AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON CAUSALITY

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The widely-held view that Al-Ghazālī took a stand totally opposed to causality can be modified through a careful re-examination of the chapter on that question in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*. The reason for the misunderstanding seems to lie in the efforts of Al-Ghazālī himself to conceal his true opinions. The paper will be divided into two parts. First, an introduction will summarize the aims of the paper and the background. Second, evidence for Al-Ghazālī's compromise will be brought out through an examination of the structure of the chapter, and through semantic and contextual evidence.

INTRODUCTION

MOST WRITERS AGREE THAT AL-GHAZĀLĪ rejected causality,[1] athough they differ in their emphases. Fakhri claims that while Al-Ghazālī rejected ontological causal necessity, he accepted the logical one;[2] in Wensinck's interpretation Al-Ghazālī's theory regarded Allah as the only agent in the world and thus Al-Ghazālī attacks causality, although he does not refrain from using the term itself;[3] similarly, H. A. Wolfson maintains that Al-Ghazālī did not accept causality, despite some modes of expression he used.[4] The only writer known to me who tries to reevaluate Al-Ghazālī's views is W. J. Courteney,[5] who argued that Al-Ghazālī, like Occam, was misinterpreted on the topic of causality.

Since there is wide divergence on how the term "causality" should be interpreted, it is advisable first to define the terms "cause," and then to determine whether this sort of causality was actually opposed by any sect or author in Islam. One such definition may be taken from Courteney's article:[6]

When we speak of critique on the 'principle of causality' therefore, we are referring to questions about the necessity, demonstrability and knowability of particular causal relationships (especially within the natural order), that is, that events have definable causes, or that causal sequences are predictable.

In this paper I shall argue that in his chapter on causality Al-Ghazālī seeks to reconcile two extreme views on causality, namely the philosophical view and that of the *kalām*. Although upon first reading it seems that Al-Ghazālī follows the traditional religious rejection of causality, closer attention to the relevant passages reveals what I shall call his compromise between the two opposing views. This is not the first time that Al-Ghazālī sought to reconcile opposing views.[7] First and foremost is the compromise he put forward between "Orthodoxy" and Sufism, but also between religon and philosophy as manifested in Islam. The present compromise concerning causality seems to be a part of the latter tendency, and perhaps should be regarded as one of its most important examples.

The question may be posed as to why Al-Ghazālī felt it necessary to seek compromise on this, as well as on other issues. The answer may lie partly in the intellectual background of the time. Ashʿarite Sunnism had reached its peak some years prior to Al-Ghazālī, while the philosophical approach was fully developed at the time of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Al-Ghazālī's spiritual teacher in philosophy. Another

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[1] His views are quoted in Ibn Rushd's *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, Ed. M. Bouyges, in *Bibliotheca Arabica Scholasticorum*, Vol. III (Beyrouth, 1930), and only according to this chapter. In this respect, Al-Ghazālī's view did not change in his later writing. (Henceforth *Tahāfut* with page and line number.)

[2] Majid Fakhri, *Islamic Occasionalism* (London, 1950) p. 60.

[3] A. J. Wensinck, *La Pensée de Ghazâli* (Paris, 1950) p. 60.

[4] H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976) p. 549.

[5] W. J. Courteney, "The Critique on Natural Causes in the Mutakallimin and Nominalism," *Harvard Theological Review*, 66 (1973) pp. 77-94.

[6] Ibid., p. 79.

[7] See, e.g., W. M. Watt, *Muslim Intellectual* (Endinburgh, 1963) pp. 173-180; W. M. Watt, "Al-Ghazālī," in *EI²* Vol. II, p. 1041; as well as many other instances. Also, H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in Al-Ghazali*, Jerusalem, 1975, p. 345, note 81, who quotes Al-Ghazālī as saying ín Ihya IV, 5 that creation out of nothing is impossible.

body is merely the soul's servant and tool. The soul's power is not necessarily restricted to one's own body, but can even affect extra-bodily things. Such phenomena, argue the philosophers, occur with no obvious physical cause, but their extent is limited to the domain of things which are disposed to accept the prophetic influence.

