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Recasting the Ghazālī-Ibn Rushd Conflict as a Metadiscursive Dispute: Register-realism vs. Register-instrumentalism

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Abstract

The dispute between al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) is typically told as a doctrinal fight over twenty metaphysical theses, with Ibn Rushd's charge that al-Ghazālī confuses demonstrative (*burhānī*), dialectical (*jadalī*) and rhetorical (*khaṭābī*) argument treated as polemical cover. We argue the dependency runs the other way. The doctrinal disputes are downstream of a prior conflict over the ontology of discourse: what a register is, and what fixes the register of an utterance. Ibn Rushd holds register-realism: registers are capacity-indexed, tracking stable divisions among kinds of mind, thus a text's register is settled in advance by its audience. Al-Ghazālī holds register-instrumentalism: registers are function-indexed, chosen for an occasion and a therapeutic end, so one author may shift registers within a work, and one text may act differently on different readers. Three consequences follow. Ibn Rushd's charge of "mixing" detects no fallacy but commits a category error, his taxonomy has no gap for immanent critique. His own second-order theory is performatively bound, the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* asserts demonstration's supremacy in a juridical-dialectical register that cannot, by his criteria, establish it. And beneath both lies a semantic disagreement: reading the veils of light in the *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār*, we take al-Ghazālī to locate obstruction in conceptuality rather than falsity, prising truth-yielding apart from adequacy to the object. The dispute prefigures a modern contest between ascriptive and enactive theories of genre.

Keywords: *Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, register-instrumentalism, register-realism, Metadiscursive, Dispute*

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Introduction

In the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, al-Ghazālī puts twenty philosophical theses under critique and declares three of them unbelief. Seventy years later and a thousand miles west, Ibn Rushd answers in the *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, reproducing al-Ghazālī's text and rebutting it lemma by lemma. The disputed questions i.e. the world's eternity, God's knowledge of particulars, bodily resurrection, and above all causal connection, are taken to be the substance of the exchange, and the two men stand in for theology and philosophy (Marmura, 2000; Van den Bergh, 1954). Running through Ibn Rushd's rebuttal, though, is a second and stranger line of attack. He charges al-Ghazālī not only with false doctrine but with arguing in the wrong way: using dialectical and rhetorical premises while claiming, or letting readers infer, demonstrative force; ascribing to the *falāsifa* as a body what belongs to particular figures; putting specialist matters before a general readership. His verdict is that the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* is a popular work, not a demonstrative one. The charge recurs too often to be incidental.

Scholarship has noticed it without theorizing it. It is usually read as an application of Ibn Rushd's tripartite framework i.e. *demonstrative*, *dialectical*, and *rhetorical*, each addressed by scripture in its own idiom. We argue that the accusation does more work than this, and that treating it as mere application hides what is at stake. Our thesis has three parts.

Firstly, the two scholars hold incompatible theories of what a register is. For Ibn Rushd, register attaches to an audience that humans are divided by natural cognitive capacity, each class has its own mode of assent (*taṣdīq*), and a text's register is fixed by the class it addresses. The classes being relatively stable, register is a real feature of the world rather than a stylistic choice. We call this register-realism. Meanwhile, for al-Ghazālī, register attaches to a communicative function: a speaker selects a mode for a purpose on an occasion and may shift modes within one work as the purpose shifts. Register is an instrument. We call it *register-instrumentalism*.

Secondly, once this is in view, the charge of *mixing* looks less like a diagnosis than a symptom. *Register-realism* has no way to represent what al-Ghazālī is actually doing on immanent critique, reasoning from premises granted only *ad hominem*, inside the opponent's system, to show that his arguments fall short of the demonstrative status they claim. Indexed to audience rather than function, such a text can only appear as a dialectical work making demonstrative claims. The confusion lies in the instrument of description.

Thirdly, the metadiscursive dispute rests on a disagreement about semantics. Ibn Rushd's hierarchy presupposes that demonstration achieves adequacy, that at the summit, language reaches its object. Al-Ghazālī's *dhawq* is not a retreat into mysticism but a claim about every register's boundary condition. The evidence is less

the *Munqidh* than the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*: among the veils between knower and God are veils of light, correct conceptions that obstruct because they remain concepts. If conceptuality rather than error is the obstruction, better doctrine is no remedy. The two are not ranking one ladder differently. They disagree about whether it terminates.

The doctrinal-dispute paradigm and its erosion

For most of the twentieth century the *Tahāfut* exchange was read declinistically, with al-Ghazālī cast as philosophy's antagonist and Ibn Rushd as its last defender. That frame was largely an artefact of transmission. Ibn Rushd's counter-refutation circulated in Latin from the fourteenth century and in accessible English from 1954, well before al-Ghazālī's own text found a serious reception; Western readers therefore met the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* through the eyes of its most hostile reader and accepted his verdict that it was not philosophy (Griffel, 2009; Van den Bergh, 1954).

