

AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON ACTION

BY

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In Chapter III of his philosophically seminal work *Tahāful al-Falāsifah* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), al-Ghazālī states or maintains a theory of action. This theory, developed much earlier in his attacks on 'The Philosophers' (i.e. al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, *et al.*), is functionally and teleologically linked with his position explicated in a much later Chapter (Chapter XVII) where he discusses and rejects the idea of necessary causal connection put forward by 'The Philosophers.' Al-Ghazālī argues that a belief in necessary causal connection is not only incompatible with the notion of voluntary agent, but it also does violence to the concept of action. That is, within the framework of theories of necessary causal connections, the twin concepts of action and agency—which are logically connected, as I shall point out presently—become vacuous and otiose. For, where things or events are occurring or being produced necessarily, there would be no place or role for an agent, and hence no action. Al-Ghazālī on his part is at pains to argue the reality of the concept of action (*ḥaqīqa ma'nā al-fi'l*, p. 102.10-11)¹ which, he says, has been denied by 'The Philosophers.' This Chapter (i.e. Chapter III) thus constitutes a logical background for the refutation of the doctrine of necessary causal connection undertaken in Chapter XVII. The aim of this paper is to critically examine and assess al-

(1) Page references are to *Algazel. Tahafot al-Falasifat. Texte arabe par Maurice Bouyges*, S.J. (Beyrouth, Imprimerie Catholique, 1927 : 'p. 102.10-12' means p. 102 lines 10 to 12. The *Tahāful* was translated into English by S. Van Den Bergh in Averroes' *Tahāful al-Tahāful (Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, Oxford University Press, 1954 and by S.A. Kamali, *Al-Ghazālī's Tahāful al-Falāsifah (Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, The Pakistan Philosophical Congress, Lahore, 1958.

Ghazālī's arguments surrounding the notion of action as explicated in Chapter III of his famous philosophical work.

Now, how does al-Ghazālī define action? Action, according to him, is causing something to come out of nonexistence into existence by producing it (*ma'nā al-fi'l ikhrāj al-shay min al-'adam 'ilā al-wujūd bi-'ihdāthihi*, p. 103.6).² Elsewhere he says that that which has not come out of nonexistence cannot be called an action, except in a metaphorical sense, having no basis in reality (p. 108.6-7). Al-Ghazālī in fact insists that prior nonexistence is a condition (*shart*) for an action to become an action of an agent (p. 106.12; 108.10): existence not preceded by nonexistence cannot appropriately (*la yaṣlahu*) be said to be an action of an agent (*fā'il*). What al-Ghazālī means is that action is bringing about, or bringing into existence something (a state, situation, etc.) which was not existing before; it is thus causing something to happen. That which is brought about was previously in a state of nonexistence or quiescence (*rest.*). Al-Ghazālī rightly considers this, that is, being previously nonexistent or quiescent, as an essential part—in fact, a condition—of the occurrence of action. Thus until I raise my arm, the state of my arm-being-raised is nonexistent, it is at rest; for no action has yet taken place. Action therefore involves movement from nonexistence to existence.

But bringing something into existence—bringing about something—which is the meaning of action, is not, as al-Ghazālī indicates, a necessary process, for, if it were, it would be in existence eternally. If the act of raising my arm were necessary, there would be no time at which my arm would be at rest. The act of raising my arm would thus be eternal, necessary. And al-Ghazālī is at pains to deny the logical validity of the notion of an eternal action: 'we cannot, he says, concede the possibility of an eternal action' (*fi'l qadīm*, p. 108.5). Similarly, he rejects the notion of action by nature (or natural act, *fi'l bi-'l-ḥab'*, p. 99.10) as self-contradictory. He indicates that the expression 'by nature' is contradictory (*naqd*) to 'action': hence, no action can be 'by nature'. By 'action by nature' I think al-Ghazālī is referring to a necessary action, an action that proceeds or occurs according to the necessity of the nature of its source. Al-Ghazālī would reject the notion of action by nature because it involves compulsion or necessitation and so eliminates important antecedents of action such as the will, knowledge, purpose, etc.