The second objective of this chapter is to establish Allah's omnipotence. Two questions arise here. First, acceptance of the principle of Allah's omnipotence logically entails acceptance of miracles. What, then, is the reason to state both, particularly in this order? The second question (which is beyond the scope of this paper) refers to the importance of miracles to Al-Ghazālī and to Islam, bearing in mind that Muḥammad had never claimed the power to perform miracles—apart from the Qurʾān itself. The answer to these questions may lie in the fact that the *Tahāfut* was aimed at readers on two different levels, the ordinary believer and the more sophisticated one. Emphasis on miracles was for the benefit of the former, while the more elaborate argument for Allah's omnipotence was aimed at the latter.

Having stated his objectives, Al-Ghazālī proceeds to describe his general view of causality at the beginning of the particular chapter dedicated to attacking the philosophers' use of this concept. Speaking on behalf of all Muslims, by using the first person plural, he discredits the alleged necessary connection between what are called "cause" and "effect." In so doing, he has in mind the philosphers' view which he himself had put forth above, again using the same wording.[13]

The skeleton of the religious view is constructed of three main ideas: first, that every two things are separate;[14] next, on the ontological level, that the affirmation or negation of one of these things implies neither the affirmation or negation of the other; and finally, on the ontological level, that the existence or non-existence of one does not imply the existence or non-existence of the other. There seems to be a particular significance in the wording Al-Ghazālī uses in this paragraph. The definition of the universality of causality, namely the assertion that

nothing has ever occurred without some cause,[15] usually maintains that the existence of a phenomenon implies that of a cause. Such a definition of causality would seem to be acceptable to Al-Ghazālī, as well as to even the most extreme opponents of causality among the Ashʿarites, who accept the doctrine that Allah is the sole cause of everything. Al-Ghazālī's intention in this general exposition seems to be to underline the differences between the philosophical and religious attitudes rather than to try and erase them as he does towards the end of the present chapter.[16]

After having stated what he opposes in the concept of causality, Al-Ghazālī then provides the explanation given by Islam of the phenomenon of the connection between things: Allah alone is responsible for their creation in a specific order, but it is in His power to disconnect them at will.

III. *Four Approaches*: Before he goes into detail, Al-Ghazālī states that three philosophical approaches, or standpoints on causality, are discernible.[17] Next, he presents the religious approach, which he does not call *maqām*, but subdivides into two, each of which he entitles *maslak*, that is, "road," "path." Thus the two philosophical approaches are called *maqām* while the religious ones are called *maslak*. In addition to stating his views in the preface to the chapter, Al-Ghazālī here replies at once to each of the two philosophical approaches. An important

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[13] *Tahāfut*, 517,1.

[14] *Tahāfut*, 517,3: "Each of two things is different from the other." I do not use Van den Bergh's translation here, because the term "individuality" in this context may connote an atomistic viewpoint, which is hardly the case in this context.

[15] See, e.g., R. Taylor, "Causation" in P. Edwards, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York and London, 1967), Vol. II, pp. 57-58.

[16] It is of interest that in the list of examples he gives of the sort of causality he objects to, the result is mentioned first and the alleged cause second (e.g., burning and contact with fire). It is also noteworthy that the greater part of this list deals with human life and welfare—drink, food, death, medical care, diarrhea and medicine in general (see *Tahāfut*, 517,5). As for the origin of the present, as well as other examples in the *Tahāfut*, see the extensive notes by Van den Bergh in his translation of the book. This attitude is to be connected with the views Al-Ghazālī held about medical care as contrasted with *tawakkul*, complete trust in Allah, which excludes any activity on man's part as concerns his own life. See Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, IV, 243ff.

[17] I do not accept Van den Bergh's translation of *maqāmāt* as "points." There is some confusion there, for in what follows only two such approaches (*maqām*) are specified.

(c) Here, for the first time in this discussion, a distinction is drawn between fact, or event, and knowledge of the fact. It is only from the outline of the religious approach to knowledge which he gives here that we can also learn about the philosophical. The two, says Al-Ghazālī, must be interrelated in a manner which will make it certain that no knowledge is possible of possible events which do not occur. If such knowledge exists in us, it has been created by Allah in a prophet or in some other people.[23] Consequently, the source of our knowledge, in contrast with the argument put forward by the philosophers, is not based upon experience or sense-perception. Events occur according to a certain habitual course, and our knowledge follows suit.