That frame has now largely collapsed. Griffel (2009) showed al-Ghazālī's engagement with *falsafa* to be selective and appropriative rather than rejectionist; his later study (Griffel, 2021) reconstructs a twelfth-century east in which philosophy not only survives al-Ghazālī but is transformed by the very techniques of critical assessment he inaugurated. Critics have noted the significance of his presenting *ḥikma* and *kalām* as parallel traditions rather than as philosophy and its opponent (Griffel, 2021). Treiger (2012) argues the complementary case, showing al-Ghazālī's theory of mystical cognition to rest on Avicennan foundations and recasting him as among medieval Islam's most effective popularizers of philosophy rather than its executioner. The argument received as decisive in its main claims even where reviewers pressed on details (Kukkonen, 2013). Marmura's (2000) parallel-text edition made the disputed object available for close reading rather than through Ibn Rushd's summary. This has dismantled the declinist narrative. It has not revisited the terms of Ibn Rushd's critique. Al-Ghazālī's rehabilitation has proceeded by showing his doctrines more philosophical than Ibn Rushd allowed; it has not asked whether Ibn Rushd's metadiscursive tools could register what al-Ghazālī was doing.

Averroan discourse theory

Work on Ibn Rushd's theory of discourse is substantial but differently oriented. Black's (1990) study of the Arabic reception of the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* remains foundational for how the Arabic Aristotelians folded persuasive and poetic discourse into the *Organon*, establishing rhetorical and poetic syllogisms as genuinely logical if epistemically inferior. Butterworth's translations of the short commentaries (1977) and of the *Decisive Treatise* (2001) supply the textual base; Hourani (1961) established the interpretive vocabulary still largely in use. The Stanford entry notes sustained doubt about the traditional partition of the corpus into demonstrative commentaries for elites and dialectical treatises for a wider popular audience. Because it cannot

accommodate *compendia*, *treatises* and *responsa*, and misdescribes the religious works (Adamson, 2016). Ahsan (2025) gives the most technically detailed recent account, emphasizing that dialectic and rhetoric are for Ibn Rushd modes of opinion (*zann*) and hence defeasible, and that their downgrading rests on their principles being grounded in testimony rather than in self-evident or demonstrated premises. Ahsan and Karima (2022) place the same material within a wider inquiry into logical normativity. Work on *takfīr* shows that Ibn Rushd's condemnation turns not on doctrinal error. Scholars' theoretical mistakes are excusable, but on exposing an unqualified readership to allegorical interpretation, which for that readership constitutes cognitive unbelief.

That finding matters to our argument and remains underexploited. It establishes that the censure is fundamentally metadiscursive: the offence lies not in what al-Ghazālī believed but in to whom, and in what mode, he said it. The literature has treated this as a point about esotericism and publication ethics rather than as evidence of a theory of discourse with determinate, criticizable commitments.

Al-Ghazālī on language, and the reticence of the scholarship

On the Ghazālīan side, work has clustered around mystical cognition and imagination rather than discourse theory. Treiger (2012) analyses *dhawq* as a state (*hāl*) in which knowledge becomes so internalized as to constitute the knower, and hence incommunicable (as a formulation widely taken up). Moosa (2005) reads al-Ghazālī through the *dihlīz*, the threshold, arguing that his characteristic position is mediation between discursive worlds; suggestive for us, but pursued as a hermeneutic and rhetoric rather than a reconstruction of register-theory. Wohlman (2010) compares the two directly on *Qur'ānic* interpretation, but hers is, as reviewers observe, a partisan adjudication that equates al-Ghazālī's critique of *falsafa* with a critique of philosophy as such, reproducing the caricature Griffel and Treiger have dismantled. Hakim (2021) is among the few to frame the exchange as counter-discourse, though the analysis stays at the level of argumentative content. The broader literature on philosophy of language and logic (El-Rouayheb, 2010; Street, 2023) is indispensable background but concerns the internal development of logical doctrine, not the metapragmatic of philosophical genre.

Two conceptions of register (First-order and second-order register)

We use register more broadly than the sociolinguistic term, though continuously with it: a mode of discourse individuated by the premises it employs, the assent it aims to produce, and the conditions of its appropriate use. The Arabic materials speak of *burhān*, *jadāl*, *khaṭāba* and *shī'r* (a classification descending from the Organon) and elaborated into a graded scheme in which each mode is a genuine species of syllogism, differentiated by the epistemic status of its premises (Black, 1990).

