

Ontologization of Ethics or Ethicization of Ontology – A Comparative Approach on Plotinus and al-Ghazali

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Abstract This article intends to show how ethics depend logically on ontology and how ontology reaches deep into the sphere of ethics. Plotinus and al-Ghazali are here interpreted as examples of philosophers who developed a perspective for the substantial rooting of justice as the yardstick of action oriented at unity as the measure of theory. Emphasizing reason to be the bracket between ontology and ethics man has a crucial role to play in the harmonization of being. Getting back to the ultimate source by the heart's drive to understand the human finds itself united with all being, a fellow creature. Knowledge of God is no escapism but at the same time self-knowledge and deep insight into the web of life that culminates in gentle devotion to all being.

Prologue

Developing a concept of ethics that allows to be binding or consequential is a task that by its complexity asks for a stable ground. In times where change is constant as much as is doubt the way to go is neither a smooth one nor easy to find. This article argues that ethics unfold from an ontological basis, practice grounds on theory which is developed along a rough overview and short glimpses on the philosophical system – if we want to call it this – of Plotinus and al-Ghazali.¹ They show how

¹This article delivers a brief and rough overview of Plotinus' and al-Ghazali's thoughts on this particular aspect of substantiating ethics ontologically or interpreting ontology ethically. It can thus only offer short glimpses into their respective complex work. The topic has been treated in more detail and depth in: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung von Ethik durch*

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cosmology is a unity of ontology and ethics as ethics develop “logically” from an ontological theory that connects all being essentially in one simple and transcendent source. Substantiating being in unity leads to an orientation of ethics at justice. The linking bracket between ontology and ethics is reason – and thus the human being that is essentially defined through reason. Plotinus and al-Ghazali here offer the possibility to expand the concept of reason beyond the rationalistic confines it experiences so often. Being the core of a purified heart, reason is perfectly unfolded in the absolute experience of unity which reflects the point of simultaneous self-knowledge and knowledge of the ultimate source. Reason, bearing additionally a spiritual aspect, thus answers a demand of cross-cultural philosophy. It shows how “mysticism”² is not anti-rational but develops a particular system and accordingly logic. Incorporating doubt fundamentally in the search for absolute truth, Plotinus’ and al-Ghazali’s philosophy can still serve as a horizon or perspective for us today.

Ontology

The One and God, Emanation and Creation

The absolute source and substantiation of all being is the One in Plotinus’ thought, in al-Ghazali’s God, whose essence is unrecognizably concealed in absolute transcendence but who can still be positively described by his attributes and implied through his works, the phenomenal being.³ Whereas al-Ghazali establishes ontology theologically, thus starts from an onto-theology,⁴ we can not directly speak of a concept of God with Plotinus. The term “God” does indeed occur occasionally here

Einheitserfahrung im Denken Plotins und Ghazalis. (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2011), [hereafter *Ontologische Begründung* (2011)]. This examination is mainly based on Plotinus’ Ennead VI9 (9) and al-Ghazali’s *Miškāt al-anwar*. Other sources and literature can be found in the aforementioned publication.

²The term is in quotation marks as is commonly understood as something at least latently irrational. This article intends to show how different philosophies or systems of thought follow their own logics, thence develop a respective concept of reason. So does “mysticism”. Above that, Plotinus and al-Ghazali emphasize the absolute role of reason which is perfect in its most exceeded abstraction or transcendence. The term “mysticism” would thus have to be treated cautiously and one would have to add “intellectual” or “rational”. The quotation marks intend to refer to this seemingly paradoxical idea of a rational and spiritual philosophy that is thought by the heart.

³Al-Ghazali for religious purposes rejects a purely negative approach to God. Cf.: Mehmed S. Aydin, *Ghazali on Metaphorical Interpretation*. Working Paper in preparation for the L.A.U.D. (Linguistic Agency University of Duisburg) Symposium. (Duisburg, 1997), no page. Cf. also: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 101–107. The attributes, al-Ghazali warns, can not be understood anthropomorphically. Cf. Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. A parallel English-Arabic text translated, introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), p. 17.