(d) What is called a "miracle" is nothing but the unusual created by Allah, who simultaneously ceases to create in us the knowledge of the habitual. His power to act in contradiction to His habitual way of acting stems from His choice and free will. Al-Ghazālī accepts this view along with, among other Muʿtazilites, Al-Iskāfī,[24] Abū Al-Hudhail, Al-Ğubbāʾī as well as many of the *mutakallimūn*,[25] who maintained that Allah can refrain from creating burning despite contact between fire and wood, or from creating falling in heavy stones. The ancient controversy concerning human free will seems to have taken a strange turn here; the issue is Allah's free will. As the partisan of the former is the opponent of the latter, Allah's free will seems to be at the expense of human free will.

Al-Ghazālī now presents the middle religious approach giving an exposition of Islam's view on causality. The Islamic views have been briefly stated twice before, in the preface, where the philosophical vs. the religious arguments are given in a general way, and when he immediately answered the philosophical arguments, but without trying to construct a whole system of the religious view.[26] Here, however, he describes the Islamic arguments in a more or less systematic way,[27] selecting three main ideas: (a) The agent of events and things is Allah acting either directly or through "the angels."

(b) Cause acts through Allah's creation which is the reason for its regularity also. There are, however, two expressions which might seem incompatible. At the beginning of his exposition, Al-Ghazālī says that a certain quality is inherent in fire, which despite its nature to burn may cause it not to do so. This quality is created either by Allah or the angels.[28] Later, Al-Ghazālī says that it is Allah who is the sole agent, but He may act either directly or through the angels. While Allah is the agent, there is a nature in things which he has created and which makes them act in a fixed manner, so that, for example, when two identical pieces of cotton come into contact with fire, both burn.

(e) This explanation further establishes the possibility of miracles by accounting for them on two levels. On the first level Allah's intervention in the "natural" course of events occurs in the stage prior to the action of the participants in the physical event, namely, He changes the quality of either these participants, so as to inhibit the fire from burning or to change the individual so that he is not harmed by the fire. That is achieved, Al-Ghazālī explains, by creating new physical (!) qualities either in the fire, which without changing its nature will prevent it from burning the prophet, or which will render him resistant to fire. This process is not inconceivable, as there exist even natural things which can hinder a natural process from taking place, such as talc being used against fire.[29]

On the second level the miracle is explained by the Aristotelian distinction between matter and form, on the one hand, and by time on the other. As matter can receive any form, anything can change into anything, provided the usual lapse of time has taken place. Allah's intervention here may take the form of shortening this lapse of time to such an extent as to render the change a miracle. However, unless one takes from the idea that events in the world go in circles and return, this argument is invalid, while the ordinary change is in one direction, the miracle change can also be reversed, for instance, changing a stick into a serpent and vice versa.[30]

What is the prophet's place in this process of the miracle? It is certainly not his direct action which produces the miracle, as he belongs neither to the realm of "natural" habitude, nor to Divine direct

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[23] See the elaboration of this question of divine knowledge in *AMIR*. Al-Ğubbāʾī the Muʿtazilite maintains (ibid., 206,6-11) that the occurrence of something known to Allah as not going to take place is possible. He makes the distinction between two connotations of the expression "possible" (*ğāʾiz*), (a) in the sense of doubt, and (b) in the sense of "allowed." In this context he means the former.

[24] *AMIR*, 313,7.

[25] *AMIR*, 312,10.

[26] E.g., *Tahāfut*, 518,5ff.

[27] *Tahāfut*, 533,12.

[28] *Tahāfut*, 533,13.

[29] *Tahāfut*, 533,12.

[30] *Tahāfut*, 534,4ff.

attitude toward the relevant issue. This can hardly be interpreted as carelessness. One example is his reluctance to use the term *maqām* for all the approaches, despite his declaration in the preface. Another example occurs when the author describes the more acceptable philosophical approach to causality, that is, that of the philosophers who do not adhere to the extreme view on causality, but come closer to the middle religious approach. These he describes as *muhaqqiqūn*,[36] which S. Van den Bergh has translated as "the true philosophers." Rather, the term seems to connote "those among them who hold right views." This point is important, as the first interpretation would imply the philosophers who most strongly advocate causality, while here the opposite is meant. Van den Bergh himself states in a footnote that the author might have meant the Neo-Platonists and the Islamic philosophers. He surely did not intend to imply that the latter are more truly "philosophers" than Aristotle, Plato, and the others?

