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Beyond Surface Comparison: Epistemic Frameworks in al-Ghazālī and Kant

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Abstract:

This study explores the critical philosophies of al-Ghazālī and Immanuel Kant, emphasizing the structural frameworks that underpin their approaches to reason, metaphysics, and the limits of human knowledge. While prior scholarship has largely highlighted surface similarities in their treatment of rational inquiry and metaphysical speculation, this paper argues that such comparisons obscure the deeper divergences rooted in their respective intellectual architectures. Al-Ghazālī's critique arises from a religiously grounded epistemology, wherein reason serves to elucidate and defend divine truths, whereas Kant's critique is grounded in pure reason, aiming to delineate the boundaries of rational inquiry and establish a metaphysical framework for moral and theological understanding. By examining their approaches to metaphysics, causality, and the interplay of empirical and rational knowledge, this paper situates their critiques within broader epistemological and philosophical traditions, revealing the distinct yet convergent pursuit of "critique of reason" in both Islamic and Western thought. The analysis underscores that the shared features in their critiques are contingent upon deeper differences in the foundations, methods, and objectives of their thought.

Keyword: Al-Ghazālī, Immanuel Kant, Critique of Reason, Epistemic Frameworks, Comparative Philosophy, Metaphysics

Introduction

A considerable body of research and literature has explored the thought of al-Ghazālī and Immanuel Kant, aiming to construct intellectual bridges between the two. Most of these studies have focused on the role of reason, its status, and its function in the writings of both thinkers. And although there are clear points of resemblance, particularly in the way each philosopher deals with metaphysical questions, these works, for the most part, remain confined to surface-level similarities. They often compare Ghazālī's and Kant's analyses of reason, its limits, its contradictions, its interaction with various sciences such as mathematics, natural science, and metaphysics, and its inherent incapacity to transcend certain boundaries. Yet, as the present researcher argues, these studies rarely account for the underlying structure and intellectual framework within which the two men developed their thought.

The intellectual structure that shaped Ghazālī's worldview, rooted fundamentally in religion, differs entirely from the framework within which Kant's ideas evolved. Ghazālī begins with religion and uses it as the foundation for rationally justifying religious experience. His critique of reason therefore emerges from truths, axioms, and teachings that he takes as religiously given. Kant, by contrast, begins with reason itself and attempts to justify rational experience as a form of faith, most notably in his critique of rational proofs for the existence of God, and in exposing the contradictions of reason when it confronts the unconditioned. In this way, Ghazālī criticizes religion for failing to provide reason with adequate first principles, whereas Kant criticizes reason for overstepping its legitimate boundaries.

This is precisely why, in works such as *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant sets out to replace the primacy of theoretical reason with ethics as the proper foundation for religious belief.

Philosophy has never been a mere mental luxury or an intellectual pastime meant to satisfy some surplus curiosity of the mind. Nor has it ever been a forced insertion of reason into matters irrelevant to the human condition. Philosophy has always been a form of struggle, an inner labor, through which the thinker attempts to polish the mirror of the human intellect, worn down by continuous questioning and the unending pursuit of understanding since the first steps of humanity on this earth.

1. *Epistemic Starting Points*

Al-Ghazālī grounds his intellectual journey in religious certainty, arguing in *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* that true knowledge ultimately rests on divine illumination rather than unaided reason. Kant, on the other hand, begins with the autonomy of reason, laying out the “a priori conditions of knowledge” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

2. *“Transcendence” vs. “Transcendental”*

For al-Ghazālī, transcendence is made knowable through revelation and spiritual unveiling, as explained in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād*. Kant's “transcendental,” by contrast, refers to the mental structures that make experience possible. Ghazālī approaches the beyond through religion; Kant restricts the mind from reaching what lies beyond its conditions.

3. *Ethics as a Ground for Metaphysics*

Kant, especially in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, makes ethics the foundation for religious belief, the “moral law within” becomes the gateway to the idea of God. Al-Ghazālī, however, links ethics to spiritual purification and the preparation for knowing God, a theme central to *Mīzān al-'Amal*.

