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## **A Renovative Dialogue on Morality: Al- Ghazali and the Expansion of the Secular Horizon**

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A RENOVATIVE DIALOGUE ON MORALITY:  
IMAM AL- GHAZALI AND THE EXPANSION OF  
THE SECULAR HORIZON

Fabio Bauer- Gauss

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

MA: PHILOSOPHY: GLOBAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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## Introduction:

With the rise of Secularism a unique movement in history occurred in a magnitude that had not priorly been seen in the story of humankind. Whereas religious worldviews constituted the center of communal life in Europe before the onset of the Enlightenment, pervading the social sphere in all its aspects, in secular societies religion turned from an unquestioned, often ruthlessly enforced imperative into an option among a variety of other ideologies. Whilst communal life had been centred around religious teachings, the people of the Christian civilization shared a common metaphysical, cosmological and moral heritage- a structure implicit to which was a claim for universal truth. In contrast, in the 21st century our societies, especially in Europe and North America are characterized by an ideological pluralism that pervades every dimension of social life like religion did in earlier ages. As the influence of the Christian monopoly diminished and religion receded ever more into the private sphere whilst easing its dominant grip on the public the people attained the liberty to think independently from the teachings of religious Scripture and to assert their own worldview regardless of whether it agreed with ecclesiastic doctrine or not. Furthermore, due to extensive processes of immigration and globalization from the late 20th century onwards public spaces turned into meeting- places of different cultures, habits and customs. Consequently ideological pluralism turned into colorful multiculturalism.

Naturally, the confrontation of communities whose ways of life are alien to each other, whose habits, customs and practises mutually strange and unfamiliar, came with problems and challenges such as clashes of ideology, separation of peoples due to differences in belief, marginalization of cultural and ethnic minorities and even violent outbursts triggered by inter- ideological conflicts. However, besides these difficulties and problems which yet remain to be solved the multicultural-secular turn brought a great promise. In *A Secular Age* the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor terms the defining feature of Secularism as “spin” towards ideological openness or closure. Worldviews, he writes, are each qualified by the attractive pull that its reasons exert on people. This attractive pull, convincing people to believe in one worldview instead of another often functions as a closed spin

whereby the beliefs of the other seem unreasonable, irrational and untenable.<sup>1</sup> However the spin may take a different turn in direction of openness towards other perspectives. In this vein Taylor defines Secularism not in terms of a dominating ideology but instead as a doxastic openness which accommodates a plurality of *Weltanschauungen* which are each attributed with appealing reasons. Within such an open-ended framework the compelling influence which different worldviews exert on humans might provide fertile ground on which mutual understanding inbetween diverging worldviews be fostered. Situated in the framework of Secularism, this thesis is devoted to the establishment of mutual understanding and expansion of horizons inbetween paradigms, albeit from a traditional Islamic perspective.

In the development from pre-modern religious worldviews to contemporary Secularism, the postmodern outlook on the world rose to dominance. Whereas Secularism is defined by its welcoming openness towards all traditions and ideologies that are not hostile towards the doxastic perspectives of the other, the situation is different in the case of certain branches of Postmodernism which we expose to closer investigation in this paper. Especially the Nietzschean and Foucauldian branches thereof are characterized by a destructive attitude towards traditional systems of thought and ways of life, which include profound, systematic and in the author's opinion invaluable and immensely beneficial teachings concerning morality. Inherent to the perspectives we treat of is the outspoken rejection of belief in a transcendent and benevolent source of existence, the propositions that humans have direct access to and are able to know reality and that we have a soul which lives on after the demise of our physical body. Being grounded in these sentences traditional metaphysics, teleology, epistemology and morality have no room within the domain of Postmodern thought, which fundamentally rejects these dimensions of holistic philosophical discourse. This paper is based on the conviction that such attitude of denial is against the spirit of and comes to detriment of the Postmodern enterprise, severely limiting its horizon and closing it off to methodologies and propositions from systems of thought which are novel and foreign to it, especially with regard to metaphysical and moral inquiry. Postmodernism arose in response to Christian values, lying at the fundament of the Western world's ideology.<sup>2</sup> Since this is the case thinkers such as Foucault and Nietzsche are in dialogue specifically with Christian doctrine, ideals and values. This thesis engages in a dialogue with the Postmodern current from a traditional Islamic perspective. Even though the ideas of Postmodernism have arisen in the dialectic of the Western world, Islamic communities are equally affected by and therefore in relationship with Postmodern ideas whilst relating to them in a way unique to the tradition. Although Islamic ideals and values often coincide with the teachings of its

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age* (London, The Belknap University Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 551

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 599-600

Christian sibling, a Muslim approach is distinct therefrom. This difference brings nuances and novelties into the conversation that might strengthen and reassure Christian faith and values which have suffered severely from the acidic scrutiny of deconstructive thought.

In light of the radical turn away from traditional thought this thesis aims to engage in a renovative dialogue which contributes to the re-establishment of the theoretical foundations of moral thought in response to Postmodernism. The present paper is re-constructive and not solely conservative because it does not aim to *go back* to a golden age that is a memory of the distant past. Other than that it is written with the conviction that many of the insights made in Postmodern thought are invaluable and irreversible in relation to traditional thought. Our endeavor is inspired by the strong conviction that the ruins which deconstruction has left behind serve as fertile soil to re-evaluate and re-root traditional teachings as well as establish a new understanding thereof in light of Secularism. Instead of denying the transformative impact of insights characteristic for Postmodernism which are absent in traditional thought the renovative approach of this paper proposes an understanding of traditional metaphysics and morality in conciliation with crucial insights acquired in the process of deconstruction. The author is convinced that traditional morality may shine in a new light due to the destructive blows of Postmodern thought. In this vein, in the further course of the thesis we aim to show that the Nihilism that resulted from the attempted destruction of tradition lays bare the ground to understand the deeper wisdom underlying that which it aimed to leave behind in dust and ashes. However our viewpoint stands in stark contrast to the thesis that traditional metaphysics and morality are fictitious, false and ought to be destroyed. Instead, acknowledging crucial insights from both currents of thought we engage in a conciliatory effort.

Operating in the field of intersection between Postmodernism and traditional Islamic thought the present thesis is fuelled by the intention to foster a conversation between secular and Islamic conceptions of morality and the role of humans in the cosmos. The author is convinced that it is epistemically legitimate and vital to fruitfully reason about these intimate aspects of human life in a manner beneficial and constructive for the reader. The scholarly field of interaction between the Islamic faith and western philosophy and science is alive and continuously growing, inviting for rigorous scholarship. Currently traditional Islamic scholarship is expanding in Western Academia, fostering an academic understanding of the Islamic faith, its parallels and frictions in relationship to European and North American thought. However, especially in the field of interaction between Postmodernism and Islam there is a lacuna which remains to be addressed. Even though the secular West poses great intellectual challenges to the Islamic tradition due to its atheistic and deconstructionist tendencies whilst questioning the veracity and legitimacy of the faith, philosophical responses on a scholarly level are barely extant. More specifically there is not yet a clearly defined

traditional Islamic treatment of the Postmodern thesis that all elements of morality are subjective, cultural constructs. The present paper serves as a contribution to fill this niche.

In the following sections we construe a renovative dialogue by placing the conception of morality that follows from Imam Abu Hamid al- Ghazali's metaphysics in conversation with equivalent ideas from Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, who are both defining thinkers of the Postmodern current. The dialogue primarily serves to clarify how exactly ideas from the traditional religio-philosophical system of the reviver of the Islamic faith may contribute to the expansion of the Postmodern horizon, whilst keeping an eye on its invaluable insights which promise to advance and enrich traditional thought. The central proposition of this paper is that Imam al- Ghazali's epistemology is expansive to Postmodern thought in providing the philosophical ground for positive and fruitful deliberations on moral truth by synthesizing the faculty of reason with immediate experience (*dhawq*) with reference to the spiritual heart (*qalb*) of humans, which is an epistemic faculty of immediate insight into the nature of reality. We argue that traditional Islamic thought is relevant in the context of Secularism, because it answers to the Western surrender of Metaphysics, offering an experientially verifiable method by means of which to engage in valid metaphysical and moral inquiry. To achieve this end we give a detailed exposition of Imam al- Ghazali's multi- faceted, life- oriented ethics, critically examine some of the central propositions of Postmodern thought in relation to morality and place them into a dynamic dialogue with the Imam's religio- philosophical system. All of the sentences under examination are explicable by reference to the absence of the Transcendent and of *qalb* which is characteristic for Postmodern thought:

- Life is meaningless and human existence does not have a greater purpose.
- Human subjectivity is in its entirety a continuously changing social construct that is constituted by the production of historical bodies of knowledge, wherefore there is no universal human nature which legitimately grounds morality.
- Humans do not have direct access to reality wherefore there is neither epistemic, nor moral truth but only a totally equal plurality of perspectives.
- Traditional morality is false, repressive and oppressive wherefore it ought to be left behind in order to transformatively create new values.

Furthermore we present personal considerations supported by and harmonious with the Imam's writings which question the validity of the nihilistic claims of its interlocutor. It is the purpose of the present endeavor to capture and deliberate about sensitive ideas which shape contemporary secular ideology in a rigorous manner, whilst opening pathways to the consideration that there might be more to reality than matter and ideology.

## Preamble: The Question of God's Existence

Currently, atheism is widespread in the Academia. Taylor lucidly explains how from the enlightenment onwards many intellectuals, among them renowned philosophers and scientists, as well as many artists and writers formed the opinion that the hypothesis that the universe was created by an all- powerful and wise Deity is unreasonable, immature and simply false. Especially the natural sciences which play an essential role in informing philosophical discourse are dominated by a pronounced materialist sentiment which operates under the pretext of excluding the Supernatural and Sacred. Taylor elucidates that many intellectuals are convinced that Darwinian theory and the neurophysiological knowledge of brain and nervous system clearly show that God does not exist. With only minor exceptions all academic fields and natural scientific communities operate on the ontological assumption that the natural universe- among possible other universes- is all there is, which means that physical reality is effectively exhausted by causally- closed, autonomous processes.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the predominant scientific attitude takes the exclusion of a greater metaphysical reality, that transcends space- time and encompasses the order of things known to us for granted. If this were truly the case then there would be no merit to a serious consideration of morality as conceived of in traditional Islam in a scholarly context since propositions from a system that is demonstrably erroneous have no place in credible epistemic work. However, despite deeply-rooted and widespread opinions affirming the contrary there is no valid refutation of the thesis that the universe was created by Divine Intellect. To the opposite, there are good reasons in support of it.

