodies. If it is born both inside and outside of the body, the state of awakening occurs. Yet if it is born only inside the body and not outside, then sleep occurs. If this soul completely departs from the body, then death occurs.⁸

Hakki draws our attention to two schools of anthropology in Islam: ‘Philosophy’ (*falsafa*) and ‘Sufism’ (*taşawwuf*). The philosophers were influenced by Greek philosophy and tried to combine it with an Islamic approach to human ontology.⁹ I should also note here that ‘philosophers’ in this context refers also to natural scientists and medical doctors, because during the Middle Ages ‘philosopher’

⁵ For a survey of Western debates on the problem of mind-body dualism over time, see D.M. Armstrong, *The Mind-Body Problem. An Opinionated Introduction*, Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1999.

⁶ For a biographical overview of Ghazālī’s life, see Eric Ormsby, *Ghazali*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2007. For more on his theological views and positions, see Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁷ For a survey of the views of Muslim scholars in the Ash‘arī, Māturīdī and Mu‘tazilī schools, and also philosophers like Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī and Mulla Sadra, on human ontology, see *İnsan Nedir? İslam Düşüncesinde İnsan Tasavvurları*, ed. Ömer Türker and İbrahim Halil Üçer, Istanbul: İLEM yayınları, 2019. Also see, Deborah L. Black, “Psychology. Soul and Intellect”, *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 308–26.

⁸ İbrahim Hakki Erzurumlu, *Mârifetnâme*, Istanbul: Erkam Yayınları, 2011, vol. 3, p. 268.

⁹ A classic introduction to the school of *falsafa* is Majid Fakhry’s *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, New York NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.

was used as a common name for them all. For example, what philosophers call human soul is the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqā*) which is an abstract essence separate from the material world, it being linked to the material world only through its actions. This soul or the 'heart' (*qalb*) acquires different names when its attributes change: the ruling (*al-ammāra*), the self-critical (*al-lawwāma*), the divinely-inspired (*al-mulhama*), the content (*al-muṭma'inna*), the pleased (*al-rāḍiya*), the pleasing (*al-marḍiyya*) and the perfected (*al-kāmila*). These names are used to indicate the changing attributes or the states of the soul or heart.

This is how Muslim scholars name the soul variously as the levels of the *self*, which is based on the changing states and attributes of the soul.¹⁰ In total, Hakki mentions seven levels of the self. Here, changes in the soul reflect as changes in morality and behaviour (*sulūk*), which is the goal of the sufis. The sufi interest in the soul is primarily aimed at reforming human morality and behaviour. Hakki mentions the different levels of human ontology as follows:

The rational soul is also called the heart. It is the one that knows the world, it is addressed by God and is held responsible. Its external appearance and its vessel is the aforementioned appetitive soul. It has an inside which is the soul, while the inside of the soul is *the secret* (*al-sirr*), the inside of the secret is *the secret of the secret* (*sirr al-sirr*), the inside of the secret of the secret is *the hidden* (*al-khafī*), and finally the inside of the hidden is *the most hidden* (*al-akhfā*).¹¹

Multiplex human existence stands like a bridge between the physical and metaphysical worlds. Hakki explains that the human body belongs to the physical world. Yet the human soul has levels in ascending order from the animal soul to 'the most hidden' (*al-akhfā*), depending on their closeness to divine reality. In descending order, this is how Hakki introduces nine immaterial components or metaphysical faculties of human beings. One important difference between the philosophers and the sufis is that the philosophers were not interested in the levels of the soul, as their primary focus was the body. Kamāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 736/1335), a sufi scholar from the fourteenth century,¹² writes that '[t]he philosophers do not make a distinction between the two types of soul and call both the rational soul'.¹³

¹⁰ For more on the concepts of changing states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) in Islam, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, pp. 109–30.

¹¹ Erzurumlu, *Mârifetnâme*, vol. 3, pp. 268–9.

¹² Qāshānī wrote prominent works on sufi Qur'anic exegesis (*ishārī tafsīr*) and sufi technical terminology (*iştilāḥāt al-şūfiyya*). For more on sufi terminology, see Mustafa Kara, "Books About Sufi Terminology", *Sufism and Sufis in Ottoman Society. Sources, Doctrines, Rituals, Turuq, Architecture, Literature, Iconography, Modernism*, ed. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2005, pp. 51–64.