(2) Cf. H. A. Prichard, *Moral Obligation* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1949), p. 187: "...to do something is to originate or to bring into existence, i.e., really, to cause, some not yet existing state either of ourselves or of someone else, or, again, of some body."

The rejection by al-Ghazālī of such notions as eternal action, necessary action and action by nature is grounded on their incompatibility with the notion of agency, so crucial to an adequate conception of action. The reason is, within the framework of such notions as eternal action, etc., it is difficult to perceive *how* the agent (involved as it is in actions) would function; it would in fact be functionless. But al-Ghazālī wants to insist that there is a conceptual relation between action and agent. Action cannot be conceived without an agent: where there is action, there is agent; and an agent is that which performs action. The conceptual relation between action and agent is perhaps rooted in the two words *fi'l* (action) and *fā'il* (agent) used by al-Ghazālī. Both words of course have the same philological roots in Arabic as *agere* and *actum* in Latin. It is on the basis of this conceptual relation between action and agent (agent as defined by him) that al-Ghazālī denies the intelligibility or meaningfulness not only of such concepts as eternal action, action by nature, etc., but also of such statements as 'the lamp *does* the light,' or 'a person *does* the shadow,' despite the use of the word 'does' (*yaf'alu*; p. 97.3). Al-Ghazālī's point here is that since the shadow follows a person necessarily (*luzūm*), and the light necessarily follows from the lamp, these occurrences have nothing to do with action; there is in fact no action involved in such occurrences at all (*laisa hādha min al-fi'l fī shay*, p. 97.2-3). And therefore one who insisted on applying the word 'action' in reference to such occurrences would merely be giving the word a sense much wider (*tawass'a*) than its definition (*hadd*): acquainted with the use of the concept of doer or agent as a cause (*sabab*) appropriate in some context, that person would only be transferring the concept, i.e., of agent, to contexts where it does not appropriately apply (p. 97.4-7).

Al-Ghazālī sees no logical parallel between the statement 'the lamp is the cause of illumination' and the statement 'God is the cause of the world' (or 'the man is the cause of the raising of his arm'). Supposing a logical parallel between the two statements, someone might think that since God, the cause of the world (or, man, the cause of an arm raising, is considered an agent, therefore the lamp, the cause of illumination, must also be considered an agent. Because al-Ghazālī finds this kind of reasoning unacceptable, he immediately clarifies the notion of agency by saying that the agent is not called productive agent (*fā'il sāni'*) merely because of his being a cause, but because he is a cause in a special manner (*'alā wajhin makhsusin*), namely that it causes through will and choice (*'alā wajh 'l-irāda wa 'l-ikhtiyār*, p. 97.7-9). On this showing, neither the wall (*judar*) nor the stone (*ḥajar*) nor the inanimate object (*jamād*) would be an agent, as agency is seen as a characteristic solely of the animal (*ḥayawān*, p. 97.9-10). Al-Ghazālī maintains

that if the inanimate object is called an agent, it is in a purely metaphorical sense (*bi-'l-isti'āra*, p. 99.3), meaning that the inanimate object cannot be an agent in a strict sense of the term. And if the inanimate object cannot strictly be an agent, then it cannot originate, initiate or perform any action. The reason for this is to be found in his clear definition of the agent.