Register-realism holds that registers correspond to real divisions in the world, specifically among kinds of minds. The mapping from register to audience is natural rather than conventional: some people are constitutionally capable of demonstration and others are not, and that fact, not the speaker's decision, fixes what is appropriate. Three commitments follow. *Fixity*: class membership is stable and not readily altered by education or occasion. *Exclusivity*: a text occupies one register, set by its addressee. *Alethic ordering*: registers rank by proximity to truth, demonstration reaching certainty and the lower modes only opinion.

Register-instrumentalism individuates registers by communicative function, selection being a pragmatic act performed with an occasion and aim in view. Its commitments: *Mobility*: the right register depends on what is attempted here and now, and may change within a text. *Multiplicity*: one utterance may operate in several registers at once, or be a first-order token of one and a second-order comment on another. *Alethic agnosticism*: registers rank as instruments by fitness for purpose, not necessarily by proximity to an object any of them reaches.

Neither thinker uses these terms or would recognize the framing. Our claim is that their practice and explicit statements jointly commit them to these positions, and that the framing exposes a disagreement their shared vocabulary conceals. A distinction unmarked in the sources but indispensable here: a text has a first-order register, the mode in which it argues, and if it thematizes modes of argument – a second-order register, the mode in which it argues about registers. The two need not coincide, and their possible divergence generates the most interesting difficulties in the material.

The *Faṣl al-Maqāl* is second-order: its subject is the classification of discourse and the assignment of interpretive license. Its first-order register, however, is juridical-dialectical, taking the form of a legal responsum reasoning from scriptural and juristic premises to a normative conclusion. Much of the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* is likewise second-order, and its concern is whether the *falāsifa*'s proofs attain demonstrative status, while its first-order register is dialectical by design.

This matter because register-realism, indexing register to audience, cannot easily accommodate divergence between levels. If register is fixed by whom one addresses, a text addressed to jurists is juridical tout court, and its second-order claims about demonstration inherit the epistemic status of its first-order mode. Register-instrumentalism faces no such difficulty: it individuates by function, and a text may perform two functions at once. Two literatures have grown up beside each other without assembly: one defends al-Ghazālī against Ibn Rushd's doctrinal charges while leaving his metadiscursive ones untouched, the other reconstructs Ibn Rushd's taxonomy of discourse in detail without asking whether it was adequate to the text it was built to condemn. Between them falls a question neither has posed:

whether al-Ghazālī held a rival theory of register rather than a defective grasp of Ibn Rushd's, and the silence reflects an assumption so settled it has never needed stating: that there is one taxonomy of discourse, that Ibn Rushd articulated it, and that all that remains is to ask whether al-Ghazālī conformed. We deny it; what Ibn Rushd took for confusion was another theory operating under the same vocabulary, and that shared vocabulary is precisely what has kept it invisible.

Method

The method employed in this paper is a comparative metadiscursive analysis. We read what each author says explicitly about modes of argument alongside how each in fact argues, and treat any gap between stated theory and enacted practice as evidence rather than as mere inconsistency.

The primary data is, for Ibn Rushd: *the Faṣl al-Maqāl* (Butterworth, 2001; Hourani, 1961), the *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (Van den Bergh, 1954), the *Kashf 'an manāhij al-adilla*, and the short commentaries on the *Topics*, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* (Butterworth, 1977). For al-Ghazālī: *the Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, with close attention to its prefatory matter (Marmura, 2000), together with the *Mi 'yār al-'ilm*, *al-Qistās al-mustaqīm*, *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, and *Iljām al-'awāmm 'an 'ilm al-kalām*. We draw on Bakhtin (1986) on speech genres, Bell (1984) on audience design, Goffman (1981) on footing, Miller (1984) on genre as social action, and van Dijk (2008) on context models. These serve heuristically, as instruments for articulating a distinction already present in the medieval material, not as evidence that medieval authors held modern views. The risk of anachronism is real, and we guard against it twice over. Every claim about what either thinker held rests on the primary corpus or on the specialist secondary literature, never on the modern theory. And the modern theory enters only after the reconstruction is complete, where it characterizes the dispute's afterlife rather than its content.

Result and Discussion

Ibn Rushd's register-realism

The *Faṣl al-Maqāl* holds that philosophical demonstration is not merely permitted but required of those capable of it, since scripture itself commands reflection on creation; and that where a demonstrated conclusion appears to conflict with a revealed text's apparent sense, the text must be read allegorically (Butterworth, 2001). Carrying this argument is a structural premise: human beings differ in cognitive capacity in a way that yields three natural classes, and scripture, addressed to all, must therefore speak in three idioms at once.