To begin with, the scholarly literature concerning arguments for and against the existence of God indicates that the discussion pertaining to this topic is inconclusive, lively and ongoing. This means that according to the academic output on both ends of the spectrum it is not certain that God does or does not exist. On the one hand, authors such as Christopher Hitchens<sup>4</sup>, Lawrence Krauss<sup>5</sup>, Richard Dawkins<sup>6</sup>, Alex Rosenberg<sup>7</sup> and Sam Harris<sup>8</sup> among many other eminent thinkers in the scientific and public scene strongly argue against the existence of God and for the explicability of the universe in strictly naturalistic terms. Those who fervently argue against the existence of God fail to support their arguments with conclusive demonstrations and fall short of presenting coherent refutations

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 4

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hitchens: *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (United States of America: Da Capo Press, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Krauss: *A Universe from Nothing* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Dawkins: *The God Delusion* (Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006)

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Rosenberg: *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012)

<sup>8</sup> Sam Harris: *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005)



against their rivals. Effectively, this means that the hypotheses that the universe came from nothing, has no purpose and consists of random causative processes are opinions, not true sentences. On the other hand, scientists and philosophers such as William Lane Craig<sup>9</sup>, Richard Swinburne<sup>10</sup>, Alvin Plantinga<sup>11</sup> and John Lennox<sup>12</sup> critically assess arguments against the existence of God in their writings, coherently argue against these claims and propose sound arguments for the existence of God whilst accepting undeniable scientific insights regarding the origin of the universe and the evolution of life forms on the planet.<sup>13</sup> These erudite thinkers present numerous arguments in favor of God's existence, such as the Ontological Argument, the Kalam Cosmological Argument, the argument from Design, and the argument from Objective Morality. These are all contested and well-defensible in philosophical terms and with regard to the current state of scientific knowledge. Furthermore empirical data such as the fine-tuning of the universe, its rational intelligibility, the lingual and intelligent functioning of cells and the omnipresence of mathematical regularities underlying the laws of Physics are good reasons which convince the scholars mentioned above that Divine engineering must be involved in the creation of the cosmos.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, with regard to scientific reasoning it is important to differentiate between raw empirical data and the theory-laden interpretation thereof. Thomas Kuhn in his insightful paper "Objectivity, Value Judgment and Theory Choice" lucidly explains how the research of a scientific community is always based on a certain paradigm, wherein a set of commonly shared background assumptions with regard to method, instruments, concepts and goals is active.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the American philosopher Norwood Russel Hanson has shown in his famous paper "Seeing and Seeing-as" that observations of scientists are always theory-laden. Observations, he writes, to be understood must be seen through the lens of a *Gestalt* which is imposed unto raw empirical data by means of the educational and institutional background of scientists.<sup>16</sup> Reflecting upon this, it makes sense that staunch Naturalists interpret the scientific data from Physics, Chemistry and Biology to

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<sup>9</sup> William Lane Craig: *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1979)

<sup>10</sup> Richard Swinburne: *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

<sup>11</sup> Alvin Plantinga: *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

<sup>12</sup> John Lennox: *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Books Publishing, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> Antony Flew: *There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind* (New York, Harper One, 2007)

<sup>14</sup> For a closer and comprehensive discussion of the question of God's existence in contemporary Philosophy of Religion refer to:

Antony Flew: *There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind* (New York, Harper One, 2007)

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kuhn: *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 222- 228

<sup>16</sup> N. Russel Hanson: *Seeing and Seeing As in Philosophy of Science: Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Yuri Balashov and Alexander Rosenberg (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 326-328

indicate that the universe came from nothing and that all causation is random. However it is equally as understandable that qualified scientists with a religious background see in the observations of the natural sciences traces of design and divine intelligence. The proponents of these strongly diverging views each see and understand scientific findings against the backdrop of their own metaphysical heritage and assumptions. Essentially, both camps of scientists interpret the same empirical data, whilst seeing therein different *Gestalten*. Since the adherents of each of the opposing hypotheses operate rationally in their reasoning and ground their theoretical claims in coherent reasons inspired by scientific evidence arguments for both hypotheses are defensible and objectionable in the context of the natural sciences- and therefore philosophically valuable. To summarize, neither theologians, philosophers nor scientists *know* where the universe came from or what brought it into existence since perception and apprehension of scientists are influenced by their respective paradigmatic background and neither human sense apparatus nor scientific instruments can reach beyond the continuum of space- time, whereas the origin of the universe lies beyond.

## 1 Imam Abu Hamid al- Ghazali's understanding of human nature and morality

### 1.2 Metaphysical teachings from the Qur'an underlying morality

What follows is a detailed exposition of the metaphysics, epistemology and ethics of the reviver of the Islamic faith. The present chapter serves as a basis for the consecutive dialogue with Postmodern thought as exemplified by Nietzsche and Foucault. To have a clear picture of Imam al- Ghazali's conception of morality and the human *telos*, it is necessary to have an insight into the scriptural background which informs his writings. Since all branches of the Islamic sciences have the Qur'an and the utterances of the Prophet ﷺ and his pious successors at its basis, the psychology of the human soul is understood most clearly in their light. Therefore, this section treats of the metaphysical significance and teleology which the sacred scriptural sources of Muslims ascribe to humans. All further considerations of morality are grounded in the understanding of human nature (*fitrah*) as follows. For the sake of clarity it is appropriate to differentiate between symbolic description of sacred Scripture and concrete, systematized spiritual psychology with regard to the Islamic understanding of human nature. The picturesque language of the Noble Qur'an, which we do not interpret literally but symbolically, places the human soul within a metaphysical and teleological context. According to the logic of our approach the holy book of Muslims conveys archetypal realities of the human soul dressed in symbols and metaphors. Therefore, the story of the Edenic garden (*jannah*) is not interpreted here to refer to a literal event, but instead to the condition of man's soul as one encounters it consequentially to *Geworfenheit* in the world.

The sacred book refers to human nature most specifically in Surah *al-Rum*:

*“Set thy face to religion as a hanif, in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind- there is no altering the creation of God; that is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not-“*<sup>17</sup>

Most importantly this verse conveys that humankind shares one original human nature, which comes from God and is therefore divine. A well- authenticated narration of the last of Messengers ﷺ states:

*“If one of you fights his brother, then let him avoid the face. Verily, Allah created Adam in His image.”*<sup>18</sup>

Since the mention of Adam in this narration is directly linked to a quarrel between brothers which have no explicit relation to him, it may be taken to refer to mankind in general. The utterance conveys that humans are made in the image which *Allah* shaped them in accordance with one of His 99 beautiful names: *al- Musawwir* (the Shaper, Bestower of Forms). Since the Divine loves goodness, nobility and beauty, humans were created with a share of these attributes and are therefore naturally praiseworthy.

Furthermore, human nature is linked to primordial religiosity. The word *hanif* refers to human beings in their natural state, who have the innate disposition to seek and discover truth, establish an understanding of the Divine by means of reflecting upon the natural world and who are qualified by a relationship with God so primordial that it is unmediated by revealed Scripture. The father of the Abrahamic faiths is known as a great *hanif* within the Islamic tradition. Abraham is characterized by the virtues of devoutness, wisdom, chivalry and generosity and thus the stories narrated about him give an insight into the characteristics of a human being in alignment with primordial nature. Due to the implicit reference to Abraham, the word *hanif* conveys that human nature is virtuous and therefore innately moral. In essence the verse states that primordial human-ness is qualified by natural faith, knowledge and virtue. This is further specified in verses 30 and 31 of Surah *al-Baqarah* of the Holy Qur’an, which read:

*“(30) And when thy Lord said to the angels, “I am placing a viceregent upon the earth,” they said, “Wilt Thou place therein one who will work corruption therein, and shed blood, while we hymn Thy praise and call Thee Holy?” He said, “Truly I know what you know not.”*

*(31)And he taught Adam the names, all of them. [...]”*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Harper One, 2015), (30:30)

<sup>18</sup> Imam Abul Hussain Muslim Ibn al- Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, tr. Nasiruddin al- Khattab (New York: Darussalam, 2007), Book 45, Hadith 152,

Within exegetical circles there are various interpretations of what precisely the Scripture connotes by “names”, however according to the mystical psychology of Imam Abu- Hamid al- Ghazali, which inspires this text it refers to the ability to comprehend things as they are. In other words, Adam- referring to the archetypal human - is given the innate ability to know divine Reality by means of direct experience, as well as the accidental contingencies of the material cosmos by means of rational thought.<sup>20</sup> Verse 30 further states that humans are given the responsibility to act as representatives of *Allah* and work as His vicegerents in the world. This statement communicates the purpose which humans are to fulfill in the world. The resources of the animate and inanimate, vegetative and animal environment are at the disposal of human beings and it is we who have the responsibility to cultivate the earth so that humans, animals and the environment flourish. Metaphorically the role which the Qur’an assigns for human beings can be understood as that of a hired gardener who takes care, beautifies and cultivates the garden of its owner under His instruction. This aspect of human teleology however tells only half of the story.

Verse 56 of Surah al *Dhariyat*<sup>21</sup> states that God created human beings in order to worship Him. This refers to the natural relationship to the Divine ascribed to human beings in the Qur’an. In another place in the sacred book it is revealed that worship serves the purpose of healing the soul, whereas the Almighty is not in need of worship.<sup>22</sup> Pondering upon this it becomes clear that in the present context *Allah* does not refer to a great man in the sky who tyrannically demands to be obeyed and glorified as might intuitively be imagined when encountering verses like these. Instead the Noble Qur’an emphasizes that the Divine is a transcendent, all-pervading, willing, intelligent and conscious Reality. The holy book refers to the Deity as the Inner and the Outer<sup>23</sup>, being closer to humans than their jugular vein<sup>24</sup>. These attributions make clear that worship is not a forced act of glorifying an external entity but instead of communion with one’s innermost Reality whilst entering the sacred refuge of prayer wherein the ills of the soul are healed. Seen in this light, worship and the remembrance of God (*dhikrullah*) are natural functions of human beings; activities that are vital for spiritual, psychological and physical flourishing and harmony. To summarize, human beings have the dual purpose of cultivating the earth and worshipping the Divine in a state of intimate union and devotion.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., (2: 30-31)

<sup>20</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul: A brief Outline and Framework for an Islamic Psychology and Epistemology* (Malaysia: International Institute for Islamic Thought, 1990), p. 1-2

<sup>21</sup> *The Study Quran* (51:56)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. (27:40)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. (57:3)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. (50:16)

In verse 12 of Surah *al- A'raf* Allah addresses *Iblees* (Satan), adding to the narrative of Surah *al Baqarah* which we evoked earlier:

*“He said, “What prevented thee from prostrating when I commanded thee? He said, “I am better than him. Thou hast created me from fire, while Thou hast created him from clay.”<sup>25</sup>*

The continuation of the analogy in Surah *al Baqarah* conveys a key-aspect of human nature in its mundane state. God commands His angels to fall prostrate before Adam- an order swiftly obeyed by all besides Satan.<sup>26</sup> According to the interpretation of Imam al-Ghazali, Satan symbolizes an intimate and inseparable constituent of the internal drama of the human soul and is therefore a component of man’s phenomenological landscape. Human beings, writes al-Ghazali, are often visited by *Iblees’* whisperings, inciting them to commit corrupt and blameworthy actions such as cheating, stealing and harming others.<sup>27</sup> However on a deeper level *Iblees’* refusal to bow to the greatness of the Divine as manifest in the form of Adam symbolizes deeply- rooted arrogance anchored in the human heart, which is the root-cause of its sicknesses. The Satanic utterance “*I am better than him.*” which we find in Surah *al A’raf* lies at the core of human relations in the fallen, worldly condition.<sup>28</sup> The Qur’an al-Kareem conveys that it is due to arrogance, selfishness and greed that the world is plagued by oppression, dishonesty and seemingly unceasing strife. It is the quintessential error which severs the bond between humans among each other and with the Divine. In this sense arrogance has an epistemic significance. In the original state, humans live in unity with each other and with God, naturally establishing a just and harmonious order which corresponds to a state of living in Truth. In other words it is epistemically and ontically correct for humans to live this Way. When poisoned with the Satanic craving to be better and more worthy than others, individuals and communities separate and position themselves against each other, giving rise to enmity and violence. This condition corresponds to ontic falsehood, contradicting the veracious state of inter-connectedness and unity. To put it in simple terms, arrogance gives rise to the illusion of separation between humans, which veils mankind from Reality- the Divine Unity of Being. (*wahdat al- wujud*).

