IBN RUSHD VERSUS AL-GHAZĀLI:
RECONSIDERATION OF A POLEMIC

The history of philosophy is, to a large extent, a history of polemics. We need only remember Aristotle and his criticism of Plato: criticism in this case was used as a constructive force in the creation of new thinking. Neither did Aristotelianism stand apart from the polemical process. When Aristotle’s works were “discovered” in the first century of the common era, they immediately became the focus of much philosophical discussion. Galen of Pergamon (129-199 A.D.), better known as a physician, moved away from the usual path of interpretation and “corrected” Aristotelian theories. Such an attitude provoked the reaction of a contemporary scholar and fellow of the same school, Alexander of Aphrodisia (160-230 A.D.), who tried to give “Aristotelian” answers to the problems raised by Galen.¹

This process reveals a “three-phase” structure which has often been present in the history of philosophical polemics. It can be summarized as follows. One authority establishes a thesis; another thinker makes objections or even refutes the original proposition; in a third moment, someone claiming to be the true follower of the first authority goes on to destroy the opinions of the second and seeks to demonstrate the validity of the first thesis. The result is not merely a return to the point of departure. Through the polemical process, a particular question comes to be considered under new aspects, and the sum of knowledge is increased. New explanations may mean a closer approach to reality.

Other paths of philosophical discourse should not, of course, be overlooked. In contrast to the polemical process stands that of synthesis, which sometimes leads to syncretism. We may remember, for example, how Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) or Porphyry (234-301 A.D.), his main disciple, “Platonized” Aristotle with such success that philosophy in the later Roman Empire became generally Neo-Platonic. Al-Farabi in his turn sought to harmonize Plato and Aristotle, in

¹ Galen’s critical remarks on Aristotle are found throughout his works. Cf. Claudi Galeni Opera Omnia, ed. C. G. Kühn. Leipzig, 1821-1833, 20 vols. In vol. XIX, pp. 39-48, he gives a list of his own works, but none is directed expressly against Aristotle.


Other works are extant only in Arabic, as we know from N. Rescher & M. Marmura, the editors and translators of The Relutation by Alexandre of Aphrodissia of Galen’s “Treatise on the Theory of Notion.” (Islamabad, 1965).
which endeavor he was facilitated by the fact that his understanding of Aristotle was already Platonic.

The present discussion, however, examines the polenical method. A second example confirms its three-phase structure. Belief in the world’s eternity was commonly accepted in antiquity, and proofs sustaining it did not need to be particularly stringent. As Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity brought into special relevance the doctrine of a personal God as Creator of the world and therefore of its temporal origin, the discussion became sharper. A renewed defense of eternity was produced by the Neo-Platonic philosopher Proclus (412-485), Bûrûjûs for the Arabs, who wrote eighteen essays in support of his philosophical view.2

The second phase is represented by John the Grammarian (ca. 490-580), known both as Philoponus and, among Arabs, as Yahâb al-Nâhâwi. This Christian thinker was the author not only of a book contra Aristotelii but also of a de æternitate mundi contra Proclus.3 John was an Aristotelian in disagreement with Neo-Platonic emanationist, and was perfectly ready to criticize Aristotle when the latter’s opinions came in collision with his own beliefs. Thus, while remaining one of the most important of Aristotle’s commentators, he is exemplary of the polenical process we are considering as an advocate of temporal creation.

For the third phase of this process, we look at Simplicius, who moved to Ctesiphon in 529 after the closure of the Athenian school of philosophy and on to Rome in 533. Simplicius was a still more detailed commentator of Aristotle and the last great Neo-Platonist. He refuted Philoponus, or John the Grammarian, and returned to Aristotle following the arguments of Proclus.4 With him, the polenical process reached its end in the Hellenistic world.

2 *Epistolkeutie peri aristotelike tou theou* The theses are preserved not in an independent book, but in that of Philoponus’ *De æternitate mundi contra Proclus*, ed. H. Rüdorff (Leipzig, 1899). T. Taylor selected the theses using Philoponus’ *Reconstruction edition* (Venice, 1550) and translated them into English. The Fragments that Remain of Proclus Roudnes (1825), pp. 36-95.


