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### **On the Acceptance of Doubt**

*Doubt is the beginning, not the end, of wisdom. - George Iles*

Of all the human emotions, doubt is one of the most haunting, persistent—and troublesome. Doubt, or uncertainty, can lead us to question the very nature of our surroundings—but what happens when we begin to doubt our own capacities? Can we still reason our way out of difficulty once we begin to doubt the power of reason itself?

I will argue that once doubt enters the mind, we cannot reason our way out of difficulty. This should not, however, cause us to live in despair. Doubt is an essential part of the philosophical enterprise, and living with doubt, a part of the human condition. Drawing from the ideas of philosophers Rene Descartes and Jean-Paul Sartre, I will explain how my beliefs and those of philosopher Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali differ, and advocate for an acceptance of the incessant state of doubt with which we are presented as an alternative to mental anguish.

A source of doubt in humanity is simple curiosity—which, for Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, is “instinctive”; a “matter of temperament and not of [his] choice or contriving.”<sup>i</sup> It is only natural to be concerned with the true nature of our situations, and only natural that we should seek answers to the questions posed by our environment. However, thoroughly exploring our origins and tackling fundamental metaphysical questions can lead to uncertainty, confusion, and even despair. All of these emotions are different ways of expressing the same sentiment: doubt.

Reflecting upon—and having doubts about—his own knowledge, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali writes:

Thereupon I investigated the various kinds of knowledge I had, and found myself destitute of all knowledge with this characteristic of infallibility except in the case of sense-perception and necessary truths. So I said: “Now that despair has come over me, there is no point in studying any problems except on the basis of what is self-evident; namely, necessary truths and the affirmations of the senses.”<sup>ii</sup>

Al-Ghazali states, there is no way of defining and ultimately “proving” the existence of absolute knowledge—we cannot know whether the senses “affirm” the truth about the empirical world, or prevent us from reaching it. If we cannot trust our senses, we have nothing concrete to rely on.<sup>iii</sup> And if we cannot be certain that the world is as we perceive it, then how can we be confident that we can discover such an abstract thing as infallible knowledge?

We are now in the same state of mind that Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali was; our rational powers have been called into question. We have doubts about our own reasoning, as he did, as well as doubts about the reliability of our senses, as he and Descartes did.<sup>iv</sup> We have been forced to conclude that, even supposing there exists such a thing as absolute truth, we are in no position to reach it.

This realization that we cannot be certain of *anything* comes with the feelings of mental anguish and “forlornness,” as described by existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul

Sartre.<sup>v</sup> We feel hopelessness at our inability to arrive at any conclusions not based upon “affirmations” from our possibly deceptive faculties.<sup>vi</sup>

For Al-Ghazali, the solution to despair comes when God casts a “light...into [his] breast,” instructing him to unconditionally accept the “truths of the intellect.”<sup>vii</sup> He then reaches a “critical point” of realization—the recognition that it is impossible to reason one's way to an unambiguous, absolute truth. Just as he reaches this attitude—which he later dubs a “disease” or mental imbalance—his position changes. A higher power tells him that he must place blind trust in his ability to reason, and he does. Abandoning his logical approach, Al-Ghazali makes no effort to question *how* he knows there is a God, nor how it is he knows he is not being deceived by this God—his sudden transition from the despairing denial of all knowledge to the “enlightened” acceptance of the power of reason is unexplained and abrupt. Adopting this solution is inconsistent with his desire to rely only upon infallible knowledge. It unconditionally accepts the existence of a higher being and makes claims as to this being's motivations, and it undermines his previous attempts at purely rational deductions.

Faced with a choice of despair or certainty derived from religious belief, Al-Ghazali makes a faith-based choice. I propose, instead of choosing the religious path that both he and Descartes ultimately take, a solution in keeping with his rational side—but not his quest for certainty. In contrast: we should acknowledge, even *accept* the sensation of doubt in our lives.

We must continue, despite our existential and philosophical desolation, to admit to the uncertainties in our environment. Whether our conception of existence is accurate or not, we are obliged to carry on as if it were—not out of certainty but out of pragmatism. We may still doubt that we are rational beings who can really perceive the truth, but to live in this world is to accept that doubt. The solution is neither to claim we can reason infallibly, nor to give in to despair—for with feelings such as despair and forlornness come those of responsibility.<sup>viii</sup> We have no one who can extract us from our situation; the only alternative is to reconcile our doubt and forlornness with the world in which we live.

Have we given in and accepted that we must be able to reason? No. It simply means that we must deal with “the essence” of the here and now; whether it is real or not that we have bodies and must adequately address their needs, or whether we can or can't trust our senses not to deceive us, we must simply be, act, proceed a certain way, knowing full well that we may not know the Truth, and may never be able to discover it. Ironically, doubt can also help us become closer to truth, if it exists, as it forces us to constantly question and re-define what we believe.

We are trapped and governed by doubt, in that we always end up re-thinking our theories, accepting that we may not have all the answers, and being open to the possibility of error. But at the same time, doubt is liberating; it completely opens up the realm of the hypothetical to us, as we cannot afford an arrogant and unchanging view of the truth. In this way, doubt is an intellectually positive force for our society, a perpetual catalyst for reflection, metaphysical discussion and the furthering of philosophical questions.

Our ability to reason, as Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali has demonstrated, can easily be called into question—especially when one cannot justify a belief in God. Without this ability, we may be tempted to sink into despair, and we may even find that we cannot reason rationally under such circumstances. However, the question of whether we can or cannot reason rationally is overshadowed by the importance of accepting doubt in our lives;

we must live with uncertainty and, in this intellectually humble manner, we can deal with our inescapable present realities and enhance the quality of our reasoning with the acceptance of doubt.

## References

Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali (translation by W. Montgomery Watt). London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953. pp. 21 - 26.

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Iles, George. (Quotation: "Doubt is the beginning, not the end, of wisdom.")

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism and Human Emotions. Lyle Stuart, 1984.

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## Endnotes

i. Al-Ghazali, The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali.

ii. Al-Ghazali, The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali.

iii. This is well illustrated by the sundial example, in which Al-Ghazali determines by using the example of a gnomon's movement in the sun that our senses can deceive us. He writes: "...The most powerful sense is that of sight. Yet when it looks at the shadow, it sees it standing still, and judges that there is no motion. Then by experiment and observation after an hour it knows that the shadow is moving and, moreover, that it is moving not by fits and starts but in such a way that it is never in a state of rest. Again, it looks at the heavenly body (se. the sun) and sees it small, the size of a shilling; yet geometrical computations show that it is greater than the earth in size...My reliance on sense-perception has also been destroyed." This brings to mind Descartes' First Meditation and the Dream Problem, in that it leads us to conclude that every belief we entertain based on the perceptions of our senses could be false.

iv. In fact, the similarities between Descartes' First Meditation and Al-Ghazali's The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali are striking. At a general level, both philosophers tackle metaphysical questions by attempting to discover "certain" truths, or absolute knowledge, and experience a state of despair or hopelessness in which it is determined that they cannot rely on anything, least of all what they perceive through their senses. Both philosophers are "rescued" by their belief in the existence of God.

v. Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions.

vii. Al-Ghazali, The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali.

viii. Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions.