

1 **Al-Ghazali's occasionalism and the natures of creatures**

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4 Occasionalism is the doctrine that God is the sole immediate cause
5 of all events, to the exclusion of any causal participation on the part
6 of creatures. While this doctrine clearly has interesting implications
7 with regard to causation and the philosophy of natural science, few
8 have noticed that it also seems to entail, not only that creatures have
9 no causal power whatsoever, but that they are completely devoid of
10 intrinsic natures, conceived as intrinsic dispositional properties. In this
11 paper, I will outline what is probably the first systematic argument for
12 occasionalism, mounted by the eleventh-century Muslim, Abu Hamid
13 al-Ghazali, and show how the implication in question follows from
14 this argument.

15 The seventeenth discussion of Ghazali's *Tahafut-ul-Falasifah*, on
16 causality and miracles, opens with this statement of the occasionalist
17 doctrine.

18 “The connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause
19 and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary,” Ghaz-
20 ali writes. On the contrary, in “all [that is] observable among con-
21 nected things” between which there is no logical entailment, “it is not
22 a necessity of the existence of the one that the other should exist,
23 and it is not a necessity of the nonexistence of the one that the other
24 should not exist... Their connection is due to the prior decree of God,
25 who creates them side by side, not to its being necessary in itself, inca-
26 pable of separation”.¹

27 Taking the sequence of events involved in the contact of fire with
28 cotton and its subsequent burning as an example, Ghazali maintains
29 the possibility of the former without the latter, and vice versa. Against
30 this possibility, he opposes the position that, “the agent of the burn-
31 ing is the fire alone, it being an agent by nature [and] not by choice
32 hence incapable of refraining from [acting according to] what is in its
33 nature after contacting a substratum receptive of it”.²



34 This position actually involves two distinct claims. One is that the
 35 burning action follows necessarily from the nature of the fire “after
 36 contacting a substratum receptive of it;” in this case, the cotton. For
 37 the action to follow necessarily from the contact, the cotton’s being
 38 a “substratum receptive of it” must lie in its nature also being such
 39 that it necessarily burns upon contact with fire. Thus, the first claim
 40 entails that material substances are endowed with essential disposi-
 41 tional properties. The second claim is that the agent of the burning is
 42 the fire alone.

43 Ghazali, of course, rejects both claims, insisting not only that inan-
 44 imate things do not bring anything about with necessity, but that they
 45 do not bring anything about at all.

46 As for fire, which is inanimate, it has no action. For what proof is
 47 there that it is the agent? They have no proof other than observing
 48 the occurrence of the burning at the [junction of] contact with the
 49 fire. Observation, however, [only] shows the occurrence [of burn-
 50 ing] at [the time of the contact with the fire], but does not show
 51 the occurrence [of burning] by [the fire] and that there is no other
 52 cause for it.³

53 Generalizing, observation shows only spatio-temporal proximities
 54 between events (e.g. burning of cotton at the time of contact with fire).
 55 Ghazali refers to these proximities variously as “occurrence with,” “exis-
 56 tence with,” and, as we just saw, the “connections” between observ-
 57 able things “habitually believed” to be cause and effect. These do not
 58 amount to evidence of any causal relation between observable things,
 59 as, in Ghazali’s words, “existence “with” a thing does not prove that it
 60 exists “by” it”.⁴

61 Indeed, we will show this by an example. If a person, blind from
 62 birth, who has a film on his eyes and who has never heard from
 63 people the difference between night and day, were to have the
 64 film cleared from his eyes in daytime, [then] open his eyelids and
 65 see colors, [such a person] would believe that the agent [caus-
 66 ing] the apprehension of the forms of the colors in his eyes is
 67 the opening of his sight and that, as long as his sight is sound,
 68 [his eyes] opened, the film removed, and the individual in front
 69 of him having color, it follows necessarily that he would see, it
 70 being incomprehensible that he would not see. When, however,
 71 the sun sets and the atmosphere becomes dark, he would then