4 His arguments against Philoponus on the present subject are mainly produced in his commentaries on the *Physics* and on *On the Heaven*. In Aristoteles Phycéovon IV, Book precum commenrations (C.A.O. XIII), idem. IV, Books postscriptum B. H. Bodel (Berlin, 1888-1895), *De æternitate* De æquale commenrationis (C.A.O. XI), Ed. J. L. Heberg (Berlin, 1894).


Al-Ghazālī’s use of *Kāfīm* in the *Iqṣās* contains neither logical demonstrations nor dialectical arguments which are the main features of intellectual debate. A chapter of the first book of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* devoted to *Kāfīm* as a debating technique, carries the significant title: "On the Evils of Debate (iṣlah) and on the Resulting Influences that destroy the Character" (*Iṣās* 1.1, p. 45-48). As the book unfolds we become more aware of al-Ghazālī’s reluctance to embrace *Kāfīm*. What was partially accepted at the beginning comes to be viewed as having dangerous consequences and is eventually rejected for the following reasons:

1) Debate, which appears as the main method of *Kāfīm*, is a cause of moral destruction. Al-Ghazālī refers to ten major evils caused by debate: envy, pride or haughtiness, rancor, back biting, self-justification, spying into the private affairs of men and rejoicing at the injuries of others, deceiving, detest- ing the truth, and hypocrisy:

> Hypocrisy is that virulent disease which, as will be discussed in the *Kīthā al-'aṣād*, leads to the graver of major sins (*Iṣās*, 1.1, p. 47).

Some pages later, in the section entitled “The Book of Faith,” we find similar judgments: the harm of *Kāfīm* lies in raising doubts about the faith and, specifically, in the fanaticism kindled by disputation which prevents people from knowing the truth (see *Iṣās*, 1.2, p. 96).

2) The destruction of morality is linked to the destruction of faith. Although everyone has access to faith, the way and the degree to which one has it vary. In this respect al-Ghazālī was particularly sensitive to the role of education. Common people run a higher risk of losing their faith than the learned, especially if it comes to them in an inappropriate form such as *Kāfīm*. This division between the learned and the unlearned seems to be traditional in Islam, and al-Ghazālī applies it to the study of *Kāfīm* towards the very end of his life (305/1111), where he wrote a book about the hazards of this kind of theology: the *Kīthā al-fatwa ilā 'amān al-Kāfīm* in which he insisted:

Proofs [concerning God’s existence and nature] are of two kinds: those requiring such great keenness and reflection that the common people cannot reach them, and those self-evident, clear, and known from the first outset. There is no danger at all in the second class; on the contrary, the first requires such efforts of thinking that it is above the capacity of the common people (*Iṣās*, p. 20).

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this analogy lies in its implied criticism of the internal weakness of the Kalam system of knowledge. Al-Ghazālī is equally concerned with its subjective consequences. The mutakallimin are in great danger of losing themselves and their faith in dry debates and logical constructions. The believers have to know God, His attributes and works, and these truths do not result from Kalam: "in fact, theology is almost a veil and a barrier against it" (Ihya' 1. 1. 2, p. 22).

This criticism of Kalam occurs throughout al-Ghazālī's writing, and is central to his thought. After his analysis of Kalam in the Kitāb ḡawā'id al-ṣaqā'id, he concludes:

Listen to one who has familiarized himself with the Kalam and after a careful study and thorough investigation... has come to dislike it and has ascertained that the road to what knowledge really is, is closed from this direction (Ihya' 1. 2, p. 57).

It is on grounds of its inability to provide a true knowledge of God that al-Ghazālī passes an ultimately negative judgment upon Kalam, even while according it a qualified usefulness, in the hands of suitably learned scholars, in defending the verities of revelation. The same criticism applies—even more so in al-Ghazālī's reckoning—to philosophy. Fearing that the defense of revelation from the assault of philosophy was insecure in the hands of Kalam, he preferred to entrust faith to religious authority and gnostic experience.