⁴Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), p. 100.

as well but in a context that can certainly not be interpreted monotheistically. Plotinus had a sceptical attitude towards the cults; his thinking still develops from a polytheistic (“pagan”) background. Against this the soul or its functioning, as for example its striving, can be called a god as it indeed happens with the Eros. When Plotinus does not speak of “a god” but “the God” it is not always clear if he means the Nous as the thinking of thinking⁵ or the One itself that defies every describability. The emphasis on the One’s absolute hyper-beingness transfers this beyond the frame of the designatable and lets it so appear completely abstract and transcendent.⁶ Plotinus’ notion of the One becomes comparable with al-Ghazali’s conception of God through the immersion of the transcendence of God’s essence. As the *Miškāt* (“The Niche of Lights”) describes, the true God is not the mover of being and not even the one who enables this to move but a principle hidden behind this to whom all being is owed but that itself lies absolutely beyond all recognisability.⁷ This underlined and deepened abstractness of the first and original principle can be interpreted as a similarity with Plotinus’ One. In a Godhead beyond the intelligible notion of God theology is in a way overcome to a hyper- or pre-theology.

The substantiation of the emergence of being also shows differences between Plotinus and al-Ghazali. Whereas al-Ghazali advocates creation Plotinus’ system is based on emanation.⁸ Of the overabundance of the One the entire being flows out mediated by the stages of the Nous and the soul.⁹ Voluntary creation is not even mentioned here rather the conscious will of the One is negated as it is beyond any definition as much as beyond consciousness or will. It is herein that al-Ghazali finds a problem; against emanation he emphasizes God’s freedom. God can through his free will determine creation directly; being does not flow out necessarily and

⁵ This is how God was characterized later in the peripatetic tradition of Arabic philosophy e.g. by Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd.

⁶ For the notion of the One cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 38–43. On pp. 34–38 the difficulty to define the One is reflected.

⁷ See: Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Die Nische der Lichter. Miškāt al-anwar*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von ‘Abd-Elamad ‘Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Hamburg: Felix meiner Verlag, 1987), p. 63. For al-Ghazali’s notion of God: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 107–113.

⁸ Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 15–20, 113–119.

⁹ It is not absolutely clear if Plotinus understands the basis of phenomenal, sensual being, matter, as being independent and eternally existent or lets this as well flow out of the One. Does he advocate a world without beginning or the world’s advent in time? We should hereby keep in mind that both Plotinus and al-Ghazali conceive time as the image of eternity. Time is the mode of that which exists and becomes comprehensible only by this. Thus the world cannot emerge in a certain initial moment as a beginning or initiation can only be in time and thence with the world. Following this, would the effluxion of being or creation not have to happen in eternity? And would creation in the sense of a beginning not be in being only assumably so that it would have to create itself as it is the only temporal existence above which the One, God is exalted?

uncontrollably by God. But Plotinus as well underlines the One's freedom.¹⁰ Just because the One is superior to any determination it is the yardstick for everything, for goodness, truth, actuality or authenticity and also for freedom. The One's overabundance does not explain a compulsion for the causation of being but on the contrary the freedom to give perpetually. However, al-Ghazali's rejection of emanation is not absolute. In his idea of the flowing of being ("Herfließen des Seins"; *fluxus entis*) he distances himself from the sensuality of the image of flowing just as Plotinus does.¹¹ The flowing out is not to be understood like the flowing of water out of a vessel where the water really dwindles from the vessel and connects for example with the surface of a hand. Being rather emerges in the way sunlight reflects on a wall or the image of a person in a mirror. The source or origin does not lose anything; it remains entirely itself but at the same time causes the light or the mirrored image. The frequent characterization of God as true light¹² or sun in the *Miškāt* suggests that God is here understood like the One with Plotinus (who also compares it with the sun),¹³ as a source above being whose overabundance does not dwindle or change in flowing out but remains the same eternally. Also al-Ghazali's theory creation being mediated along a row of intellects¹⁴ as an alternative to direct immediate creation by God can be compared with emanation. As therein the Nous and the soul mediate material being here stages of angels, that represent intelligible principles,¹⁵ translate God's command into being.

¹⁰ The debate on the free will of the One can be read in chapter VI8 (39) "Der freie Wille und das Wollen des Einen" in: Richard Harder, *Plotins Schriften*. Band IV: die Schriften 39–45 der chronologischen Reihenfolge: a) *Text und Übersetzung*. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1967), S. 2–61.

