

Agents of Grace: Ethical Agency between Ghazālī and the Anthropology of Islam

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Abstract

This article contributes to theorizations of ethical agency in the anthropology of Islam by turning to the medieval moral theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111). Building on Talal Asad’s engagement with Ghazālī, this article closely reads the latter’s writing on intentionality, which amply illuminates his theory of

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ethical agency. Ghazālī neither elaborates an idealist theory of ethical agency nor posits an ethical subject whose practices are “directed at making certain kinds of behaviors unconscious or nondeliberative” (Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 139). Rather, he articulates ethical agency as a site of contingency and ambivalence, as action involves not only knowledge, resolution/will, and bodily capacity but also divine grace. Grace, this article argues, is a cipher for the non-sovereignty of the ethical subject, since for Ghazālī agency is split between the subject’s discursive and material capacities (knowledge, resolution, and bodily strength) and a certain metamorphic spontaneity/enablement that is experienced as a gift of the Other (grace). By turning to Ghazālī, then, this article encourages serious engagement with the concept of grace for understanding ethical agency in the anthropology of Islam.

“[The pious ancestors] knew that intention is not what a person pronounces with his tongue when he utters, ‘I intend.’ Rather, *it is the springing forth in the heart of the flowing stream of openings from God*, [a springing forth] that sometimes happens easily and sometimes with difficulty.”

—Ḥujjat-ul-Islām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī

Introduction

Talal Asad’s recent work allows us to rethink the cultivation of ethical and aesthetic sensibilities pursued within discursive traditions.¹ His fresh focus on “the sensible body” attempts to bridge the gap between an analytic that listens to *forms of language* and one attuned to *forms of life*. Asad has thus expanded his earlier, extremely influential idea of Islam as a discursive tradition but has also demonstrated his capacity to listen to the anthropological scholarship that took his ideas as points of departure. What the idea of Islam as a discursive tradition now implies—in terms of methodology for students and scholars of Islam in multiple disciplinary contexts—is “to focus on the ways language

directs, justifies, and permeates the senses of the living body through the repeated performance of virtuous action, thought, and feeling (what [the eleventh-century Muslim theologian] Ghazālī called ‘exercising the soul’).² Note how this articulation of discursive tradition can be—in fact, should be—read as Asad’s subtle response to the reception history of this analytical category in the anthropology of Islam, including in Saba Mahmood’s widely cited and debated *Politics of Piety*.³

In *Secular Translations*, Asad delicately offers a set of correctives to Mahmood’s theorization of ethical agency vis-à-vis Aristotle and Foucault. Let me briefly mention two inter-related illustrations. Recall that Mahmood reads her ethnography, based on her mid-1990s fieldwork on “an urban women’s mosque movement that is a part of the larger Islamic Revival in Cairo, Egypt,” in light of poststructuralist ideas to demonstrate that the “desire for freedom from social conventions is not an innate desire.”⁴ While this argument promotes her political critique of secular liberalism, Mahmood pursues this line of reasoning without discussing what innateness means in her interlocutors’ *forms of life* and how it is articulated in their *forms of language*. Asad, therefore, notes the misfit between the poststructuralist critique of the subject and Islamic theories of the self concerning the question of innate desire and potentialities.⁵ Second, Mahmood uses Foucault’s ideas to theorize the micropolitical implications of her interlocutors’ ethical practices.⁶ Asad questions the utility of Foucault when he speaks of the latter’s “individualistic formulations.” Foucault’s aesthetic approach to “technologies of the self” does not resonate, at least for Asad, with a tradition of thought and practice that approaches ethical formation in a communal, inter-generational context.⁷ It seems to me, then, that Asad’s recent reformulation of discursive tradition offers a corrective to certain theoretical presuppositions that have gained citational purchase in the so-called ethical turn in the anthropology of Islam.⁸

Yet, in another sense, Asad’s reformulation of discursive tradition only partially addresses certain salient critiques. For Samuli Schielke, Asad and Mahmood (as well as Charles Hirschkind) examine “the practice of morality and religion primarily from the perspective of coherence.”⁹ The multiple and ambivalent ways in which people relate

to religious ideals and practices, institutions and personages, are contingent on several factors (from their personal histories to socio-economic opportunities). Hence, scholars, argues Schielke, “must find a way to account for views that are neither clearly nor consistently in line with any grand ideology, and lives that are full of ambivalence—not only between moral and amoral aims, but also between different, at times mutually hostile, moral aims.”¹⁰ Otherwise, we run the risk of putting forth, in the words of Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, “totalizing notions of the cultivation of virtue.”¹¹ A more rigorous study of lived virtue ethics requires paying close attention to “struggle, ambivalence, incoherence, and failure” as noteworthy aspects of “everyday religiosity.”¹² Such important critiques emphasize the diversity of ethical projects that might be integral to tradition as an assemblage of language and life; in fact, these critiques question the very idea of belonging—or, projective identification, in the language of psychoanalysis—to tradition as such.¹³ Let me briefly discuss how *Secular Translations* engages with these critiques.

Asad acknowledges how failure functions in moral language/life: “failure threatens the virtuous formation of the soul at every moment.”¹⁴ He also distinguishes “discursive tradition” from “religion”—his rigorous understanding of the former resists the reification, and hence the totalization, implied in the latter. Moreover, he does not think that tradition as an assemblage of language and life has any necessary connection with “the absence [or presence] of secular freedom.” Finally, Asad recognizes the need to consider multiple forms of belonging to the tradition.¹⁵ His revised idea of Islam as a discursive tradition “signals an attempt to engage with the multiple temporalities of those who aspire to a shared inheritance—as well as those who reject it.”¹⁶ At the same time, Asad does not go as far as provincializing his privileged themes in this tradition, such as the “the concern with ‘essence’.” While he distinguishes the latter term from “authenticity,” he nonetheless privileges the contestation over “essence” as a major node of signification that facilitates the internal diversification of the discursive tradition.¹⁷ We could thus say that Asad does not *adequately* incorporate into his nuanced theory of “the sensible body” ideas such as contingency and ambivalence, to mention only

two conceptual supplements needed to discuss ethical practices without reifying ethical agency. Thus, Asad's reformulations offer much-needed correctives, but also continue to theorize ethical agency in programmatic, hence problematic, ways.

This article extends the scope of Asad's insightful engagement with the medieval Muslim theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111). I take Ghazālī as a theorist of psychic life and closely read his writing on intentionality to highlight the significance of contingency and ambivalence in everyday ethical action.¹⁸ Ghazālī approaches ethical agency—that is, the capacity to transform self and society by means of ethical practices—as an open site of signification. Human action, for him, involves four prerequisites: knowledge, resolution/will, bodily capacity, and the grace of God. I argue that grace for Ghazālī is a cipher for the ambivalence and contingency that haunt self-moralizing regimes. I further contend that Ghazālī's ideas on action and agency problematize how Mahmood approaches agency. Ghazālī allows us to acknowledge the gaps and fissures that remain between *forms of language* and *forms of life*, which is to say that traditions do not *totally* map onto bodies. By being attuned to action as textuality as well as the play of grace in ethical agency, Ghazālī cautions us against the analytical, and by extension the political, aspirations of totalizing theorizations of agency.

Now, a brief description of what follows. The first section builds on Asad's idea that prophetic traditions (ḥadīth texts) translate the transcendental authority of divine scripture (the Qur'ān). I thus read two ḥadīth texts on intention (*niyya*) to elaborate its conceptual and practical contours in Muslim thought and practice. This section also draws attention to the anthropological resourcefulness of ḥadīth texts by underscoring what I call "ethnographic illustrations." The following three sections systematically discuss Ghazālī's insightful writing on intention, his theory of human action, and his ideas about ethical agency. The penultimate section begins by summarizing the previous three sections, before moving onto a compassionate yet critical assessment of Mahmood's widely influential views on ethical agency. I draw on Ghazālī to question some of her assumptions about how ethical agency works in the Islamic tradition. The conclusion further clarifies my argument but also stresses the need

to take seriously resources in the Islamic tradition that might allow us to enrich what counts as “theory.”