Basic faith, he argued, is surely open to everybody, but it does not seem to result in great knowledge. Religious observance, while compulsory for all, needs to be complemented for those who seek greater understanding of the meaning of Qur'ānic tenets. For this, al-Ghazālī turned to Sufism or mystical knowledge.

Gnostic science is what al-Ghazālī referred to as the "Mysteries of the Heart," to which he devoted an entire book in the Ihya' (see note 9). In this he argues that everything which God has created or will create is contained in the "well preserved table," doubtless a derivation of the "table" keeping the original Qur'ān. Here are inscribed all eternal ideas, of which the bodies of the sensitive world are merely copies.

The heart, in al-Ghazālī's analysis, can know these ideas or true essences in two forms: through the senses, i.e., through their copies, or directly. Direct knowledge may be gained through the heart which acts like a mirror, reflecting not only sensitive images but also ideas existing in the "well preserved table." Such knowledge he also compares to water springing direct from the earth.

10 "Book on the foundations of the beliefs," Ihya' 1. 2, pp. 89-125.
11 Sura 85:22.

We say: we may imagine that the heart reaches the reality of the world and its form sometimes through the senses and sometimes from the "preserved table" as we may imagine that the eye gains the form of the sun sometimes by looking at it and sometimes by looking at the water which reflects the sun and repeats its form. Whenever the veil between the heart and the preserved table are raised, the heart sees the realities and science flows into it, and it does not need to acquire the science through the senses: it is like an outlet of water from the depth of the earth (Ihya', III. 1. 10, p. 211).

Al-Ghazālī's own words suffice to introduce a way of knowing which is different from both Kalam and Falsafa, one in which the "well preserved table" and the heart, considered as a "spiritual and divine fine-substance" (Ihya', 1. 2, p. 3) are the central pillars. Man's heart is actually his true essence (nafs) and can hardly be distinguished from his spirit or his soul.

Although al-Ghazālī's theory of the "preserved table" differs in important respects from Sufi understandings of this Qur'ānic symbol, just as his system of thought is not that of Sufism, it is clear that both share a common attitude. We agree with Duncan Black MacDonald that al-Ghazālī helped Sufism attain a recognized position in Islam. This convergence is clearest, with respect to the concerns of this paper, in the way knowledge is obtained:

not by study, but rather by frutialon experience and the state of ecstasy and "the exchange of qualities" 12

However, we must not overlook the originality of al-Ghazālī's system which J. Obermann characterized as "Subjectivism"—whatever other scholars may argue about external influences upon him. 13 As far as knowledge is concerned, he argued that it does not have to be rational:

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12 Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory (New York, 1909), p. 239.
14 Der philosophische und religiöse Subjektivismus Gherasits (Vienna, 1952).
THE MUSLIM WORLD

For the mystics 'arbâb al-ghubâb, God causes every atom in the heavens and on the earth... to speak a language without letters and without sounds (Ihsân IV. S. 1. p. 248).

To understand this language, man has to acquire a hearing organ, other than the physiological one, one that "perceives a speech without letters and sounds, neither Arabic nor foreign" (Ihsân). This is the knowledge of the heart which leads to a supra-rational deepening of understanding within the obligations of religious observance which mark the sentinel authorities of faith. Differentiating himself at this point from both the advocates of Kûtan and Fâkâta, al-Ghazâlî was equally critical of many Sufis who, in his judgment, failed to live up to the standards of the "masters of the heart". Only the very true believers are the kâtibûn al-amûrûn, whom we may call gnostics.16

It is at this point that al-Ghazâlî's polemic against the philosophers and mutakallimûn is sharpened to a practical issue. In his "Book of the Mysteries of the Heart" he criticizes the opinions of people "who speculate and reflect" concerning Sufism. Aîn Pâlânîs reade[s] this as a reference to the philosophers, and translates accordingly, though my own judgment is to interpret the reference more broadly to include Muslim theologians in general representing the traditions of Kûtan as well as Fâkâta.18 While these each followed systems of thought which were very different from Sufism, they did not deny its legitimacy either as an ascetic discipline of purification, or as a means of knowledge (mu'tala). They saw it, however, as the way of a very few, and even those who traversed the path of spiritual purification had no assurance of being able to retain the gift of mu'tala for a sustained period. It was scarcely an effective way of knowledge for the majority of believers. Against this view al-Ghazâlî maintained the inherent quality of mu'tala as the superior way of knowledge of God, and persisted in calling everyone to undertake the spiritual path without which it was inaccessible.