The verse that closes our elucidation of the Qur’anic framework of human nature reads:

*“They said, “Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves. If Thou dost not forgive us and have Mercy upon us, we shall surely be among the losers.”<sup>29</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. (7: 12)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. (2: 34)

<sup>27</sup> Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: *The Revival of Religion’s Sciences Vol. 3*, tr. Mohammad Mahdlal-Sharif (Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2011), p. 33

<sup>29</sup> *The Study Quran*, (7, 21-22)

This verse appears in the image of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Edenic garden, which is shared symbolic heritage among the Abrahamic religions. However it is worthy of mention that in the narrative of the Torah and Old Testament Adam and Eve do not turn in repentance to God, which is unique to the Qur'an. In the auspicious Garden aloof from space-time and death Satan had tempted the lovers to eat from the one tree the All- Wise had forbidden them to eat from, thus inspiring them to disobey the Divine Law they so naturally abided by. Upon being shown out of the garden they share a crucial insight. Realizing in a contemplative moment of understanding that they had acted wrongly they turn in repentance towards God and ask for forgiveness, which He grants them. The act of *insight* is crucial here, since Adam and Eve did neither turn to the Divine due to the wish to be in His favor nor due to selfish, instrumental interest. Instead, they oriented themselves towards *Allah* in the spirit of mature agency, responsibility, self-inquiry and genuine remorse in retrospection of their deeds. The verse conveys that repentance- the act of turning back and reflecting upon our choices and actions- is a natural function of human beings, vital for sharing our intersubjective life- world in a mature and responsible manner whilst contributing our share to the establishment of a just society.

### 1.2 Imam al- Ghazali's mystical psychology

Let us now turn to have a closer look at the mystical psychology<sup>30</sup> of Imam al-Ghazali. In his writings human nature is not treated of as a changeless, stable entity. Other than that the human condition is described in terms of continuous changes of state and transformation of character. Living in the world, human beings oscillate between angelic and devilish states of being. By means of practise synthesizing the spiritual, professional, social, filial and personal aspects of life one may ascend to a divine and virtuous state of soul, but equally descend, living a lowly and brutish life full of vice. In the worldly condition human nature is qualified by this fundamental torn- ness.<sup>31</sup> Being thrown into a field of tension between polar opposites, conscious agency and choice are defining features of what it means to be human. In other words, being human is to walk a road paved with moral choices. According to traditional Islam we carry great responsibility since the choices one makes have a direct influence- either beneficial or harmful- on one's environment, which includes humans as well as flora and fauna. Additionally, one's choices and disposition of will shape the path

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<sup>30</sup> Mysticism here refers specifically to the practise of purifying the heart (*tazkiyat al- nafs*), which is essentially a rational and contemplative activity that centers on reason, immediate insight (*dhawq*) and divine inspiration (*ilham*). The purification of the soul refers psychological inquiry to the interior (*batin*) life of human beings. In the course of continuous vigilance, prayer and ascetic exercises such as fasting the Islamic scientists of the soul practise observation, purification and transformation of emotions, intentions and thoughts. It is the goal of the practise to divorce one's character from qualities and behavioral dispositions which are harmful to others and oneself, to attain self- knowledge and experience the original state of annihilation in the Divine. Therefore "mystical" refers to the interior dimension of Islamic practise which emphasizes rigorous observation of those phenomena which are not available to inquiry from a 3rd person perspective.

<sup>31</sup> Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: *The Revival of Religion's Sciences*, p. 15-17

through life, directly contributing to the formation of future events. Each choice is like the flapping of a butterfly's wing which may cause a tornado at the other end of the world.

Imam al-Ghazali locates conscious agency in the heart (*qalb*). With regard to the heart he intentionally distinguishes between the physical organ located within the ribcage and spiritual substance<sup>32</sup> which is cognizant and knowing. *Qalb*, writes al- Ghazali is a lordly, divine thing capable of knowing Divine Reality by means of inspiration (*ilham*) and via direct experience (*dhawq*) and the contingencies of the manifest cosmos by virtue of deductive and inductive reasoning. The rational operations of the heart are exercised by intellect (*aql*), which refers to reason in its application of logic and the establishment of relations between propositions. Spiritual insight and inspiration is mediated by the spirit (*ruh*), which al- Ghazali defines as noumenous and unfathomable with regard to human intellect.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore of a supra- rational order accessible only to direct experience. The complementarity between *aql* and *ruh* shows that within the Imam's epistemology the act of knowing is inseparable from sentience, and not limited to instrumental rational thought as is the case in the Naturalist and Post-modern paradigms. As remains to be shown in the further course of this paper, it is the interplay between Spirit and intellect taking place in the heart, which bears the potential to expand the Secular horizon.

To continue, Imam al- Ghazali describes the interior drama of the Psyche with regard to agency, choice and the heart's susceptibility to purification and defilement by means of an allegory. In an insightful passage he writes:

*"We may say that the soul (I mean by the soul the aforementioned subtle tenuous substance) is like a ruler in his city and his kingdom, for the body is the kingdom, world, abode and city of soul. The powers and organs occupy the place of craftsmen and laborers. The intelligent reflective power is like the sincere advisor and intelligent minister. Appetence is like an evil slave who brings food and provisions to the city. Anger and passion are like the chief of the police. The slave who brings the provisions is a liar, a deceiver, an impostor, and a malicious person who plays the part of a sincere advisor, while there lies beneath his advice dreadful evil and deadly poison."*<sup>34</sup>

This passage clearly describes the dichotomous nature of the human condition. Furthermore it clearly conveys the soul's potential for substantial transformation, since the different characters present in the allegory- the king, his advisor, the chief of police, the malevolent servant, the craftsmen and the laborers may relate to each other in the form of different constellations depending on one's way of life. In a scenario where the king is seduced by his treacherous servant, and heeds his advice appetence takes over the kingdom and chaos breaks out. The king is not able to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 33

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 11

keep the city in good order by himself but depends on the wise counsel of his minister. However, given to his deceitful servant he no longer has an ear for the counsellor's advice. Since the sincere advisor no longer has the permission to delegate the police forces according to his long-lived wisdom acquired in a life-time of first-hand experience, the chief of police lacks the appropriate instructions to maintain good order in the kingdom. If in an alternative scenario intellect dominates over the appetites, the king trustingly confides in his advisor who is then able to utilize his wisdom to communicate the instructions necessary to establish harmony within the city's gates to the chief of police. Due to his disciplinary forces justice will prevail and craftsmen and laborers be well-nourished and justly, mercifully and generously governed. In Imam al-Ghazali's own words:

*"Whoever makes use of all of his organs and powers in such a way as to seek their aid in attaining knowledge and work, becomes like the angels and is worthy to be joined to them, and deserves to be called an angel and a lord-adherent (Rabbani)[...] But whoever spends his energy in lagging behind bodily pleasures and lusts as do the animals is brought down to the low depth of the brutes. So he becomes ignorant as an ox, glutinous as a pig, greedy as a dog or a tomcat, malevolent as a camel, arrogant as a tiger, or sly as a fox; or he may unite all of these and become a rebellious devil."<sup>35</sup>*

This passage elucidates that being human is characterized by continuous changes of state. According to Imam al-Ghazali's view human beings live in a field of tension between different motivating forces, which each push them in different directions. When appropriately governing passions and harmful inclinations by means of intellect, humans contribute to the re-establishment of their innate, noble nature. Opposingly, when humans lose control over their desires a spiritual descent towards an animalistic and instinctual state occurs. The soul's susceptibility to substantial transformation does not imply that there is no universal human nature which grounds moral truth. Other than that, according to the Imam universal verities are unveiled to humans in different degrees. In its original state the heart is in a state of continuous receptivity, reflecting Reality without mediation. However, there are different gradations regarding the extent to which the original purity may be realized. In the worldly condition the heart is barely recognizable as mirror of the Divine. Instead it is a veritable warfield crowded by conflicting desires, thoughts, intentions, imaginations and thus undergoes continuous change. To summarize, al-Ghazali's account of the fluctuating character of *qalb* accounts for direct access to reality, the universality of humanness as well as for the unfathomably complex variegations of human character, differences of disposition, taste and opinion.

### 1.3 Imam al-Ghazali on Truth

In his autobiographical work *The Deliverance from Error* Imam al-Ghazali proposes that reason is never safe from the pangs of uncertainty and does therefore not establish true Knowledge, which

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 16



according to him must be qualified by indubitable certainty.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, he is staunchly convinced that left to its own devices without the appropriate guidance, reason is bound to fall into error and conceive of an erroneous model of reality. Thus, in a nuanced manner he takes a position inbetween a plain rejection and a total affirmation of reason.

In the *Deliverance from Error* the Imam explains the dialectic steps he traversed on his journey towards epistemic certitude. It is in light of his personal intellectual struggle that his final epistemic position is understood best. At first, he methodically doubted all beliefs which he had acquired in the course of his pious upbringing, seeking to find out which things he naively believed and which of his claims to knowledge were certain. He came to the conclusion that every single belief of his had been naively accepted.<sup>37</sup> Afterwards, he affirmed that only his sense data and self-evident truths such as the law of the excluded middle and mathematical verities of the kind “ $2+2=4$ ” are indubitable. Postulating this he discovered that even the image of the world which sense-data provided him with was not beyond doubt. He lucidly explains the fallibility thereof with reference to the perception of a star in the distance. Looked at from the anthropic perspective conditioned by the sense-organs a star seems to be smaller than the moon. Geometrical proofs demonstrate however, that the star must be much vaster than the moon. Therefore, he concludes, sense-data gives only unreliable testimony; reason has demonstrated that the sensory faculties are fallible. Next, he postulates that in the same way in which the testimony of his sense-apparatus had been proven uncertain by reason, the certainties of reason might equally be proven false by another faculty higher than reason. Analogous to how reason captures a higher level of reality than sense-data, there might be a faculty which is receptive to yet a higher order of reality than reason. Having verified the theoretical underpinnings of the *tasawwuf* tradition in his own experience in the course of years of spiritual practise, asceticism and contemplation, he defined the faculty of spiritual insight as *qalb*, in the manner outlined in the section dedicated to al-Ghazali’s psychology.<sup>38</sup>

This leads to the Imam’s conception of Knowledge. He describes it as a light that is revealed within the heart due to unveiling (*kashf*). Standing alone, this expression is vague. However statements such as these are easily clarified in the context of his epistemology. As mentioned earlier, according to the Sufic science of the soul, the heart is like a mirror wherein Divine Reality is reflected. Thus, coming to know Truth beyond the domain of the contingent requires another methodology

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<sup>36</sup> Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: *Al Ghazali’s Path to Sufism, Deliverance from Error: al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* tr. by R. J. Mc Carthy (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000), p. 22

<sup>37</sup>On a side note, the investigative manner of Imam al-Ghazali comes close to Foucault’s method of self-inquiry. In the endeavor to attain clarity with regard to his ideology, al-Ghazali scrupulously inquired into the body of knowledge which constituted his subjectivity.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24

than inferential and deductive reasoning. True Knowledge is unveiled to the seeker in the life-long process of *tazkiyat al- nafs*; the purification of the heart, which removes the obscurations of the heart. According to the epistemology the Imam adheres to, abstinence from sensual pleasures and the distractions of the world, seeking solitude in contemplation, remembrance of the Absolute and doing good deeds of selfless altruism, sincerity and generosity are the instruments required for the path to Knowledge.<sup>39</sup> In the course of the heart's unveiling, Imam al- Ghazali relates from personal experience, one starts to receive visions and inspirations which convey meanings.<sup>40</sup> These meanings can be described as states of experience whose semantic content conveys information about reality in a direct and unmediated way.