Intentions and Actions

Asad famously wrote in his 1986 classic essay, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, “If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the Hadith.”¹⁹ In his reformulated version of this concept decades later, Qur’an and Ḥadīth continue to serve as linchpins of the discursive tradition, but Asad now illuminates how transcendental authority is translated into bodily practice, into ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. The translation of a divine *form of language* into a human *form of life* is, in part, mediated by ḥadīth texts:

Translation in the Islamic tradition does not occur directly from divinity to the believer’s body; it occurs from traditional representations of the Prophet’s life—that is, accounts of his sayings and actions transmitted down the years by a chain of named individuals beginning with his companions. Together with the words of the revealed Qur’an, these textual accounts are a major Islamic source that has been translated from the Arabic into the local languages of Muslims in various parts of the world—and thence into behavior patterns regulated and taught by Islamic tradition. The ultimate authority of these accounts resides in the Qur’an, which repeatedly commands the faithful to follow the Prophet, and it is the Prophet who sets up the paradigm of prayer in which verses of the Qur’an are recited together with repeated bodily movements expressing submission and reverence toward God.²⁰

Note that these remarks belong to a broader discussion wherein Asad formidably challenges the misguided idea that the Islamic doctrine of Qur’ānic inimitability necessarily implies the nontranslatability of scriptural discourse into local contexts of lived religion.

Yet Asad does not explore the ethnographic imagination contained in ḥadīth texts, and whether this imagination might complicate programmatic theories of ethical agency. I would like to pursue here precisely this line of inquiry by engaging in a mode of close reading that resembles ethnography as attunement to the play between *forms of language* and *forms of life* and as an ethic of the encounter. This is to say that my mode of reading ḥadīth texts is also an opportunity for me to imagine, and to think about, what it means to be interpellated into a subject position by an ethical discourse that retains its soteriological significance as it mediates transcendental authority.

“Actions are indeed [evaluated] according to intentions” are the initial words of a text known as “the ḥadīth of intention” (*ḥadīth an-niyya*).²¹ This textual fragment is one of the most widely discussed ḥadīth texts on the subject of intentionality in the Islamic tradition. For the early Muslim jurist Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (767-820), this ḥadīth “contains one-third of knowledge (*‘ilm*).”²² Thus, what Islamic theological, legal, and Sufi texts have said on intention, a concept that intimately informs debates on the interplay between psychic life and social realities, might be seen as commentarial notes on this foundational ḥadīth.²³ The key ethical principle here is that intention is the evaluative criterion for the moral status of an action, a view that encourages believers to meditate on the motives that infuse their bodily movements (including the affective movements of that vital organ, the heart).

When writing in a Sufi register, Muslim religious thinkers interiorize intention (*niyya*) by seeing it as an action of the heart. For them, intention is the embodied soul’s attentive search for goodness, beauty, and sincerity within intersecting spheres of relationality. Sometimes, the same authors approach *niyya* in a jurisprudential register, and adopt an empirical approach to illuminate the practical implications of intention in acts of worship, social relations, commercial transactions, and criminal acts. These two registers in fact flesh out the psycho-social investments of a unified ethical tradition, especially given that some of the most renowned Sufi authors who have addressed the subject were also steeped in jurisprudence and normative ethics. The significance of intention as a portal into understanding the interface between exteriority

and interiority becomes quite clear when we examine its finessed treatment in the analytical hands of Sufi-inspired moral theologians such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111). In his “Book of Intention, Sincerity, and Truthfulness,” Ghazālī theorizes *niyya* as a bridge concept between the inner and the outer, one that has profound ethical significance for Muslims in their everyday lives (the next three sections flesh out Ghazālī’s writing on *niyya*).

The remainder of “the ḥadīth of intention” offers what I call an “ethnographic illustration,” which encourages listeners and readers to appreciate the practical implications of the ethical principle at hand. “Rooted in living communities,” explains historian of religion Anna L. Peterson, religious ethics “emerge from practical experiences, and are meant to be practiced.”²⁴ Thus, the full version of the above report alludes to a practical, even political, context: “Actions are indeed [evaluated] according to intentions, and in fact what belongs to a man is what he intends. So, whosoever migrates toward God and His Messenger, let it be known that his migration is for God and His Messenger. So, whosoever migrates to pursue the world or to marry a woman, let it be known that his migration is for what he migrates towards.” This ethnographic illustration emphasizes that only a migration pursued for God’s sake, and in imitation of the Prophet, has soteriological significance and merits reward. The Ḥadīth literature is replete with ethnographic elaborations that specify the meaning of an ethical principle by imagining it as being practiced in a particular place by a particular person (hence provincializing a universal ethical principle by recourse to singularity). These ethnographic elaborations are also pedagogically effective insofar as they stoke ethical imagination and encourage listeners and readers to reflect on their own practices. Thus, this particular ethnographic illustration might provoke the following question: What motivates my actions and whose pleasure do I seek?

Let me briefly comment on the particular “world” of the ḥadīth of intention. If the Prophet Muḥammad uttered these or similar words, he most likely did so after the *hijra* (the migration to Medina). Recall that many believers had already reached Medina when the Prophet arrived there in 622 CE. Others migrated afterwards. The act of migration was

not easy, since it demanded radical unbelonging, abandoning one's property and lifelong attachments to home. An act of pure fidelity, migration demonstrated one's commitment to the faith community. Yet, there was the question of motive: What about the believer who migrates not to express his fidelity to the community, but for the sake of a prospective marriage partner or to pursue a lucrative opportunity? In a context where different believers might have had conflicting, or simply multiple, motives to migrate, the Prophet might have wished to distinguish those who had migrated "towards God and the Prophet" from those who had migrated to pursue their worldly interests. Ḥadīth commentators mention that the Prophet might have had in mind a particular man who had migrated to Medina for the sake of marrying a woman by the name of Umm Qays.²⁵ This man in turn was called "the migrant of Umm Qays" (*muhājir Umm Qays*).

Let us contrast the case of the migrant of Umm Qays with another ethnographic illustration. Recall the ḥadīth about those believers who did not join the Prophet Muḥammad during the Tabūk expedition in 630 CE due to poverty or physical disability. Imagine the following scene: The Prophet is sitting with some companions in Tabūk, hundreds of miles north of Medina, and wistfully recalls those friends and acquaintances who were absent from the expedition due to valid excuses. He shares with the believers sitting around him the thought crossing his mind: "There are many people left behind in Medina who have been with us all along. They were with us in every valley we crossed, every path [tactic] we deployed to trouble the unbelievers. They have a share in what we have spent and [will be rewarded for] the hunger we have felt." The statement confuses some of his companions, prompting them to ask: How can those who failed to join the expedition and stayed behind in Medina also be present here in Tabūk, hundreds of miles away? The Prophet informs them that he is thinking otherwise: "They are held back due to valid excuses, but they are with us by virtue of their good intention."²⁶ This anecdote serves to underscore the value of virtual formations in Islamic ethics, such as good intentions of the heart.

The two ḥadīth texts I have discussed in this section emphasize the centrality of interiority and the primacy of intention over action. In this

way, these reports corroborate another ḥadīth according to which “the intention of a believer is better than his action.”²⁷ I shall revisit and discuss in detail this report in a following section on Ghazālī’s theorization of ethical agency. To return to Asad, what we see in these two ethnographic illustrations are the exact ways in which prophetic discourse *translates* transcendental authority. Thus, the ḥadīth of intention might be seen as, and in fact has been read as, *translating* the Qur’ānic words: “So call on God with sincere devotion” (40:14). I have therefore attempted in this section to attend to what Asad asks us to consider, namely how *forms of language*, such as transcendental discourse, have come to mean something practical in *forms of life*.

Let me underscore that the two illustrations of *niyya* examined above concern political acts, involving unbelonging and mobility. This context is significant since one of the original meanings of the word, *niyya*, is “the direction in which one travels.”²⁸ One could thus say, “this caravan intends Yemen,” by observing the direction in which the caravan is proceeding. In other words, Yemen motivates this caravan as its goal or *telos*. And to say, “this caravan desires Yemen,” means the same thing, since the people of this caravan desire to reach Yemen. In fact, it is the latter valence—intention as desire—that animates Ghazālī’s insightful writing on the subject.

The Thirty-Seventh Book of the *Iḥyā’*

In the thirty-seventh book of his monumental work, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (*Resuscitation of the Sciences of Religion*), Ghazālī elaborates *niyya* and two related terms, namely sincerity (*ikhlas*) and truthfulness (*sidq*). This book follows his exposition of “love, longing, intimacy, and contentment” and precedes his discussion of “contemplation and self-examination.” He commences his elaboration of *niyya* by noting that our felicity—in this immanent world (*al-dunyā*) and in a future scene of transcendence called in Islamic theological discourse “the hereafter” (*al-ākhirā*)—is contingent on knowledge (*ilm*) and devotional practice (*ibāda*). Yet, knowledge and action must be accompanied by sincerity (*ikhlas*). Ghazālī approaches *niyya* under five subheadings: the virtues of good intention, its reality,

how intention is superior to action, the relationship between action and intention, and the difference between intention and choice.