¹¹ Cf.: Dominic J. O'Meara, *Plotinus: an introduction to the Enneads*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 60–61. For al-Ghazali see: Muhammed Yasin El-Taḥer Uraibi, *Al-Ghazalis Aporien. Im Zusammenhang mit dem Kausalproblem*. Vorgelegt an der Philosophischen Fakultät der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität. (Bonn, 1972), p. 303.

¹² See: Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Die Nische der Lichter- Miškāt al-anwar*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von 'Abd-Elsamad 'Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), p. 27.

¹³ VI, 6, 34 in: Richard Harder, *Plotins Schriften. Band I: die Schriften 1–21 der chronologischen Reihenfolge*. (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1930), p. 118.

¹⁴ See al-Ghazali's simile of the waterclock e.g. in: Muhammed Yasin El-Taḥer Uraibi, *Al-Ghazalis Aporien. Im Zusammenhang mit dem Kausalproblem*. Vorgelegt an der Philosophischen Fakultät der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität. (Bonn, Univ., Diss., 1972), pp. 106 following.

¹⁵ For the association of angels with intellects cf. Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. A parallel English-Arabic text translated, introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), p. 65.

Reason and Being, Hierarchical Organization of the Worlds and the Role of Man

Plotinus and al-Ghazali explain being to be divided into two worlds, the sensual-material or phenomenal one and the intelligible one.¹⁶ These worlds parallel each other and their relation is like that of model (intelligible or spiritual world) and image (sensual world) whereby the spiritual world is again the image of the absolute model, the One or God. Being is organized hierarchically in these spheres. The highest stage, the One or God, as the perfect model and source of all being is the yardstick against which the truthfulness and actuality of being is measured.¹⁷ Whereas the One or God is the only truly real and actual, being grades according to its proximity to this original principle. The highest stage of the intelligible world is closer to it than for example the soul that mediates between the worlds. Matter finally, which is the farthest from the hyper-being source and the most scattered into multitude and vagueness, is at the lowest rung of the ladder of being. Measured against the yardstick of unity multitude is, the more it progresses, to be judged as privation. The lesser the unity is the lower is the form of being. The rank of being is measured against the proximity to the perfect unity of the One or God. The more a being approaches this the higher its value is to be judged and the more actual it can be denoted as being at all. Thus the intelligible world is more veritably being than the sensual phenomenal one that turns out to be a mere metaphor of the spiritual world. As any being arises from one source it is always essentially a symbol, sign and reference. Not that inauthenticity bestows it with its value but the role as a sign of the ultimate ground distinguishes it as valuable and truly being. Its function as a reference also substantiates the possibility of knowledge and approximation of the source of all being, which can add to the value of being, its truthfulness. Understanding the phenomenal world in its being an image and a sign of the intelligible one, of which structure and form are depicted in the corporeal, one attains a more authentic notion of real being on the one hand and on the other hand one raises the value of the material world through the realization of its symbolic function. Also, looking at the intelligible, spiritual world as the image of the One or God, this as well appears to be a sign wherein its true character and thus its value is based and what at the same time enables the ascent along the yardstick of truth. The inauthenticity of being on the one hand means a privation of unity measured against absolute unity. On the other hand, if it is understood as a symbol, interpreted as a sign, it facilitates the attainment of unity through knowledge. Being is by this function linked with rational knowledge directly.

The correspondence of being and reason, organized along stages that rise up to the One or God and meet their perfection there can be found equally with Plotinus and al-Ghazali. As all being stems from one original source it is shaped uniformly.

¹⁶ Cf.: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 20–24, 85–89.

¹⁷ See: Jens Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus*. (München: C.H. Beck, 2004), p. 37.

The source being the highest principle of reason, real and true light, being is organized rationally through all its stages. Thereby it can only just really be regarded and work as a symbol, a reference to its source. Mirroring through its rational shape and organization the perfection of the absolute reason of the first and real principle, it can qualify to achieve knowledge of this. The rationality of the order of being substantiates the harmony of cosmos. Not just any principle could create and determine the “best of all worlds”; only reason itself in its absolutely free, unlimited and undifferentiated form (or pre-form) can guarantee the balance of being, letting its intelligibility flow into and fundamentally form it. The spiritual world that imprints the rational forms into the material world is therefore, with regard to rationality, also pre-eminent compared with the corporeal. Here the soul, that occupies a position between the worlds, plays a crucial part. If the soul is successful in overcoming the material for the spiritual and in realizing knowledge to be its real role and value, it unfolds its rational core and thus its being by which it further rises in the hierarchy of unity.