Three features of the position deserve emphasis. First, the classification is naturalistic. It concerns constitution, not training, office or social role. That is what licenses Ibn Rushd's inference from a person's class to the discourse fitting for them,

and what makes the licence to interpret allegorically non-transferable. The demonstrative class is obliged to move past apparent meanings; the rhetorical class is obliged not to. The same interpretive act thus carries opposite normative valences depending on who performs it, which is the crux of the *takfir* argument. Al-Ghazālī's culpability lies in inducing the unqualified to perform an act meritorious for the qualified and constitutive of unbelief for them. Secondly, the classification is alethically ordered. Ahsan (2025) emphasized that dialectic and rhetoric fall for Ibn Rushd within *ẓann*, opinion, defeasible by definition, since to hold an opinion is to allow that things might stand otherwise; and that their inferiority traces to principles grounded in testimony. Demonstration terminates in certitude. The registers are therefore not merely different tools but rungs, and the ladder has a top. Thirdly, the classification is exhaustive and exclusive. A text belongs to a register. Ibn Rushd's own corpus was long read, and to some degree invited being read in just these terms: *commentaries demonstrative* and *elite-directed*, *religious treatises dialectical* and *popular*. That this partition has been challenged as inadequate to the actual range of his writing (Adamson, 2016) is significant, but the challenge is to the application, not to his evident commitment to the principle.

The charge of "mixing"

Against this background the accusation levelled at *the Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* becomes intelligible in its specific form. Ibn Rushd's complaint is threefold: that al-Ghazālī reasons from premises the *falāsifa* do not grant; that he uses strategies calculated to persuade non-specialists rather than meeting the standards of scientific demonstration; and that he attributes to the *falāsifa* at large what belongs to particular figures, or to caricature. The verdict is that the work is not a demonstrative book but a popular one, since it pursues questions of allegorical interpretation through rhetoric and dialectic. Elsewhere he goes further, classing certain of al-Ghazālī's arguments as sophistical (Ahsan, 2025).

Note what the three complaints share. Each alleges a mismatch between register and claim. Reasoning from ungranted premises is a defect only if one purports to demonstrate; against an opponent, arguing from premises he grants is the standard and legitimate form of dialectical engagement, codified as such in the Topics tradition Ibn Rushd himself commented upon (Butterworth, 1977). Appealing to non-specialists is a defect only if one has undertaken to address specialists. Generalising across a school is a defect in a demonstrative treatise and a commonplace in polemic. The whole force of the charge therefore rests on the assumption that al-Ghazālī was attempting demonstration and failing, or attempting it while covertly using lower means. That assumption is nowhere established by argument in the *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*. It is *presupposed* — presupposed, we argue, by the register-realist framework itself.

Al-Ghazālī's function-indexed practice

The prefatory materials of the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* are the decisive evidence, and they have been read with increasing care in recent scholarship. The work opens not with a thesis but with a set of introductions in which al-Ghazālī specifies his procedure, and the analysis of these introductions has been argued to reveal an overall strategy quite distinct from straightforward refutation (*radd*). What al-Ghazālī announces is that he will not defend a doctrine of his own but will show that the philosophers' arguments for their theses fall short of the demonstrative certainty they claim. His complaint at the outset is precisely that the *falāsifa* are convinced of the superiority of their manner of knowing by *burhān* over theological knowledge drawn from revelation and its rational elaboration (Griffel, 2009).

This is a second-order project executed in a first-order dialectical register, and it is executed deliberately. Al-Ghazālī is not confused about the epistemic status of his premises; he is using premises he does not endorse because the target of the argument is not the world but his opponents' claim about their own arguments. In modern terms this is immanent critique: the suspension of one's own commitments in order to operate inside a system and derive its instabilities from its own resources.

The evidence that al-Ghazālī's register-selection is function-indexed rather than audience-indexed extends well beyond the *Tahāfut*. In the *Mi'yār al-ilm* he expounds logic as an instrument, taking up and extending al-Fārābī's arguments for the utility of logic to theology and law — a striking move for a supposed opponent of philosophy, and one that presupposes that a mode of reasoning can be detached from the doctrinal school that developed it and redeployed for a different purpose (Street, 2023). The *al-Qiṣṭās al-mustaqīm* recasts syllogistic forms as scriptural 'balances', which is register-transposition in its purest form: the same inferential structure is relocated into a different idiom for a different readership and a different end. The *Fayṣal al-tafriqa* legislates the boundary between admissible interpretation and unbelief, and does so by attending to the conditions under which figurative construal is warranted rather than by assigning interpretive licence to a class of persons.