In this light it becomes clear how al-Ghazâlî represents the second-stage position in the three-stage polemical process which developed in the Islamic tradition. In the struggle against Fâkâta he made a qualified use of Kûtan while being alert to its epistemological and moral shortcomings. But he relied ultimately upon the experiential knowledge of the heart which, as a mirror, reflects the eternal truths of God's revelation. Thus, if al-Ghazâlî made limited use of certain forms of Kûtan in his polemic against philosophy, it was with the effect of infusing these with the epistemological richness of what he learned from the Sufi tradition as it adapted in it his distinctive system of thought.

Turning now to the third stage in the philosophical polemic which developed in the Islamic tradition we call to evidence the work of the great Islamic philosopher, Ibn Rushd, who took up the argument against al-Ghazâlî in defense of the principles of Fâkâta which he—al-Ghazâlî—had attempted to refute. Before addressing this polemic, however, it is important to acknowledge areas of agreement between Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazâlî. For example, in chapter three of the Fasl al-munâqib, which is clearly a conciliatory work, Ibn Rushd pays tribute to al-Ghazâlî for his contribution to the development of the "sciences of asceticism and of the future life" (Ihsân, p. 19; tr. p. 63). Moreover, we find Ibn Rushd in agreement with al-Ghazâlî on the need to avoid Kûtan. If Ibn Rushd's criticism lacks the moral condemnation which is characteristic of al-Ghazâlî's position, Ibn Rushd's polemic disqualifies Kûtan on methodological grounds. In the Fasl al-munâqib, his discussion of al-wâl19 considers three kinds of interpretative method regarding theological issues: "rhetorical, dialectical and demonstrative" (Ihsân, p. 14; tr. p. 58). The mutakallimûn employ dialectical proofs which Ibn Rushd rejects as illegitimate, even though he was prepared, like al-Ghazâlî, to extend a qualified tolerance to other aspects of Kûtan. To wâl, he argues, can only be undertaken legitimately by philosophers on the basis of natural understanding or demonstrative proofs.

The dialectical way in the discussion is forbidden when talking about how the Creator knows Himself and the other beings, let alone putting it down in a book (Tabaqât p. 356; cf. tr. p. 215).

The only way to discuss these questions is by way of strictly philosophical reasoning, the tarjî al-bâhthân (Ihsân, p. 357). Few people are capable of

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19 Certainly, there is the disagreement between al-Ghazâlî and Ibn Rushd upon the nature of 'arâfî which consisted originally in interpreting some passages of the Qur'ân in an allegorical way.

Al-Ghazâlî builds many of his doctrines upon the double meaning of terms (istitâ'istitâ'ic) and does not lack it with dialectic. After having examined different kinds of interpretation in the Book of Rushd, he states: "a group went to the subtle point and they opened the door of the allegorical interpretation for what is related to God's attributes and excluded it from what is related to the future life, they are the Ash'arîs" (Ihsân, 1 I. 2. p. 109). He could accept the 'arâfî and its restricted application of 'arâfî in this case and could employ it also in others, but probably not to the extent that F. Jabir sacrificed to him: "le arâfî de Ghazîa prend ainsi des proportions cosmiques" (La notion de vériable selon Ghazâlî, p. 298, p. 179).

Ibn Rushd was not prone to making wide use of 'arâfî; it becomes necessary only if the revealed text contradicts the results of demonstration. In such a case, he looked for the metaphorical meaning of the words following the rules of the Arabic language.