The agent (*fā'il*), according to al-Ghazālī, is someone from whom an action (*fi'l*) proceeds with the will (*al-irāda*) to act according to choice (*'alā sabīl l'ikhtiyār*) and with the knowledge of the object willed (*al-'ilm bi-'l-murād*, p. 96.11-12). Elsewhere he says that the agent is one from whose will an action originates (*šadara*, p. 102.1), and that 'action' means that which really (*ḥaqīqa*) proceeds from the will (p. 102.10). From these statements we can reach al-Ghazālī's conception of both agency and action: for anything to count as an action, (i) it must be voluntary, proceeding from the will of the initiator of the action; (ii) it must be a free action, an action by choice; and (iii) it must be purposeful or intentional, originating from motive and reason—this, I think, is what is intended by the phrases 'with the knowledge of the object willed'. As a concept logically related to action, the agent would be someone who has a will, acts from his will (i.e. voluntarily), by choice and with reason, motive and purpose.

These criteria of the agent and action make inappropriate the description of the activities of inanimate objects as actions, and of those objects themselves as agents, despite the indications of our linguistic activities. Al-Ghazālī refers to a hypothetical philosophical opponent who might argue that the Arabs in their linguistic activities employ such statements as 'fire burns,' 'sword cuts,' 'ice cools,' 'bread satisfies hunger' and so on, and that in such statements the applicability of the term 'action' cannot surely be denied. The reason is, so would the hypothetical opponent continue, when we say 'strikes' (*yadrub*), we mean 'does striking' (*yaf'alu al-darb*); and by 'cuts', we mean 'does cutting', etc. (p. 100.13 to p. 101.3). The hypothetical opponent's point (which al-Ghazālī would of course criticize) is that implicit in the use of the verb 'cuts' is 'does cutting' (*yaf'alu al-qa'*) where the 'does' (*yaf'alu*) signifies action. The opponent's attempt to explicate the concept of action by examining the logical properties of verbs used to report actions is forthrightly rejected by al-Ghazālī, who, on his part, considers all such locutions as metaphorical (*mujāz*, p. 101.5). It seems to me, however, that al-Ghazālī is wrong in saying that in the sentence 'the rain spoiled the painting,' one is using the verb 'spoiled' in the metaphorical sense. What, then, would be the literal, nonmetaphorical sense? Such locutions are in fact not metaphorical, for they are understood

literally. What al-Ghazālī could have said in rejecting his opponent's thesis is that the use of the verb does not by itself indicate the presence of action, and that in such cases the nature of the subject of the sentence is of utmost importance in determining whether or not an action has taken place. That is, from a consideration of the grammatical or logical properties of the verb alone we cannot arrive at an adequate theory of action. Al-Ghazālī could have pointed this out despite the fact that in Arabic the word for verb (*fi'l*) is also the word for action!

To explain the point further, let us take the two sentences:

- (a) The rain spoiled the painting.
- (b) The doorman spoiled the gate.

In (a) the verb 'spoiled' is not used metaphorically as such; but neither does its use here indicate an action. The use of 'spoiled' in (b), however, expresses an action. The explanation for the interpretation of the two sentences both of which are of the same grammatical type, is based on al-Ghazālī's criteria of agency and action. In spite of the verb 'spoiled,' (a) does not indicate action because the only real or proper action (*al-fi'l al-ḥaqīqī*), insists al-Ghazālī, is related to the will (p. 101.5-6), and therefore to an agent. Thus, he would want to say, even though we frequently speak of inanimate objects as doing things—for we do have them occupy the position of subjects of sentences, yet this does not by any means imply the attribution of agency to those objects. It is thus pretty clear that for al-Ghazālī consideration must be given rather to the nature of the subject of a sentence in determining whether or not that sentence indicates the occurrence of an action. But it is also clear that for him action essentially is that which is done by rational beings who act in order to make something happen, to bring about something, and who do so voluntarily.