Unity through reason can only be really created and understood through the role of man in this system. Man being essentially endowed with reason represents a microcosm.¹⁸ Where macrocosm appears to be rationally organized being man is its smaller counterpart holding reason in his and her innermost heart. Thereby man is at the same time the mirror of the original source in being. This being characterized by the perfection of reason, the human being is its worldly representative as reason defines man essentially. This human reason is subject to the difficulties of earthly being. It is embroiled in the inauthentic multitude and has to learn through unfolding to look for the truth in the abstract or spiritual. For this the human being goes back to the structure of being surrounding it. Through scientific activity¹⁹ man unveils the perfect organization of being and infers the principles determining this thereby rising to the intelligible world. If man comprehends that these principles have flown out of one sole and simple source, the first and original principle of the most perfect reason, he or she transcends all worlds and attains the

¹⁸ Plotinus and al-Ghazali define the human being and its capacity essentially as being reason. Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 48–53, 119–122. Compare the idea of man as microcosm on pp. 95–98. Al-Ghazali himself calls man the “small world”. See Muhammed Yasin El-Taher Uraibi, *Al-Ghazalis Aporien. Im Zusammenhang mit dem Kausalproblem*. Vorgelegt an der Philosophischen Fakultät der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität. (Bonn, 1972), p. 305 and Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 269.

¹⁹ This is one of two ways al-Ghazali suggests to achieve truth. Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 167–172 and Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Die Nische der Lichten. Miškāt al-anwar*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von ‘Abd-Elсамad ‘Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), p. 24. The other way is that which al-Ghazali calls *dauq* (tasting). He explains this term in: Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Der Erretter aus dem Irrtum. Al-Munqid min ad-dalal*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von ‘Abd-Elсамad ‘Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), p. 54.

aim of knowledge, the origin of being. The unfolding of human reason thus enables the realization of the unity of all being; it is the essential link to really let this unity come to light. If from this experience of unity the human being derives an ethics that is mirrored and realized in his or her conduct of life, the “mystical” ascent to the original absolute, hyper-conceptual knowledge is able to connect or unite being and morality, ontology and ethics. By assuming one source of being that appears to be the most perfect, hyper-rational principle of reason, Plotinus’ and al-Ghazali’s systems of thought facilitate, through the key position of man mirroring reason, the unity of beginning and end, of the substantiation of being and a just perspective of action.

Ethics

The Ascent²⁰ and the Difficulty of Its Comprehensibility

Man’s essential core, reason connects, following Plotinus and al-Ghazali, being with an ethics of unity and justice and creates a unity between the worlds. Being characterized as rational, man, in the harmonization of being towards unity, holds a crucial function in the cosmic system. He is challenged by a double ethics. The one side develops in an ascent and refers to the understanding progress of the human reason towards absolute simplicity and unity in the transcendent One or God. The following descent denotes the action in the world of being and against the fellow creatures.

To some extent the ascent follows an ethics of subjectivity; only every single person him- or herself can through individual efforts discover and unfold his or her innermost core of reason. Man is thereby embedded into the all of being along which knowledge is oriented and perfected. As absolute unity is the yardstick of all truth, reason as well unfolds towards this and is then regarded as real and authentic when it merges into the absolute, being beyond concepts, speech and differentiation. The path leading there is characterized by abstraction or purification from the sensual and from multitude.²¹ The basic insight at the beginning of each ascent is the doubt about the reality of being and the realization of it being an inauthentic

²⁰ The idea of ascent and descent stems from: Euree Song, *Aufstieg und Abstieg der Seele. Diesseitigkeit und Jenseitigkeit in Plotins Ethik der Sorge*. Hypomnemata. Untersuchungen zur Antike und zu ihrem Nachleben; Bd. 180. (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009). The detailed treatment of this idea, formulated as an ontologization of ethics or ethical interpretation of ontology, and its association with Sufism can be found in: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung von Ethik durch Einheitserfahrung im Denken Plotins und Ghazalis*. (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2011).

