

The Elevation of Language and the Transcendence of the Self in Augustine and al-Ghazali's Autobiographies

علو اللغة وسمو النفس في السيرة الذاتية لأوغستين والغزالي

L'élévation de la langue et la transcendance de l'étant dans les autobiographies de Augustine et al-Ghazali

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Abstract

This article puts in dialogue two medieval theologians of different religious beliefs in order to understand the relation between mysticism and language and how language contributes to the achievement of the mystical experience.

The close reading of the autobiographies of both Augustine and al-Ghazali shows that the mystical experience of transcendence and gnostic truth is linked to transcending language itself.

In Augustine's *Confessions*, conversion to Christianity takes place when rhetoric transcends to the stage of what Augustine calls "Christian rhetoric" or "redeemed rhetoric."

For al-Ghazali, in *Deliverance From Error*, language turns into as a mediator for the mystical experience of transcendence only when it serves the word of God.

From this perspective, language is perceived of as a communicative instrument that is not only connected with moral imagination but is itself an instance of moral action. For both thinkers, mysticism is possible through language and language has no meaning outside of ethical parameters.

Keywords: transcendence, mysticism, rhetoric, language, philosophy, ethics.

المُلخَص

يؤسس هذا المقال حوار بين عالمين من القرون الوسطى ذوي ديانات مختلفة بغرض تحديد العلاقة بين التصوف واللغة وتبيين مدى مساهمة اللغة في إكتمال تجربة التصوف.

إن البحث في السيرة الذاتية لكل من أوغستين والغزالي يؤكد أن تجربة التعالي الصوفية والمعرفة الروحية مرتبطان إرتباطاً وثيقاً بتعالى اللغة في حد ذاتها. في كتاب الاعترافات لأوغستين، لا يكتمل الإيمان بالديانة المسيحية إلا عندما تتعالى البلاغة لتصل إلى مرحلة البلاغة المسيحية أو البلاغة المُستردّة. أمّا بالنسبة للغزالي في كتابه المنقذ من الضلال، تصبح اللغة وسيلة لتحقيق تجربة التعالي بالمعنى الصوفي عندما تكون في خدمة إحياء علوم الدين. من هذا المنطلق، ينظر كل من أوغستين والغزالي إلى اللغة على أنها أداة تواصل محمّلة بغايات أخلاقية ومثال عن العمل الأخلاقي. فتجربة التصوف في حد ذاتها رهينة اللغة وليس للغة معنى خارج الإطار الأخلاقي.

كلمات مفتاحية : التعالي، التصوف، البلاغة، اللغة، الفلسفة، الأخلاق.

Résumé

Cet article met en dialogue deux théologiens médiévaux de différentes confessions afin d'établir une relation entre le mysticisme et le langage et montrer ainsi comment la langue permet la complétude de l'expérience mystique.

Une lecture attentive de l'autobiographie d'Augustine et al-Ghazali montre que l'expérience mystique de la transcendance et la vérité gnostique sont liées à la transcendance de la langue elle-même.

Dans Les confessions d'Augustine, la rhétorique doit se transformer en "rhétorique chrétienne" ou "rhétorique rédemptif" pour que la conversion au christianisme devienne une possibilité.

Quant à al-Ghazali, dans son livre *La délivrance de l'erreur*, le langage ne peut devenir un médiateur de l'expérience mystique de la transcendance que lorsqu'il est au service du Créateur.

De ce point de vue, la langue n'est pas seulement perçue comme un outil communicatif lié à la moralité, mais se transforme elle-même en un exemple d'action morale. Selon ces deux penseurs, le mysticisme est possible à travers la langue et la langue n'a pas de sens en dehors des paramètres éthiques.

Mots-clés: transcendance, mysticisme, rhétorique, langage, philosophie, éthique.

■ Introduction

There are basic differences in the premises of the philosophical and theological teachings of Augustine and al-Ghazali, being intellectual advocate of two different faith traditions, but a deep analysis of their theories regarding for example divine illumination or on the relationship between faith and reason, can reveal numerous similarities and intellectual enterprises.