4. *Limits of Reason*

Both thinkers acknowledge the limits of reason, but for different reasons. For al-Ghazālī, reason remains insufficient without the illumination of revelation, a point he stresses in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*. For Kant, reason is limited because it cannot access the “noumenon,” the realm beyond possible experience, as explained in the antinomies of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Reason Examined: Tracing the Origins of Meta-Critique

Philosophy, in its deepest sense, is an act of critique: an ongoing attempt to unlock what resists the human mind and to probe the hidden layers of reality. Yet once the mind succeeds in clarifying a difficult problem, a more demanding confrontation appears, the mind's confrontation with itself. This is where genuine critique begins. It

becomes a “critique of critique”, meaning reason takes itself as the object of judgment. At this point, inquiry moves from external puzzles to an examination of reason’s capacities, limits, and claims.

Because philosophy is the most refined product of human intellect, it naturally carries the greatest share of this task. Such that critique was never achieved through conventional, orthodox methods. It required transcending the familiar and treating the mind not as the final authority but as an instrument. This is precisely the convergence between al-Ghazālī and Immanuel Kant. Both thinkers rose above the authority of reason to establish a higher-level critique, one that shaped the trajectory of Islamic thought in al-Ghazālī’s case and Western philosophy in Kant.

If Kant initiated the method of transcendental reflection in modern Western philosophy, balancing between dogmatic rationalism and skeptical empiricism, al-Ghazālī did something equally transformative in Islamic intellectual history. In *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, he pushed reason to its limits, exposing the weaknesses of rational absolutism and empiricist reduction. His work was not merely a critique of philosophers but a critique of philosophy’s underlying rationalism, a kind of “critique of pure reason” expressed in the language and problems of his time.

Kant similarly rejected the classical ontological, cosmological, and physico-theological proofs for the existence of God in the Critique of Pure Reason,¹ accepting only a modified form of the ontological proof grounded in the possibility of things rather than concepts. This argument traces back to Augustine, Aquinas, Malebranche, Fénelon, Bossuet, and Leibniz.

Kant later summarized the matter in Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A human being must deepen his understanding of the existence of God; he need not prove it. Ghazālī had already reached similar conclusions centuries earlier in his critique of fourteen philosophical claims, such as the eternity of the world, God’s knowledge of particulars, and the resurrection, where he revealed the limits of pure rational speculation and anticipated a transcendental approach grounded in surpassing the authority of reason.

3. Divergent Limits of Reason: Between Empirical Boundaries and Revelatory Boundaries

This is why the researcher’s view diverges from Dr. al-Fallāhī’s comparison of Kant and al-Ghazālī, especially regarding their critique of reason on matters of the noumenal realm, the self, metaphysical causes, and the existence of God³. Comparative studies sometimes slip into hasty parallels, but the foundations of their critique differ profoundly.

Kant established strict conditions for how the intellect can operate within scientific knowledge. The mind must engage in synthetic activity (ref.⁴ through categories that organize experience, enabling mathematics and physics to function as coherent sciences⁵. Time, space, and the categories are a priori forms shaping human experience. Metaphysics, however, lacks these foundational givens; it has no intuitive content upon which the intellect can build. For this reason, Kant argues that metaphysics can not be constituted as a science⁶.

Al-Ghazālī, however, approaches the question from the opposite direction. For him, metaphysical truths, especially the existence of a Creator, are self-evident, grounded in fitrah (innate disposition). Kant later rediscovered this notion in ethics⁷. In al-Ghazālī’s thought, this innate light is “the original illumination through which humans grasp the realities of things”⁸. His approach arises from religious teaching, which instructs reason

not to trespass into matters beyond its scope. Reason is limited and can not reach ultimate truths independently. How can it, when its reach falters precisely in areas that transcend its nature? ⁹

Kant's boundary for the intellect is experience. In the preface to the Critique of Pure Reason, he insists that valid knowledge must arise from experience, which confirms the principles of reason¹⁰. Sensory intuition provides the material for cognition; the intellect organizes this material through concepts. Without intuition, there is no knowledge. Knowledge results from the synthesis of concepts and intuition.¹¹ Al-Ghazālī, however, restricts the limits of reason not to experience but to revelation. Reason must never contradict scripture, and knowledge must remain anchored to divine guidance. For this reason, he classified the sciences into three main categories.

The Three Categories of Knowledge

Al-Ghazālī divides the sciences into three distinct types. First are the purely rational sciences, logic, mathematics, geometry, and medicine, fields that operate through demonstrative reasoning alone. Second are the purely transmitted sciences like ḥadīth and tafsīr, where revelation is the sole source and human reasoning has no authority to alter meaning. The third category blends reason and revelation, such as in kalām and the principles of religion. In this middle space, his admiration for mathematics and natural sciences becomes noticeable. This appreciation does not follow Kant's claim that these sciences contain built-in a priori conditions that restrict the mind's movement¹². Instead, al-Ghazālī approaches them from a scriptural and metaphysical standpoint. His view diverges sharply from al-Falaḥī's comparison¹³, for in al-Ghazālī's understanding, mathematics consists of "demonstrative certainties that cannot be denied," free of doctrinal danger, containing nothing objectionable to religion¹⁴.