Imam al- Ghazali writes that Truth cannot be captured in logical propositions, since these are limited to the domain of the relative and contingent. Instead, Knowledge is none other than a mode of being; a non-dual experience of incommunicable insight. The Imam refers to direct insight with the concept of taste (*dhawq*), which refers to the semantic content of experience as apprehended by the heart. To simplify, *knowing* is *tasting*. According to the Sufic perspective one does not know a glass of ice- cold mango juice in all its depth by comprehending a conceptual description of its appearance and chemical components. Instead, one comes to direct knowledge of the otherworldly refreshing treat only by drinking from it. This implies that the establishment of truth is not limited to reason, but that reason is one among many instruments which are utilized on the quest for Knowledge. Imam al- Ghazali's approach situates Truth in experience- revealed in the heart. Therefore his epistemology is not only theoretical as is the case in the western european tradition, but practical and alive. This implies that moral truths are not propositional objects of reason but instead insights unveiled and tasted in the heart. In other words, the apprehension of moral truths is situated within the domain of unique, momentary experience. It is the role of reason to systematize the insights of the heart and establish on their basis an experience- oriented system of morals which goes hand in hand with sacred Scripture.

Imam al- Ghazali does not limit the utility of reason to processes of systematization, deductive and inductive reasoning. As treated of in the section on psychology, intellect takes on a guiding function by directing the body towards certain habits and practises, making moral choices and acting upon or restraining different classes of desires. In more simple terms, the way of life which an individual embarks on is determined by choices made by means of reason. Reason itself does not operate autonomously but is oriented by the center of consciousness in accordance with its conception of the Good, which derives from personal experience. The Imam emphasises that left to

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 62

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 57

its own devices, reason is not able to establish correct judgments with regard to truth and falsehood, virtue and vice. It has the innate capacity to understand error and falsehood, as well as good and evil, but the activation of this wisdom requires guidance in the form of Scripture and illumined teachers (*murshid*). The Prophets, whose intellects were illumined by divine Wisdom communicated to humankind knowledge of God, the nature of the world, good and evil and the purpose of life. Knowledge of these matters, explains the Imam, serve as a compass with the help of which reason can unlock its dormant wisdom and correct discrimination with regard to epistemic and moral issues as well as steer the body towards towards the good life.<sup>41</sup> *Ratio* can only fully unfold when in interaction with Revelation since the key to the experience of subtle matters such as God's Wisdom, virtue and vice are not conceptual kinds of knowledge which are available to everyone by means of theoretical reasoning. Instead, such domains of knowledge pertain to the unseen, which can be accessed only by those whose spiritual faculty of direct experience is purified and active.

#### 1.4 Ethics in the thought of Imam al- Ghazali

This section presents the basic structure of Imam Abu Hamid al- Ghazali's conception of morals, which serves to clarify what is meant by "morality" and "ethics" in the context of this thesis. In opposition to the European philosophical tradition Imam al- Ghazali does not apply terms such as "ethics" or "morality", but instead treats of these domains of thought in *'ilm al- mu'amala* (the science of works), which is dedicated to the study of the beneficial and harmful effects that actions and qualities of character have on the soul.<sup>42</sup> Being termed the science of works, it becomes clear straightaway that morality is conceived of not as a mere theoretical art. The comprehension of systematic morals is not an abstract activity limited to thought exercised in a secluded space. To the opposite, it is of utmost importance to acquire an understanding of moral *theoreia* whilst living as a responsible individual in- community.<sup>43</sup> The works with which *'ilm al- mu'amala* are concerned with are actions towards *Allah*, friends, family members and other social peers and lastly purificational acts relating to one's own body, thoughts, sentiments and sensations.<sup>44</sup>

At the center of this science lies the purification of the heart of mentioned above, by means of which the highest goal of life may be attained: the direct knowledge of God and the annihilation of the egoic mind in the Divine Presence (*fana*).<sup>45</sup> *Tazkiyat al- nafs* is a life- long struggle which requires active attention, earnest self- observation and sincere intention. Wayfaring towards the Divine, one

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<sup>41</sup>Abul Qasem, *The Ethics of al- Ghazali* ., p. 27-29

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 22

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.25

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 22

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 69

ought to be vigilant over both internal (*batin*) and external (*zahir*) activities. The former refers to those elements of experience which are unavailable to a 3rd person mode of inquiry, such as kinetic sensations, thoughts, ideas and emotions whereas the latter encapsulates those elements which lend themselves to 3rd person experience, such as outward actions and events in the external world. Since the purification of the heart lies at the center of traditional Islamic practise, its system of morals, including the definition of what is praiseworthy and blameworthy, is defined in terms of what is conducive to the healing of the heart and what is detrimental to its health, covering, defiling and numbing its natural sensitivity.

Although annihilation in the Divine Presence is the highest goal, morality as Imam al- Ghazali conceives of it has as its object the realization of subordinate goals which are necessary for the highest end. As such, ethical practise aims toward the cultivation of good character whereby one's personality is adorned by beautiful qualities, which are in alignment with the noble nature according to which humans were created (*fitrah*). Whilst good qualities are cultivated, bestial, devilish and harmful tendencies are transformed and exchanged with pleasant ones in the course of *tazkiyat al-nafs*. The transformation of character traits requires the application of will, knowledge (*'ilm*) and action (*'amal*). Once one is well- established in insight on the path of divine knowledge, one has acquired an understanding of which qualities, habits and actions reap spiritually beneficial or else harmful consequences. By virtue of such insight a longing for the cultivation of virtuous traits develops, which steers the soul towards purification. It is by virtue of the yearning for goodness that is inspired by knowledge that reason can be utilized to govern anger and desire.<sup>46</sup>

Since one of the core-dimensions of Islamic ethics is the cultivation of good character, an enunciation of what exactly is meant by that is in place. To begin with, Imam al- Ghazali states that character is a dispositional state of the soul which naturally gives rise to certain actions in accordance with its level of cultivation. To illustrate this, a woman of fortunate disposition, when asked what she thinks about a specific acquaintance of hers might respond respectfully, make a genuine compliment, emphasize her strengths and give sincere counsel with regards to her personal weaknesses, whereas one of vile character would respond in a disrespectful manner, talk behind her back, seek to portray her in a bad light and emphasize only her weaknesses and dark sides without doing justice to the positive qualities of her acquaintance. According to Imam al- Ghazali good character is exemplified by four cardinal virtues. First and foremost of these is wisdom (*hikma*), which refers to the ability to rightly discriminate in matters of truth and error, right and wrong belief and good and evil. Due to right discrimination, anger does not take over the dictates of reason and Revelation, but is submitted to their guidance. Thus, one attains the strength to stand up for what is right and denounce what is

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 50

contemptible. Acting thus one embodies the virtue of courage (*shaja'a*). She whose desires and tempered by reason and insight has attained temperance (*'iffa*). The last of the cardinal virtues refers to justice (*'adl*), which refers to the ability to sovereignly hold the reigns of anger and desire and steer the chariot of one's soul in the cause of the good.<sup>47</sup> Similar to Aristotle al- Ghazali defines each of these virtues as a mean between an excessive and a deficient quality. This is easily exemplified on hand of temperance. If one's desires are out of hand and in control of the will, then one falls into a state of greed (*sharah*) which is excessive. If on the other hand lust is cut out completely, then a state of lethargy, indifference and apathy ensues which is a state of deficiency.<sup>48</sup>

At last, the practise of morality serves the attainment of happiness in the natural world shared among humans, as well as in the afterlife, the belief in which is an article of faith within the Islamic tradition. It is the latter kind of happiness which is understood as more valuable, being more intense in kind and everlasting. Imam al- Ghazali enumerates many goods which are conducive to happiness. These pertain to the Divine, the soul, the body and external factors respectively. The goods of the Divine are gifts which a few fortunate humans receive, such as a form of guidance (*hidayat*), that is inexplicable in materialistic terms and linear causality, or else the equally inexplicable inner yearning to be in the Divine Presence (*rushd*). The goods of the soul are faith (*iman*) and good character (*husn al-khuluq*), which together embrace all favorable qualities and dispositions of the soul, a detailed exposition of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Among the goods of the body are long life, health, strength and beauty and among the external factors wealth, influence, family and birth in a pious family.<sup>49</sup> These are all defined as goods because they are factors which induce happiness and facilitate the purification of the heart. Fulfilment with regard to filial, vocational, personal and social life are held as much beloved treasures within the domain of Islamic ethics, however they are inseparable from the essential *telos* of human life, which is nearness to the Divine (*qurb*).<sup>50</sup>

## 2 Pluralist Metaphysics and Epistemology of Postmodernism

The ground for our renovative dialogue has now been laid in sufficient depth with an understanding of Imam al- Ghazali's conceptions of morality, archetypal human nature and teleology. In the following sections we explore the Postmodern equivalents thereof. At the end of each section critical remarks are included, which place the respective Postmodern position in dialogue with Imam al- Ghazali's thought. Thereby, the interrelation and differences in understanding and approach between Postmodernism and Imam al- Ghazali's traditional Islamic perspective become clear.

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 80

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 81

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 58- 61

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 69

Furthermore the critical remarks attempt to show that central assumptions of Postmodernism are inconclusive as well as the expansive potential of Imam- al Ghazali's thought with regard to the Secular horizon.

## 2.1 The rejection of truth from the Enlightenment to Postmodernism

The rejection of traditional morality which strongly features in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault depends on the thesis that the intellectual faculties of human beings do not have direct access to reality, wherefore reality is unknowable. This is so because from the incapacity to comprehend epistemic truth the impossibility of moral insight consequentially follows. In this section we give a brief account of the development of the thesis that reality is unknowable from its roots up until its pronounced expression in Postmodern thought. Furthermore it gives an impression of the wide variety of views which underlie Postmodernism and shows that there is not one exclusive worldview that can be identified as such, wherefore the current of thought resembles a spectrum of perspectives and opinions which share specific premises, rather than a specified ideology.

To begin with, according to the post-modern view there is no one Reality, which is true for all human beings and neither are there elements of experience that are universally shared.<sup>51</sup> In this vein Foucault writes that "It is meaningless to speak in the name of- or against- Reason, Truth, or Knowledge."<sup>52</sup> The quest for truth, Foucault is convinced, is pointless because of the insufficiency of reason and language to know and comprehend reality. Therefore the vast cosmos of knowledge accumulated throughout history is made up of a plurality of opinions, which are true according to their own standards. In this regard Postmodernism is characterized by the rejection of metanarratives, meaning thereby a comprehensive understanding of life that embraces all humans in a community.<sup>53</sup> The form of Pluralism which prevails in Secular societies primarily has a political end, aiming to ensure that citizens freedom of thought is ensured and their choice of opinion not threatened. Other than that, the strain of Pluralism under investigation makes an ontological assertion. According to this view there are no moral codes, values, epistemological methods, philosophical, scientific or religious systems which may legitimately be proclaimed to be universally true. Social life is necessarily, unavoidably and unsolvably characterized by confrontation, conflict and oppression. A unity of purpose, epistemology, self- understanding and narrative is impossible and plurality and separation is our unavoidable allotment.