And the *Iljām al-awāmm*, which counsels that ordinary believers be kept from the disputations of *kalām*, is often adduced as evidence that al-Ghazālī shared Ibn Rushd's stratified elitism. It shows something subtly but importantly different. Al-Ghazālī's restriction is situational and prudential: this discourse, for these people, at this stage, is harmful. It is a claim about what a particular mode of talk does to a particular audience under particular conditions. It is not a claim that those people belong to a natural kind whose members are constitutionally incapable of demonstration. The difference between prudential restriction and constitutional

exclusion is precisely the difference between register-instrumentalism and register-realism, and it is invisible if one attends only to the surface fact that both authors sometimes counsel silence.

Why register-realism cannot see immanent critique

The central claim can now be stated precisely. Ibn Rushd's taxonomy individuates registers by audience. It therefore has the resources to represent a demonstrative text addressed to philosophers, a dialectical text addressed to theologians, a rhetorical text addressed to the many, and mismatches among them: a text pitched to the many in a mode they cannot follow, or to philosophers in a mode beneath them. What it cannot represent is a text whose first-order register is dialectical and whose object is the demonstrative status of another text. Such a text is not a failed demonstration, not a rhetorical appeal, and not a dialectical exercise in the ordinary sense of reasoning toward a probable conclusion. Call it meta-dialectic: dialectical form recruited to a second-order metadiscursive end. Its premises go ungranted by its author by design, since showing that an opponent's proofs fall short requires reasoning from what the opponent accepts.

Faced with such a text, register-realism has two available descriptions, and both misdescribe. Either the text is a demonstrative work arguing badly, yielding the charge of ungranted premises, or a popular work dressed as a serious one, yielding the charge of appealing to non-specialists. Ibn Rushd deploys both. That he deploys both of the same text is itself diagnostic: a framework compelled to characterise one object under two incompatible descriptions is a framework lacking the category that object instantiates.

One step further. The failure is structural rather than accidental. Register-realism indexes register to audience, and audiences do not individuate second-order projects. Whether a text is about the world, or about another text's claim to be about the world, is a fact about its function, not about who reads it. A taxonomy individuating by audience will therefore be systematically blind to the first-order/second-order distinction, collapsing metadiscursive work into whatever first-order register its form happens to resemble. Ibn Rushd's misreading of al-Ghazālī is thus not a failure of charity — though it may be that as well — but a predictable output of the classificatory instrument.

The reflexivity problem in the Faṣl al-Maqāl

If the foregoing holds, a sharper difficulty follows for Ibn Rushd, one that has not, so far as we can determine, been pressed. The *Faṣl al-Maqāl* is a fatwā. Scholars stress that it is cast as a legal opinion for fellow *Mālikī* jurists, presenting itself as a plea before a tribunal where the revealed Law alone holds authority (Butterworth, 2001). Its premises are scriptural and juristic; its conclusion is that demonstrative reflection is religiously obligatory for the qualified, and that allegorical interpretation is their

prerogative and duty. Apply Ibn Rushd's own criteria. Juridical reasoning, on his account, ranks below demonstration, bearing the impress of opinion and convention, a mode of *zann* (Ahsan, 2025). Yet the *Faṣl*'s conclusion concerns the relative epistemic worth of the registers themselves: that demonstration reaches certainty where dialectic and rhetoric reach only opinion, and that humanity divides into classes as it does. That is a substantive claim about the structure of mind and of knowledge, and by his own lights such a claim, if known rather than merely discoursed, requires demonstration. It is delivered instead in a juridical-dialectical register, to an audience he would place in the dialectical class, from premises grounded in testimony.

This is the Averroan performative bind. The taxonomy cannot be promulgated in the highest register without becoming unavailable to the very audiences whose conduct it regulates; promulgated accessibly, it forfeits the authority it claims. His second-order text thus occupies the position he condemns in al-Ghazālī's: dialectical form advancing a claim only demonstration could license.

Two replies deserve notice. One might say the juridical form is a rhetorical envelope around a demonstration conducted elsewhere in the commentaries, or the *Kashf*. But that concedes the point damagingly: the *Faṣl* would then ask readers to accept on juridical authority a conclusion they are by hypothesis unable to assess, which is assent by *taqlīd* to the proposition that *taqlīd* is inferior. Or one might say the class-division is empirically evident and needs no demonstration. But Ibn Rushd nowhere treats it as a self-evident first principle, and an empirical generalisation about human capacities is paradigmatically the sort of claim yielding opinion rather than certitude. Al-Ghazālī is not exposed to this bind. Register-instrumentalism claims no unique truth-attaining register and so incurs no duty to establish its metadiscursive claims demonstratively; its second-order claims are practical claims about fitness of instrument to purpose, warranted appropriately by practical reasoning. What looks from Ibn Rushd's vantage like a deficiency in rigour is, within al-Ghazālī's framework, the absence of a debt he never contracted.