Al-Ghazâlî had frequent recourse to 'arâfî but never accepted, as did Ibn Rushd, that it can be used in order to cause reason to prevail over revealed texts whenever both are in apparent contradiction (Ihsân, pp. 14-15).
pursuing this path, for few possess the requisite moral and intellectual qualities. Where these are lacking Ibn Rushd warns against any form of knowledge other than common-sense understanding:

It is appropriate for you to keep yourself to the apparent meaning (fazîrî) of the Divine Law (shari'a) and not to look for these new dogmas [e.g., Ash'arism] in Islam; for if you adhere to them, you will be neither a man of certainty [philosopher] nor a man of Divine Law (Tahâlit), p. 361-362; cf. tr. p. 218.

On such grounds Ibn Rushd excludes Kalâm from treating basic theological questions. His criticism is based not only on its negative results, but on the wrongfulness of its arguments. In the Tahâlit al-Tahâlit he often complains that the mutakallimin employ false premises in their arguments; on other occasions, he accuses them of falling back on acts of sophistry like the use of "transference." 20

Thus far we can find no reasons for a polemic between Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazâlî. Both agree that Kalâm is not the way to truth. Though they do not agree upon where the way to is to be found, Ibn Rushd does not reject the intuitive knowledge of the Sufi (thawbi) (See p. 15) nor al-Ghazâlî the rational knowledge of the philosophers. Yet the polemic does take place because both are moving on a rational level and because al-Ghazâlî, in spite of his critique, makes use of Kalâm. This brings us to their difference regarding philosophy.

Two well-known writings bear special witness to their philosophical polemic: al-Ghazâlî's Tahâlif al-Fâsâka and Ibn Rushd's Tahâlit al-Tahâlit. Al-Ghazâlî's book was written in 1088/1095 according to Bouyer. 21 This makes it earlier than the aforementioned 'Aqîda ('and 'Abûl, and it is important to notice that the texts I have produced so far to express his opinions against Kalâm are dated later. Ibn Rushd wrote his Tahâlit in 1180, and there is no reason to believe or suspect that the relevant thoughts contained in the work were superseded by later evolution.

Ibn Rushd's criticism of the twenty objections which al-Ghazâlî raised against the philosophers follows the same non-systematic order as al-Ghazâlî had elaborated. The issues that can be qualified as 'substantive' mainly concern the nature of God and the world, but it is my intention to consider only the concepts underlying them. Causality 22 is such a concept, and a basic one, which appears already in the 'first discussion,' and it will now draw our attention.

All of Greek and Roman philosophy, with the possible exception of the Epicurean school, avowed both the existence of causes and an order among them. Causes, it was argued, are linked to one another, and all eventually go back to a First Principle identified with God, who acts not directly, but through the chain of causes. The theory of knowledge in harmony with this view links the chain of reasoning to the chain of causes and is a doctrine which the Muslim philosophers in their turn would inherit.

Kalâm theologians, however, tried a different rational explanation, with the primary intention of enhancing the omnipotence of a personal God. If we follow Wolfson's analysis, 23 we find as many as eight ways of explaining the phenomenal world without admitting any principle of causation in the philosophical sense. The common denominator among these Kalâm theories is the principle that God acts directly, not indirectly through a chain of causes and effects as the Graeco-Roman philosophers believed. According to Kalâm, as God created the world from nothingness by an act of divine will, so God creates directly every single action which occurs in space and time. Al-Ghazâlî sets forth the classical Ash'arite position in the following passage:

Accidents are destroyed by themselves and their endurance is not conceivable. For if their endurance were conceivable, their annihilation (i'târ) would not be conceivable because of this intention (ma'âsid). Although substances do not endure by themselves, they do so because of an endurance added to their existence. If God does not create the endurance, they become non-existent. 24

Ash'arite Kalam thus posits a continuous activity of the Divine, who creates not only all beings but also their changes and actions (khawāṣī') as well. Although differences within Kalam concerning this subject should not be overlooked, there is, as al-Ghazālī affirmed, a prevailing common ground. This denies causality between created beings, and argues as follows:

The link between what we believe is a cause by custom and what we believe is an effect is not necessary in our opinion... From the necessity of the existence of the one, the existence of the other does not follow; and from the necessity of the non-existence of the one, the non-existence of the other does not follow, as between quenching thirst and drinking, becoming satiated and eating, burning and touching fire... (Tahātīf, XVII, 1, p. 277).