It is surprising that “there have been few attempts at a comparison of their ideas.” (Shaw 1987:10) And “because Augustine wrote in the early fifth century A.D and al-Ghazali in the early twelfth century A.D. few have attempted to compare them.” (Shaw 10 :1987). Both writers used the genre of autobiography to give the reader a synthesis of their religious doctrine. Saint Augustine wrote *The Confessions* and al-Ghazali wrote *Deliverance from Error* which was translated by Claud Field into English also as *The Confessions of AL-Ghazali*, a hint to Augustine’s book. In their way to faith, both theologians were filled with doubt and uncertainty, experienced a spiritual and intellectual crisis, until a divinely superior force, what al-Ghazali calls ‘a light of God’ and Augustine calls ‘divine enlightenment’ made them experience faith beyond mere rational speculations. Their narratives, while being autobiographies, are more preoccupied with the spiritual journey of serving the word of God rather than relating their life story and its historical development. In this sense, their autobiographies can be read as instances of intellectual supplications and didactic discourse. Both also reach the conclusion that the union with the divine is possible through the mystical path.

An exploration of the historical contexts of Augustine and al-Ghazali is necessary to elucidate how their personal life shaped their philosophical and theological thought. Saint Augustine was a Christian theologian who played a significant role in the development of early Western philosophy. He was born on 354 A. D., in the town of Thagaste, on the Northern coast of

Africa and died on 430 A. D. He was fascinated by philosophical enquiries and spent his early life exploring various philosophical and religious doctrines. He studied rhetoric to be a public orator. But he was full of uncertainty and tried to find guidance and enlightenment in philosophy. He was greatly influenced by Manichaeism, though later Neo-Platonism became the major philosophical framework of his thought. After years of confusion he read the Holy Scriptures and became convinced that he could attain salvation only through the Christian experience. Upon his conversion to Christianity, he started developing his own theories on philosophy and theology which left a profound impact on the medieval thought.

In a different part of the world and seven centuries later, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a would be Muslim theologian and mystic was born in 450 A.H. (1058 A.D.) in Tus, Iran. He passed through a spiritual and intellectual crisis that filled him with doubt (Griffel 2009:41). He abandoned later his career as a leading theologian and teacher at the Niẓāmmiyyah school, one of the leading institutions in the 11th century of Islamic learning. Al-Ghazali left on the pretext of going on pilgrimage to Mecca. He travelled to Damascus, Jerusalem and Mecca to settle down finally in Tus, where he was joined by his Sufi disciples to live a monastic ascetic life. In his path to spiritual certainty and gnostic truth, he studied religion, philosophy and chose the Sufi path. He evaluated and criticized the religious sects of his time and the Neoplatonist philosophies of Al-Farabi and Avicenna. Al-Ghazali's greatest work is *Ihya' 'ulum ad-din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) in which he explained religious doctrines and argued for the moral base of the Islamic faith. In that book, he argued at length about the value of ascetic life and the inward turn that leads to spiritual self-ascension and union with the divine. He explained later in his autobiographical work *Al-Munqidh min ad-dalāl* (Deliverance from Error) how he found true knowledge and holistic truth through mysticism

and experiencing the mystical presence of the divine in the self. To sum up, in their way to divine enlightenment, both thinkers, filled with doubt and uncertainty went through intellectual and spiritual crises that made them question the premises of what they have taken for granted as scholastic education and the religious exegesis proposed by scholars of the day. Their autobiographies translate their spiritual dilemma and provide the key to self-sufficient truth and union with God. While Augustine thinks of truth in terms of language, al-Ghazali links truth and knowledge to ethical language and ethical philosophy. To what extent can language convey gnostic truth and how? What are the limits of language in interpreting and teaching the word of God?

1. Saint Augustine and Rhetoric

Rhetoric takes a big share in *The Confessions*. Augustine was concerned about the functions of rhetoric and how it was conceived of in his time. The only concern of his parents and schoolmasters, he wrote, “was that I should learn to make a good speech, and how to persuade others by my words” (II.2.4). Hence, Rhetoric was linked to worldly motives such as fame, wealth and power. With retrospection, Augustine felt that he was caught in the “whirlpool of debasement,” (I.19.30), where the rhetoric he learnt was a “fruitless pastime” (I.18.28) that turned him away from God. Such a rhetoric that is void of spirituality brought about “filth committed with greater evidence as a result of learning the words” (I.16.26). In that, Augustine bitterly confesses that he took “sinful pleasure” (I.16.26).