The deeper stratum: semantic adequacy

We have argued that the doctrinal dispute is downstream of a metadiscursive one. We now argue that the metadiscursive dispute is itself downstream of a semantic one.

1. The received reading

Ibn Rushd's alethic ordering presupposes that at the top of the ladder discourse arrives. Demonstration yields *yaqīn*; the proper quid syllogism establishes not only that something is so but why. The *Faṣl*'s architecture depends on this, since demonstration can override the apparent sense of revelation only if it reaches its object. Al-Ghazālī's *dhawq* is standardly read as marking off a mystical domain lying outside discourse, leaving the discursive domain intact and ordered much as Ibn

Rushd describes. On that reading he is an *ineffabilist* about God and an ordinary rationalist about everything else, and his position is compatible with a register-realism narrowed in scope. If that reading is right, our thesis loses its deepest layer: the disagreement becomes one about the extension of a shared framework rather than about the framework. We argue that it under-describes the position, and that al-Ghazālī's claim concerns not a class of objects but a condition on linguistic mediation as such.

2. The domain-generality of the health analogy

The first evidence is the analogy in the *Munqidh*: the difference between knowing the definitions, causes and conditions of health and satiety, and being healthy and sated. Health is not an ineffable object. It is mundane, exhaustively describable by medicine, and al-Ghazālī does not suggest the definitions are false or incomplete. The gap lies not between describable and indescribable objects but between propositional grasp and the state that grasp is about. Treiger's (2012) reconstruction sharpens this: *dhawq* names a state (*ḥāl*) in which knowledge becomes so internalised as to constitute the knower, and such states are not transmissible by instruction. The incommunicability belongs to the form of the knowing, not the object known. Any object may be known propositionally or fruitionally, and no quantity of better propositions effects the transition.

3. The veils of light

The decisive evidence is the doctrine of the veils in the third chapter of the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, which has not to our knowledge been brought to bear on this controversy. Expounding the Light Verse alongside the tradition of the veils, the *Mishkāt* classifies those veiled from God (Buchman, 1998; Whittingham, 2007). Crucially, the veils are not only veils of darkness i.e. *falsehood*, *ignorance*, and *corrupt belief*. There are veils of light. Commentators note that the highest knowing in the *Mishkāt* is strictly non-conceptual, and that even abstract, doctrinally correct conceptions of divinity continue to veil precisely because they remain human concepts: theological notions, though not false, function as limits on knowledge rather than vehicles of it. The philosophical force is easy to miss. Were falsity the problem, better doctrine would be the remedy and demonstration the royal road — Ibn Rushd's position exactly. But a veil of light is constituted by conceptuality, not by error. A demonstrated truth about God is a concept; a concept is a veil; the summit of Ibn Rushd's ladder is therefore, in al-Ghazālī's terms, still a veil (luminous), the best available, and still an interposition.

The position's elegance lies in what it declines to deny. Al-Ghazālī does not claim that demonstration fails to yield truth; Marmura (1965) established long ago that he affirms demonstrative science in its sphere, and Janssens (2001) has argued the *Tahāfut* is far from a wholesale rejection of Avicennan philosophy. What he denies is that yielding truth and achieving adequacy to the object are one property. This is

the distinction register-realism cannot draw: ranking registers by proximity to truth, it treats "yields certainty" and "reaches the thing" as one property under two descriptions. Al-Ghazālī prises them apart, and his instrumentalism follows from the gap.

4. The positive theory

Stopping here would attribute to al-Ghazālī a corrosive scepticism about language, and that is false to the texts. What blocks the sceptical reading is that he does not merely diagnose the inadequacy of concepts; he builds the alternative. The second part of the *Mishkāt* is a science of symbolism — a systematic treatment of outward and inward, similitude and what it figures, and of how symbolic imagery conveys anything at all: how, in his own formulation, the spirits of the meanings come to lodge within the frames of the similitudes (Buchman, 1998; Moad, 2007). Whittingham (2007) shows the continuity between his hermeneutical theory and his exegetical practice across the *Jawāhir al-Qurʿān*, the *Qistās* and the *Mishkāt*, which is to say this is a working method, not a gesture. And he presents the *Mishkāt* itself as *taʿwīl* upon apparent meanings — performing, in a work of no fixed audience, the very act Ibn Rushd reserves to the demonstrative class. Nobody who thought figuration a concession to the incapable would construct a science of it. The construction makes sense only if figuration does cognitive work concepts cannot: the similitude presents without purporting to capture, and so does not incur the veiling a concept incurs by its claim to determinacy.