In explaining why the voluntary action is the proper or real action, al-Ghazālī says:

The proof is that, if we assume an event which is based on two facts, the one voluntary, the other involuntary, the mind relates the act to the voluntary fact. Language expresses itself in the same way, for if a man were to throw another into a fire and kill him, it is the man who will be called his killer, not the fire. If, however, the term were used in the same sense of the voluntary and non-voluntary, and it were not that the one was a proper sense, the other a metaphorical, why should the killing be related to the voluntary, by language, usage and reason, although the fire was the proximate cause of the killing and the man who threw the other into the fire did nothing but bring man and fire together? Since, however, the bringing together is a voluntary act and the influence of the fire non-voluntary, the man is called a killer, and the fire only metaphorically so. This proves that the word 'agent' is used of one whose act proceeds from his will (p. 101.6 to p. 102.3. The translation here is Van Den Bergh's).

In this extensively quoted passage, al-Ghazālī makes some interesting points both explicitly and by implication: (i) he repeats a point he has made a few times before, namely that it is the voluntary action that is an action in the real sense. This means that a non-voluntary action is, strictly speaking, not an action (a view we shall have occasion to examine later); (ii) the fact that when a man throws another man into a fire and kills him it is the man, not the fire, who is held responsible for murder, means that it is the man's doing which is (to be) considered an action, a voluntary action. This means, (iii) that responsibility is ascribed only to action, or put differently, action is that to which responsibility is ascribed. From (iii) it follows, (iv) that only actions—actions voluntarily and purposefully performed—can be morally assessed—can be considered right or wrong. Finally, it follows from (i) to (iv) that, (v) only an agent can be held morally responsible, for it is he who can cause something to happen voluntarily, knowingly and purposefully.

The concept of the will (*al-irāda*), as we have seen, is so crucial to al-Ghazālī's conception of action that for him if anything is an action, then it must, of necessity, proceed from the will, that is, of the agent. But what proceeds from the will does not proceed necessarily, according to al-Ghazālī. This is in fact one of the points at issue between him and his opponents, i.e. 'The philosophers.' The latter maintain that God's action in creating the world was necessary and inevitable (*luẓūman ẓarūrīyan*, p. 96.4), a position rejected by al-Ghazālī as incompatible with the notion of the will, which can be attributed also to God. For al-Ghazālī, willing is central to the occurrence of action. But is there a logical connection between willing (or, act of volition) and doing? Is willing a necessary or sufficient condition of action? Answers to this set of questions will be attempted after examining how the nature of the will is conceived by al-Ghazālī.

What is the will? No definition of the will (*al-irāda*) is provided in this chapter. But from two other chapters, one earlier and the other later, we can have some idea of al-Ghazālī's conception of the will. In chapter I he states that 'the will is a quality (*ṣifa*: attribute) which has the faculty of differentiating one thing from another.' What al-Ghazālī most probably means is that the will is a faculty in the soul which determines the soul to choose between two possible actions, between acting or not acting. Also, what al-Ghazālī says in a passage in Chapter XVI about the movement of the spheres may be relevant to his view of the will. One of the statements he makes in that passage is as follows: 'Therefore an individual will is needed for a definite movement' (*al-ḥaraka al-mu'ayyana*). The idea of a movement requiring a will is repeated in a few other places in this

Chapter. It can be inferred from these two statements that al-Ghazālī maintains a facultative or entitative conception of the will, holding that the will is an object, an entity—an inner force that originates movement or action. Al-Ghazālī, it seems, considers the will as a faculty in the soul responsible for translating intentions, desires and decisions into action. In much of contemporary Western philosophy, however, the concept of the will seems to have fallen on evil days in the wake of the attacks on the Cartesian conception of the mental contained in the influential book *The Concept of Mind* by the late Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle. In the Cartesian metaphysics, the will was held as a part of the mind, itself considered a non-physical entity. Having denied that there is a nonphysical entity called the mind with a separate and distinct nature and existence from the body, it was only logical for Ryle and his followers to deny that there is an entity called the will. However, what Ryle denies is the characterization of the will as an entity, *not* as a capacity or ability with which decisions and intentions are translated into actions. Al-Ghazālī, however, it seems to me, perceives the will as an entity, a mental faculty.

