

# *Methodological Skepticism:*

*A Comparative Study of Imam Al-Ghazali and René Descartes*

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## **Dissertation**

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## **Abstract**

Methodological Skepticism is a tactic of applying the technique of doubt, for achieving an approximate or implicit certainty. It is considered by various constructive critics to be the best way of acquiring the factual knowledge. The most eminent philosophers who have ever dealt with the problem of methodological skepticism or method of doubt in knowledge include Imam Al-Ghazali (1058 -1111 A.D.) and Rene Descartes (1596-1650 A.D.). Although Descartes was born some 500 years later than Al-Ghazali's death, but there are found immense similarities in their philosophies and works. Muslim as

well as Western philosophers have frequently compared the epistemologies of Al-Ghazali and Descartes. The reason for these repeated comparisons is the enormous resemblance between the two. As, both Al-Ghazali and Descartes aspired to rebuild the entire edifice of knowledge from the very foundations. Both doubted the testimony of the senses and the first principles in acquiring the absolute knowledge. Both realized that there was no absolute way to distinguish waking experiences from those in dreams and so both decided to pretend that everything which their minds had perceived till then, was no more than a dream. Both invented identical methods for discovering the truth. The similitude between Al-Ghazali's 'Al-Munqidh min-al-dalal' and Descartes' Discourse de la method' and 'Meditations of First Philosophy' are so overwhelmingly close with regard to their entire plan, the treatment of the subjects discussed therein, the details of arguments and the examples and sometimes even the very language itself, that it is impossible to attribute all this to sheer happy coincidence. Some of the critics and scholars strongly believe that there is no doubt as to Al-Ghazali's influence on Descartes.

Regardless of these gigantic similarities, we must not, however forget that Imam Al-Ghazali was the eleventh century Persian Muslim scholar, holding the position of a great theologian, jurist and a mystic while Rene Descartes was a seventeenth century French Christian mathematician, scientist as well as a philosopher. Due to such evident differences, the goals and aims of the two scholars were also varied from each other. The purpose of Descartes to find the true source and nature of certain knowledge was to establish a new philosophical system, to reconstruct all the sciences and to systematize them as a unified and intact knowledge. Al-Ghazali, on the contrary, aspired to establish the religious truths and teachings on a confirmed base. He simply emphasized the spiritual realities rather than emphasizing on science and philosophy. He mainly addressed the prevailing problems of the society, since people in his time became entirely attached to the material causes or were perverted by the harmful effects of philosophy as well as sectarianism. So, he felt it incumbent upon him to amend the religious and spiritual matters of Muslims.

This research work, thus intends to explore whether the thoughts and works of Imam Al-Ghazali had truly put a considerable influence on the thoughts and works of Descartes or the similarities between them were merely coincidental. Comparing these two intellectuals carries great significance to understand the overall concept of the epistemologies of two entirely different civilizations. The impact of these two philosophers on their respective nations is historically recognized, yet the interrelationship of these two philosophers has not been fully appreciated. Thus a comparative study of the two is expected to be academically fruitful and philosophically rewarding.

Dedicated to

My

Great-Grandfather

*Syed Haider Shah*

&

Great-Great-Grandfather

*Syed Ahmad Shah*

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