²¹ Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 53–59, 172–185. As al-Ghazali has developed a profound theory of epistemology, based on stages of doubt, see also pp. 119 following.

sign of truth. This simplification is radical with Plotinus and al-Ghazali: not even the own self of the searcher for knowledge can endure before absolute unity.²² Only in the overcoming of the self, in complete transcendence of being or dying of the self is the aim really achieved; man is as he was before he was, immersed in the original source.²³ As here even consciousness is transcended, unity is less known but rather extensively experienced beyond the rational.²⁴ This experience of complete unity can take place inside the inner depths through the abstraction of everything external. Leaving the corporeal the searcher for knowledge transfers him- or herself ever deeper into his or her own, rational core. Paradoxically the transcendence of the self lets man find his true ground that reflects the original principle, pre- or hyper-reason. In the experience of unity man transfers the absolute transcendent origin into his innermost core. Self-knowledge and knowledge of God are one in this experience of unity.²⁵ They unite transcendence and immanence in the heart of man.²⁶ This experience is called a vision by Plotinus and al-Ghazali and they distinguish this from sight. Vision describes a different kind of seeing, an inner insight or tasting and happens only in the individual heart of the soul. Sight only perceives objects that can refer and lead to true vision.²⁷

The vision or the experience of unity bears difficulties concerning their communication and comprehensibility that Plotinus and al-Ghazali were aware of.²⁸ Vision happens momentarily, suddenly, uncontrollably and hyper-rationally. Thus it exceeds the limits of the expressible. Merely the way there, doubt, abstraction and the education of the individual reason can (roughly) be communicated or it can be motivated to pursue it. The absolute experience itself is an individual affair. Anybody can experience the vision only in his or her own depths and this is therefore incomparable with the experience of others. The One or God being the

²² See Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 65, 181. Cf. also: Werner Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen: Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), p. 123; and Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*. (London & Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 59.

²³ Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), p. 148.

²⁴ Cf. Jens Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus*. (München: C.H. Beck, 2004), p. 56 and Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 63–64, 181.

²⁵ See: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 62, 72–73 and 146–150. Cf. also: Mahmoud Zakzouk, *Ghazali und Descartes. Ein philosophischer Vergleich*. Interkulturelle Bibliothek; Bd. 104. (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2005), p. 84 and Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam*. (Aalen: Qalander Verlag, 1979), p. 211.

²⁶ As the absolute aim of the striving of man is achieved momentarily Plotinus' and al-Ghazali's philosophy does not have to be characterized as oriented towards the hereafter. In the moment of vision the hereafter is also transcended. Absolute "enlightenment" is experienced in life already and thus heightens man as living and rational.

²⁷ See Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 59–66, 137–146.

²⁸ Cf.: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 34–38, 66–70, 151–156, 183. See also: Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Der Erreter aus dem Irrtum. Al-Munqid min ad-dalal*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von 'Abd-Elsamad 'Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), p. 47.

yardstick of truth and authenticity, thereby at the same time being unspeakable and incomprehensible through its pre- and hyper-existence, generally questions the capability of speech to indicate the truth. Speech can not grasp perfect unity that exceeds it; at the same time it can thus not actually describe an existing being as this is always only a symbol, a sign or a reference to the real truth. Thus speech can finally only be understood as a metaphor. Every statement does not really indicate something but circumscribes its object roughly and therefore functions symbolically. Because in this way speech fundamentally fails as a means of communication of truth, it all the more misses the absolute experience of unity. This is thus approached in silence or in inauthentic speech, the awareness of the speechlessness of speech, which is communicated in a paradoxical technique of simultaneous negation and affirmation²⁹ or in symbolic allegories. In Plotinus' and al-Ghazali's "mysticism" the true God, the One is discovered just through the comprehension of the incomprehensibility; in the immersion into the suspecting ignorance the absolutely hidden is unconceptually, hyper-conceptually realized, tasted, experienced.