Ghazālī draws the reader’s attention to the virtuousness of *niyya* by citing Qur’ānic verses, ḥadīth texts, and aphorisms of early Muslim luminaries. In this citation-heavy section, he does not comment at length on any single quotation; rather, the section seeks to establish the scriptural and traditional significance of the topic under discussion. For example, he cites the Qur’ānic injunction addressing the Prophet Muḥammad (and by extension each listener): “And do not cast aside those who call upon their Lord, morning and evening, desiring His countenance” (6:52). This verse lends support to the idea I mentioned above that in Ghazālī’s discussion intention and desire assume semantic neighborliness, if not connotative equivalence. The ḥadīths and sayings (*al-āthār*) he cites highlight different valences of *niyya*. For instance, according to a report, “God sees neither your faces nor your riches; but what God sees are your hearts and your actions.”²⁹ Ghazālī explains, “God sees what is inside, in hearts, since this is the place where intentions belong.”³⁰ Yet he readily acknowledges that the inside manifests in material existence, and so he draws the reader’s attention to the following report: “Whosoever fragrances himself for God will find himself on the Day of Resurrection smelling more beautiful than musk. But whosoever fragrances himself for anyone other than God will find himself smelling more disgusting than carrion.”³¹ What is being conveyed here is not some essentialist interiorization of intention, but rather how our ordinary life *translates* our desires (the objects that motivate us).

To appreciate Ghazālī’s treatment of *niyya*, it is important to briefly examine how Sufi authors before him had broached the topic. In his *Al-Ri’āya li-ḥuqūq Allāh*, a text that was “composed in the form of counsels given to a disciple in response to questions on his part,”³² the mystical theologian al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857) defines *niyya* as “the resolution on the part of the believer to align his action to an idea from among ideas. Hence, when he determines that he will perform *this* particular action for *this* particular idea, then such a resolution is called *niyya*, be it for God’s sake or for another’s.”³³ Al-Muḥāsibī further emphasizes introspection and examining one’s motives:

The heart's corruption results from abandoning the act of examining one's soul (*al-muḥāsabat li'l-nafs*) and being deceived by high hopes (*al-ighṭirār bi-ṭūl al-amal*). Thus, if you want to reform your heart then pause to examine your intention and every fleeting thought, accept what is for God and abandon what is for anyone besides Him, and seek [God's] assistance against high hopes by consistently remembering death.³⁴

We shall see below that Ghazālī retains the link between action and what al-Muḥāsibī calls idea (that is, between *amal* and *ma'nā*, the latter also meaning, “mental content”).³⁵ However, instead of *ma'nā* Ghazālī opts for a more psychologically-laden word, namely, *gharaḍ* (aim or purpose). To return to al-Muḥāsibī: “intention thus covers two meanings: the resolution to do a particular action and doing something while desiring a particular meaning [object of thought].”³⁶ The Egyptian scholar Muḥammad ‘Abduḥ al-Drāz (1894-1959) characterizes these two valences as the moral and the psychological. The former pertains to the *what*, the latter to the *why* of an action. This is to say that Drāz distinguishes form and motive by using the terms intention and inclination.³⁷ He explains that “the moral act is found in desire's movement from the ideal to the actual—or, for that matter, from *bāṭin* to *zāhir*, or from thought to practice.”³⁸ Ghazālī's account of intention, as I discuss below, fleshes out how the inner and the outer are mutually constitutive domains of subjectivity, even if the inner is ultimately more significant than the outer from his soteriological vantage.

We should note, however, that Ghazālī, unlike Drāz, does not endorse any functionalist division between “intention” and “inclination,” since the former belongs to a threshold space between the moral and the psychological (see discussion below of *niyya* as an “intermediate attribute” of the soul). The fact that a single human being's actions can be at once good and evil according to a normative moral spectrum means that hearts have the capacity to long for competing objects. Desire is the force that splits the subject (I return to this below when I discuss Ghazālī's ideas on “multiple motives”).

Let me mention another source of inspiration for Ghazālī, namely, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996), whose *Qūt al-qulūb* furnishes Ghazālī with

many of the sages' aphorisms that decorate the pages of the *Iḥyā'*.³⁹ Al-Makkī takes a holistic approach to the centrality of *niyya* in everyday ethics: intention/desire pervades not only formal devotional rituals but also "eating, drinking, attire, sleeping, and marital relations, since these are all actions for which one shall be questioned [by God]. If one performs these actions for God's pleasure, then they increase his tally of good works. However, if one undertakes these actions in pursuit of lust or for the sake of another's pleasure, then they end up amplifying the tally of evil deeds. This is [the meaning of the Prophet's words] for every man is what he intends."⁴⁰ Al-Makkī additionally says that *niyya* is ultimately a gift of God and that a single action can contain many intentions, and in this way a single action becomes a source of plentiful merit. Such merit, however, is not only contingent on grace but also the doer's knowledge of and assent to the revealed norms.⁴¹ I read what al-Makkī is saying here in light of Asad's views: prophetic traditions and believers' bodily behavior *translate* not only transcendental discourse but also divine grace. Ghazālī elaborates this point more fully in his treatment of *niyya*.

Ghazālī on *Niyya*

Ghazālī's discussion of *niyya* is simultaneously systematic and elusive, an approach demanded by the subject matter at hand: "*niyya* is a secret known only to God."⁴² Ghazālī alerts his readers that he uses the following three terms interchangeably: intention (*niyya*), desire (*irāda*), and resolution (*qaṣd*). These terms, in turn, are connected to knowledge (the tree/thought) and action (the fruit/extension). Action, he explains, is an extension of thought that can be expressed in the form of bodily motion or voluntary rest (thought, for him, does not express itself through one's involuntary motion or rest, which he sees as expressions of instinct rather than thought—and we shall return to the idea of instinct disrupting the conscientious subject).

The next point Ghazālī develops is that knowledge/thought is not the only foundation or prerequisite of action. Rather, action requires both desire (*irāda*) and physical capacity (*qudra*). He defines *irāda* as

“the movement of the heart towards what it sees as agreeable to the aim, whether in the present or in the future.”⁴³ In order to underscore this definition’s broader implications, he drives home the point that the human organism is predisposed to pursue what it perceives as beneficial and to ward off what it sees as harmful. In other words, we are attracted to those objects that yield us pleasure and we detest those things that cause us pain. The basis of our judgment concerning sources of benefit/pleasure and harm/pain is the knowledge we acquire from both our external and internal senses. Throughout one’s life, the knowledge one acquires keeps on modifying one’s perception of the beneficial and harmful. To put it otherwise, our knowledge of good and evil is contingent on our experience. For example, knowing the effectiveness of a bitter medicinal syrup allows one to become agreeable to, and ultimately desirous of, drinking something that opposes one’s disposition. Ghazālī’s point is that while human nature is predisposed to certain objects, acquired knowledge, such as the knowledge of God’s norms, can ultimately transform disposition.⁴⁴

For Ghazālī, the knowledge of good and evil is at once rational and revealed, albeit the ultimate standard or criterion remains revelation (that is, the law of the divine Other, or, heteronomy). Let me engage in an act of auto-theory to imagine what this *might* look like in a situated form of life. Suppose I take myself as both an addressee of the divine norms and an agent of critical thinking (which are, of course, overlapping subject positions). I encounter the prospect of extra-marital sexual pleasure, an encounter that also brings to mind all the rational reasons and revealed norms that censure this form of pleasure. At some psychic-cum-cognitive level, I have been convinced by both reason and revelation that illicit sexual pleasure is harmful or might lead to harm (here or hereafter). Yet my knowledge of harm itself is not enough to check my behavior. I therefore have to activate my inner resolution and bodily capacity to shun what I perceive as harming my secular and soteriological wellbeing. My initial, pre-meditated longing for sexual pleasure is what Ghazālī calls “the motivating aim” (*al-gharaḍ al-bā’ith*), which only becomes “the intended object” (*al-maqṣad al-manwā*) once my knowledge, resolution, and bodily capacity are collectively willing to transform aim

into object (note that this often happens subconsciously and sometimes unconsciously). Thus, Ghazālī should not be misconstrued here to mean that longing for an aim is the same as intending an object.