¹³ Kamāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, *Iştilāḥāt al-şūfiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Kamāl Ibrāhīm Ja'far, Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1981, p. 151.

The writings of the philosophers and the sufis gave rise to two different genres regarding human ontology. Below I will demonstrate the concept of body, mind, and soul in Islamic anthropology, mainly drawing on the works of Ghazālī. Yet at the outset, I should note that Ghazālī uses four terms as synonymous in some contexts: soul, heart, intellect (or reason) and self. He also warns that these terms may have separate meanings in some contexts, thus the reader should determine the meaning of the term under question depending on the context. Ghazālī sees this ambiguity in the terminology as a source of enormous confusion among religious scholars and students. I will also be using the terms ‘heart’ and ‘soul’ interchangeably. However, I will use the ‘self’ only to denote the changing states of the heart or the soul which are used to explain variation in behaviour.¹⁴

Ghazālī on the Body

As Ghazālī says, both human beings and animals have bodies, and both have desires, anger, knowledge, and willpower. The difference and superiority of human beings over other creatures does not arise from their bodies, but rather from their minds and their souls¹⁵ which make them capable of theoretical reasoning, wisdom and rational judgement based on the final consequences of events. Animals and humans share the will of desires (*irādat al-shahwa*) which is short term, but only humans have the will of reason (*irādat al-‘aql*) which takes into account long term consequences. Animals and humans also share knowledge, but animal knowledge is limited to the visible world and particulars as they are unable to extrapolate universals from their observations. The heart of the human being possesses a special type of knowledge which distinguishes him from other living creatures and even from children in the early phases of their lives (as they only gain it after puberty).¹⁶

Ghazālī observes that the theologians and sufis do not see studying the body as their primary interest, because it is not the main concern of the travellers in the

¹⁴ Ghazālī argues that there are four words in Arabic used to indicate the concept of the soul. These are: soul (*rūḥ*), heart (*qalb*), intellect (*‘aql*) and self (*nafs*). These words are used synonymously for the concept of the soul, but at the same time they also have other distinctive meanings. The readers have to pay attention to the context to determine which meaning is appropriate, lest confusion may arise. Translating these words into English is also a complicated issue. *Nafs* is the most problematic one, because it is used to indicate more than one meaning, namely: (1) the human being, (2) the soul, (3) the appetitive self and (4) the heart. It is variously translated into English as self, soul, ego and the like. One should also add the word *fu’ād* for the heart, which frequently occurs in the Qur’an. Ghazālī uses heart (*qalb*) more frequently than the others for soul in his *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. Below I will follow Ghazālī’s usage. Needless to say, what is meant here is the spiritual and not the physical heart.

¹⁵ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2015, vol. 5, pp. 30–1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 31–4.

spiritual path to God and the Hereafter. Therefore, he argues, studying the body should be left to the medical doctors and the knowledge they produce is sufficient for the disciple of the spiritual path to use in case he needs medical assistance. Consequently, his writings reflect the common understanding of his time about the body and its functions. Yet his major contribution is on the spiritual making of human beings and its relationship to the human body and actions. What is striking for a modern reader is that Ghazālī, like others of his time, accepts that there are two souls in human beings: one soul is the source of biological life and belongs to the material world, while the other is the source of spiritual life and belongs to the metaphysical world.¹⁷ Medical doctors study the first type of soul as they are more interested in biological life, while the theologians and sufis study the latter as they are primarily interested in the moral life. Therefore Ghazālī, who was not involved in biology or medicine, leaves the first type of soul to medical science, and focuses on the metaphysical soul. When he uses the term soul, he refers to the second principle.¹⁸ He states that the metaphysical soul is not subject to empirical study because it does not belong to the material and visible world.¹⁹ The body is however controlled by the metaphysical soul. Bodily limbs are soldiers or servants of the soul because they receive commands from the soul and act accordingly. But the relationship is not one way; bodily needs are also communicated to the soul. Therefore there exists a two-way communication between body and soul. Ghazālī uses several metaphors to illustrate the relationship between the body and the soul: the body is the kingdom, the army, the vessel, and the ship of the soul. The immediate connection between body and soul is through two points: the physical heart and the brain. ‘The spiritual heart has a connection with the physical heart’.²⁰

