

# **The Animal Soul and the Angelic Soul**

## **A Study on Al-Ghazzali's "Alchemy of Happiness"**

Ursula Lytton

"Know that man was not created in jest or at random, but marvellously made and for some great end."

Al-Ghazzali

### **Introduction**

The philosopher and theologian Al-Ghazzali from Meshed in Persia lived in the 11th century AD, an era that experienced a lively exchange of cultural heritage and ideas which were predominant in the Mediterraneans and Asia Minor. Ghazzali himself eagerly tried to combine the philosophical methods of Greece with Islam and the traditions of the Koran. It is even said that he attempted to integrate the outstanding ideas of all philosophical systems known to him into Islam. This took place on the background of a scholastic current which did not succeed in proofing its religious theories by means of intellectual processes. In order to combat this current, Ghazzali created his most eminent essay "The Revival of Religious Sciences" ("Ihya-ul-ulum ad-din") in Arabic, an abridgment of which was written by the author himself in Persian, called "The Alchemy of Happiness" ("Kimiya'e saadat") meant for popular use and studies.

The basis of Ghazzali's theory and his "Alchemy" consists in the concept that man and his soul are furnished with two fundamentally different qualities: 1. a physical quality, which is mean and earthly; 2. a spiritual quality, which is lofty and divine. These qualities are acting in continuous contrast. In the process of developing one's character, it is therefore a necessary prerequisite to study the peculiarities of the earthly component through constant self observation. This will reveal that the physically and materially oriented human being is largely engaged in activities which are also prevalent in animal life. They concentrate mainly on earthly and sensual areas. If, however, he strives for those faculties which are reserved solely for human beings, aiming at the liberation from the desires that are closely connected to carnal passions, his spiritual component will develop and he will become able to acquire angelic qualities. Instead of being subject to lust and anger he will find his satisfaction in the contemplation of divine beauty. However, the process of transformation is rather difficult and it is to its very support that Ghazzali has described the necessary steps in simple words. The following constituents are indispensable:

1. The knowledge of self.
2. The knowledge of God.
3. The knowledge of this world as it really is.

#### 4. The knowledge of the next world as it really is.

The present study merely concentrates on the first chapter which emphasizes the difference of the animal soul and the angelic soul.

#### **Levels of Perception**

In order to understand Ghazzali's approach, his classification of perception into five sections, respectively the *modus operandi* of the human spirit, needs to be considered:

- The **sensory spirit** is responsible for perception by means of the sensory organs, i.e. the eye for seeing, the ear for hearing, the nose for smelling, the mouth for tasting and the whole body for touching.
- The **imaginative spirit** serves as administrator of the information which is perceived through the sensory organs. One of its peculiarities is to consist of the same substance as all terrestrial things, because all objects of perception are clearly defined in size and shape, in other words, as "bodies". Further, the spacial distance between observer and observed object is significant.
- The **intelligential spirit** aims at the comprehension of those items which are perceived sensually and, at the same time, serves as a basis for the cognizance of divine ideas.
- The **ratiocinative spirit** provides the possibility to start pondering from one certain point of view and from that starting point generate numerous further ideas and thoughts. Ultimately, it leads to conclusions which in turn, may serve as a basis for further conclusions. This faculty allows the human being to make provisions and plans for the future.
- The **transcendental, prophetic spirit** is possessed by saints as well as prophets. It can be divided into two different sections, one of which is subject to external instruction and advice. The other one is luminous and absolutely clear in itself as though any external source of supply were not necessary.

Source: "The Niche for Lights", by Al-Ghazzali, from "Four Sufi Classics",  
The Octagon Press, London, 1980

#### **The Knowledge of Self**

"According to Ghazzali, The real object of education was not merely to provide information, but the stimulation of an inner consciousness." Idries Shah

The beginning of the alchemical process is characterized by the search for knowledge of the self which is composed of the following elements and calls for the activation of the ratiocinative spirit: What are you in yourself and from where do you originate? Where does your way lead and for what purpose did you come to linger on this earth for a while? What does your happiness and your misery consist of? To find appropriate answers to these questions is absolutely necessary.

If one studies the behavioural patterns of animals it is easily detected that they are preoccupied with their physical survival, i.e. eating, sleeping, fighting as well as their multiplication. Human beings who mainly engage in lower, physical activities, are therefore not completely dissimilar to the creatures from the animal kingdom, since they operate on the same level of existence. However, reason is able to overcome the physical barriers of space, time and other worldly matters and capable of revealing the real meaning of life. Whosoever uses his reason in order to find his higher faculties and place of origin, will be liberated from animal instincts and material desires. Instead, he will acquire angelic qualities and be capable of the contemplation of divine beauty. In this condition he will also be liberated from the pressures so closely connected with lust, passion and anger.

To start with we have to acknowledge that man is created with an outer form, the body, and an inner entity, the heart. This "heart" describes the inner entity, the soul, and not the physical organ. Belonging to the invisible world, this inner heart has come into this terrestrial abode like a foreign traveller wanting to sell his merchandise in a far off place, upon which he will be bound homeward. The very study of this inner, spiritual factor is the key to the knowledge of self and ultimately the knowledge of God.

In the spiritual battle against the animal faculties, the body may be figured as a kingdom and the soul as its sovereign, and the five senses as constituting an army. Reason will occupy the position of a general, giving orders to stay on the correct path. For the soul it is important to keep control of the lower, sensual faculties and not allow human life to be dominated by physical desires, dragging man from desire to pleasure and back from pleasure to desire. The cultivation of demonic, animal qualities as well as of angelic attributes results in the production of corresponding characteristics, which at the Day of Judgement will be manifested in visible shapes and judged accordingly.

Yet how are we to know that the angelic faculties are the essential part, when man has been furnished with animal qualities at the same time? The answer to this question lies in the very fact that the essence of each creature is to be sought in its highest quality. In the case of man, this is surely his reason. Reason resembles the very faculty by which man is clearly distinguished from animals. Should the spiritual qualities be fostered and predominate in him when he dies, he leaves behind him all tendencies to passion and resentment and becomes capable of the association with angels. In all of creation, each faculty finds its greatest satisfaction in solving its most difficult task. This holds true for the physical

as well as the spiritual domain. Be it mountain climbing, playing chess or a complicated mathematical problem: Man will be happy, when he finds the solution. The most difficult spiritual task, however, is the recognition of truth. Whereas matter is confined in the limits of time, the spirit will outlast time. With the termination of its time called death, the sensual appetites of the body will vanish. However, the soul will continue to exist and maintain the very knowledge which it has acquired during its lifetime within the body.

Although the body may be able to disclose the secrets of being, ultimately the spirit plays a far greater role in the acquisition of the knowledge of self and of God. Man is rather weak in this terrestrial world and subject to all kinds of disturbances. Thus, his real value is to be sought in the next world, the presupposition for which is the discovery of the “Alchemy of Happiness”, which allows him to rise from the rank of the beasts to that of the angels.

Source: “The Alchemy of Happiness“, Al-Ghazzali, The Octagon Press, London, 1980.