Ghazālī further complicates things by claiming that it is not the thing per se, but rather our perception of the thing, that informs the aim. What brings together knowledge, resolution, and bodily capacity to transform aim into object is a certain heartfelt movement. It is this movement of the heart that Ghazālī calls “intention” or *niyya*.⁴⁵ Ghazālī interchangeably attributes this movement to the heart *and* the soul/spirit. He writes, “intention is the soul’s springing forth, direction, and inclination towards what it perceives as its purpose [intended object], in this life or in the hereafter.”⁴⁶ The word I have translated as “springing forth” is *inbi’āth*, which can also be understood, according to Ibn al-Manẓūr, as *indifā’*, meaning plunging into something spontaneously. *Inbi’āth* also implies the doing of an action with haste; for example, to say, “he outpoured himself in the errand” (*inba’atha fi’s-sayr*) implies that “he rushed” (*asra’u*) in running an errand.⁴⁷ “The springing forth of the soul”—*inbi’āth al-nafs*, which one might even translate as the flow of the inner onto the outer—is a beautiful phrase that captures the organic way in which *niyya* mediates the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin* (we shall return to the word *inbi’āth* when discussing grace). This word also affirms my speculation above that the conjoining of knowledge, resolution, and bodily capacity, in the service of transforming aim into object, happens subconsciously or even unconsciously. At any rate, this philological detour allows us to appreciate how *niyya* is a modality of a dynamic, not static self.

Ghazālī refers to the idea of *niyya* as taking place in-between *zāhir* and *bāṭin* when he calls it an “intermediate attribute” (*al-ṣifat al-mutawassiṭa*) of the soul.⁴⁸ *Niyya* thus *translates*, in an Asadian idiom, between two forms of subjectivity: *zāhir* (the empirical self) and *bāṭin* (the inner self). It is at this point that Ghazālī revises his definition of action, which he now defines as: “the rousing of bodily capacity to move the physical limbs in the service of desire (*irāda*).”⁴⁹ To summarize what we have covered thus far, recall that action requires three prerequisites: knowledge, desire/resolution (*irāda* and *qaṣd*), and bodily capacity. (We will see below how the grace of God is the final prerequisite of action.)

Ghazālī then addresses the question: What about actions driven by multiple motives?

Ghazālī's offers a concise but complex account of "multiple motives."⁵⁰ He understand how a single action is often located in multiple vectors of discursive formations, desires, relationships, and social practices. He theorizes the relationship between action and motive as unfolding on four paths. The first involves "pure intention" (*al-niyyat al-khāliṣa*); here Ghazālī's example is the man who runs when he encounters a wild beast. In this scenario, the action of running is infused by a single motive: survival! At other times, one acts in response to two or more *strong* motives, what Ghazālī calls "the accompaniment of motives." Take the case of someone who provides financial assistance to a poor relative because of a *strong* urge to help the needy and a *strong* desire to show kindness to kinsfolk. The Ḥadīth literature encourages both forms of charity and links them with salvation and reward in the hereafter. The third modality of motive is when two or more *weak* motives come together to prompt action (this Ghazālī calls "the partnership of motives"). In such a case, a single motive does not prompt action; however, two weak motives partner together in the realization of an action. Finally, there is the presence of a strong and a weak motive. For Ghazālī, "there is no virtuous deed that does not possess multiple intentions. Yet, these [multiple intentions] become manifest in the believer's heart only when he makes the hard effort to seek the good. He has to embark upon and reflect the good. This [attention to one's motives] makes actions pure and good deeds manifold."⁵¹ The purpose of this typology is to emphasize that one must deliberate how strong and weak desires/motives undergird one's actions. All this to say that the relation between *forms of language* and *forms of life*, insofar as intention elucidates this relation, are complex and prone to contingency, defying totalizing theorizations of ethical agency.

Ethical Agency as Textuality

Ghazālī further theorizes the relationship between action and intention by recourse to three themes: the superiority of intention over action, the jurisprudence of intention, and finally, the difference between intention and choice (*ikhtiyār*). This section discusses each theme successively.

Ghazālī uses the ḥadīth, “the believer’s intention is nobler than his action,” to highlight the dynamic connection between action and intention. He first explains that this ḥadīth does not imply the superiority of intention over action in general, since action broadly conceived always already encompasses “actions of the heart,” such as contemplation. Nor does this ḥadīth imply that *niyya* is superior to action because of its temporal longevity as compared to the temporary duration of most human actions. Rather, *niyya* is superior, he argues, because “the heart’s actions are undoubtedly nobler than the body’s movements.” Of the actions of the heart, nothing is nobler than *niyya*, since it is “the general inclination and desire of the heart towards what is good.”⁵² Here, as elsewhere in the *Resuscitation*, Ghazālī identifies interiority as the core locus of ethical excellence. Yet, he does not want his readers to think that bodily action is redundant or inconsequential. He thus discusses at length the precise relationship between intention and action and the exact sense in which the Prophet might have preferred the former to the latter.

Ghazālī explains that only a person familiar with the objectives and particular practices of the divine norms can grasp the wisdom behind the Prophet’s saying, “a believer’s intention is nobler than his action.” He shares with his readers a taste of this wisdom by means of an analogy: “When a person claims that bread is superior to fruit, what he means is that it is superior due to its capacity to nourish the body in relation to fruit.” The sound judgment that determines which foods are better for the body’s health belongs to the one who has intricate knowledge of the human body. The contemplative practices that nourish the heart and train this bodily organ to apprehend God, such as *niyya*, are therefore nobler than the bodily practices that merely express one’s desire. Ghazālī is fully aware of the erotic nature of the contemplative practices. He goes as far as suggesting that the heart’s true happiness is the pleasure it can derive from beholding God’s countenance. The ultimate encounter with the divine coincides with death itself: “No one will have the pleasure of meeting God except the one who dies loving God—as a knower of God. The only path to know God is that of loving Him and the only way to become intimate with God is to remember Him (*dhikr*). Understand, then, that intimacy [with God] is realized by means of constant remembrance

(*dhikr*) and knowledge [of God comes about] by means of contemplation (*fikr*).⁵³

Note how carefully Ghazālī theorizes the relationship between affect and ritual. He connects the feeling of divine intimacy to the physical practice of moving one’s tongue in God’s remembrance (*dhikr*), and joins the mystical insight *dhikr* produces to an inner practice of the heart, namely, contemplation (*fikr*). Esoteric as well as exoteric—inner and outer—actions produce qualities of love and intimacy in the soul. Both types of actions are necessary as the believer has to train both the external senses (audition, touch, sight, smell, and taste) and the internal senses (including common sense, imagination, and the rational faculty).⁵⁴ Thus, Ghazālī’s two examples—namely, *dhikr* and *fikr*—are well-chosen, since they underscore the necessity of both inner and outer practices.⁵⁵ The mysterious meaning of the ḥadīth, “a believer’s intention is nobler than his action,” thus becomes disclosed once a practitioner grasps that it is the heart that is one’s instrument with which one apprehends, remembers, and loves God. In this framework, the ultimate objective of piety is the movement towards communion with the divine.

The second theme Ghazālī uses to theorize the relationship between intention and action concerns jurisprudence and normative rituals. He acknowledges that from the vantage of everyday life, what we do with our bodies covers a dizzying array of experiences and practices, including deeds and sayings, rest and motion, thought and recollection, and in short, all actions that pursue the desirable and shun the undesirable. However, from the vantage of normative jurisprudence, all human action might be divided into three types: acts of devotion (*tā’āt*), acts of disobedience (*ma’āṣī*), and permitted or neutral acts (*mubāḥāt*). Ghazālī first tackles the second type, explaining that the ḥadīth, “Actions are indeed [evaluated] according to intentions,” does not apply to acts of disobedience. Of course, evil deeds contain their own intentions, but Ghazālī’s point is that a good intention does not change the moral status of an evil action. The act of stealing money, for example, does not become a virtuous act if the thief intends to feed the poor. Similar is the case of someone who furnishes a “highway robber with a sword, a horse, and other provisions, and then says, ‘My intention was to express my

generosity and to imitate the beautiful attributes of God. I therefore supplied him this sword and this horse so he might fight in the path of God.” The numerous ḥadīths that promise reward to the person who equips soldiers with swords and horses do not apply here. Ghazālī thus says, “the jurists are unanimous that this is forbidden, even though generosity is a virtue most dear to God.”⁵⁶

Moving on to “acts of devotion,” Ghazālī explains, that they must be motivated by a desire to please God. Thus, longing for the divine is both a prerequisite for the soundness of an action and a means of increasing its merit and reward. He reminds his readers that the desire to attract attention towards oneself by means of a good deed is called ostentation (*riyā*), which is forbidden and turns good deeds into causes of punishment and debasement in God’s sight. Lastly, he points out that the permissible acts can be transformed into virtuous deeds and acts of devotion if they are done to please God and to follow the Prophet’s normative example (*sunna*).