The classical rhetorical theory in practice emphasized style and delivery, but content was not of primary importance comparing to style. The rhetoric of the second sophistic, the rhetorical culture, in which Augustine was educated left truth as a secondary concern (Tell 2010:433). Style was the priority. However, style and eloquence alone are no guarantee of wisdom as “wisdom and folly can be clothed alike in plain words or the

finest flowers of speech" (V.6.10). An ornamented form and a high style without a meaningful content is useless. This is the kind of rhetoric that Augustine was denouncing. It is useful to read the critique of rhetoric in *The Confessions* through the ethical framework that Augustine suggests in *De Doctrina Christiana* which explains how he formulated a theory of pastoral rhetoric that serves Christianity and transforms "pagan literacy into Christian literacy" (Johnson 1976:222). For Augustine, an authentic believer has to serve the word of God through an ethical and moral language, leading to salvation. In the same vein, Al-Ghazali did not believe in a philosophy that is unethical and that would deny either the Creator of the world or the belief in eternal life. He considered philosophy and philosophical language that convey such unorthodox ideas as heretical. The following section explores al-Ghazali's attack of unethical philosophy.

2. Al-Ghazali and Ethical Language

Deliverance from Error is a unique account of al-Ghazali's search for truth and redemption. Nevertheless, the purpose of the book was not in fact autobiographical and "the autobiographical element is accidental" (Umaruddin 1996:74). It is rather an attempt to expose the errors of the prevailing philosophical and theological doctrines of the time. The book translates his struggle to study religious and philosophical creeds and sects to search truth. When al-Ghazali published *The Incoherence of Philosophers*, the book was interpreted as an attack on philosophy. However, he "was not against philosophy or science as such," he was rather "against the spirit of skepticism which they brought in their train" (Umaruddin 1996:46). Some Philosophers of the day thought they were above religion. "Even the ignorant who knew Plato and Aristotle only by name neglected their religious duties and justified their actions by saying that philosophers did not follow any religion" (Umaruddin 1996:47).

In his autobiography, al-Ghazali wrote “convinced that to dream of refuting a doctrine before having thoroughly comprehended it was like shooting at an object in the dark, I devoted myself zealously to the study of philosophy” (Field :1909 24). He spent many years studying Greek philosophy through the interpretation of two prominent medieval Muslim Philosophers, Farabi and Avicenna in order to discover the inconsistency of the philosophical doctrines in depth. He divided the sciences into six branches which are mathematics, logic, physics, politics, ethics and metaphysics and discussed them in detail. Concerning politics and ethics, he argued that they do not contradict religion. He noted that philosophers derived these sciences from religious books and from the prophets and saints. Hence, the sciences did not in any way contradict religion. Mathematics, logic, physics had nothing to do with religion, their study is desirable as long as they are not applied to other domains such as metaphysics. While some scholars thought that mathematics can be beneficial when applied to other domains, he warned the mathematician against the error of applying the results of their research for the evaluation of metaphysical and religious issues (Umaruddin 1996:79). According to him, “logical reason when applied to metaphysics, led nowhere, rather it gets involved in contradictions” (Umaruddin 1996:50). Like Kant, al-Ghazali perceived that the mathematical method although sound in the domain of exact science was useless in the domain of metaphysics. “He definitely anticipated Kant in that the science of metaphysics is impossible” (Umaruddin 1996:80). In his work *The Incoherence of Philosophers*, he demonstrated that the philosophers cannot prove the existence of God or his unity by logic and their views, on this matter, bring about heresy and unbelief. In addition, reason cannot account for invisible things such as life after death, or angels (Umaruddin 1996:80). There is a scope beyond reason, logic and intelligence that can only be attained through faith and divine enlightenment. For al-Ghazali, reason is important

when it is guided by faith. Consequently, philosophy should be concerned about the search of truth and knowledge. Can language transport faith and generate religious and spiritual knowledge? How can language be transcended to serve religion and reach union with the Creator? Augustine suggests a theory of Christian Rhetoric in *De Doctrina Christiana* that empowers language to convey religious and ethical discourse. The next section explains what Augustine means by Christian rhetoric and argues that transcending language precedes self-ascension in Christianity.

3. Christian Rhetoric and Transcending the Self

In a garden in Milan, Augustine turned away from his profession as a professor of rhetoric and quit what he called “the chair of lies” (IX.2.4). The denunciation of his rhetorical past went in parallel with his denial of the pleasure of the flesh. His spiritual ascent happened at the moment when he broke away with his past as a “vendor of words” (IX.5.13). His “release from the profession of rhetoric was to become a reality.” He wrote; “I was free from it already” (IX.4.7). Augustine understood that “the art of eloquence should be put into active service, and not rejected out of hand because it is tainted with paganism” (Farrell 2008:283). Consequently, he promised God; “I want these things to be used to serve you” (I.15.24).