A further problem of the comprehensibility of the experience of unity is grounded in the fact that the inner self is one with the transcendent divine during the momentary vision. Complete purification lets the original reason be reflected in the rational core of the human soul. When the vision is over they part again. In this duality unity can not actually be grasped, it slips away from describability that only characterizes the multiple separation of being. Hereby the understanding of the unity of man and God or the One deserves fundamental scepticism: Plotinus and al-Ghazali both emphasize that the unity is not real, essential.³⁰ Man and the divine do not merge into actual unity; the first one does not truly immerse in the last one. This unity should rather be understood like a reflection whereby the picture flows onto the surface of a mirror so that both seem to be one. But in fact the model remains the model and the surface of the mirror the surface. For the moment of their being opposite each other, and only if the surface of the mirror is clear, just as the soul or heart of the person has to be pure, the picture of the model is reflected on the surface of the mirror; the mirror resembles the model in depicting this on itself, thence being its image. If the model disappears, the mirror's surface is imageless as well. Model and surface do not change essentially. They remain themselves and their mutual similarity is abolished after the moment of reflection. Just like this, the unity of man and the One or God is not essential but a simile that intends to circumscribe the radical nature of the approximation. Actually, in this so-to-speak-unity the real difference between transcendent source and human being

²⁹ Cf.: Werner Beierwaltes, *Das wahre Selbst: Studien zu Plotins Begriff des Geistes und des Einen*. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2001), p. 145. A very insightful publication on the dynamics of paradoxical speech is: Michael A. Sells, *Mystical languages of unsaying*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁰ Cf.: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 64–65, 182–183 and also Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Die Nische der Lichte. Miškāt al-anwar*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von 'Abd-Elsamad 'Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), p. 25.

becomes obvious. Whereas the source is absolutely simple, hyper-worldly and pre-existent, man is living, being and embedded in a complex world in which he or she occupies an important role. In the experience of unity man does not only know God or the One, but as well discovers himself essentially. He comprehends his humanity that is substantiated in reason. If man realizes his rational unity with the absolute source, he at the same time understands himself as differentiated from this because of his being a mortal but rational human being. Herein the second side of ethics is grounded, the descent into the world that is the domain of man during his or her life. As a living being that is above that endowed with reason and thus capable of achieving knowledge of the absolute truth, man is responsible to harmonize cosmos, to perfect the unity of the universe through his wise behaviour acting according to justice.

Descent into the World, Ethics of Justice and of Pure Conscience

Whereas the ascent can be seen as ethical because it fulfils the responsibility of self-knowledge that leads towards the source which substantiates being, the descent (or ethics) is to be understood as its result.³¹ Insofar practical ethics have to be seen as a philosophical way of life as man's conduct is based on his extensive experience of truth. Ethics thus come forth from the most subjective, for man individually educates his soul towards simplicity and purifies it, and culminates in action in the world inspired by the attainment of unity. Reason is here the soul's master. It discovers absolute truth in the original source, the One or God, against whom the value of all being has to be measured. Every single being herein has a function that is oriented at its essence, it has been endowed by the ultimate source of being, which it unfolds to achieve perfection, its determination and destiny. Man is actually and really reason. Its perfect unfolding, wisdom, thus represents the achievement of bliss for the human being. True wisdom is the realization or rather experience of the unity of all being in the One or God. In this way every existent being appears to be actually equal in and through the ultimate source. Man's responsibility is to promote the unfolding of being and of man by emphasizing the relevance of reason and to act as an example in his own rational conduct of life. The yardstick of his action is thereby equality in unity, that is justice. Every human being, a sovereign as well,³² is under the obligation to its fellow creatures to act according to mildness, gentleness and goodness. Especially a person who has had a

³¹ For the connection of theory and action, ontology and ethics by reason or knowledge see: Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 70–77, 162–167, 185–197.

³² Dorothea Krawulsky, *Briefe und Reden des Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazzali*. Übersetzt und erläutert von Dorothea Krawulsky. Islamkundliche Untersuchungen Bd. 15. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1971), pp. 69, 115, 133 beautifully underlines this.

vision, experienced unity has to and is only able to fulfil this commandment. She has become so pure and is so immersed into her heart that she bears the source inside herself and is thus similar to it. As Plotinus defines the One as the ultimate Good³³ and al-Ghazali as well emphasizes man's being the image of the Merciful,³⁴ it suggests itself to interpretation that this achievement of the highest knowledge (or "enlightenment") culminates in action according to similarity, that is in mercy or compassion and goodness, in an ethics of giving. Here the role of reason is crucial: knowledge achieved through the perfect unfolding of reason substantiates and grounds just conduct towards every fellow being. Insofar as Plotinus' and al-Ghazali' "mysticism" does not at all advocate escapism but an ethical conduct of life that is philosophical, the path of the wise.