5. The inversion of the ladder

For Ibn Rushd, figuration is what one offers those who cannot receive demonstration; the philosopher passes through the figure to the demonstrated meaning and discards it as scaffolding. For al-Ghazālī, figuration is ineliminable for everyone, philosophers included, because the veiling it circumvents is a function of conceptuality rather than of the reader's capacity. The ladder is not merely re-ranked; its top rung is denied the property that made it the top. A further result follows, independently valuable: this explains the *Iljām al-ʿawāmm* without any taxonomy of classes. The reason to keep ordinary believers from the disputations of *kalām* is not that they belong to a lower natural kind but that the disputational register dissolves the figure without supplying what the figure was doing — a functional, occasion-relative harm of just the type al-Ghazālī's framework will generate. Ibn Rushd's restriction follows from who the audience is; al-Ghazālī's from what the register does.

6. Limits and costs

Three concessions are owed, and we state rather than bury them. First, al-Ghazālī plainly maintains a reliability-ranking among modes of argument — the *Miʿyār* would otherwise be unintelligible. Nothing above denies this; denying terminal

adequacy is compatible with a robust ordering by reliability, and conflating the two would be a serious error. Second, the argument's centre of gravity rests on the *Mishkāt*, a text whose authenticity and consistency with the rest of the corpus have been contested since Gairdner and Watt. Landolt (1991) and subsequent work have largely defended its place, and Buchman's (1998) edition permits careful assessment; but our reading would be weakened were the *Mishkāt* set aside. Hence the Munqidh's health analogy and the deliberate reticence of the *lḥyā'* (*the unspoken doctrine of the soul*) Gianotti (2001) reconstructs, are adduced alongside it rather than as a decoration. Third, and most awkwardly, al-Ghazālī practises extensive esoteric withholding of his own, marking passages incommunicable and deferring to the immaturity of his less-initiated reader. This looks like Averroan elitism in Ghazālīan dress. Our reply is that withholding on grounds of readiness differs categorically from withholding on grounds of constitution: readiness is an occasion-property that can change, and a discourse withheld today may be owed tomorrow. We acknowledge that the two are hard to tell apart from outside, and that an unsympathetic reader might take the reticence as evidence that the two thinkers stand closer in practice than in theory.

7. The afterlife: ascriptive versus enactive genre

With the reconstruction complete, the modern resonance can be stated without anachronism. The dispute maps with unusual precision onto a live contest in discourse studies over whether genre and register are ascribed or enacted. The ascriptive view treats register as a relatively stable configuration of linguistic features correlated with situational context and describable in advance of any act of speaking; Biber and Conrad (2019) give it its most systematic articulation, and that tradition's descriptive achievement is considerable. The enactive view treats genre as social action, constituted by what participants are doing rather than by the features their doing exhibits (Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990), and treats register-shift as speaker agency responsive to a projected audience (Bell, 1984). Goffman's (1981) footing supplies the mechanism by which one speaker occupies several participation statuses within a stretch of talk; Bakhtin (1986) stresses that utterances are always oriented toward an anticipated response; van Dijk (2008) formalises the mediating role of subjective context models, so that situation shapes discourse only as construed by participants.

Ibn Rushd is, in these terms, an ascriptivist of a strong and metaphysically loaded kind: register is fixed not by situation but by the addressee's natural constitution. Al-Ghazālī is an enactivist: register is what a speaker does, calibrated to a purpose. The modern consensus, such as it is, has moved decisively toward the enactive pole, not because ascriptive description is worthless, but because it cannot accommodate the routine phenomena of register-mixing, footing shift and strategic genre-appropriation that enactive frameworks were built to handle. The irony is

worth registering: the phenomena modern discourse theory takes as its central data are precisely those Ibn Rushd's framework was constitutionally unable to see.

Argumentation theory converges from another direction. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) make the reasonableness of a move relative to the discussion stage and participants' commitments rather than to a fixed hierarchy of argument types; Walton (2008) recognises argument from an opponent's concessions as a legitimate dialogue type with its own success conditions, not a degenerate demonstration. On these accounts al-Ghazālī's procedure in the *Tahāfut* is not a defective demonstration but a well-formed instance of a distinct type. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) had already argued that demoting rhetoric to a residual category left argumentation theory unable to describe most actual reasoning (a diagnosis that bites on the Averroan scheme). And Toulmin's (2003) critique of assimilating all serious argument to a single formal ideal name, in another idiom, the structural problem we have located in Ibn Rushd. None of this shows that al-Ghazālī was right and Ibn Rushd wrong about metaphysics. It shows that on the specific question of what discourse is and how its modes are individuated, the position that has proved analytically fertile is the one Ibn Rushd's polemic was designed to discredit.