The spiritual heart is connected to the body as a whole and uses it, but one of the primary points it connects with the body is through the physical heart. Plainly put, the immediate connections of the soul or the spiritual heart are to the physical heart. ‘The physical heart is the place, the kingdom, the world

¹⁷ This view may be traced back to antiquity and the ancient theory of the three levels of life and soul: the vegetative soul (*al-rūḥ al-nabātī*), the animal soul (*al-rūḥ al-ḥayawānī*) and the human soul (*al-rūḥ al-insānī*). This theory is based on the understanding that there are three parallel and interrelated levels of existence and life emanating from a soul peculiar to this level (Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Tahānawī, *Mawsū‘a kashshāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn wa-l-‘ulūm*, ed. Rafīq al-‘Ajm et al., Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1996, vol. 2, p. 1414). I should also add here that in the Islamic scriptures (Qur’an and Hadith) qualities of living beings, such as communication, memory and glorifying God, are attributed to nonhuman beings as well. Therefore, I suggest, it would not be misleading to add a fourth type of soul: the material soul (*al-rūḥ al-māddī*). Ghazālī also sees human beings as constituted of plant and animal life (Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, vol. 5, p. 36).

¹⁸ Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 15–16.

¹⁹ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 74.

²⁰ Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 14, 19.

and the vessel of the spiritual heart'.²¹ However, Ghazālī does not elaborate on this relationship as much as he does on the relationship which exists between the spiritual heart (or the soul) and the brain. He explains in detail how the body cannot directly communicate with the soul but needs the mediation of the mind or the brain. The body and its limbs (eyes, feet, hands etc.) are visible soldiers of the heart or the soul along with the invisible armies of the heart, such as knowledge, desires, and anger. The heart uses the limbs for two purposes: drawing benefit and repelling harm.

There exists a circular relationship between body and soul.²² The senses collect data from the external world and convey them to the mind. Bodily needs and desires are also conveyed to the mind. The mind analyses these data and transfers them to the heart through the animal self (*nafs*). In an ideal scenario, reason should check and filter such data from senses and the demands from the body before they go to the heart. This may happen in a case where reason is triumphant over the animal self. Here the heart makes its decision to act upon it and communicates its will to the limbs through the brain to be realised by the body. The body may also use additional tools such as weapons or instruments to realise the will of the heart.²³

Ghazālī on the Mind

According to Ghazālī, the soul connects to the body through the brain (*dimāgh*) which we today call the mind. Thus, for Ghazālī, the brain (or the mind) is not the ultimate command centre of human existence and life. The mind is only a mediator between the soul and the body, in particular in three areas:

- (1) The information collected by the five senses first goes to the brain.
- (2) Biological needs and desires of the body are first conveyed to the brain.
- (3) Commands for action reflecting the human will to act in a particular way come first to the brain from the soul.

²¹ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 19.

²² Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) explains this circular relationship as follows under the title of 'Admonition concerning the effect of the soul on the body, and vice versa'. He writes: 'Has it not become clear to you that the dispositions that primarily belong to the soul are such that dispositions may proceed downward from them to bodily powers? Similarly, the dispositions that primarily belong to the bodily powers are such that dispositions proceed upward from them and reach the soul itself. How could it not have become clear to you when you know that a frightened person experiences failure of appetite, disorder in digestion, and powerlessness to perform natural acts that were possible' (Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism. Remarks and Admonitions. Part Four*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1996, pp. 92–3).

²³ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, vol. 5, pp. 23–5.

The mind is also the locus of some of the rational faculties because the data gathered by sense perception goes to the brain where they are then processed and analysed to a particular extent and stored. From ancient times until today the meaning of mind, including its functions and the ways through which it is related to the body, has always been an extremely controversial issue. Some even deny the existence of the mind as a separate phenomenon apart from the physical brain. However, following the commonly accepted view, it is possible to define mind as the emerging qualities and functions of the brain.²⁴ Furthermore, philosophers accept that there is a mental level of existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*). The Ottoman polymath Katip Çelebi (also known as Hājji Khalīfa, d. 1068/1657) in his bibliographic encyclopedia *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, and the Ottoman historian and encyclopedist Taşköprüzâde (d. 968/1561), in his *Miftāḥ al-sa‘āda*, both give special attention to disciplines studying the level of ‘mental existence’ in their ontological taxonomy of the sciences.²⁵ Logic is one of the disciplines that studies subjects that have only mental existence. Arabic linguists also accept that there is a mental level of existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*). It is used to explain the definite (*ma‘rifā*) usage of words (*al-ahd al-dhihnī*) which must be related to memory in the mind.²⁶ The mind may be seen as closely corresponding to what is traditionally called the animal soul, the source of biological life. It is considered that the human soul is a heavenly entity which is beyond space and measurement. However, the animal soul in human beings (*al-rūḥ al-ḥayawānī al-basharī*) belongs to the created physical world (*‘ālam al-khalq*) and is subject to space and measurement. It is the vessel of the higher soul. The animal soul is a subtle substance which carries sense perception and motion and resides in the heart.²⁷ Therefore, we can conclude that the animal soul in human beings, or mind, is subject to empirical study, while the human soul is not.