Ghazālī offers an extended example to underscore how *niyya* serves to deepen and expand the scope of everyday practices of piety. While this ethnographic illustration is not unique to Ghazālī (it appears in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s *Qūt al-qulūb*), his sophisticated expository style is certainly unprecedented. Let me take some *translational* liberty to flesh out Ghazālī’s ethnographic illustration. Imagine a woman who wants to be pious by going to the mosque to offer her afternoon prayer (*ṣalāt al-‘aṣr*). The same woman then intends that another objective of her visiting the mosque is greeting fellow Muslims (a virtuous act discussed in Ḥadīth literature). While at the mosque, she remembers her sick uncle and raises her hands in an act of supplication to pray for his health (recall that this woman has now performed three good deeds!). Finally, she exits the mosque in such a way as to make sure that her right foot is the last foot to exit sacred space, and by doing so she is blessed yet again with another good deed (as exiting the mosque in this manner is to imitate the Prophet and all such acts of imitation merit divine pleasure, since the Prophet is God’s beloved). In fact, this woman can *intend* many more virtuous deeds while visiting the mosque.

Note how this ethnographic illustration fleshes out the idea of multiple motives and the simultaneous focus on God as one’s object

of devotion, the Prophet as one's object of imitation, and relationships with human beings as objects of communal belonging. Actions are thus playful and ambivalent sites of signification—what Jacques Derrida calls textuality.⁵⁷ Note also how this ethnographic illustration imagines an ethical subject who constantly considers how to multiply the moral and ethical scope of an action. In practice, this implies thinking about the dialectic of the inner and the outer in daily life, which involves, of course to different degrees, a disruption of mindless habituation. Thus, deliberation and introspection, which allow one to constantly attend to one's motives/desires/intentions, are key elements in the formation and practice of pious selves. In fact, we could say that the repetition of devotional practices in the Islamic tradition presupposes the need to constantly refine one's intention due to the “disjunction between will and body.”⁵⁸ Repetition, here, is therefore not the same as automatism, but rather “repetition-with-difference.”

By means of contemplation and introspection, what appears to be a single act at first glance—visiting the mosque to partake in the congregational prayer—turns out to be a network of related motives and actions. When the woman frequenting the mosque thinks about her action, and certain other actions related to mosques in the Ḥadīth literature, she might ask herself: How can I change my single *niyya* for prayer into a double *niyya* by also intending to use my time at the mosque to engage in reflective isolation (*i'tikāf*), or a triple *niyya*, by further intending to save myself from reprehensible actions that I might have done if I was in the market instead of the mosque? To engage in this kind of moral attentiveness both deepens the action at hand but also opens up possibilities for continuous reflection and deliberation.⁵⁹

Finally, Ghazālī turns his attention to the difference between *niyya* and “choice” (*ikhtiyār*). His purpose in this final section of Book 37 of the *Iḥyā'* is to explain how *niyya* does not amount to *ikhtiyār*. The former is connected to one's inclination and desire, while the latter is an exercise of the rational faculty. He says, “When there is no inclination, one cannot contrive or acquire it by means of pure will.”⁶⁰ Imagine the case of a person who is overly satiated after consuming a grand meal at his favorite restaurant. He eats so much of a delicious entrée that he reaches the

threshold where the same object switches from being a source of pleasure to one of unpleasure. Once he crosses this threshold, he can no longer tolerate looking at or smelling this entrée. He now comes to lack the biological factor or innate drive that had undergirded his desire for that entrée. In this case, this overly satiated person's mere words, "I desire to consume this entrée and am inclined towards it," would not be enough to reactivate the immanent drive. Here, I have *translated* Ghazālī's example to convey his message: desire is a function of psychosomatic disposition and not the volitional self. At the same time, this does not imply that the volitional self has no relation to disposition; rather, it means that a gap always remains between desire and volition, even when the subject engages in practices that seek to transform instinct and disposition.⁶¹

Ghazālī's broader point is that while one cannot use will power to completely control and/or change the nature of the drives, one can nonetheless transform one's disposition by a humbler process that he calls "the cultivation of the means of desire."⁶² This interpretive move enables Ghazālī to question both the autonomy of the will and the determinism of the drive. In other words, humans cannot align their disposition to social norms by means of their will power alone. They lack a will powerful enough to transform nature itself. For Ghazālī, our basic instincts are beyond the jurisdiction of resolution and reason. What lies in the capacity of the ethical self, however, is the performance of those practices that slowly shape disposition and steer human nature towards embodying the normative order.

Yet, sometimes the ethical practices fail to transform disposition, bringing the ethical agent face-to-face with his, her, or their limitations and non-mastery. This is a crucial point to grasp about ethical agency. While practices need to be performed regularly, so that one becomes inclined to adhere to one's normative ideals, the ultimate metamorphosis of ethical subjectivity is beyond one's control. This means that while mindful repetitive ethical action can often transform disposition, this transformation is never an absolute event. Ghazālī is fully aware of how we can easily slip back into fulfilling more instinctual demands and desires that are indifferent to the normative order.

This is where divine grace enters the picture in Ghazālī's discussion: "[The pious ancestors] knew that intention is not what a person

pronounces with his tongue when he utters, ‘I intend.’ Rather, *it is the springing forth in the heart of the flowing stream of openings from God*, [a springing forth] that sometimes happens easily and sometimes with difficulty.⁶³ Recall from our discussion above that “springing forth” (*inbi‘āth*) implies spontaneity. Ghazālī is talking about an affective rigor that moves the heart to action, a sudden flood of feeling that inundates the heart like a frozen spring that gushes out water in melting temperatures. Grace changes temperament and warms up the heart to action.

This description of God’s enabling grace resonates with the Sufi dialectic of consolation and desolation (*baṣṭ* and *qabḍ*, respectively). Thus, sometimes knowledge, resolution/will, and bodily capacity are there, but a virtuous action is not realized because one lacks the final ingredient, namely, an experience of enablement that acts as a metamorphic force. Recall that ethical agency is enmeshed in ambivalence toward right and wrong and is shaped by cognitive-cum-corporeal limitations and moral failures. The idea of grace further highlights the contingency of ethical agency. Because grace is the gift of the Other and not a function of an autonomous self, ethical agency remains a contingent project. Ethical agency, for Ghazālī, is an open site of signification and experience, since it involves interactions between knowledge, resolution/will, bodily capacity, and finally but importantly, the grace of God.

Ghazālī’s Intentional Subject and the Anthropology of Islam

Let me now summarize Ghazālī’s systematic exposition of intentionality, which is also an elaboration of his theory of ethical agency. The most basic unit of this theory is action, which he defines as intentional motion or rest. Action is thus an extension of thought and is contrasted to nonvolitional motion or rest, which are extensions of instinct. Ghazālī does not support the idea that we are creators of our actions as an exercise of our free will; nor does he forward the notion that human beings are automatons whose actions are already determined by their natures (instincts and drives) or by an external sovereign. The former view would negate the presence of God, the latter would dissolve moral responsibility altogether (hence questioning the very idea of the normative order). He

thus rejects all monocausal understandings of human action. Rather, he affirms the view that action is contingent on four factors: knowledge, resolution, bodily capacity, and divine grace. Intention, for him, is the “intermediate attribute” of the soul that conjoins the first three factors, preparing the heart to receive the gift of grace, which is experienced as sudden inspiration and spontaneous enablement. This theory of action allows us to appreciate how agency is embodied in contingent ways, relational frameworks, and is open to both failure and ambivalence. This theory of ethical agency also resists the dominant view of agency in the anthropology of Islam, namely, Saba Mahmood’s writing on the topic in her influential *Politics of Piety*.

Mahmood’s book has generated wide-ranging debate and discussion, within and beyond the anthropology of Islam, about the question of gender and Islam, the limits of Enlightenment humanism and secularity, and ethical agency and the political dimensions of pious practices. Mahmood critiques the universalist assumptions about human nature, agency, and politics that undergird secular-liberal governance and its attendant modes of sociality and subjectivity. She particularly questions the moral convictions and epistemological certainties of secular-liberal feminists and exposes the ethico-political dangers involved in the desire to transform the “sensibilities and commitments of women whose lives contrast with feminism’s emancipatory visions.”⁶⁴ *Politics of Piety* encourages the anthropologist (but also the general Anglophone reader) to ask of herself: “Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that ‘unenlightened’ women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds distinct from mine ever lead me to question my own certainty about what I prescribe as a superior way of life for others?”⁶⁵ To ask oneself these questions is to engage in reflective practices that importantly displace and parochialize “secular-liberal understandings of agency, body, and authority.”⁶⁶ The recurrence of “life” in the above litany of questions—*life forms*, *forms of life*, and *lifeworlds*—is hardly arbitrary. Mahmood’s ethico-political intervention centers on recognizing her interlocutors’ lives as meaningful projects of world-making.

Her attunement to alterity here might be seen as a springing forth of grace, since these questions open the self to the Other.

Mahmood draws on her mid-1990s fieldwork among women of the mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt. Mahmood's focus is on their ethical practices, which she reads as micropolitical modalities for embodying agency "beyond the confines of the binary model of enacting and subverting norms."⁶⁷ She resists *translating* her interlocutors' life-worlds into the terms of a liberationist feminist grammar, an analytic that would have undermined the heterogeneity and specificity of her interlocutors' particular ethical practices and experiences of selfhood.

I find compelling Mahmood's call to experiment with modes of analysis that pay attention to "the morphology of moral actions" for observing alternative practices and spaces of world-making that are otherwise depoliticized by secularist conceptions of society and polity. This methodological move encourages us to avoid seeing "religion" in epiphenomenal terms in postcolonial studies, feminist scholarship, and area studies disciplines (such as Middle Eastern studies). Mahmood's book certainly raises a set of compelling questions and asks several fields of academic study to rethink their assumptions about agency, freedom, and resistance, the diversity of ethical striving, the subject of political participation, and the need for critical self-reflexivity.

A creative and nimble engagement with the ethical philosophies of Aristotle and Foucault enables Mahmood to contrast her interlocutors' ethical practices to the liberal subject that is presupposed in secular feminism. Ethics in the Aristotelian-Foucauldian framework neither assumes the inner conviction of a duty-bound autonomous self nor the calculated pursuit of pleasure on the part of a free-floating neoliberal self. The mosque movement's women embody a performative virtue ethics that is rooted in the practice of devotional rituals elaborated within the Islamic tradition. There is no "true inner self" that precedes the practice; rather, a sustained bodily engagement with these rituals generates practitioners' sense of self and informs how they inhabit socio-political norms and exercise their agency. When performed consistently, these ethical practices shape the women's capacities so that the doing of virtuous deeds becomes a "nondeliberative aspect of one's disposition."⁶⁸ The point of

cultivating a habitus—an acquired disposition based on “human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline”—is precisely to free the self from always requiring “revelatory experience or natural temperament” to motivate virtuous behavior.⁶⁹ Mahmood says, “The appeal of this notion to Christian and Muslim theologians is not hard to understand given its emphasis on human activity and deliberation, rather than divine grace or divine will, as determinants of moral conduct.”⁷⁰

Mahmood calls on us to become attuned to “the morphology of moral actions,” that is, the particular rules and techniques involved in a practice, the substance (body, heart, feelings, and so on) that it seeks to shape and transform, the forms of ethical reasoning that undergird it, and the discursive tradition from which it derives its historical force. As mentioned above, here she privileges two ethicists: Aristotle and Foucault. The legacy of Aristotle, she explains, “continues to live within the contemporary da‘wa movement in Egypt,” as is evident “in the frequent invocation of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s spiritual exercises and techniques of moral cultivation, found in popular instruction booklets on how to become pious, and often referred to in ordinary conversations within the da‘wa circles.”⁷¹ While Mahmood does not document citations and the circulation of the medieval theologian’s ideas among her interlocutors, Ghazālī serves for her as the bridge between Aristotle and her ethnographic site.

Mahmood thus justifies her deployment of Aristotle due to the citational presence of Ghazālī in the contemporary Islamic Revival in Egypt. Here, Mahmood problematically assumes Ghazālī to be more or less a site for the reproduction of Aristotelian ethics. While the Greek tradition was important for Ghazālī, recent scholarship has demonstrated the originality with which he reinterpreted Greek philosophy as well as its reception by earlier Muslim philosophers such as Farabi and Avicenna.⁷² Ghazālī, I argue, is not merely a bridge between Aristotle and contemporary ethical practices in the Islamic Revival. Rather, contemporary Muslim practices of ethics assume a broad genealogical base and reflect important differences from Aristotelian (and Foucauldian) ethics. For example, Aristotle and Foucault are not open to grace, while Ghazālī certainly is (as I demonstrated above). This raises the question: What happens to Mahmood’s

theorization of ethical agency if we treat Ghazālī as a theorist of ethical agency in his own right? My question, put otherwise, is: How can we enrich our understanding of ethical agency in the contemporary Islamic Revival by approaching our interlocutors as agents of grace?

Before I proceed further with my critique of Mahmood, let me remind readers that what I offer below in fact builds on her argument about listening closely to “the morphology of moral actions.” I begin my critique of Mahmood’s theorization of ethical agency with the theme of desire (before addressing intentionality and grace). Mahmood justly questions the universality of desiring freedom (as defined in the secular-liberal tradition). The liberal universalization of the desire for freedom presupposes a constant tension between the autonomous individual and social structure/political authority. Here, Mahmood urges us to consider the case of her interlocutors: how they inhabit norms and assert agency in traditionally patriarchal religious spaces. Mahmood thus points to a practice of agency that presupposes neither the universalized desire for freedom nor the actualization of agency through resistance. Yet, the very tradition in which the women of the mosque movement practice their agency serves as their scene of subjectivation. Here, desire works differently, contends Mahmood. For her, the logic of her interlocutors’ practices teaches us that the desire for prayer, for instance, is not innate but the product of repeated bodily action.⁷³

The idea that all desires, including the desire for God, are products of a performative ethics is problematic, to say the least. This view ironically reproduces the very autonomy Mahmood so fiercely opposes. We saw above that Ghazālī is careful here; he neither affirms a completely free agent nor a totally passive ethical subject. Rather, he alludes to the play of ethical agency through the trope of grace. My point here is not that we must be true to Ghazālī; rather, the point is that Mahmood does not explore how her interlocutors approach the question of desire and its innateness and transformation. Moreover, she forecloses a productive engagement with this critique by insisting that to ask of her interlocutors such questions is somehow “to underwrite all over again the narrative of the sovereign subject as the author of ‘her voice’ and ‘her-story’.”⁷⁴ This is, for me at least, the least persuasive part of her otherwise important

intervention, since here Mahmood reinforces the sovereignty of the anthropologist, who becomes the arbiter of when someone's "her-story" matters and when it does not. It also contradicts Mahmood's own call for greater attention to the specificity of her interlocutors' discursive logics and the morphology of their moral actions.

Let me now consider how Mahmood treats the notion of intentionality. She vacillates between affirming the constant need for intentional "work" that one must do to shape one's habitus to become virtuous, on the one hand, and highlighting that the "goal" of her interlocutors' repeated actions is to make "consciousness redundant to the practices of these virtues," on the other hand.⁷⁵ Put differently, Mahmood's appreciation of her interlocutors' ongoing monitoring of their intentions runs counter to her insistence that their repeated ritual observances are aimed at producing an "unconscious or nondeliberative" mode of action.⁷⁶ It seems to me that Mahmood's interlocutors often center "intention" in their practices, but she is at pains to undermine their invocation of intentions, since intentionality is one of the foundations of the autonomous subject. However, I have demonstrated above that if we read Ghazālī closely, intentionality cannot be collapsed into autonomy.

The conceptual equivocations in Mahmood's theorization of ethical agency also relate to her neglect of the concept of grace in Islamic thought. She seems to think that Aristotelian ethical ideas appealed to "Christian and Muslim theologians" because he furnished them with a theory of "moral conduct" that did not presuppose "divine grace or divine will."⁷⁷ To the contrary, many Muslim theologians, such as Ghazālī, articulated a theory of moral conduct that does presuppose "divine grace or divine will." The key methodological problem that generates such distortions is Mahmood's neglect of available theoretical resources internal to Islam as a discursive tradition.