The Confessions had given him a critical space in order to assess his rhetorical theory that he had fully developed in *De Doctrina Christiana*, considered as a guidance to those who want to understand or teach the Scripture. One way of conceiving the word of God is to elevate rhetoric to a redeemed rhetoric or a Christian rhetoric. From this perspective, he did not condemn rhetoric itself but a corrupted residue of it. He suggested that its use should be associated with the search of truth because “those who seek the truth,” seek “Him who is the truth” (I. 24 25). Rhetoric used for worldly motives such as fame and wealth,

leads to a selfish attitude. However, the Christian rhetoric whose purpose is to utter the truth for the good of audience becomes a charitable rhetoric (Tell 2010:433). Now that he elevated rhetoric to the stage of Christian rhetoric, he was ready to fuse in a union with God. The moment at the garden in Milan is crucial to understand Augustine's transcendence from a sinner to a true believer. This union happens through words and the elevation of rhetoric precedes his spiritual ascent. Before the scene of the garden, Augustine explains how close he was from making a resolution and devoting his life to the divine. He wrote: I stood on the brink of resolution, waiting to take fresh breath. I tried again and came a little nearer to my goal, and then a little nearer still, so that I could almost reach out and grasp it... And the closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me, the more I shrank from it in horror. But it did not drive me back or turn me from my purpose: it merely left me hanging in suspense" (VIII. 11). Augustine was a sinner who believed in God. Torn between the pleasure of the flesh and a higher cause, he made his resolution. With perseverance and faith, he found his way. He purified himself and his rhetoric in order to be used only to serve The Creator. In the garden, "beneath a fig tree," Augustine says: "I probed the hidden depth of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears" (VIII. 12). At that moment, he did not belong to the material world any more, his soul was flying to accept the word of God. He heard "the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house," repeating a refrain "Take it and read, take it and read" (VIII. 12). The words probed into his heart and he understood them as "a divine command" to open the Bible. He hurried back to seize the Scripture, he opened it and read: "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather... spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites" (VIII. 12). He was thus elevated

by words and through words. The words he read transcended him. These words could have not touched his heart if this had happened earlier when he indulged himself in pleasure and worldly desires. The difference here that made him accept these words is that he has already developed his own notion of ethical language and redeemed rhetoric that should be in the service of God. Thus, transcending language was essential to receive divine enlightenment and transcend the self.

The impact of words was powerful and filled him with faith. "Only when the whole person turns towards the truth, does it become available to him. This means that faith in the sense of personal trust and belief is prior to understanding, unless we believe, we shall never understand" (Battenhouse :1955 6).. According to Augustine, faith is prior to knowledge and knowledge is made possible through faith, which engenders enlightenment. From this perspective, the fusion of ethical language, faith and divine enlightenment were the key behind his spiritual ascent. The mystical experience that Augustine witnessed is "a mental state that provided an immediate sense of access to deeper spiritual truth, and would thus offer a feeling of the noetic. It would be one whose content would defy description in categories of ordinary language, and so would be ineffable" (Kenny 2005:2). While Augustine was not explicit about his mysticism, al-Ghazali was. He proposed a theory of ethical philosophy whose ultimate goal is pure knowledge that can be reached through mysticism. Better transition

4. Al-Ghazali's Mysticism

Al Ghazali was more articulate about his mysticism than Augustine. Unsatisfied with the philosophical language that did not serve religion, he developed his own ethical philosophy that was based on transcending the self to reach knowledge. He argues that Sufism is the best way to reach '*as-Sa'ada al-Haqiqiya*' (true felicity) and *fanā*' (union with God). The following section

explores how transcending the self in *Deliverance from Error* happened through transcending philosophy and language into an ethical stage.

Sufism in Islam started as “a reaction against the formalism of the theologians, the intellectualism of the rationalists and the philosophers, the ungodly ways of the ruling classes” (Umaruddin 1996:58). The Sufi were ascetics and quietists. They retired from society and they devoted their lives for God. In his autobiography, al-Ghazali studied theological, philosophical and the Sufi doctrines to conclude that the theologians were unreliable because they took everything for granted. The philosophers brought about heresy as they only believed in reason and in the visible. He rejected all sects and “adopted the Sufi literature thoroughly” to become later “responsible for weaving the Sufi doctrines into the texture of Islamic thought and literature” (Umaruddin 1996:62). Al-Ghazali asserts in his autobiography that the advanced “stage of mysticism could not be reached by mere instruction, but only by transport, ecstasy and the transformation of the moral being” (Field 41 :1909). In other words, reason is able to accept divine knowledge by transport of faith. The soul reaches ecstasy when united with God and thus, man is transformed and transcended.