Having denied the will as a faculty of the soul, a number of contemporary philosophers propose to use the notions of intending, deciding, desiring, wanting, etc. as conceptual surrogates for the will. Even though all these notions are relevant antecedents of action—and al-Ghazālī says so both implicitly and explicitly, nevertheless there is neither logical nor causal connection between them (individually or jointly) and action. For, no statement about a man's intentions or decisions implies any statement that the man will carry out his intentions or decisions; neither does a man's decision to do something automatically lead him to do it. It appears, therefore, that the will, in al-Ghazālī's words, 'is needed for a definite movement,' for action. It is thus indispensable to our decisions and intentions to perform an action. There is a logical connection between willing and doing: it is logically impossible (contradictory) to say that a man willed (to perform) an action but did not perform it. This implies that willing is a sufficient condition for action. And it also means that there is a causal connection between willing and doing: willing can bring about something, it can cause (make) something to occur. The concept of the will is, thus, most central and stands out as the most brilliant in the galaxy of concepts involved in the analysis of action. Al-Ghazālī is therefore right in giving a pivotal place to the will in his analysis of action.

The central place given to the concept of the will in al-Ghazālī's analysis of action leads him to maintain that the expression 'voluntary action' (*fi'l bi-'l-ikhtiyār*) is a much redundant (*takrīr*) as

the expression 'he wills and knows what he wills' (p. 150.2-3). Al-Ghazālī states a bit earlier that willing is inconceivable (*lā yutaṣawwar*)—logically impossible—without the knowledge of the object willed. This means that the statement 'he knows what he wills' is equivalent to the statement 'he wills.' This being the case, it would be redundant to use both statements at the same time, since the one says the same thing as the other. And just as there is a logical connection between willing and knowing, so there is between willing and doing (acting). On this showing the expression 'voluntary action' is redundant. The expression 'actions' is thus elliptical for 'voluntary action': by 'action' one means 'voluntary action', for an action is necessarily a voluntary action. It follows from all this that an involuntary action is inconceivable. Thus, al-Ghazālī implicitly denies the coherence or intelligibility of the concept of involuntary action. 'Involuntary action' would be self-contradictory in terms. An involuntary action, like one that is coerced, is not an action, since it does not originate from one's will and knowledge. Al-Ghazālī's view that action is necessarily voluntary and that, consequently, the concept of involuntary action is self-contradictory, is also held by some contemporary Western philosophers. Plamenatz, for instance, made the following observation: 'It is, of course, quite clear that all action is necessarily voluntary, since it is never possible for a man to do what he does not wish. Indeed, to do what one wishes is the same thing as to act, for an action which has no motive is inconceivable.'³ Plamenatz's observation, like al-Ghazālī's, implies that there is no involuntary action. Ryle also considers an involuntary action a self-contradiction. 'What is involuntary,' he writes, '...is not describable as an act.' The reason is, because 'Being carried out to see, or being called upon, is something that happens to a person, not something which he does.'⁴

In bringing this discussion to a close, I would like to make two remarks. The first is that al-Ghazālī's criticisms of his opponents (i.e. 'The Philosophers') are incisive, trenchant and mostly effective. He is right in pointing out that it is inconsistent on the part of 'The Philosophers' to hold that God is a purposive agent and yet acts necessarily: as a purposive agent God must have a will and free choice for his actions. His actions therefore cannot proceed from Him with necessity. Al-Ghazālī is also right in saying the 'The Philosophers' cannot consider the world as an action of God and at

(3) John P. Plamenatz, *Freedom and Political Obligation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 110.

(4) Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London, 1949), p. 74.

the same time as something eternal. My second remark is that anyone acquainted with the contemporary literature on the philosophy of action—instances of which I have briefly referred to from the works of Prichard, Ryle and Plamenatz—will undoubtedly be struck not only by the profundity of al-Ghazālī's philosophical insights regarding the concept of action, but also by the logical acuity and perspicacity of his intellect.*

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