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (New Berlin: Scholargy Publishing, 2004), p.2

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. xxiv

Let us turn to the roots of the anti-realism and subjectivism which is characteristic for secular worldviews. In his book *Explaining Postmodernism*, Canadian philosopher Stephen Hicks traces the basic propositions of Postmodern thought to its roots. He writes that Postmodernism arose as an antithetical response to Modernism, the defining feature of which is confidence in the power of reason.<sup>54</sup> The philosophers of the Enlightenment overthrew medieval philosophy which was based on the reliance of faith. This momentous point in the intellectual history of the Western world is the founding-stone of Pluralism as lived in contemporary Europe and North America. Whereas in Latin Christendom individual autonomy and freedom of choice as well as thought were not acknowledged, society being structured according to a form of crude collectivism, these values became the defining feature of the Enlightenment.<sup>55</sup> In opposition to their medieval predecessors the avantgarde of the Enlightenment proposed that reason alone is the legitimate means to come to knowledge of reality.

Thus, Modernism is characterized by the conviction that reason has direct access to reality and is able to comprehend and know it as it is. Whilst reviewing the dialectical development from Kant's novel insights onwards towards Postmodernism Hicks clearly shows how a victorious sense of confidence in reason gradually gave way to anti-realism and irrationalism. In the dialectic towards Postmodernism reason was taken less and less serious in its epistemic significance.<sup>56</sup> In opposition to the basic proposition of the Enlightenment Immanuel Kant argued that reality- the *Ding an Sich*, which he conceived of as that noumenon which is independent of and outside of subjective experience- cannot be known. In other words, he postulated that reason does not have direct access to reality. Instead, reason operates within a representation of reality synthesized by the mind. Since knowledge is limited to what is given in experience, reality as such is necessarily unknowable and all axiomatic and scientific systems and sentences which are formulated by the application of reason are subjective in nature. In this vein Kant argues that the knowledge arrived at by reason is not objective. This, writes Hicks, is the root of the Postmodern anti-realist subjectivism which lies at the root of all its epistemological, ontological and metaphysical propositions.<sup>57</sup> On a side note, it is paradoxical that Kant's insight came to be the intellectual ground for the rejection of the Transcendent, since he himself formulated his propositions whilst aiming to demonstrate that the metaphysical reality of revealed Scripture cannot be proven fallacious by means of the operations of reason. This is made especially clear in his weighty statement: "I here therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, p. 20- 23

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20- 25

<sup>58</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* tr. Norman Kemp Smith (Toronto: MacMillan, 1965), Bxxx.

Henceforth those philosophers which contributed to the formulation of the Postmodern spectrum did not think that humans experience reality as such, but instead a subjective, internal representation thereof that is conditioned by the unconscious and synthetic operations of the mind. From thereon anti- realist and irrationalist tendencies came to predominate the landscape of continental philosophical thought. Thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche<sup>59</sup> emphasized that only by discarding reason and emphasizing instead the faculties of instinct, feeling and will can one experience reality authentically. According to them reason is futile because life is irrational, meaningless and absurd, wherefore its operations fail to discover a meaningful and ordered structure of reality. Instead, they propose that life is governed by blind, striving forces in a world that is a chaotic warfield of the will to power. Martin Heidegger moved the quest for truth even deeper into Phenomenology. Heidegger was perplexed by being. Amidst the rich plurality of things in the world, he realized that all phenomena share being- the fact that *they are*. Consequently, asking himself what being is, he came to the conclusion that an answer to this question that is limited to rationality misses the essential import of the question. The reality of the question, writes Heidegger lies in the most intimate and existential experience of *questioning what being is*.<sup>60</sup> Thus, according to him a rational answer is at best vacuous whilst the underlying experience is real. Thereby Heidegger anchored truth in experience impenetrable by reason alone.<sup>61</sup>

At last, even though Logical Positivism greatly differs from Postmodern thought it marks a crucial passage towards the anti- realism and subjectivism characteristic for it. In its development in Anglo-American philosophical discourse the postulate that logic is entirely separate from and does not connect to reality came to predominate logical positivism. Consequentially Logic was deprived of its legitimacy in formulating true sentences which correspond to reality. Since there was no longer any metaphysical and objective value ascribed to Logic it came to be conceived of as subjective. Logic no longer conceived to be rooted in reality, the majority of philosophers came to believe that it is meaningless to embark on the journey to discover truth any longer. As a result truth itself lost its significance in philosophical thought, stamped as a meaningless concept fruitless for proper philosophical inquiry.<sup>62</sup>

Leaping from Logical Positivism to pronounced Postmodernism, Richard Rorty rejects the proposition that any system of knowledge can ever be objective. Instead, he proposes that the conception of truth of any epistemic system always depends on its specific, underlying ends. He defines knowledge as a social and conversational practise, implying that the construction of

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<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 475

<sup>60</sup> Martin Heidegger: *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 23- 25

<sup>61</sup> Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, p. 62

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78-80



philosophical and scientific traditions which aim to arrive at truth is a discursive, social activity.<sup>63</sup> Thereby he delegitimizes truth, stating that it is a concept without a real referent, and in pointing towards nothing in particular is meaningless. Instead, he affirms that within society there co- exist multiple discursive practises and descriptive vocabularies. These descriptive vocabularies each have their internal aims and purposes tailored to achieve their specific ends. He likens these vocabularies to tools such as a pair of scissors, a saw and a hammer. Each of those is fit for its own purpose. Since each tool has utility within its own domain it is impossible, even meaningless, to determine which of the tools is the best or true tool. Even though Rorty's view is philosophical and abstract, it points to an epistemological sentiment that is widely shared in contemporary Europe and North America. Life in secular society is characterized by a near-endless diversity of purposes, dreams and goals which are sought after by humans of all different walks of life. In other words, what is right for one person is not necessarily right for another and the standard of justification for respective goals is the individual him- or herself. Rorty's theory mirrors reality in that in the context of secular society there is no acknowledged hierarchy of ends. There are no purposes and endeavors which are universally agreed upon to be soteriologically or epistemically more valuable than others. Rather, it is individuals themselves who assign value to their personal endeavors.

Michel Foucault most significantly shaped the conception of truth in Postmodernism. According to his genealogical thought the sovereignty and very existence of the subject are illusory.<sup>64</sup> Really, individual persons are shaped and possessed by bodies of knowledge which are constitutive of their customs, habits, manners of expression, ideologies and even their physical movements. Since knowledge informs and influences the most intimate aspects of human life it is intimately related to power. Power expresses itself in the lives of communities and individuals by determining the range of possibilities of activity and action. Private and public activity, occupations in the working world, social interaction and the etiquette of daily life are each informed by a certain know- how. In other words, humans act in certain ways not out of pure spontaneity but because they know how to respond to certain situations. It is precisely via this implicit know- how that power manifests itself in regulating, ordering and dictating movement in a society. Therefore, power is exercised by means of knowledge and the object of knowledge is power.<sup>65</sup> Reflecting on this it becomes clear that according to Foucault truth does not refer to reality as such. Other than that it corresponds to the power-relations of a community at a given socio- historical point in time. Since this is the case Foucault does not seek to establish what truth is, but instead aims to find out how different communities define truth within the discourses active therein. In other words Foucault asks what makes something true or false for a

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<sup>63</sup> Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 170

<sup>64</sup> Michel Foucault: *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 117

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 52

certain community, thereby uncovering the standards, method, preconceptions and assumptions underlying its paradigm of truth. To give a concrete example, in his writings Foucault endeavored to find out why in the West the insights of the natural sciences are accepted as true.<sup>66</sup> To summarize, according to Foucault truth and falsehood are not objective and universal but determined within and relative to the paradigm of a community in a given socio- historical context. He agrees with Rorty that different discourses operate on the basis of varying conceptions of truth and that one community's conception thereof cannot be more true than another's, since there is no Truth outside of the plurality of ideologies and discourses shaped by the disciplinary and regulative play of power.

Comparing the conception of truth and the role of reason in the philosophy of the Enlightenment to its antithesis in Postmodernism it becomes clear that the metaphysical scenery of philosophy has turned into the drastic opposite of the Enlightenment, building on epistemological subjectivism and metaphysical anti- realism.<sup>67</sup> Gradually, reality has come to be conceived of as unknowable by reason, since it is limited to the self- referential prison of language. Philosophically speaking it became the fate of mankind to live in a world that is inherently meaningless, which does not care about human beings and is void of purpose. The ideological and ethical Pluralism which characterizes social and political life in European and North American secular society, which this chapter began with is based on the metaphysical and epistemological propositions of Postmodernism enumerated thus far.

## 2.2 The epistemological limitation of Postmodern thought

### 2.2.1 Erroneous conclusions drawn from descriptive insights of Pluralism

An important insight that is characteristic for Postmodernism is that from the viewpoint of the "I" living in the world perspectival pluralism is in fact the case. The world really is inhabited by human beings which come from different cultural backgrounds, strata of society, are qualified by different likes, interests, beliefs, customs and convictions, who understand the world and act therein in significantly different and often mutually opposing ways. Furthermore it is true that the various ideologies which citizens hold are in constant interaction and confrontation with each other, especially in the context of secular Europe and North America. However it is of great significance to differentiate between descriptive and metaphysical forms of perspectival pluralism. The descriptive interpretation results in a philosophy of being- in- the- world. In other words, it describes the world as experienced by the innumerable subjects which experience the world given their differences in

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 131

<sup>67</sup> Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, p. 82

culture, religion, ethnicity, upbringing, age, gender, position in social hierarchy among the other features which differentiate individuals from each other. The descriptive account of Pluralism is invaluable, since it gives due attention to the fact that intersubjective reality is comprised of a wild and colorful variety of perspectives, through the lenses of which the world looks vastly different. In other words, the perspectival mosaic comprising social reality is indubitable and must be considered by any rigorous philosophical system. Systematic theoretization of perspectival pluralism uniquely features in the postmodern spectrum, whereas it is absent in traditional thought.

In contrast, the metaphysical interpretation of pluralism draws conclusions from descriptive insights which are *inconclusive and unwarranted*. That social reality is empirically constituted by an intersubjective web of a plurality of opinions, worldviews and ideologies does not with necessity imply that there is no truth, as thinkers such as Foucault and Nietzsche boldly and loudly proclaim. In other words, from the fact that intersubjective reality is constituted by a mosaic of different perspectives it does not follow that reality is exhausted by that mosaic. In a like vein it does not follow that firstly there is no one reality which all humans share and which may rightly be called 'Truth' and secondly that the variegated spectrum of human perspectives cannot be either closer or further in apprehension of reality as it is. This point is rejected in the writings of the Postmodern thinkers which this paper is in dialogue with. Furthermore, the fact that the conception of social roles and what it means to be a person living at a specific socio- historical point in time and place, continuously changed in the course of history's cultural developments does not imply that there are no universal elements of human experience. At last, that conceptions of justice, beauty, love and other concepts closely linked to morality arose and transformed in the course of history does not imply that there are no universally shared magnitudes of life. Such inconclusive jumps from descriptive statements to metaphysical axioms are not rigorous and fail to comprehend the inherent complexity of the mentioned themes. Whether there is absolute Truth which can be accessed and experienced, whether the concept of human nature captures universal aspects of intersubjective human experience and whether concepts such as justice, love and peace have an underlying experientiable reality are weighty, subtle and complex questions which deserve the most earnest, open-minded, open-hearted and unbiased investigation. The limitation of the Secular horizon is based on hasty and unexamined conclusions with regard to these questions.

