

Ghazālī on zombies and what to do when you drop your cellphone in the toilet

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What makes a remarkable intellectual a great writer? What makes a text pass the test of time? It is, of course, the writing style of the author. Having interesting ideas is one thing - communicating them in a way that captivates the reader is wholly different. In a world where social media are killing spelling and punctuation, and where mass media are force-feeding us regurgitated, stale imagery and overused stereotypes, one may justifiably be frustrated that the art of writing is indeed an art; it can make or break a good idea. It seems that Ghazālī, though unfamiliar with Twitter and Fox News, knew very well that style is of the utmost importance, thus exploiting his talent of explaining difficult philosophical intricacies with vivid imagery, accessible to anyone and derived from daily life. This made his books far-reaching and added to their persuasiveness. It is also astounding how well Ghazālī's examples seem to relate even to our lives, 900 years later. This may of course be one of the driving forces behind Ghazālī's undiminished popularity. It is therefore safe to say that it is the combination of his brilliant mind and his excellent skills in writing and rhetoric that made him one of the most influential figures of humanity.

One of Ghazālī's favourite imageries was the surgeon and his cup. In Ghazālī's time, a popular remedy for feeling under the weather was to consult a surgeon who would relieve one of 'impure blood'. After some moments of dizziness, people would tend to feel better (because the body produces new blood, boosting one's feeling of well-being), thereby 'proving' the surgeon had indeed managed to remove the foul blood and keep in the good blood. The former was caught in a cup by the surgeon, and it seems that this cup in particular caught the attention of Ghazālī. In one of his

most popular books, *The Deliverance from Error* (his autobiography), he contrasts this repulsive cup with sweet and tasty honey:

“The lowest degree of education is to distinguish oneself from the ignorant ordinary man. The educated man does not loathe honey even if he finds it in the surgeon’s cup. Instead, he realizes that the cup does not essentially alter the honey. The natural aversion from it in such a case rests on popular ignorance, arising from the fact that the cup is made only for impure blood. Men imagine that the blood is impure because it is in the cup, and are not aware that the impurity is due to the blood itself. Since this property is absent from the honey, the fact that the honey is in such a container does not produce this property in it. It therefore does not follow that impurity should be attributed to the honey. To do so is fanciful and false.”

The example, eating honey from a surgeon’s cup, is wildly disgusting, and at the very least Ghazālī does show great confidence in the surgeon’s cleaning capabilities of his cup. Because of the high gore level, however, he knew that his reader would not forget it. His example has, just from a stylistic perspective, so much force that even now we are disgusted by it and we will always think of Ghazālī and his example of the cup when we stare in despair at our phone lying at the bottom of the toilet. We know we flushed the toilet and that all the waste material has been replaced by clean water. Do we dare stick our hand and forearm into that water to grab our phone? According to Ghazālī we should have no hesitation to do this. That Ghazālī used this example as a stylistic element is obvious from the fact that it can not only be found in *The Deliverance*, but also in many other writings —theological, juridical, mystical— and he in fact does not always use it to illustrate the same point. The commonality among all cases is however that the extreme shock value of the gory example takes the attention of the reader away from the actual argument at stake. By agreeing with the example, one consequently has to agree with the argument which is, in most cases, one that not everyone would find agreeable. In the example just given we may notice its quite potent concluding remark. “To do so is fanciful and false” seems to be in place to invoke the feeling of agreement on the side of the reader and squeeze out any room for dissent. No one wants to be fanciful or false! So, as it is better to err on the safe side, the reader automatically assumes the

example to be correct. Doing otherwise would imply that Ghazālī thinks we are being fanciful and of a patently false opinion. But by agreeing to the example we now also have to concede the actual argument at stake, which is that people who we may resent for one reason or another, may have something of value for us in their culture and sciences. “Seek knowledge, even in China” says a famous *ḥadīth* (a statement made by the prophet Muhammad that has been recorded and preserved through the ages), but Ghazālī adds force to that one-liner: “Seek knowledge, even if it means you have to deal with those bloody Chinese!”, so Ghazālī wants to argue using the example of the surgeon’s cup.

Ghazālī was not always out to win his audience through an amusing example, however. Sometimes he tried it the other way around, using a rational argument to engender an emotional response in his readership. In his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, for example, his main goal is to put philosophy in its proper place. On many issues, he feels the philosophers used too simplistic arguments to construct theses that look attractive from a first glance, but which may not be necessarily true. The autonomy of the human being is a good example of this. Philosophers in his age and time argued that human beings have free will, freedom to choose as they please. Because we see the harmony of will and action in human beings, it is easy to assume that whatever we do involves our free will, that we are making our choices ourselves as we wish. For example, we can think of a house and then actually build it. Ghazālī’s philosophical counter-argument is that this thesis is based on itself: because we *think* we can do what we want to do, choose exactly as we wish, we conclude that we in fact *can* do what we want to do. But he does not write this in a straightforward fashion. It is as though he feels his audience (primarily philosophers who think they have unrestricted autonomy over themselves) will be too haughty to accept such a neutral argument. He therefore decides to hold a mirror up to his audience, asking them to think about the following:

“God can create a will [that is, a sequence of choices of actions] without knowledge of the object willed [...] He can move a dead man’s hand, seating him and with the hand writing volumes and engaging in crafts, the man being all the while open-eyed, staring ahead of him, but not seeing

and having no life and no power over [what is being done] —all these ordered acts being created by God together with the moving of [the man's] hand, the moving coming from the direction of God. By allowing the possibility of this, there ends the distinction between the voluntary movement and the tremor.”

The typical philosopher reading this, would reluctantly have to agree, line by line, step by step, with the possibility of all of this. But throughout, a feeling of deep worry would grow: as the reader stares at the words he wonders why Ghazālī chose to make the zombie “write volumes”. If he would only say “bake cakes” it would be something a philosopher could not care less about, but writing volumes sounds eerily like something the philosopher could and would do. While the words unfold, we can picture the reader staring ahead, open-eyed, with a growing sense of doubt whether he is actually alive. All the proud journal articles and peer-reviewed books published; is it really something he did himself or could it just have been a tremor, a set of neurophysiological events over which he had no say whatsoever? The example elegantly shows the destructive force of philosophy. In just a few lines one can move the argument from the idea that humans have a godlike free will to that of humans being mere zombies, thereby stripping the proud philosopher of one of his most cherished possessions: his independent thinking. That is worrisome to say the least and it is undoubtedly the case that the arousal of this worry is the main objective of Ghazālī. His goal of putting philosophy in its proper place is thus achieved by having philosophers think twice before once again proudly proposing arguments for a thesis they would really like to be true. That this is his objective is clear when he returns to his words a few pages later, where he explains that it was just for argument’s sake that he argued that human beings are mere zombies. As long as you remember that God’s will always and forever trumps your own will, and that you should in fact be thankful to God that He made the world in such a way that we at least have the illusion that we can freely do what we like, you should be good.