Objections and Replies

Objection 1. This overreads a polemical device. Ibn Rushd was writing a rebuttal, and accusing an opponent of sloppy argument is what rebuttals do. Extracting a theory of register from the accusation mistakes rhetoric for doctrine. *Reply 1.* It would be a mere device were it not systematically tied to the theory independently attested in the *Faṣl* and the *Kashf*, and were the *takfīr* verdict not resting on it. But the verdict does rest on it: al-Ghazālī is condemned not for doctrinal error, excusable in scholars, but for exposing the unqualified to interpretation. That is a metadiscursive charge issuing directly from the class-taxonomy. Accusation and theory are one apparatus.

Objection 2. Al-Ghazālī had no theory of register; he was simply inconsistent. His variety reflects the variety of occasional writing, not a considered position. *Reply 2.* Three things tell against this. The *Tahāfut*'s prefatory apparatus announces the procedure rather than drifting into it. The *Qisṭās* deliberately transposes syllogistic form into scriptural idiom, which requires a working conception of registers as separable from their conventional contents. And the *Mi'yār* argues for logic's transferability across disciplines, register-instrumentalism as a methodological thesis. Practice this consistent, accompanied by explicit metadiscursive commentary, is a position.

Objection 3. The reflexivity problem proves too much. Any theory of discourse must be stated in some register; if the *Faṣl* is self-undermining, so is every

metadiscursive text, this one included. *Reply 3.* The generalisation fails because the bind arises specifically from alethic ordering combined with audience-indexing. A framework ranking registers by proximity to truth, and assigning register by audience, incurs an obligation to establish its ranking in the top register (one it cannot discharge without inaccessibility). A framework ranking registers by fitness for purpose incurs no such obligation, since practical claims are warranted practically. The problem is not reflexivity but reflexivity under a truth-ranked hierarchy. The objection does identify a real cost: our own framework is stated in an academic register whose warrant is disciplinary, and we do not claim exemption from scrutiny of the same kind.

Objection 4. Reading *dhawq* as a general boundary condition is too strong. Al-Ghazālī plainly holds demonstration more reliable than rhetoric, and plainly holds some propositions known with certainty. *Reply 4.* Granted, and nothing here requires otherwise. The claim is not that he denies differential reliability among registers but that he denies any register closes the gap between propositional knowledge and the knower's state that such knowledge concerns. Reliability-ordering and the denial of terminal adequacy are independent. The load-bearing evidence is the veils-of-light doctrine, which locates the obstruction in conceptuality rather than falsity and so cannot be neutralised by citing al-Ghazālī's endorsement of demonstrative science. That endorsement is what the position predicts.

Objection 5. The *dhawq* argument depends on a contested text. The *Mishkāt* has been suspected of interpolation since Gairdner, and resting the paper's deepest claim on it is imprudent. *Reply 5.* The concern is legitimate. The *Munqidh*'s health analogy and the *Iḥyā*'s studied reticence about the soul (Gianotti, 2001) point the same way independently, so the reading is over-determined even discounting the *Mishkāt*. And the modern editorial and interpretive literature (Landolt; 1991; Buchman, 1998; Whittingham, 2007), and Girdner (2018) treats the text as authentically Ghazālīan and philosophically continuous with the corpus. The claim is nevertheless weaker without it, and we would not want that disguised.

Conclusion

The Ghazālī–Ibn Rushd controversy is usually read as a doctrinal quarrel in which the charges about argumentative method are decoration. They are not. Those charges follow from a theory of discourse, register-realism, which holds that registers track natural kinds of minds, that a text's register is set by whom it addresses, and that the modes rank by nearness to truth, with demonstration at the top reaching its object. Al-Ghazālī's practice and his methodological writing commit him to something else. Registers are instruments, individuated by what they are for. A speaker picks one for an occasion, may shift within a single work, and none of them arrives. The charge of

“mixing” diagnoses no fallacy; it commits a category error, since a taxonomy tied to audience cannot see second-order work and can only take immanent critique for failed demonstration or for popularisation in disguise. Ibn Rushd, tellingly, calls it both. *The Faṣl* is caught in its own machinery, arguing juridically for a conclusion that on its own account only demonstration could license. And underneath sits a disagreement about meaning: the veils of light put the obstruction in conceptuality rather than in error, pulling apart two things Ibn Rushd's ladder treats as one, yielding certainty and reaching the thing. Figuration then stops being a concession to the weak and becomes something nobody can do without. There is a lesson here for the historiography. Al-Ghazālī has been rehabilitated by refuting Ibn Rushd's doctrines while quietly keeping his classification as the neutral language of description. It was never neutral. To describe a dispute in one disputant's terms is to have settled it in advance.

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