72 know that it is sunlight that is the cause for the imprinting of the
73 colors in his sight.⁵

74 Here, the seeing of colors occurs with the opening of the sight, but
75 not by it. More precisely, the latter is not the agent. Ghazali, speak-
76 ing the Aristotelian language of the philosophers he is addressing, is
77 using the term ‘agent’ in the sense of ‘active cause’. What the example
78 shows is that the opening of the sight is the removal of an impediment
79 to the eye’s passive disposition to receive the ‘imprinting’ of the col-
80 ors, not an independently active cause that necessitates the seeing of
81 colors.

82 As it turns out, the sun is the agent. But interestingly, that is also
83 a mistake. For according to Ghazali’s position, the sun is no more an
84 agent than the eye. So the example is actually one of a man coming
85 to the realization that an initial belief was mistaken, only to replace it
86 with another mistaken belief! Indeed, the observation of the sun set-
87 ting “with” the cessation of seeing colors no more proves that the sun
88 was the agent “by” which the colors were seen than the replacement
89 of film on the eyes “with” such cessation would prove that its removal
90 was the agent. This apparent mistake is in fact a technique Ghazali
91 uses to make his point.

92 Whence can the opponent safeguard himself against there being
93 among the principles of existence grounds and causes from which
94 these [observable] events emanate when a contact between them
95 takes place – [admitting] that [these principles], however, are per-
96 manent, never ceasing to exist; that they are not moving bod-
97 ies that would set; that were they either to cease to exist or
98 set, we would apprehend the dissociation [between the temporal
99 events] and would understand that there is a cause beyond what
100 we observe?⁶

101 Just as the blind man in the example was led by the realization of
102 the falsehood of his initial belief into a new false belief, Ghazali uses
103 the example itself to lead the reader from the refutation of the posi-
104 tion that individual substances are agents that necessitate effects to the
105 consideration of a new position. In every case where there appear to
106 be events connected in such a way that one necessarily follows from
107 another, or from the properties of a substance involved therein, there
108 are conditions under which the latter will not follow from the former.
109 What were thought to be active causal properties of the substance or



110 event that necessitate the “effect” turn out to be operative only under
 111 certain conditions. They are not active causal principles, but disposi-
 112 tions subject to external conditions of actualization. These conditions
 113 can only be provided by an active cause. There must, then, be some
 114 independently active cause. This is a line of reasoning that resonates
 115 with the adherents of the next position at which Ghazali takes aim.

116 The second position belongs to those who admit that these tem-
 117 poral events emanate from the principles of temporal events, but
 118 that the preparation for the reception of the forms comes about
 119 through these present, observed causes – except that these prin-
 120 ciples are also [such that] things proceed from them necessarily
 121 and by nature, not by way of deliberation and choice, in the way
 122 [light] proceeds from the sun, receptacles differing in their recep-
 123 tion because of the differences [of] disposition...the principle is
 124 one but...the effects differ because of the differences of the dispo-
 125 sition in the receptacle.⁷

126 In other words, there is a single active first cause that operates as
 127 the agent in all events, providing the conditions under which events
 128 occur according to the dispositions of various substances that are, in
 129 themselves, purely passive. Many of Ghazali’s contemporaries, claim-
 130 ing coherence with Islamic orthodoxy, identified this first cause with
 131 God. However, their view that the fact that events occur as they do is
 132 a necessary consequence of a homogenous action of the first cause on
 133 the various dispositions of substances sharply contradicts that ortho-
 134 doxy. “Based on this notion,” writes Ghazali, “they denied the fall-
 135 ing of Abraham in the fire without the burning taking place, the fire
 136 remaining fire, and claimed that this is only possible by taking the
 137 heat out of the fire – which makes it no longer fire – or changing the
 138 essence of the body of Abraham into stone or something over which
 139 fire has no effect”.⁸

140 Having arrived at a single active cause, the point of controversy is
 141 the idea that events occur by it in the way they do with necessity, in
 142 virtue of the dispositions of substances being as they are. This is a
 143 consequence of the postulation that God’s action is homogenous and
 144 that substances are characterized in their natures by essential disposi-
 145 tional properties. “We do not concede,” writes Ghazali, “that the prin-
 146 ciples do not act by choice and that God does not act voluntarily”.