Kant's confidence in mathematics and natural science arises from his conviction that their certainty comes from the mind's a priori structures: space and time shape mathematics, and the categories, especially causality, shape natural science. These structures are, for Kant, purely mental intuitions without direct connection to external reality¹⁵. Al-Ghazālī, however, sees these rational categories as concepts created by God in the human mind¹⁶. They are not self-generated structures of reason. As a result, metaphysics is not expelled from the domain of knowledge, as Kant insisted; instead, human reason is removed from the realm of ultimate certainty and placed under the authority of revelation and faith. This dual-path model, revelation for absolute truths and reason for natural inquiry, was later echoed by Zaki Naguib Maḥmūd, who argued for "two domains of knowledge, each with its proper method, and neither allowed to encroach on the other"¹⁷. This duality also rests on distinguishing between natural causation and free, voluntary causation, aligning al-Ghazālī with the idea, shared by Kant, that natural events follow physical laws while free acts belong to a different order whose ultimate ground is God¹⁸.

The Question of Causality: Between al-Ghazālī, Kant, and Hume

This brings us directly to the problem of causality, a central pillar in understanding how both thinkers critique traditional epistemology. Al-Ghazālī argues from his metaphysical framework that God has stripped created things of intrinsic causal power. After the cessation of prophetic revelation, God instituted observable patterns as signs for human beings, setting them as apparent "causes" for His judgments, but without granting them real necessity¹⁹. This is why al-Ghazālī and Kant part ways. For Kant, the connection between cause and effect is necessary because causality is an a priori mental category. For al-Ghazālī, causality is contingent, held moment-to-moment by divine will. God can create effects without their usual causes, hunger without eating,

death without the sword²⁰ a view Ibn Rushd famously dismissed as sophistical and destructive to science²¹. Al-Ghazālī anticipates David Hume in denying necessary connection²², but their motivations diverge. Hume, the radical empiricist, reduces causality to mere habit; the mind sees constant conjunction and assumes a connection, but reason has no right to assert necessity²³.

Al-Ghazālī, by contrast, accepts that the intellect has a vital function, yet one that must not trespass into divine matters. This is why his critique parallels Kant: both restrict reason's authority, though to different ends. Kant breaks with Hume not by restoring external necessity but by redefining necessity as internal to the mind's structures. Causality becomes a cognitive rule, not an objective metaphysical bond²⁴. What is often overlooked is that al-Ghazālī does not abolish causality entirely. In al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād, he distinguishes three kinds of necessary relations: symmetrical relations (like up and down), conditional relations (between condition and conditioned), and true causal relations in which the effect depends on the cause if it has only one cause²⁵. In this sense, al-Ghazālī stands midway between Hume's skepticism and Kant's transcendental certainty. His position anticipates a nuanced model: nature operates through stable patterns, but these patterns are contingent on God rather than the autonomous structures of reason.

Despite the profound differences in method and metaphysics, both al-Ghazālī and Kant place reason under rigorous critique. Each, in their own way, subjects the intellect to a demanding examination that breaks the rigidity of inherited epistemologies and opens the way for a more dynamic engagement with truth.

The Ascent beyond Traditional Rational Methods

Both al-Ghazālī and Kant announce, right at the threshold of their major works, that they are pushing beyond the inherited routes of rational inquiry. This becomes unmistakably clear when one places side by side the introductions to al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl and Critique of Pure Reason. Al-Ghazālī writes: "The thirst for grasping the realities of things was my habit and character from my earliest years. It was a natural impulse and a God-given instinct embedded in my constitution, not of my choosing or planning, until the bond of blind imitation was loosened and the inherited beliefs were shattered"²⁶.