Ghazālī's ideas on desire, intentionality, and grace, which I have attempted to *translate* above, enable us to attend to the specificity of the Islamic discursive tradition. He articulates ethical agency as a site of play, contingency, and ambivalence, since it involves not only knowledge, resolution, and bodily capacity but also divine grace. Grace, I argue, is a cipher for the non-sovereignty of the ethical subject, since for Ghazālī

agency is split between the subject's discursive and material capacities (knowledge, resolution, and bodily strength) and a certain metamorphic spontaneity/enablement that is experienced as a gift of the Other (grace). Grace, put otherwise, underscores the relational context of ethical agency and an openness to alterity. Ghazālī's theoretical framework, I contend, might help us to deepen our understanding of ethical cultivation and world-making in the contemporary Islamic Revival.

Conclusion

My readings of the "ethnographic elaborations" found in ḥadīth texts and Ghazālī's *Resuscitation* have highlighted a robust theoretical framework for understanding agency in the Islamic tradition. I have demonstrated that action for Ghazālī is akin to what Derrida calls textuality, a scene of signification that is informed by several sources of contingency and ambivalence: knowledge, resolution, bodily capacity, and finally, but importantly, grace, that is, the enabling presence of the Other. In this way, Ghazālī offers us a dynamic moral theological discourse that posits a self that can always lapse, a self that is forgetful, and therefore remains in constant need of both personal recollection/effort and repeated encounters with the Other.

Ghazālī understands the human self as volatile but always already open to transformation. In other words, while scriptural sources say that the true nature of the self is its forgetfulness and ignorance, both scriptural sources and Muslim theologians have in fact identified in ethical deliberation, which activates the power of grace, a provisional antidote to forgetfulness and ignorance. In this way, Ghazālī's focus on grace does not collapse into fatalism.⁷⁸ Rather, he is immensely relevant for contemporary discussions of agency since he underscores relationality and contingency, and critiques monocausal understandings of action. In other words, the play of knowledge, resolution, bodily capacity, and the grace of God complexify the idea and practice of ethics. Thus, Ghazālī's moral theology posits *a form of life* that is open to multiple *forms of language*, such as Greek philosophy, scriptural sources, and Sufi discourse (among others).

To conclude, let me acknowledge that the specter of a certain deconstructive psychoanalysis has informed my above reading of Ghazālī. Yet, what I have documented and analyzed in this article also reflects close engagement with Ghazālī's *Resuscitation* and the capaciousness of his thinking about ethical agency. I have written this article to ask a trans-disciplinary question, from a scholar of Islam based in religious studies to scholars of Islam, and religion more broadly, based in (cultural) anthropology. That question is: Can we take on board a serious engagement with Ghazālī's complicated theory of ethical agency, and what might it mean to pursue fieldwork among agents of grace? I *intend* myself in this "we," since my thinking about method has benefited immensely from the gifts given to students and scholars of Islam by anthropologists of religion such as Asad and Mahmood.

Endnotes

- 1 See the following three texts: Talal Asad, "Thinking about Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015):166-214; Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); "Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein." *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (2020): 403-442. To rehearse the various nuances in Asad's approach to tradition between the mid-1980s and more recent publications is beyond the scope of this article. For a nuanced, meta-analytical engagement with his anthropological thinking, see Basit Kareem Iqbal, "Thinking about Method: A Conversation with Talal Asad." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 26, no. 1 (2017):195-218.
- 2 Asad, *Secular Translations*, 92.
- 3 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 4 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 4; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 152.
- 5 He does this by engaging with Ghazālī's definition of *nafs* or soul as "a set of divinely implanted potentialities and tendencies within which there are continuous tensions but always containing the possibility of awareness of what one is in the fullest sense" (Asad, *Secular Translations*, 71).
- 6 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 122.
- 7 Asad thus writes: "Michel Foucault and others have famously written about the 'care of the self,' but in contrast to individualistic formulations of that process, my emphasis here is on how the self gradually learns to develop its abilities from within a tradition that presupposes generational collaboration in the preservation, teaching, and exercise of practical knowledge that is rooted in a vision of the good life" (*Secular Translations*, 74.).
- 8 *Secular Translations* also elaborates self-correctives; a case in point being Asad's complication of what he had said earlier concerning the link between agency and intentionality in *Formations of the Secular* (in the chapter titled, "Thinking about Agency and Pain"). In the latter, Asad assumed a rather reductive view of intentionality, often attributing it to liberal autonomy. However, *Secular Translations* demonstrates the need for renewed engagement with intention in Islamic thought and practice. To that end, Asad engages briefly with Ghazālī's views on intention. My discussion of intention below is in part inspired by Asad, but note that I have offered a different, more textually grounded, take on the theme of intention in Ghazālī's thought. Let me mention here why I remain somewhat skeptical of Asad's treatment of intentionality. He points out how knowledge and "will or intention" shapes our "practical orientation to an object" and makes a problematic claim when he says that "the agent's causal energy," or the idea of his, her, or their will as the *origin* of action, paves the way "toward secularity" (*Secular Translations*, 72). He

further locates this turn toward secularity in Descartes and the seventeenth century (*Secular Translations*, 88). As I demonstrate below, for Ghazālī human actions are shaped not only by knowledge and resolution (what Asad calls will) but are also contingent on bodily capacities and the grace of God. As opposed to the sovereign notion of will that appealed to philosophical liberalism, Ghazālī is able to resist a monocausal theory of action while equally emphasizing the agent's causal energy and the relational context in which actions are performed (including the relation to God through grace). Asad's view that the transition from *inclination* to *origin* is an ingredient in the making of modern secularity is therefore reductive, if not outrightly dubious, since the idea of human beings as origins of their own actions is one of the key questions debated in the contentious conversations on secondary causality among classical Islamic philosophers and theologians, and thus can hardly be seen as modern or originating in the seventeenth century. For a discussion of this with special reference to Ghazālī, see Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128-146.

- 9 Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2009):S24-S40, at S25.
- 10 Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan," S25-S26.
- 11 Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, "Introduction: Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa," in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007):1-24, at 18.
- 12 Filippo Osella and Benjamin F. Soares, "Islam, Politics, and Anthropology," in *Islam, Politics, and Anthropology*, 11.
- 13 Ranjana Khanna's wide-ranging work on unbelonging has touched what I am thinking here. See, for example, Khanna, "Touching, Unbelonging, and the Absence of Affect." *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012):213-232.
- 14 Asad, *Secular Translations*, 73.
- 15 Asad, *Secular Translations*, 92. Already in his 2015 *Critical Inquiry* piece, Asad had said: "Tradition is singular as well as plural. For subjects there are not only continuities but also exits and entries. Tradition accommodates mistakes as well as betrayal; it is not by accident that *tradition* and *treason* have a common etymology" ("Thinking about Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today," 169).
- 16 Asad, *Secular Translations*, 92.
- 17 Asad writes: "A living tradition is not merely capable of containing conflict and disagreement; the search for what is essential itself provokes argument. A concern with "essence" is therefore not quite the same as a concern with authenticity" (*Secular Translations*, 95).
- 18 I am here, as elsewhere, indebted to Stefania Pandolfo's *Knot of the Soul*, which models for me how to take Ghazālī and other Muslim thinkers as serious theorists