The mind with its five external and five internal senses is one of the soldiers of the heart and is situated in the brain.²⁸ It produces knowledge, comprehension and consciousness, and thus introduces the world to the heart. Every human being has five external senses to collect data for the mind from the external world and also five internal senses to analyse and store this data. The five internal senses include the following: (1) joint sense perception (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*), (2) imagination (*takhayyul*), (3) thinking (*tafakkur*), (4) remembering (*tadhakkur*), and (5) memory (*ḥifẓ*). These exist inside the brain as its

²⁴ Mind is usually translated to Turkish as *zihin*, from the Arabic word *dhihn*.

²⁵ Ahmad ibn Mustafa Taşköprüzâde, *Miftāḥ al-sa‘āda wa-miṣbāḥ al-siyāda fī mawdū‘āt al-‘ulūm*, Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2010, p. 55; Katip Çelebi, *Kashf al-ẓunūn ‘an asāmī l-kutub wa-l-funūn*, ed. M. Şerefettin Yalçın, Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1941, p. 35.

²⁶ Tahānawī, *Mawsū‘a*, vol. 1, pp. 830–1.

²⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 878.

²⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, vol. 5, pp. 24–5.

functions. Ghazālī says that if God had not created these qualities in the brain, the brain would be empty of them and be like a piece of meat.²⁹

The ultimate happiness is in the following: [making one's] meeting with God, the Exalted, his highest goal; the Hereafter, his eternal abode; this world, his transitory station; the body, his vessel; and the limbs, his servants. Consequently, the consciousness of man dwells in the heart as a king in the midst of his kingdom. He employs the imaginative faculty, whose seat is in the front of the brain, as the master of his couriers, for the reports of sense perceptions (*maḥsūsāt*) are gathered therein. He employs the faculty of retentive memory (*ḥāfiẓa*), whose seat is the back of the brain, as his store-keeper. He uses the tongue as his interpreter and the active members of his body as his scribes. He uses the five senses as his spies, and it makes each one of them responsible in a certain domain.³⁰

The heart functions as the king in the kingdom of body and mind. Ghazālī compares the operations of a human being with the operations of a state:

Thus he appoints the eye over the world of colours, hearing over the world of sounds, smell over the world of odours, and so on for the others. These are the bearers of news that they collect from their different worlds and transmit to the imaginative faculty, which is like the master of the couriers. The latter in turn delivers them to the store-keeper, which is memory. The store-keeper sets them forth before the king, who selects therefrom that which he has need of in managing his kingdom, in completing the journey ahead of him, in subjugating his enemy by whom he is afflicted, and in warding off from himself those who cut off his path. If [the king] does this he is successful, happy, and thankful for the blessings of God, the Exalted.³¹

This is the ideal scenario which may not always work because not everyone is successful in managing the powers given to his control. Marshalling all the powers which subsist in human beings as an army requires great self-discipline and an effort which most people lack.

Ghazālī on the Soul (or the Heart)

What separates human beings from other creatures and puts them at the top of the hierarchy of creatures, second only to the angels, is the human soul (*rūḥ*) which is also called the heart (*qalb*) or the self (*nafs*).³² The body is the ship of the soul while the soul is the vessel of knowledge. The most important knowledge is

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 25.

³⁰ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 36. I revised the above translation from the *Marvels of the Heart* (Al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart*, trans. Walter James Skellie, Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 2010, p. 26), relying on the Dār al-Minhāj edition of the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*.

³¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, vol. 5, p. 36; Al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart*, p. 26.

³² In the Qur'an it is mentioned that people are given very limited knowledge about the soul because it is a divine affair or a divine command or a metaphysical entity belonging to the World of Divine Command (*'ālam al-amr*) (Q 17:85). Therefore Ghazālī says that we cannot empirically or rationally know the essence of the soul – unless we are blessed with access to

the knowledge of God which comes through the knowledge of the self. Knowing God is the ultimate purpose of the human being for which he is created and the ability to achieve this is his distinct quality.³³ This goal could be achieved only by the heart.³⁴

The human being is a *plant* with respect to eating and reproducing; he is an *animal* with respect to sense perception and voluntary motion. He is a *form* similar to a picture painted on the wall with respect to his form and shape. His distinct quality is the knowledge about the truth of things.³⁵

Ghazālī, following other Muslim scholars and philosophers, shares the view that the human soul belongs to the metaphysical world (*‘ālam al-malakūt*). Hence it cannot be a subject for empirical or rational research and study, and the only way to know it is through the purification of the self, which leads to the opening of the eye of the heart that unveils metaphysical reality (*kashf*). This may be called spiritual epistemology and methodology, which constitutes yet another level in the multiplex epistemology of Muslim scholars commonly known as *marātib al-‘ulūm* (the degrees of the sciences). In fact, Ghazālī outlines detailed arguments to ground this spiritual epistemology along with the rational epistemology of philosophy and the religious-rational epistemology of theology.³⁶

The soul is hidden in itself while it is manifest with its actions. Although the mind and sense perception cannot grasp the essence of the soul, they can observe and study its implications and manifestations in human thought and actions. The soul is hidden in itself but manifest in its actions on the body which uses it as a tool to exercise its will. The soul is like a powerful king who hides himself from his subjects but acts through his retainers and soldiers. The purpose of studying the soul is not to understand its true nature or essence but to grasp its attributes and changing states. There are two reasons for this: first, practical morality does not require it; and second, it belongs to the secret knowledge of the prophets and saints which is not disclosed to common people.³⁷ In relation to practical morality and piety one does not need to know the essence of the soul or the heart. Nor does one need to know the essence of Satan to avoid his harm, as one does not need to know the essence of an enemy to defend oneself against him.

The heart is what is addressed and held accountable by God, because it is the heart that knows, believes, decides and wills. Intentions are what God looks at and they emerge in the heart and become materialised into actions by the body.

divine knowledge through spiritual cleansing – but we can study its states and attributes (see al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, vol. 5, pp. 14–5).

³³ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 34.

³⁴ For more on the concept of *qalb*, see Sara Sviri, “The Niche of Light”, *The Taste of Hidden Things. Images on the Sufi Path*, Iverness CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 1997, pp. 1–22.

³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, vol. 5, p. 36.

³⁶ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 84.

³⁷ Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 14–5.

The heart is not fixed and stagnant. Instead, it is open to continuous change, conflict and evolution. What is most striking in Ghazālī's account of the heart is the conflict between the two faculties of the heart: reason (*ʿaql*) and the appetitive self (*al-nafs al-shahwāniyya*). The appetitive self rebels against alignment with reason in the service of the heart. The relationship between reason and self is decisive with regard to human character and action. The heart is networked with the physical, metaphysical and social worlds through reason and the appetitive self which are linked to the mind. And the mind is linked to the five senses which mediate between the mind and the physical world. In the metaphysical world, the relationship of Satan with the appetitive self (*nafs*) and the relationship of the angels with reason play an important role in the actions of the heart, embodied in the intentions and will, and eventually in the actions of the body. Society's influence is also mediated through reason and the appetitive self. According to Ghazālī, the soul is an independent metaphysical essence and does not have its seat in the body, the physical heart or the brain, but it is networked with them all. This is unlike some of the theories which assume that the soul is in the heart or the brain. Yet the heart is linked to different levels of existence through them. The heart is a centre of attraction by different actors from different levels of existence:

So it is, as it were, a target that is being hit constantly from every direction. Whenever a thing hits the heart, it influences it, and it is also hit from another direction by an opposing influence, so that its character is changed. If a demon comes to the heart and calls it to desire, there comes also an angel to drive it away. If a demon entices it to one evil, another demon entices it to another. If an angel attracts it to one sort of good, another angel attracts it to some other good. So at one time it is torn between two angels, at another between two demons, and at another between an angel and a demon. It is never left alone at all.³⁸

The heart is like a battlefield and this continues until one reaches a state of peace by making reason control all agents upon it.