147 By denying that the principles (of dispositions) do not act by
 148 choice, does Ghazali mean that created material substances themselves



149 passively contribute to the course of events by choice? Besides the fact
 150 that little sense can be made of the idea of a passive contribution by
 151 choice, such a claim would completely dissolve the distinction between
 152 the inanimate and the animate that Ghazali has been clear so far on
 153 maintaining. Rather, this statement should be understood such that
 154 the denial that the ‘principles’ do not act by choice and the denial that
 155 God does not act voluntarily are equivalent. The ‘principles’ of dispo-
 156 sitions are simply patterns in God’s voluntary action. Indeed, from the
 157 premises that God is the single active cause, and that He acts volun-
 158 tarily, it can be shown to follow that created things do not have spe-
 159 cific intrinsic dispositions or passive causal powers, and thus contrib-
 160 ute nothing, causally, to the course of events.

161 Ghazali addresses the issue of will in the first discussion of the
 162 *Tahafut*, during the course of a lengthy set of arguments regarding
 163 the temporal creation of the world. In regard to this, the ‘philoso-
 164 phers’ argued that, as one moment in time is identical to every other
 165 in relation to the world’s origination, all the conditions of its existence
 166 were present throughout eternity. Since there is nothing to explain the
 167 world’s being created at one time rather than another, it must have
 168 existed from eternity, being emanated from God by necessity. Ghaz-
 169 ali answers by reference to will. “The world came to existence when it
 170 did, having the description with which it came to exist, through will,”
 171 he writes, “will being an attribute whose function is to differentiate a
 172 thing from its similar”.⁹

173 In response to the argument that such a faculty is inconceivable,
 174 Ghazali poses the following thought experiment:

175 For we will suppose that there are two equal dates in front of some-
 176 one gazing longingly at them, unable, however, to take both together.
 177 He will inevitably take one of them through an attribute whose func-
 178 tion is to render a thing specific, [differentiating it] from its like. All
 179 the specifying things you have mentioned by way of goodness, prox-
 180 imity, and ease of taking, we can suppose to be absent, the possibility
 181 of taking [one of the two] yet remaining. You are hence left between
 182 two alternatives. You could either say that equality in relation to the
 183 individual’s purpose is utterly inconceivable, which is sheer foolish-
 184 ness, the supposition [of this equality] being possible; or else, that
 185 if the equality is supposed, the man yearning [for the dates] would
 186 ever remain undecided, looking at them but taking neither through
 187 pure will and choice that [according to you] are dissociated from the
 188 objective [of taking a specific one].¹⁰



189 The position of claiming that in such a situation a person would
 190 actually be unable to reach out and select one of the identical dates
 191 is intuitively absurd. "It is hence inescapable, for anyone engaged in
 192 theoretical reflection on the true nature of the voluntary act, whether
 193 in the realm of the observable or the unseen, but to affirm the exist-
 194 tence of an attribute whose function is to render one thing specifi-
 195 cally distinct from its similar." If such an attribute should be affirmed
 196 for human beings, as the thought experiment makes persuasive, then
 197 it would be quite strange to claim the inability of God to choose
 198 between identical options. In this context, the argument is that there is
 199 no impossibility in God's choosing to create the world at one moment,
 200 rather than another, in time. Our purpose, however, is to see how all
 201 this leads to the denial of even passive causal contributions on the
 202 part of created things.