- of psychic life. See Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). For how I approach Pandolfo's broader recasting of psychoanalysis and Islam, see Ali Altaf Mian, "The Play of the Qur'anic Trace: Engaging Stefania Pandolfo's *Knot of the Soul*," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 28, no. 1 (June 2019):189-210.
- 19 Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 14.
 - 20 Asad, *Secular Translations*, 66-67.
 - 21 Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Bukhārī, *Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ bi-ḥāshiyat al-muḥaddith Aḥmad 'Alī al-Sahāranfūrī*, ed. Taqī al-Dīn al-Nadawī, 15 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 2011), 1:180-181. This ḥadīth, which is the first report recorded by Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, appears with slight modifications in six additional "books" of this collection. Here, I cite the opening version, but have used italics to indicate a phrase that is included in many other versions in and beyond Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*. For an insightful analysis of this report, see Ignazio de Francesco, "Il Lato Oscuro Delle Azioni: La Dottrina Della Niyya Nello Sviluppo Dell'Etica Islamica," *Islamochristiana* 39 (2013):45-69.
 - 22 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Muntahā al-āmāl fī sharḥ ḥadīth innamā al-a'māl*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1986), 43.
 - 23 I discuss the rich commentarial tradition on this ḥadīth in a book chapter titled "The Ḥadīth of Intention and Islamic Ethics" (forthcoming).
 - 24 Anna L. Peterson, *Works Righteousness: Material Practice in Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 5.
 - 25 Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Imām Abī Abdillāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Bukhārī*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Abd Allāh b. Bāz, 13 vols. (Cairo: Al-Maktabat al-Salafiyya, 1969), 1:10; Suyūṭī, *Muntahā al-āmāl*, 37-38.
 - 26 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, eds. 'Alī Muḥammad Muṣṭafā et al., 6 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Fayḥā'), 6:132.
 - 27 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:140.
 - 28 Jamāl al-Dīn b. al-Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1984), 15:347-348.
 - 29 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:131. For this report, see Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al-birr wa'l-ṣila wa'l-adab, bāb taḥrīm zulm al-muslim...* It is ḥadīth # 2564.
 - 30 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:131.
 - 31 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:135-136.
 - 32 Margaret Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad: A Study of the Life and Teaching of Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī A.D. 781-A.D. 857* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1935), 44.
 - 33 Al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, *Al-Ri'āya li ḥuqūq Allāh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.), 246. On al-Muḥāsibī, see Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad*; Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011). Picken describes *Al-Ri'āya* as "essentially a book concerning

sincerity to God, cleansing the heart, purification of the soul and a life of complete moral, ethical and behavioural perfection” (*Spiritual Purification in Islam*, 69). Regarding this text, Margaret Smith writes: “This is al-Muḥāsibī’s great treatise on the interior life, which reveals a profound knowledge of human nature and its weaknesses, while in the means which he suggests for combating these weaknesses and for attaining to the single-hearted service of God, he shews also the discerning wisdom and inspired insight of a true spiritual director and shepherd of souls” (*An Early Mystic of Baghdad*, 45). See also ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, *Al-Moḥāsibī: Un mystique musulman religieux et moraliste* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1940); ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, *Ustādh al-sā’irīn al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1973); Şahin Filiz, “The Founder of the Muḥāsabah School of Sufism: Al-Ḥārith Ibn Asad Al-Muḥāsibī,” *Islamic Studies* 45, no. 1 (2006): 59-81.

- 34 Cited in Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam*, 202. Translation revised.
- 35 The intellectual historian Key has recently demonstrated that the word “meaning” does not fully capture the Arabic term *ma’ nā* (*Language Between God and the Poets: Ma’ nā in the Eleventh Century* [Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018]). He proposes that we view this latter term as signifying “mental content.” In his eleventh-century Arabic sources spanning the work of lexicographers, logicians, theologians, and literary critics, *ma’ nā* was wedded to *ḥaqīqa* (accuracy) in two important ways. First, *ma’ nā* implied an accurate correspondence between mind and language, as if words mirrored mental images. Second, *ma’ nā* implied an accurate correspondence between mind and reality, as if the mind mirrored the external world but also the essences of things. By wedding *ma’ nā* to these two meanings of “accuracy,” Key’s sources established the validity of such a thing as pre-linguistic meaning or “mental content.” It was this picture of language that Wittgenstein questioned most forcefully by suggesting that language does not reflect some pre-linguistic given, but is an ordinary phenomenon.
- 36 al-Muḥāsibī, *Al-Ri’āya*, 246.
- 37 For Drāz, “the moral good, in general, is neither encompassed by an internal reality nor by a bodily manifestation, but it consists of communication between the two” (see Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Drāz, *Dustūr al-akhlāq fi’l-Qur’ān*, trans. into Arabic from French by ‘Abd al-Şabūr Şāhīn [Kuwait: Dār al-Buḥūth al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1972], 446, translation mine). For the original French, see Mohamed Abdallah Draz, *La morale du Koran* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951). For the English translation of this landmark study, see M.A. Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur’an*, trans. Danielle Robinson and Rebecca Masterton (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).
- 38 Drāz, *Dustūr al-akhlāq fi’l-Qur’ān*, 448.
- 39 On Abū Ṭālib al-Makki’s influence on Ghazālī, see Kojiro Nakamura, “Makki and Ghazali on Mystical Practices,” *Orient* 20 (1984):83-91.
- 40 Abū Ṭālib al-Makki, *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm Muḥammad al-Riḍwānī, 3 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 2001), 3:1342.

- 41 al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 3:1343.
- 42 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:140.
- 43 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:137.
- 44 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:137-138. Let me note in passing that this same insight was developed more fully in colonial India by Mawlānā Ashraf 'Alī Thānavī (1863-1943).
- 45 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:138.
- 46 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:155.
- 47 Ibn al-Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, 2:117.
- 48 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:138.
- 49 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:138.
- 50 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'* *'ulūm al-dīn*, 6:138-139.
- 51 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'* *'ulūm al-dīn*, 6:150.
- 52 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:142.
- 53 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:141. Alexander Treiger sheds further light on this point: "There is no doubt that al-Ghazālī's understanding of felicity is indebted to the Arabic philosophical tradition, where the term 'felicity' refers specifically to the bliss in the afterlife (*al-sa'āda al-quṣwā*, ultimately going back to the Greek εὐδαιμονία), and knowledge of God is regarded as the *telos* of human life and the prerequisite to the attainment of that bliss" (*Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī's Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennan Foundation* [London: Routledge, 2012], 47). Ghazālī's invocation of "meeting God" in a discussion of sincere intentions is supported by the Qur'anic verse, "Say: 'I am only a mortal, the like of you; it is revealed to me that your God is One God. So let him, who hopes for the encounter with his Lord, act righteously, and not associate anyone with his Lord's service'" (18:110).
- 54 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:137. Cf. Jules Janssens, "Al-Ghazzali and His Use of Avicennan Texts," in *Problems in Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Miklós Maróth (Budapest, 2003), esp. 37-49; Frank Griffel, "Al-Ġazālī's Concept of Prophecy: The Introduction of Avicenna Psychology into Aś'arite Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004):101-144, esp. 129-130.
- 55 The following saying attributed to a son of 'Abdullāh b. Mas'ūd also emphasizes how the interplay among *fikr* and *dhikr* transforms interiority: "Glad tidings belong to the one who purifies his devotions and supplications to God, and does not let what his eyes behold preoccupy his heart, and does not let what his ears hear become a cause for forgetting the remembrance of God, and does not let [the wealth] given to others sadden his soul" (Ibn Abī'd-dunyā, *Al-Ikhlāṣ wa'n-niyya*, ed. Iyād Khālid aṭ-Ṭabā'a [Damascus: Dār al-Bashā'ir, 1992], 36).
- 56 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 6:146.
- 57 Derrida's conceptualization of "textuality" is not a valorization of play qua play (or, ambivalence qua ambivalence). Rather, his point is that texts at once *intend* meanings and exceed their intentions, and one is always already thinking in form when

- trying to subvert genre or when aspiring to realize a transcendental opening. See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 58 I am grateful to Basit Kareem Iqbal for this point.
- 59 This introspective practice can be seen as another type of migration, one that involves the traversal of psychical instead of physical distance.
- 60 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 6:155.
- 61 Again, let me note in passing that this same insight was developed more fully in colonial India by Mawlānā Thānavī.
- 62 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 6:155.
- 63 Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 6:157. The Arabic original for what I have italicized in the translation is: *inbiʾāth-ul-qalbi yajrī majrāʾl-futūḥi min allāhi-taʾālā*. By framing how God enables human actions through the expression, “the flow of openings from God,” Ghazālī maintains his ambiguity around secondary causality, an ambiguity that also characterized his teacher al-Juwaynī’s ideas on this issue. See Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 128.
- 64 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 197.
- 65 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 197-198.
- 66 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 191.
- 67 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 29.
- 68 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 137.
- 69 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 137.
- 70 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 137.
- 71 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 137.
- 72 Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*; Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*.
- 73 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 126.
- 74 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 154.
- 75 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 139.
- 76 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 139.
- 77 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 137.
- 78 For an argument that has some resonance to this point, see Amira Mittermaier, “Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim Subjectivities Beyond the Trope of Self-cultivation,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. 2 (June 2012): 247-265. However, I have emphasized in this article a different conceptualization of intentionality than what is presupposed in Mittermaier’s account. My thanks to Basit Kareem Iqbal for this reference.