Reason educates the soul towards knowledge and justice. Just as it facilitates the purification of the sensual it also enables the bareness of evil conduct. With this Plotinus and al-Ghazali emphasize, along with personal disposition, teaching and habituation to good deeds.³⁵ Thence, the education of reason is directly associated with the capability of moral conduct which is why reason (also in the descent) can be denoted a virtue. As reason is concealed in the innermost core of the human being, ethics have to be judged according to the state of the human inwardness.³⁶ Not every giving is good; mildness can be a deception when it is mere pretence. Plotinus and al-Ghazali demand a pure, honest conscience which can only just really characterize an action as good. The relativity of morality is harmonized in the rational attainment of the highest knowledge in the experience of unity through the purity in the deepest core of the heart that can only appear as just through its becoming similar to the ultimate Good. Thus reason is a virtue and the ethics of justice the peak of a philosophy that is oriented at unity. In the absolute immanence of the individual innermost core of the soul the key point of the actuality of being, of truth, of reason and certainty and of the purity of doing can be found. Plotinus and al-Ghazali, through the unity of immanence and transcendence in the rational core of the human being, link knowledge, ethics and happiness; insofar, we could here also speak of an earthly, rationally oriented Eschatology.

³³ Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), p. 40.

³⁴ See: Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Die Nische der Lichter. Miškat al-anwar*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von 'Abd-Elsamad 'Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), p. 40.

³⁵ See Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Das Kriterium des Handelns. Mizan al-'amal*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt, mit einer Einleitung, mit Anmerkungen und Indices herausgegeben von 'Abd-Elsamad 'Abd-Elhamid Elschazli. (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006), p. 138. Also: Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*. (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 230.

³⁶ Cf. Ilona Kock, *Ontologische Begründung* (2011), pp. 58–59, 194.

Epilogue

In spite of all contradictions and differences, Plotinus and al-Ghazali appear to be comparable in their emphasis on the absolute part of reason. The original source of all being, the One or God, is as true light the original principle of reason, organizing and forming thereby all being rationally. Man being essentially determined by reason, his responsibility being the reflection of divine light in his own individual innermost core, fulfils the unity of rationality through his comprehension of the One's, God's, actuality what only just renders the rationally ordered being understandable. The philosophies of Plotinus and al-Ghazali stress the relevance of reason and have the human being in their centres; finally they advocate a philosophy of man, for he, through the unfolding of reason, creates the unity of being and of being and ethics. The human being herein has the responsibility to harmonize cosmos through knowledge. Man translates the rational providence (for being emerges ordered along the absolute reason) of the first principle into the world of the living. For this his ascent in knowledge to absolute unity, the immanence of transcendence, is fundamentally relevant.

The exceeding of reason, the expansion of the concept of reason with the hyper-rational, the extensive experience of unity enables to base ethics on ontology. The hyper-rationality of "mysticism", *Henosis*³⁷ or the experience of unity is thus not so much an overcoming or dismissal of reason (and not of rationality as well) but rather its perfection. Through the absoluteness of this deep realization, the comprehension of being in its actuality culminates in action following the principle of justice. Insofar, the knower, the philosopher and "mystic" is an example for society as she can communicate her knowledge through teaching and her conduct of life.

The knowledge of the unity of being demands, if it is experienced in the truthful inner depths, the purest heart, no escapism but an ethics of justice. Thus the basic principle of reason with Plotinus and al-Ghazali shows the mutual dependence of ontology and ethics which are linked through knowledge or reason. Therefore the extension of the concept of reason with the hyper-rational, with "mysticism" as the absolute unfolding of reason towards unity, is absolutely relevant as it only just facilitates the substantiating explanation of ethics through (and on) ontology and the orientation at unity and justice instead of division and injustice.

The substantiation of being through a hyper-rational, reason itself principally substantiating source, the original principle of reason, lets it be rationally organized and thus be comprehensible and interpretable as a reference to its source. Because man is defined as being essentially rational he or she is able to attain perfect knowledge or experience of unity. Letting this become alive in the conduct of life through wisdom, mercy, goodness and justice, man himself only just creates the unity of all being.

³⁷ This term is very well explained by Werner Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen: Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*. (Frankfurt am Main: Votterio Klostermann, 1985), p. 123.

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