### 2.2.2 The expansive potential of Imam al- Ghazali's epistemology

To understand the unique features of Imam al- Ghazali's epistemology which are novel to the strongest currents of contemporary western philosophy, how his writings may expand the Secular horizon and make room for a fruitful deliberation on morality, it is insightful to differentiate between

the epistemology of the Enlightenment, Postmodernism and *Tasawwuf*. The Postmodern paradigm is characterized by the following propositions:

- i) Reason does not have access to reality and is self-referential.
- ii) There is no Truth independent of the relative aims and purposes of various discourses.
- iii) Reality is meaningless, arbitrary and void of order and purpose.

In a nuanced agreement with the Postmodern perspective Imam al-Ghazali emphasizes that reason is limited, and that it cannot comprehend ultimate Reality. However he differs with Postmodern thinkers on two crucial points. According to postmodern philosophy reason is incapable of formulating true sentences and ultimate Reality cannot be known or directly experienced. Imam al-Ghazali affirms the opposite of these propositions. At first he explains that even though ultimately limited, within the relative and practical domain of the sciences, reason can rightfully establish knowledge by means of apodictic demonstrations. He endorses the proposition that reason is suitable to adequately describe the contingencies of the material world and establish axiomatic systems wherein propositions stand in logical relationships towards one another. Therefore the knowledge of the sciences, in his conception embracing the sacred and mundane, is reliable. However, Imam al-Ghazali's conception of truth and certainty *cannot* be conflated with either the Enlightenment conception or that of Postmodernism. The Imam agrees on the reliability of reason with Enlightenment thinkers, albeit in a different metaphysical context, showing confidence in reason, in contrast to the Postmodern school which rejects exactly this. In contrast to the Enlightenment tradition however Imam al-Ghazali does not absolutize reason. Thus, his perspective includes elements that are novel to both the Enlightenment and Postmodernism.

Secondly he affirms that via *dhawq* (taste) and *ilham* (divine inspiration) immediate, non-dual knowledge of Reality may be attained. The traditional Islamic psychology on which his writings are based are characterized by the synthesis of the rational operations of intellect (*aql*) and direct insight inspired by the spirit (*ruh*). The interplay of these two faculties is situated in the throne of the human body- the heart (*qalb*). Within the Postmodern spectrum it is left out of consideration that there might be an epistemic faculty of direct insight which transcends the reach of reason. It is due to the absence of this faculty and the rejection of reason mentioned above, that moral truth is rejected in Postmodern thought. Turning the coin around, it is the inclusion of the heart in epistemological considerations which might expand the Secular horizon and open up pathways for the exploration of metaphysical and moral realities, whilst maintaining that reason is ultimately limited and not absolute. On ground of Imam al-Ghazali's epistemology it is legitimate and beneficial to establish a theoretical system elucidating the subtle issue of morality, based on the heart, formulated by reason

and grounded in experience. This is clearly not the case in Postmodern thought, which allows neither for a concrete system of morals that makes a claim for universality nor for constructive thinking about morality.

### 2.3 Foucault's conception of human nature the basis of the rejection of traditional morality

We treat here of Foucault's conception of human nature because it elucidates the Postmodern conception of morality treated of later on. This is so since the conception of morality within a philosophical system depends on the nature which it ascribes to human beings. To understand the outlook on morality within a system of thought it is necessary to understand the qualities, characteristics and the teleology within the greater cosmos which it attributes to humans. The randomness and meaninglessness of life as well as the idea that human beings are essentially exhausted by matter and ideology characterize Foucault's conception of human beings. He postulates that in the most abstract sense humans are material bodies who are aware of and interpret their own existence.<sup>68</sup> Foucault intentionally omits giving a positive definition of human nature since according to him there is no such thing. He writes that concepts characteristic for traditional jargon such as "human nature" arise within philosophical discourse and have no real, substantial referent outside thereof.<sup>69</sup> In other words human nature is a concept which has arisen and was developed in a specific tradition of thought and only means something in relation to other concepts, objectives and internal rules within that tradition. Essentially it is a construct which arose in the course of the historical production of knowledge. Therefore it is vain to ask what human nature is as such but instead one ought to investigate how a conception of human nature expresses itself in society.<sup>70</sup>

What is of interest is *how* human nature is conceived of and lived in certain socio-historical, ideologically conditioned contexts.<sup>71</sup> For this reason Foucault explores subjectivity instead of human nature, which is in closer alignment with his genealogical mode of inquiry. Since human nature does not properly exist in Foucault's *Weltanschauung* he explains the identity of persons, individual and collective, as subsisting in archaeologically built bodies of knowledge. These bodies of knowledge structure the experience, self-understanding, political and social practise of humans. Foucault states that ultimately individuals have only an ephemeral existence. It is bodies of knowledge which possess and condition humans and largely organize their lives and societies. Thus, the nature of human

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<sup>68</sup> Philip Barker: *Michel Foucault: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 77-78

<sup>69</sup> Fons Elders, *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), 'Human Nature: Justice versus Power', p. 187

<sup>70</sup> Foucault, M., *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 4

<sup>71</sup> Elders, *Reflexive Waters*, p. 184- 185

beings is exhausted by the historical transformation of ideology, which unfolds through us.<sup>72</sup> In other words, we are playfields on which the construction and transformation of ideology take place. Philip Barker presents two principal propositions of Foucauldian thought on human nature, which succinctly summarize what's been written so far:

*"1) Human nature does not exist in any kind of substantive or essential way.*

*2) What we experience as most fundamental about ourselves is a consequence of theoretical, social and political practises."<sup>73</sup>*

These principles deny that there are any universally shared aspects of human experience. Effectively, all values, norms, practices and social roles are groundless and arbitrary social constructs. Foucault adds that these elements of human life have traditionally been utilized by the ruling classes in societies in order to regulate, discipline and oppress the governed masses.

Additionally, the innate ability for transformation is at center stage in Foucault's thought on subjecthood. Even though bodies of knowledge shape the life and self-conception of human beings, individuals have the chance to become aware of the oppressive structures which subjugate them, rebel against them and define their own sense of personhood. By intently acting against the social practises of a given society and experimenting with taboos, the traditionally inherited roles of subjectivity may be shattered, to make room for freedom. According to Foucault's understanding, subjectivity is fundamentally lucid, momentary and transformative. Since there is no ground for a stable identity to subsist in, he identifies human existence with momentary presence that is liable to change from instant to instant and cannot be defined in any positive way.<sup>74</sup>

Considering the french historian's understanding of knowledge and the interplay between collective and individual it becomes clear how the rejection of metaphysics and morality follow therefrom. The principal assumption underlying his ideas is the arbitrary and meaningless nature of life. If life is such, then it follows that humans are not made in a way which would enable them to know reality as it is. Since knowledge is therefore limited to self-referential, relative and continuously transforming discourses there is no ground for veracious Metaphysics. Additionally, because there is no divinely instantiated archetypal and universal human soul, it naturally follows that individual subjects are strictly speaking cogs in a greater clockwork, whose identity is defined and exhausted by bodies of knowledge living through the communal collective. Additionally, according to this view the conceptions of *telos* and the Good are defined by random, dialectical processes. Due to these sentences there is no legitimate ground for a system of morals that makes a claim for truth. The

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 147- 149

<sup>73</sup> Barker: *Michel Foucault*, p. 76

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 84-85

propositions enumerated in this section are not limited to Foucault's writings. They are defining features of Post-modern thought, being widely agreed upon in the circles of its spectrum of opinions. Before we turn to the rejection of traditional morality in Nietzsche's and Foucault's thought, some evaluative remarks and nuances are in place.

## 2.4 Criteria of a renovative conception of morality

### 2.4.1 Questioning Foucault's assumption on teleology and human nature

It is an insight of great merit that subjectivity has an archaeological history, is influenced and shaped by the production of knowledge and directly bound to relations of power in a society. However this does not necessitate that the metaphysical claims which Foucault draws from these observations are correct. As mentioned above, Foucault defines human nature and soul as an ideological construct which is not legitimately grounded in reality. Implicit to his ideas are two assumptions. Firstly, Foucault assumes that all causation- cosmological and historical- is random, wherefore life and the dialectical movement in history have no purpose and no specific end. Thinking in terms of the logic which these propositions yield, it naturally follows that human nature is an ungrounded construct that does not have a deeper, universal reality. However this conclusion is inseparable from its metaphysical premises. If, in contrast the sentences mentioned are false, then the conclusion too is invalid. As we have established earlier on it is scientifically unknown whether movement in the universe is random and purposeless, wherefore it is uncertain that the Postmodern stance on causality and teleology is in fact correct.

According to the second assumption which Foucault's ideas are based on, human beings are essentially blank slates which are programmed and conditioned by pre-existing ideological formations and power structures. This proposition follows from an inconclusive manoeuvre worth questioning. Foucault's observations with regard to the influence which bodies of knowledge have on individuals are indubitable. However the conclusion that since this is the case human beings are blank slates void of an innate nature and that all systematic formulations of metaphysics and morality are social constructs *is dubitable*, because it is an interpretive assumption. The suspense of a definite answer, dressed in the shroud of certainty, invites for a more nuanced consideration of the matter at hand, which does justice to the uncountable experiences of humans all over the world, saturated with the impression that human nature is irreducible to a mere conceptual reality.

If it is the case that in opposition to currently widespread opinion the universe and humans were engineered for a purpose, then the above mentioned premises so characteristic for post-modern thought are false. For if life was created for a purpose, it follows that human beings are made such

that they can live according to or in defiance of that purpose. Only if human beings emerged by pure chance are our nature, behavior and characteristics arbitrary. If however human beings were created, then we are made in a specific way inspired by the nature, intelligence and intention of our Maker. In this case it would be valid to propose: "There is a universal human nature." since according to this perspective human nature refers to the archetypal composition of human beings. These considerations aimed to show that the Postmodern thesis that there is no human nature stands on dubitable assumptions and is not a truism.

#### 2.4.2 Foucault's ideas in light of Imam al- Ghazali's framework

Since the assumptions on ground of which Foucault operates are dubitable, whereas the observations he analyses in his writings are indubitable, his insights could equally well cohere with another metaphysical basis. Foucault's observations regarding the regulative function of power structures in society, the constitutive function which bodies of knowledge have in relationship to individual subjectivity and the continuous transformation of discourses, social roles, norms and moral values are in fact harmonious with Imam al- Ghazali's understanding of humans. Having written centuries before the insights of Foucault emerged in the cosmos of philosophical thought, the Imam was not aware that individual subjectivity is molded by archaeological bodies of knowledge. However this does not contradict his psychology of the heart, but may be understood in terms of it. To illustrate this briefly, interpreting the al- Ghazali's paradigm in a postmodern context, one may claim that the hearts of individuals are continuously exposed to and affected by ideology and social practice and that it is due to this influence that personal identities are molded. The only difference in relation to Foucault's perspective is that in place of the assumption that humans are blank slates, the Muslim thinker asserts that we have a heart that has innate, archetypal qualities. Islamic psychology might in fact greatly benefit by incorporating Foucauldian insights of how ideology, power-relations and social practices influence the heart.