Kant's preface to the Critique of Pure Reason, originally a letter to Baron von Zedlitz dated 29 March 1781, echoes this same spirit of intellectual restlessness. He describes how anyone devoted to a contemplative life and blessed with the approval of a fair-minded judge is spurred toward studies "of great consequence yet far beyond ordinary reach," studies that ignoble minds ignore entirely²⁷. Both texts reveal thinkers dissatisfied with inherited certainties and driven toward a deeper re-examination of knowledge. This sets up the central question: if true critique is meant to free one from the spell of what one critiques, did al-Ghazālī and, after him, Kant fall into the very snare they exposed? Kant mounted a full assault on both rationalist dogmatism,²⁸ especially Descartes, and empiricist skepticism, especially David Hume. Yet in the very act of dismantling previous systems, he constructed a new metaphysics and aimed to secure it scientifically through Critique of Pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason, and Critique of Judgment.

A similar judgment had long been passed on al-Ghazālī. In critiquing the philosophers and the mutakallimūn, he began to philosophize and theologize in their very languages. His student Abū Bakr ibn al-'Arabī famously remarked: "Our teacher Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī entered into the depths of the philosophers, and when he wished to exit, he could not"²⁹. Badawī notes three key works in which al-Ghazālī's

engagement with Greek philosophy is undeniable: *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, shaped partly by John Philoponus's refutation of Proclus on the eternity of the world; *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, influenced by the Hermetic treatise *The Equilibrium of the Soul*; and *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, marked by elements from Plotinus's *Enneads*³⁰.

Yet this is precisely what the researcher calls "the critique of critique", using philosophy as a tool against philosophy itself. Both men spoke the language of philosophy, but only insofar as it allowed them to expose its limits. This is what we see in al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, *Ijām al-'Awām*, and *al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād*, and in Kant's critique of both rationalist dogmatism and empiricist skepticism in the *Critiques*. Despite differences of religious framework and historical era, their positions toward various sciences, mathematical, natural, and theological, often converge. For al-Ghazālī, any science that does not contradict the foundations of religion, such as logic and mathematics (the transcendental logic of Kant's vocabulary), is demonstratively certain and cannot be opposed.

Certain natural sciences, what Kant would call the transcendental analytic, are likewise permissible: astronomy, physics, medicine, the study of plants, animals, minerals, and the causes of their transformations. These fields pose no problem unless they directly conflict with divine omnipotence³¹. The conditions al-Ghazālī places on natural science parallel Kant's categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality, which form the mind's a priori framework. The difference is decisive: Kant grounds these conditions in the self-structuring power of reason prior to experience, whereas al-Ghazālī grounds them in revelation and divine agency. The methods diverge, but the structure, the careful filtering of acceptable knowledge, remains strikingly similar.

This applies equally to mathematics and astronomy. These sciences are "true and certain in their demonstrations and admirable in their conclusions," as al-Ghazālī affirms, but he warns that it is a grave error to turn scientific truths into theological doctrines, just as it is misguided to confine religion to the proofs of logic. Each draws from a different source: science rests on reason, while religion springs from the heart³².

Al-Ghazālī's aim was to subordinate philosophy to religion. Kant's aim, by contrast, was to reach a philosophical religion: the use of religion to advance the work of reason. Emile Boutroux captures this well: "Kant did not intend to destroy church doctrine completely; it can always remain useful insofar as it is a vehicle for a rational faith"³³. Abd al-Rahmān Badawī adds another illuminating detail: al-Ghazālī argued, following Philo of Alexandria and St. Augustine, that Greek philosophy ultimately stemmed from the scriptures of Abraham and Moses, which Greek sages adopted and renamed³⁴.

This view reflects his broader project of drawing philosophy toward religious understanding. He applied this strategy concretely in *al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm*, where he replaced technical logical terminology with Qur'anic expressions, presenting the four Aristotelian syllogistic forms as scriptural patterns. He used philosophical method without binding himself to any philosophical school. In debates with the philosophers, he refuted their methods without asserting a single alternative: he argued at times like an Ash'arī, sometimes like a Mu'tazilī, sometimes like a Karrāmī, and sometimes like a Wāqifi³⁵.

Conclusion

This analysis ultimately strengthens the core argument of the paper: the true engine driving the critiques of al-Ghazālī and Kant is not the superficial overlap in

terms or outcomes, but the deeper intellectual architectures that govern their thought. What appears as similarity is merely the accidental surface of two fundamentally different epistemic worlds.

Al-Ghazālī grounds reason within the authority of revelation, while Kant attempts to ground religion within the limits of reason itself. Their shared vocabulary masks opposing directions of philosophical movement. Between them stretches the defining tension of the post-medieval intellectual landscape, one in which Kant casts a long and transformative shadow.

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