The Multiplex Self as the Source of Action

Thus far I have sketched out an argument which suggests that an Islamic anthropology, a multiplex human ontology of body, mind and soul, can give rise to a multiplex concept of the self which is based on its constantly changing inner conflicts and reconfigurations. Now we can explore how this concept of the multiplex self is used to understand and explain the cause(s) of human action. In order to understand the causal relationship between a multiplex self and action we need to closely examine the theory of the levels of the self and its practical outcomes in the form of moral attributes and social action. Simply put, the levels of the self are an outcome of the conflict between the intellect and the appetitive

³⁸ Al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart*, p. 131.

self. It is like a proxy war between the angel using the intellect and Satan using the appetitive self.³⁹ Most commonly it is accepted that there are seven levels of the self. It would distract our attention and exceed the limits of this paper if we were to indulge in its details here, because there exists a rich literature and discussion about it which has been produced over many centuries across the Muslim world. However, for our purpose here, it is possible to reduce them to three major levels depending on the phases of the conflict between reason and the appetitive self:

(1) *Al-nafs al-ammāra*: the ruling appetitive self

(2) *Al-nafs al-lawwāma*: the self-critical self

(3) *Al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*: the content self

We can now take a brief look at the behavioural outcome of each self. Firstly, *al-nafs al-ammāra*: 'the ruling appetitive self'. At this level, the appetitive self, which is the voice of desires, rules the heart. This is reflected, at the empirical level, in certain moral qualities and behaviour. The appetitive self subjugates the intellect and uses it in its service, which is considered to be the opposite of what it is supposed to be: the intellect controlling the appetitive self. If, however, the soul gives up its opposition and becomes submissive and obedient to the demands of the fleshly appetites and the invitations of Satan, it is called 'the self that commands evil' (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l-sū'*). God, the Exalted, said, relating the words of Joseph or the wife of Potiphar 'And I do not acquit myself, for verily the soul commands to evil' (Q 12:53).⁴⁰ The moral qualities of a person at this level are characterised by an oscillation between two extremes: cowardly or destructive, stingy or extravagant. He usually misses the golden mean and moderation in his actions. He follows his desires and employs his reason to serve his desires.⁴¹ At this level, the heart is considered to be ill, because the self is suffering from maladies of the heart, such as showing-off, revenge, arrogance, avarice, cowardliness, and the like. The maladies in the heart are reflected in the maladies in feelings, attitudes and actions. At this level of the self, reason exists in the service of passions. Ironically it is popularly considered that the more reason serves the passions the more 'rational' a person becomes. Yet paradoxically this type of 'rational actor' is seen as spiritually ill by the sufis, because his heart and mind are not free from the rule of the passions.

³⁹ For more on the concept of *al-nafs* and various examples from early sufi literature, see Sara Sviri, "The Self and Its Transformation in Šūfīsm. With Special Reference to Early Literature", *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, ed. David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 195–215.

⁴⁰ Al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart*, p. 9.

⁴¹ Modern social sciences usually see the level of the appetitive self as human nature. This may be because of the way the statistical majority behaves in society. There are also deeper philosophical reasons why a person at the level of the appetitive self is seen as representing human nature. The empiricist philosopher David Hume (d. 1776) claimed, which is the opposite of what Ghazālī defends, that reason is, and ought to be, in the service of desires.

Al-nafs al-lawwāma or ‘the self-critical self’ denotes a transitory state from complete obedience to desires to freedom from them and a complete control by reason. This is a stage entailing great struggle to gain freedom from the rule of passions represented by the appetitive self. But when the soul is not completely at rest, it is striving to drive off and oppose the appetitive soul, and is called ‘the self-critical self’ (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*); for it upbraids its possessor whenever he falls short in the worship of his Master. God the Exalted says, ‘Nay, and I swear by the upbraiding soul’ (Q 75:2).⁴² At the level of the critical self, one’s actions are no longer consistently in accordance with the demands of the appetitive self. This is because one develops an awareness about the negative results of completely following the appetitive self. At this level, one blames and criticises oneself for completely surrendering to one’s desires, and seeks liberation from that state. However it requires a challenging inner struggle to leave this state behind, and this is called the greatest war (*al-jihād al-akbar*), or migration (*al-hijra*) or journey in the homeland (*safar dar waṭan*). At this level one’s actions are not coherent and are even self-contradictory, because neither the intellect nor the appetitive self has complete control over one’s intentions and actions as the struggle between the two goes on. The illness in the heart has yet to be completely recovered but the healing process has commenced.