Nonetheless a pronounced incongruence existing between Foucault's and Imam al-Ghazali's understanding of human nature deserves close attention. Foucault explicitly claims that there is no such thing as a soul or spiritual substance which might serve as the basis for human nature. The Imam's metaphysical position on this point is fundamentally different. According to his perspective there is a tenuous substance, spiritual substance (*ruh*) that is incomprehensible by reason, which may rightly correspond to Foucault's understanding of soul. According to traditional Islamic psychology it is due to *ruh* that human beings are conscious, sentient, able to comprehend mundane



and divine realities and chose between alternate courses of action.<sup>75</sup> It is the spiritual basis of human existence. With regard to his ontology, according to Imam al- Ghazali human beings are in essence souls which undergo substantial transformation throughout life, are independent from the body and hence from the confinements of space-time, and continue to exist albeit in another form after death. This is an idea that per default is not taken serious in the Secular frame.

## 2.5 Roots of the Postmodern rejection of traditional morality

In the last section we examined the assumption that any system of morals which makes a claim for truth is bound to fail, since it cannot be grounded in archetypal and universal human nature since humans are in essence blank slates that are shaped by the production of knowledge. Building on epistemic subjectivism, we turn to the final assumption that is investigated in this paper, namely that traditional morality is erroneous and ought to be overcome which roots in Nietzsche's ideas and comes to full bloom in the writings of Foucault. We take Nietzsche and Foucault as paradigms of Postmodern moral thought, because the anti-traditional sentiment and the demand for the freedom to express instinctual forces and desires uninhibited by religious teachings which strongly features in their writings is characteristic for collective consciousness in the contemporary secular world. The condemnation of tradition is exemplified by the madman's triumphant claim:

*"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"<sup>76</sup>*

Nietzsche's utterance mirrors the conviction which came to shape Euro- American thought from the time of the Enlightenment onward, tidings of which he was the untimely harbinger, according to which the existence of God had turned out to be a hopeful fabrication for which there would no longer be room in truthful and genuine philosophical thought. The wandering philosopher writes with what resembles certainty that there is no God and that the whole array of religious entities and principles such as angels, the afterlife, the supreme Good and Sacred are all fictions which comforted the helpless human herd and sheltered it from the encroaching pangs of Nihilism.<sup>77</sup> Nihilism, exclaims Nietzsche, is the necessary result of the insight that there is no divine order, human and cosmic *telos*, celestially ordained laws and standards of right and wrong, good and evil, or any meaningful structure by means of which humans ought to live. However this condition is not the end-point, but the first shoot of a philosophy of the future that is to overcome the numbing delusions

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<sup>75</sup> Abu Hamid al- Ghazali, *The Revival of Religion's Sciences*, p. 11

<sup>76</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Gay Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 120

<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *Der Wille zur Macht*, in Nietzsche Werke 2 (Salzburg: Das Bergland- Buch, 1983), p.93

with which the church had held Christian civilization in its grip. Even though inevitable, Nihilism ought to be overcome by those courageous souls who fearlessly gaze into the abyss, have the strength to live in the face of it, deal with the absurdity of life and victoriously affirm the will to power. Freed from the chains of religious values and duties the humans of the future will invent their own values and become masters of their lives, sailing the raging ocean of randomness and the struggle for power that is the life of this world. Clearly, the affirmation of the will to power and the freedom from religious ordinances play a central role in Nietzsche's ecstatic manifesto for a new future.

According to him, the only sincere way forward in philosophical thought is a radical break with the Christian tradition and declare war against it, including its metaphysical tenets and values.<sup>78</sup> This brutal act is necessary since the moral, ontological, teleological and metaphysical teachings of tradition are *fundamentally wrong* and brought great harm to the people of Europe by breeding sheepish and repressed human beings. Traditional moral values are erroneous, writes Nietzsche, because they emphasize the intent extinction of vital instinctual forces. As Nietzsche understands it, fleshly desires and egoistic self-affirmation are condemned in Christianity to the extent that pious believers ought to extinguish them to attain to a state of sanctity. Renouncing the will to power for the sake of humbly serving the Divine is a central virtue of the Christian ethic. Nietzsche describes the struggle against carnal lust and the primeval yearning for power which is involved in the sanctification of the soul as life-denying and passionately condemns it as an act of mutilation.<sup>79</sup> He fervently shouts from the hilltop that characteristics such as pride, scorn, passion and egoism are vital qualities.<sup>80</sup> According to him instinctive forces should not be inhibited by what he deems false restrictions. Instead, the pulsating life-force of human beings ought to flourish. Since according to him there is no return to traditional metaphysics, building on Schopenhauer, Nietzsche seeks to establish a new way of understanding reality. He proposes that at the essence of the world and of human beings lies the will to power, which he describes as a primal urge to expand, embrace, grow and become more of itself.<sup>81</sup> According to this view, all living beings are expressions of different modalities of one striving force wherein all of the world's complexity and plurality originate. The moral values of the future have the will to power at work in a chaotic and carnivorous world as their founding principle.

Foucault, even though his writings do not share Nietzsche's poetic fervour, agrees with Nietzsche that traditional values, rules and social roles ought to be resisted against, since they restrict the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 96

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 86

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 74

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 168

possibility of action of subjects within society. The two thinkers share the sentiment of destruction, both proclaiming it necessary to shatter the millenia old philosophical tradition which had evolved up to their time, to rebuild in the wake of its ashes a creative and transformative philosophy free from the pretensions of Truth, reason and universality. During his life the french philosopher strove to inform the academy and the general public of the mechanisms of implicit and unconscious conditioning which orders and moves the masses. He writes that it is the role of an intellectual to acquire a penetrating insight into the strategies underlying power- relations, in order to raise awareness about them in the general public and open a space for resistance against these otherwise implicit and unnoticed structures.<sup>82</sup> The momentum of resistance enables those daring to transgress against harmful and oppressive norms to attain freedom, transform and redefine their subjectivity. This indeed is laudable and immensely important, since every human being deserves to know about the subtle mechanisms which influence their customs, habits and practises and are yet hidden from plain sight. However, Foucault does not stop there. He explicitly states that the false sense of stable identity underlying subjective consciousness in normal circumstances ought to be destroyed. According to him this can be achieved by transformative acts of transgression such as acting out social taboos, the loose experimentation with intoxicating substances and sexual intercourse, the dissolution of gender roles and the enactment of prohibited actions.<sup>83</sup>

## 2.6 The Postmodern attack on traditional morality in light of Imam al- Ghazali's writings

### 2.6.1 Foucault, Nietzsche and Imam al- Ghazali on negative freedom and instinctual forces

Nietzsche and Foucault share a principal agreement on one aspect which plays a central role in Imam al- Ghazali's ethics, namely the givenness of negative freedom which qualifies human life. The world itself places no restrictions on action. In this context, humans are qualified by the will to power and a wide variety of passions. According to the two thinkers tradition imposes fabricated moral rules and values unto the natural condition of negative freedom in order to preserve oppressive hierarchies and keep the people of a society in order. Whereas according to Foucault and Nietzsche religious values and rules are arbitrary social constructs, Imam al- Ghazali takes a different stance. According to him the teachings of sacred scripture are vital for the establishment of harmonious personal, filial and social order. He agrees with Nietzsche and Foucault that society is a wild jungle of instinctual forces and the will to power. Greed and anger- two of the strongest expressions of Nietzsche's will- are central components of his moral system. In contrast to Nietzsche's portrayal of the Christian ethic, he does not think it necessary to cut off vital human instincts. Other than that he

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<sup>82</sup> Barker: *Michel Foucault: An Introduction*, p. 32

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85

writes that humans ought to learn *how to control* their anger and their desire for self-affirmation, status, power and influence so that they may avoid harming themselves and others as a consequence of these potent forces. The Imam's ethical system is formulated with the awareness that humans share an intersubjective space wherein each individual's actions have a direct influence- either beneficial or harmful- on the lives of family, friends and other social relations. Whether one's actions have a beneficial or harmful effect in the energetic matrix of the world depends in part thereon, how well individuals understand and are in control of their instincts, drives and desires, wherefore humans have the responsibility to learn to beneficially balance their energies. The cultivation of good character is precisely that: Utilizing one's intellect in such a way so as to foster one's body and its instinctual forces for the sake of acquiring sacred knowledge and being of benefit to others. According to the Imam's perspective one ought to release the deepest urges of the human soul via channels which result in an expression of instincts and desires that is conducive to spiritual health and social harmony. In opposition to Nietzsche and Foucault he is unconvinced by the idea that humans can reach this goal and deal with the primordial chaos of instinctual forces on their own. Rather, he proposes that we are in need of moral guidance by those who are trained to control their dormant internal forces and have an insight into the deeper wisdom of divine revelation, namely prophets and saints, whilst we travel towards an illumined understanding of moral responsibility and action ourselves.

### 2.6.2 Mundane and Divine Strategies

Another critical remark with regard to Foucault's analysis of traditional power-relations is in place. With regard to power-relations one may distinguish between religious statutes that originate in revealed Scripture and laws and customs which are imposed by agents of power unrelated to sacred Scripture. This distinction might prove valuable in the context of Postmodernism, since it implies that there are regulations of conduct which when put into practice promise to work for the good of humans. How this is possible is readily explicable with reference to Foucault's own thoughts. Foucault writes that all relations of power are based on strategies, the aim of which is to bring about certain effects in society.<sup>84</sup> In other words the mechanisms of power which are active in a society have underlying reasons, intentions and motifs. These may be brought to light by means of genealogical investigation, which Foucault so brilliantly carries out. However due to his doxastic stance he leaves out of consideration that the power-relations which are inspired by religious law might be based on strategies that are truly divinely inspired and aim at the human good. In contrast,

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<sup>84</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979), p. 94-95

Imam al- Ghazali's understanding of the wisdom underlying revelation emphasizes this point: revelation conveys laws to humankind which are beneficial for and protect the material and spiritual well-being of humans as well as orienting them towards their divine *telos*. The Islamic contemplative agrees with Foucault thereon that the strategies underlying power-structures readily open to the faculty of understanding in the course of inquiry. According to him religious law and morality are justified precisely because they are based on a deeper wisdom accessible to humans, when their spiritual and intellectual faculties are purified and in balance. This point has a serious implication. If it is true that there is a deeper wisdom underlying certain moral teachings such as "Do not kill.", "Respect your elders." or "Be kind to others and tell them beautiful things." then traditional morality is not at all arbitrary but well- justified.