203 We do not want to say that voluntary action is only possible
 204 between identical options. Rather, voluntary action is only possible for
 205 a being with the capacity to make a choice between identical options,
 206 regardless of whether the options before them are, at any given time,
 207 identical with regard to the objective. But as a consequence, voluntary
 208 action is only possible for a being with more than a single option.
 209 Thus, the adherents of the second position, conceiving God's action
 210 as homogenous, render him rather like a cosmic generator, involun-
 211 tarily and continuously zapping things into being just what they are
 212 disposed to be. The fact that God can act voluntarily, then, entails
 213 that his action is not homogenous.

214 If God is a single, homogenous, active causal principle, then the
 215 operation of that principle in relation to some substance with a dispo-
 216 sition *D*, constitutes in every case a single homogenous condition *C*,
 217 of the activation of *D*. Then, all behaviors *B*, of all the substances,
 218 result from the activation of their dispositions to behave in just that
 219 way, under condition *C*. Thus, in as much as anything happens at
 220 all, what happens follows necessarily from the natures of substances.
 221 Under the hypothesis that God's action is homogenous, that action
 222 could only be described as, simply, the activation of the dispositions
 223 of things – making actual. But since God's action is voluntary, it is
 224 not homogenous, and thus not limited to the application of a single
 225 condition in relation to the dispositions of things.

226 Suppose God has two qualitatively distinct actions He can apply
 227 to substances. Then, if a substance's disposition is to play a role in
 228 determining its behavior, each qualitatively distinct possible action of
 229 God's must constitute a qualitatively distinct condition of activation



230 of the substance's potential. This potential must, then, involve two
 231 dispositions: one disposition to behave in such and such a way under
 232 condition 1, and another to behave in such and such a way under
 233 condition 2.

234 If we allow qualitative distinction between God's actions, then His
 235 action cannot be described as simply that of activating the disposi-
 236 tion of a substance. Nor can we distinguish them by simply index-
 237 ing them to the various dispositions of substances (i.e., we cannot say
 238 that God has two actions: (1) to activate disposition 1 in x, and (2)
 239 to activate disposition 2 in x). The descriptions of the dispositions of
 240 the substance are themselves indexed to the actions [i.e., (1) 'to behave
 241 in way B1 under condition 1'; and (2) 'to behave in way B2 under
 242 condition 2']. What descriptive content, then, could be attached to the
 243 two actions in virtue of which they could be rendered qualitatively
 244 distinct? All that can be said is that, to 'activate disposition 1' is to
 245 'make x behave in way B1'; and to 'activate disposition 2' is to 'make
 246 x behave in way B2.' The dispositions of the substance, then, will be:
 247 (1) to behave in way B1 under the condition that God makes it behave
 248 in way B1, and (2) to behave in way B2 under the condition that God
 249 makes it behave in way B2.

250 God is omnipotent, and so not limited to two qualitatively distinct
 251 actions. As Ghazali says, God is capable of everything that is logically
 252 possible. Consequently, the dispositions of substances really all reduce
 253 to the single disposition to behave in all and only those ways in which
 254 God makes them behave. They contribute nothing to the course of
 255 events other than their absolute submission to the will of God. Thus,
 256 if substances are to possess distinct natures under the occasionalist
 257 doctrine, then these must be understood otherwise than as specific sets
 258 of dispositions or potencies.

259 Notes

- 260 1. Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid Muhammad, *Tahafut al-falasifah* ('Incoherence of the
 261 Philosophers'), translated by M. Marmura (Provo, Utah.: Brigham Young Uni-
 262 versity Press 1997), p. 170.
 263 2. *Ibid.*, 171.
 264 3. *Ibid.*, 171.
 265 4. *Ibid.*
 266 5. *Ibid.*, 171–172.
 267 6. *Ibid.*, 172.
 268 7. *Ibid.*, 172–173.



- 269 8. Ibid., 173.
270 9. Ibid., 22.
271 10. Ibid., 24.