A third example is found at the beginning of his description of the middle religious approach when he says, "The second answer is to agree that in fire there is created a nature ... ,"[37] using the Arabic verb *naslam*. This verb connotes a certain compromise more than it does agreement, especially when later[38] he makes it clear that he has some reservations about miracles: "But still we regard ...." The same verb is also used in another place, when opposition to the view following is expressed: "We do not accept (*naslam*) the assertion that the principles do not act in a voluntary way ...."[39]

CONTEXTUAL EVIDENCE

At the beginning of his exposition of the middle religious approach, Al-Ghazālī says, "the second answer, and in it is to be found deliverance from these reprehensible consequences ...."[40] Even if we did not know that the author was aware of the difficulties raised by the extreme religious approach,

these words can only mean that Al-Ghazālī acknowledges the difficulties and is prepared to put forward new arguments which will avoid them. As these difficulties are logical, the answer must meet them on the same level, namely the logico-philosophical one, that is, it must concede to the philosophical approach to a certain extent.

The second concession to the philosophical approach Al-Ghazālī makes is more substantial. He accepts the concept of the "nature" of a thing, without accepting this term itself. The word he uses instead is *sifah*, i.e., quality (literally "description," "attribute"). He goes on to explain this term: "The second answer is to agree that fire has been thus created as to burn two identical pieces of cotton when these come in contact with it, without differentiating between them."[41] While yielding to the philosophers' argument on this topic, Al-Ghazālī immediately makes it clear that he does not do so entirely: " ... but still we regard it as possible that a prophet should be thrown into the fire and not burn."[42] Paradoxically, the explanation our author provides for the occurrence of the miracle in this context not only does not discard causality, but rather affirms it as Allah acts through physical means to block physical actions, " ... either through a change in the quality (*sifah*) of the fire or through a change in the quality of the prophet."[43] In this paragraph Al-Ghazālī concedes almost entirely to affirming the idea of causality, but he still maintains, or so he thinks, Allah's omnipotence—the first of the two objectives he stated in the introduction to the chapter. His argument here is very similar to the one he calls "the second *maqām*," where he even uses almost the same wording.[44]

His second objective was to maintain the possibility of the miracle. This Al-Ghazālī manages to do despite his partial acceptance of causality; he agrees to reduce the miracle to a phenomenon which follows the course of nature without the usual lapse

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[36] *Tahāfut*, 519,10. See H. Lazarus-Yafeh, ibid., pp. 54-60, and also D. Z. Baneth, "Philosophical Notes to the Metaphysical Book of Joseph ibn Yahuda ibn Shimʾon" (in Hebrew) in the *Anniversary Book to G. Shalom*, Jerusalem, 1958, p. 115, note 30.

[37] *Tahāfut*, 533,14. Van den Bergh's translation, 326,29.

[38] *walākinna maʿa hādhā naǧūz ʾan yulqā nabī ... .* English translation, Van den Bergh, op. cit., 326,32.

[39] Ibid., 323,9; *Tahāfut* 528,6.

[40] *Tahāfut*, 533,12; Van den Bergh, op.cit., 326,28.

[41] *Tahāfut*, 533,12: ... *an naslam an al nār khuliqat khalqatan idhā lāqāhā qiṭʿatān mutamathilatān ahra-qathumā walam tufarriq bainahumā.* Van den Bergh, 326,29. I disagree with his translation here, mainly because he uses the word "nature," which Al-Ghazālī could not have done (" ... is to agree that in fire there is a nature which burns ... ").

[42] *Tahāfut*, 533,12.

[43] *Tahāfut*, 533,14. Van den Bergh (whose translation I have used here), 326,33.

[44] *Tahāfut*, 525,7.

of examples given above, there is no difference between the two realms, the logical and the ontological, and hence, impossibility (and, for that matter, causality) is accepted in both.

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