Finally, *al-nafs al-muṭma’inna*, refers to ‘the content self’. If the conflict between the intellect and the appetitive self culminates in the victory of the former over the latter, one’s intentions and actions come into accord with the dictates of reason. The intellect becomes the sole ruler of the self. This is a great inner revolution, from the rule of passion to the rule of reason under divine guidance. When it is at rest under God’s command, and agitation has left it on account of its opposition to the fleshly appetites, it is called ‘the soul at rest’ (*al-nafs al-muṭma’inna*). Of such a soul, scripture says, ‘Oh, you [the] soul at peace, return to your Lord, pleased, and pleasing Him’ (Q 89:27–8).⁴³ This great and deep transformation is reflected in one’s actions and attributes, which fall into the category of the golden mean or moderation between two extremes. It no longer is at one of two extremes (for instance, generosity is the golden mean between avarice and extravagance). At this level one’s attributes and actions are characterised by coherence, consistent moderation and stability. At this level the self is cured of all the maladies of the heart, and this is reflected outwardly and becomes observable as good intentions, attributes and actions. Satan no longer has power over that person. The moderate demands of the appetitive self are approved by the heart and met by corrective actions. Excessive and extravagant demands are vetoed by the intellect under divine guidance. The voices and ideas coming from the mind are also critically evaluated by the intellect before they

⁴² Al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart*, p. 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

are put into practice. In this state of affairs, the angel, the intellect and the heart are allied to establish complete control over the kingdom of the heart and body. The appetitive self, desires and passions are not killed or eliminated, rather they are put under the judicious control of reason. Reason rules over the heart. The emphasis on reason may be called the 'rationalism' of the sufi way. This type of reason bases its judgements on the ultimate outcome of actions, while the appetitive self bases its judgements on the immediate outcomes and pleasures of actions. Thus the person with the contented self is a rational actor, but his rationality is multiplex and includes both this world and the next world.

Conclusion

One can conclude from the foregoing account, which has been drawn mostly from Ghazālī, that human action is a joint production of soul, mind and body. The soul is the locus of meaning, intention and will. If a physical action is willed, for instance, then the will is communicated to the brain, which moves the body to produce a particular action. From this perspective, the ultimate control centre of a human being is the soul, which is also called the heart, the intellect (or reason) and the self. The soul is hidden in itself and thus it lies beyond empirical study, but it is manifested through its actions in the body which is subject to empirical research and observation. Yet the soul is not stable, with its changing states known as the levels of the self. The self, from this perspective, denotes different states of the heart or the soul. The self is the cause and source of actions: it is the real effective agency. The self is not stagnant or fixed, instead it is fluid and open to change and evolution. The self changes depending on the configuration or the state of the heart which comprises an outcome of the ceaseless conflicts which obtain between reason and desires. Order in the heart is the cause of order in one's actions, while malady in the heart is the cause of disorder in actions. Consequently, reforming actions requires reforming the heart, so that the therapy must focus on the heart. A healthy heart is the one ruled by the intellect under divine guidance, which manifests itself in one's inner life as contentment and peace, and in observable actions as coherence, moderation and stability.

Multiplex human ontology thus potentially offers an alternative model to explain human action based on the following premises: (1) Human ontology is multiplex: body, mind and soul. (2) The self is multiplex: ruling, critical and content. (3) The different states of the heart cause different intentions which in turn cause different actions. Therefore we may conclude that the states of the heart are the root causes, while the intentions are the causes of actions. Observable human action is only the tip of an iceberg and its causal chain needs to be traced back to the heart from which it originates.

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The contributors of the present volume explore Islamic and Christian ideas of human life. Informed by classical and contemporary theological questions and interests, they offer scholarship in the humanities and sciences important insights into debates pertaining to human beings, their nature, future, and purposes.

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ISBN 978-3-16-161777-5