Like Augustine, al-Ghazali had a prestigious position, “the highest attainable in the religious community” (45). However, he was following the “vain desire of honor and reputation” (43). Later, he abandoned his career and spent ten years meditating in order to attain “the last stage being lost in God” (48). His awakening happened at the end of his life, after studying and criticizing the rational language of philosophy that was void of spirituality and faith. The alternative was to shape and construct his own ethical philosophy to serve the word of God. His transformation happened through words. Thanks to words, he accepted the light of God in him. He relates in his autobiography, *Deliverance from Error* that the voice of religion and knowledge was talking to

him: "Up! Up! thy life is nearing an end" (43). His heart, soul and mind were ready to listen and let "God indwells completely" in him (60). From the time his inner self that was tortured by doubt and uncertainty followed the path of mysticism, it was healed. The self comes "to see in the waking state angels and souls of prophets" and "hears their voices and wise counsels" (48). By means of this contemplation of heavenly images, the self rises "by degrees to heights which human language cannot reach, which one cannot even indicate without falling into great and inevitable errors" (48).

The ordinary language cannot describe the ineffability of God. Al-Ghazali experienced a stage above belief. To account for this experience, language has to be elevated. The elevation of language is prior to self-ascension. Once language transcended to a higher divine space, where ordinary language cannot afford to describe, the self was touched "by a light which God pours into the heart" (Macdonald 1972:238). Filled with ecstasy, he says in his autobiography; "what I experience I shall not try to say. Call me happy, but ask me no more" (Field 1909:48). From this perspective, Sufism is a complete rupture with the material world and a total devotion to God. The spiritual condition of the Sufi believer advances from witnessing high stages of union with God where language fails to translate the state of the elevated self and no rendering in words is possible.

When the self is elevated, pure knowledge is possible to grasp. Knowledge is a cornerstone of al-Ghazali's ethical philosophy. It is linked to morality and is impossible without it. It is the product of 'aql (reason) and 'qalb (heart). For him, 'qalb' is the "transcendental entity that perceives and knows" (Umaruddin 1996:98). In this sense, knowledge is linked to morality. Therefore, reason that is devoid of faith and ethics is pointless. Ethically speaking, believers should try to achieve knowledge and good conduct (Umaruddin 102 :1996). The highest stage of pure knowledge is possible through mysticism. It is the

stage where “man is wholly absorbed in God after purifying the heart. It is a light which reveals itself in the heart of man; From this light, many things that were vague or were only hearsay become real and living. Through it is given to man the knowledge of all spiritual realities such as God, His attributes, His actions, revelation, heaven, hell, etc. By it the curtain of doubt is removed, the truth becomes absolutely manifest, and all spiritual realities are apprehended as clearly as with one’s own eyes” (Umaruddin 1996:98). In a nutshell, according to al-Ghazali, ethical philosophy and ethical language are the key behind breaking with the material world and transcending the self into a stage where only pure knowledge counts. Augustine also sets knowledge of God and the self as an ultimate goal.

■ Conclusion

To conclude, these two autobiographies are considered by scholars as a foundation of medieval preaching theory. Augustine’s “writings remain among the dominant peaks in the range of Christian thought” (Battenhouse 4 :1955). *The Confessions*, particularly is “unique in the literature of antiquity, told in a spirit of meditation” (Battenhouse 15 :1955). It is “a prayer” that symbolizes the quest for self-knowledge and such knowledge can only be found in the light of knowledge of God (Troup 36 :1999). Al-Ghazali’s *Deliverance from Error* “is unique in Arabic for the keenness and the fullness of its self-revelations” (Macdonald 174 :1909). This book “brought orthodoxy and mysticism into closer contact” (Watt 15 :1953) and laid the foundations of a sound Islamic mysticism. For Augustine, rhetoric should amount to redeemed rhetoric and this transcendence is prior to self-ascension. For al-Ghazali, ethical philosophy leads to redemption. Gnostic poetic expression is needed because ordinary language is unable to account for the ineffability of divine. After the transcendence of language, the self is ready to embrace pure knowledge of God. Studying both Augustine and

al-Ghazali shows that a link between classical Christian thought and Islamic thought is possible. Both thinkers had broken the fetters of tradition and freed themselves from past beliefs to shape their own theological theories. Both devoted their lives to reach knowledge and ultimate truth. But there is something beyond knowledge and reason. Augustine refers to it as 'divine enlightenment', al-Ghazali calls it 'mystical intuition'. This source of knowledge cannot count on senses because they are deceptive, nor on reason and logic that the philosophers advocated because it is unable to comprehend the invisible. It is rather the product of divine force, a light from God.

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