### 2.6.3 The inconclusive character of the Postmodern rejection

Furthermore, the rejection of tradition which Nietzsche and Foucault share is problematic. To begin with, as prior chapters have begun to show, it stands on shaky ground since on one side of the coin it depends on the truth of the central premises of Postmodernism, namely metaphysical anti-realism, epistemological subjectivism and the randomness of life. On the other side of the coin the rejection depends thereon that the principal axioms of revealed religion are false. In other words, only if God does not exist and did not bestow the faculty of reason unto man is there fertile ground for the axioms of Postmodernism to flourish. Even though Postmodern thinkers take it for granted that these propositions are true, neither they nor Naturalists are able to offer conclusive demonstrations which are necessary to cement this worldview. Now, the serious issue at hand is that even though the Postmodern architecture stands on such unfirm and inconclusive ground, its basic axioms have become the roots of social reality in governmental institutions and the shared public spaces of the Secular world. This does not mean that Secularism is essentially Postmodern and Naturalistic.<sup>85</sup> However, it does imply that the majority of people in the secular world, who do not have the time, resources and intellectual training required to unground the ideological roots of their worldview plan and act out their lives on the basis of axioms which might very well prove false. Additionally, the truth of the axioms of Postmodernism is not exposed to serious doubt in the academic and public sphere. The general attitude towards reality is not one of uncertainty, as it ought to be in a scientific civilization that thrives on the falsification of hypotheses. The mouth of the general public does not proclaim: "Within the last centuries *we came to believe*, on the basis of the following reasons, that God does not exist wherefore social life is based on the following principles.."

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<sup>85</sup> As established in the introduction the conception of secularity which is applied in this paper and is operative in secular societies refers to an attitude of acceptance towards all non- hostile worldviews.

Instead, social life is based on the implicit and unexamined agreement that God does not exist. If it is true, as multiple religious traditions relate, that it is the purpose of human beings to undergo a process of spiritual purification during one's life-time in the world and to come to direct knowledge of ultimate Reality, then it is problematic that such a way of life is not facilitated and barely even talked about in the public domain.

## Conclusion:

Throughout the flow of chapters we placed Postmodern and traditional Islamic conceptions of morality in dialogue with each other, inspired mostly by the thought of , Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault and Imam Abu Hamid al- Ghazali. The preamble gave a brief insight into the landscape of the contemporary discussion with regard to the existence of God in Philosophy of Religion and showed that according to contemporary scientific data it is ultimately a matter of interpretation instead of apodictic demonstration whether the universe was engineered by Almighty God. We first established that it is viable to include considerations on morality from the Islamic tradition in academic and scientific discourse since it is supported by millenia of systematic and rigorous argument. Afterwards, the ground for the consecutive dialogue was laid by a detailed exposition of Imam al- Ghazali's moral system, whilst traversing from the metaphysical nature and *telos* of human beings, to his epistemology and system of morals. According to the teachings of the Holy Qur'an the utterances of the Prophet ﷺ humans are divine in nature and mirror *Allah* being made in His image. As such, humans are qualified by the capacity to know God, innate religiosity and natural virtue. The noble book further relates that it is the purpose of human beings to live as vicegerents in the world, establish a harmonious and just order and enter into intimate communion with the Divine in the sacred space of worship. The angelic qualities of the Edenic state lay dormant in the depths of the human psyche and are to be re-established by devotion and spiritual training. In the worldly state the human heart is poisoned by satanic arrogance, which is the root of chaos, misery and suffering. However mankind is equipped with the ability to turn towards *Allah*, sincerely repenting in the face of actions that are clearly apprehended to be harmful for oneself or others. In his writings Imam al- Ghazali adds that the heart (*qalb*) is akin to a mirror wherein the Divine is reflected. According to him we have the capacity to ascend towards angelic states of being and re-establish our original nobility or else descend into bestial or even hellish states of being. The central goal of moral action is nearness to *Allah* (*qurb*) and ultimately annihilation in the Divine presence (*fana*). This end may be reached by the strenuous purification of the heart (*tazkiyat al- nafs*). Human life, he writes, is qualified by the constant struggle between the intellect and passions such as anger and greed. When the intellect, which has the capacity to comprehend what is good for the heart, governs the human

body and guides it towards the pursuit of illuminative knowledge, worshipful acts and good deeds the heart is purified and the soul ascends towards its natural luminosity. In contrast, when passions take control and incite the soul to give in to a way of life that serves the satisfaction of carnal desires in the pursuit of which self and others are harmed the heart is veiled, its original sensitivity numbed and the spiritual faculty of direct insight obscured. As a consequence the soul descends into the dark depths of ignorance and misery. Accordingly, the moral compass of al- Ghazali's system is calibrated in terms of the soul's good.

Having given a sufficiently clear picture of al- Ghazali's ethics, the next section focused on an exposition of the roots of the Postmodern rejection of truth, which led to anti- realism and subjectivism currently prevailing in social and philosophical discourse. Starting with Kant's proposition that the activity of reason is limited to the domain of representation, which is the product of the mind's synthesis of the raw data of experience, we ended at the claim that various conceptions of truth are relative to the discourses in which they are active, shared by Rorty and Foucault. Consecutively, the Postmodern conception of truth was placed in relationship with Imam al- Ghazali's paradigm thereof. This section crystalized the parallels and differences between the two accounts of truth. In his epistemology the Imam synthesizes reason (*aql*), taste (*dhawq*) and divine inspiration (*ilham*) and affirms that due to these faculties humans have direct access to reality. Furthermore, he asserts that due to the inductive and deductive capacities of intellect and the ability to establish apodictic demonstrations verified by the laws of logic, reason is reliable in establishing veracious axiomatic systems of thought wherefore the sciences accurately describe the domain of the contingent cosmos. However in an absolute sense reason is limited and real Knowledge transcends its domain. Even though he agrees with Postmodern thinkers on the ultimate limitation of reason, he disagrees with the Postmodern claim that reason is unfit even to establish contingent truth which transcends the frame of a self-referential discourse.

The following section examined the assumption that there is no legitimate ground for a system of morals that makes a claim for truth since all knowledge is limited to self-referential discourses. At first we elucidated the Postmodern conception of human nature with an emphasis on Foucault's viewpoint. With regard to its basic outlook the postmodern view is based on the thesis that reality is limited to the natural world, wherefore there are no dimensions of reality that transcend the mundane order of things. Based on the exclusion of the Transcendent and the affirmation of the randomness of life, Michel Foucault claims that human nature- among all other universals which are constitutive elements of morality- does not have a referent that is grounded in reality. Instead, it is a concept the meaning of which is entirely exhausted by recourse to the conceptual discourse of the tradition in which it originated. Since subjectivity, social roles, customs and norms continuously

transform in the course of history, there is no archetypal and universal human nature. Understanding human nature as vacuous, Foucault prefers to refer to humans in terms of subjectivity. According to him human identity is constituted and transformed by bodies of knowledge which undergo continuous transformation in the course of history. Whilst explaining Foucault's understanding of subjecthood, we established that the proposition that moral systems cannot legitimately be grounded in truth depends on the premises that human existence does not have a purpose and that the qualities of humans, moral standards and conceptions of the Good are social constructs and not divine in origin. Next, we showed that both of these assumptions are inconclusive. Even though Foucault's observations with regard to the transformation of subjectivity, moral systems and social roles throughout history as well as the constitutive function of power-structures are indubitable, the metaphysical conclusions that he draws therefrom are uncertain. Having demonstrated the inconclusive nature of these propositions it was clarified that Foucault's observations are harmonious with, beneficial and insightful in the context of traditional Islamic thought.

At last we examined the assumption that traditional morality is fallacious and ought to be overcome, which strongly features in the writings of Nietzsche and Foucault. Their moral thought is grounded in the acclaimed non-existence of God and all things sacred. Both thinkers agree that since there is no divine Being which creates and governs the world by means of sacred law, moral values, ideals, social roles and rules derived from tradition are arbitrary impositions on negative freedom. In a dialogue on the value of traditional morality we established the differences of perspective between the Postmodern duo and Imam al- Ghazali. This served to show that the Postmodern perspective is problematic and shares the domain of secular discourse with a reasonable alternative. According to Nietzsche and Foucault traditional morality ought to be rebelled against since it is wrong and oppressive. In the space of transgression subjects may transform themselves and attain freedom of choice and action. On the other hand, according to the Imam traditional morals ought to be harboured and put into practise, since they embody a deeper, divine wisdom which aims at social harmony and the physical as well as spiritual health of individuals and communities. Whereas Nietzsche and Foucault are convinced that instinctual forces and the will to power ought not be restrained by traditional moral teachings, Imam al- Ghazali thinks otherwise. He writes that individuals ought to be morally educated on the basis of sacred Scripture for the sake of learning the intent control of instinctual forces- that is desires and drives- on the basis of illuminative understanding. He explains that the knowledge of how to express one's most deeply rooted urges via appropriate channels contributes to mutual respect, security and welfare. Next we discussed that whereas Foucault leaves out of consideration that the strategies behind scripturally derived power-structures might be divinely inspired, aimed at the human good and based on comprehensible



wisdom, it might well be that this is the case. Finally we problematized the fact that public life in secular society is conducted on the basis of the Postmodern assumptions we discussed, whereas the general public lives without the awareness that these premises might well be wrong.

This thesis attempted to show that teachings from Imam al- Ghazali's metaphysical system expand the secular horizon, firstly by demonstrating that some of its central propositions which are grounded in Postmodern thought are inconclusive and secondly by giving a well- reasoned, experience- based alternative inspired by the writings of the reviver of the Islamic faith. As elaborated upon above, in his writings he addresses multiple issues common to discourse-shaping thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche in ways that are novel to them. Doing so, he offers an internally sound metaphysical system which invites for constructive and renovative deliberation about morality and the role of humans in the cosmos. Whereas Nietzsche and Foucault proclaimed that traditional conceptions of morality are groundless, Imam al- Ghazali operates within a worldview wherein these concepts are legitimately grounded and verifiable in lived experience. In other words, Imam al- Ghazali gives us tools with which to make sense of morality and human nature in the domain of our own experience, in ways expansive to Postmodernism.

Being grounded in the Kantian insight that reason is limited to subjective representation of the *Ding- an- Sich* as synthesized by the mind, the Postmodern metaphysical horizon is limited to matter and ideology and its epistemology to reason alone, whose ability to compose accurate axiomatic systems of knowledge is rejected within its current of thought. Thereby Postmodernism forcefully denies any attempts to fruitfully *and veraciously* deliberate about anything that transcends the world, which more specifically includes themes such as the existence of the Divine, moral truth, universal values and the human *telos*. In other words, Postmodern thought declares it meaningless- a term synonymous with *epistemically fallacious*- to deliberate and aim to establish insights in the domain of the Metaphysical and Moral. On the other hand, Imam al- Ghazali is able to give a positive account of these domains of thought because his epistemology is not limited to reason. It includes direct experience/ taste (*dhawq*) and inspiration (*ilham*) which are functions of the Spirit (*ruh*). It is this faculty which enables positive deliberation about the subtle issues treated of above. Following in the footsteps of the great scientists of the soul of the *tasawwuf* tradition he postulates that it is via *ruh*- the divine Spirit indwelling in the human soul, that she may come to experiential knowledge of metaphysical reality and apprehend moral truths. Thus, traditional Islamic thought as championed by Imam al- Ghazali may expand the Secular horizon with a detailed exposition of the heart as an epistemic faculty of direct insight. The Islamic tradition is highly relevant within secular philosophical discourse because it challenges the rejection of Metaphysics and morality which is characteristic for the last two centuries of Western philosophy and in turn offers an epistemology

that promises to broaden its horizon and a conception of morality which provides a clear moral compass with regard to the experientially verifiable purification of the heart. As an illuminating beacon of his tradition Imam Abu Hamid al- Ghazali invites us to consider that metaphysical and moral truth are realizable in the same manner as quenching one's thirst with a sip of ice- cold, celestially- sweet mango juice under the burning sun on a wide desert plain.

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