Such a theory not only contradicts our daily experience at first sight, but implies very serious consequences. If we cannot know causes, we cannot know the special functions of each thing, and we cannot act either, Because we cannot foresee the results of our action. Yet, in fact, we do all these things. We are thus confronted with a contradictory situation: if there are no causes, we act as though there were, and it works.

Kalam's answer to this problem rests on the principle of habit or custom (ʿibād), the origins of which can be traced to al-Ash'arī. The starting point is the very concept of "habitual." Habit is what happens "often" but without necessity, i.e., it need not always happen; sometimes it does not and sometimes it does—but in the opposite direction. It is evident, however, that exceptions apply and that exceptions are few. In this manner the Ash'arite theologians even sought to explain miracles.

This answer was not fully satisfactory for all mutakallimūn, however, because they were loath to allow "custom" to re-enter the realm of objectivity. In their internal polemic, al-Ghazālī stood behind the Ash'arite school and strove to complete their doctrine of "habit":

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25 The concept has its roots in the Stoic adōnaiōmenos, but Maimonides in the 12th century AD. developed the Kalam doctrine in this direction.
28 Wolfson, Kalam, p. 456.
"quality in the mind": philosophers accept causality and therefore the existence of effects: the theologians speak of signs[31] even though this also implies a kind of causality.

The main thrust of Ibn Rushd's argument comprises his criticism particularly of the theory of "habit," which—as we have just seen—was affirmed by al-Ghazālī. Ibn Rushd points to what he sees to be its inherent ambiguity:

I do not know what they [the Ash'arites] understand by the term "habit," whether they mean that it is the habit of the agent, the habit of the existing things, or our habit to form a judgment about such things?[30] (Tabāqāt, p. 523; tr. p. 320).

He then argues that God cannot acquire a "habit" that would constrain Him. Un-created beings cannot acquire "habit" either, because this would mean that it belongs to their nature. Of course, the human intellect is familiar with custom, but from it only a "hypothetical" knowledge is possible. If all knowledge were hypothetical "everything would be the case only by supposition and there would be no wisdom in the world from which it might be inferred that its Agent was wise" (Tabāqāt, pp. 523-524; tr. p. 320).

These last words open the way to another dimension: causality appears not only as the foundation of our knowledge but also as the manifestation of God's wisdom to men. The philosophical argument is definitely better built, but also achieves—in its own way—the same aim intended by Kalam, i.e., to emphasize God's influence upon the world and its beings. As M. Fakhry[32] has shown, Ibn Rushd and the tradition to which he belongs have rendered a great service to philosophy.

Although causality was a very important component in the polemic, we should not forget other issues of a non-substantive nature. If we consider, for instance, how causality acts, we see that it is by means of the interaction of the four classical causes (matter, form, agent, end). They are, however, not sufficient to explain the very essence of change or the relation between being and non-being, and last principles have to be found. The polemic against al-Ghazālī also involves these questions.

Let us go back again to the first stage of the philosophical polemic as represented by Aristotelian philosophy. In Metaphysics (IV, 3, 1005 a 19-b, 1012 b 31), Aristotle formulates the principles of non-contradiction and of the excluded third: "x is or is not. But in the same work and especially in the Physics (III, 1, 200 b 12-201 b 15), he introduces a new predicate: "possible." Although "x" does not actually exist, it may potentially exist. Aristotle was here in argument against the Meiranic school which denied any kind of potential existence, but his answer did not remain unchallenged. Diodorus Cronos, famous for his Master Argument,[33] derived his definition of the possible from that of the Megarians. Hellenistic philosophy, in general, was concerned with the nature of possibility.

The issue, as it appears in Aristotle, can be summarized for our purpose as follows: existence and non-existence are not contradictory, because existence can be either actual or possible, i.e., in potentiality. Thanks to this distinction, Aristotle found a suitable explanation for the changes and for the coming to be in nature, which consist always of an "actualization" of an existing "potentiality."

A consequence of this theory is that there is no absolute non-existence; thus Greek thought is alien to the idea of nothingness as well as creation from nothingness. The possibility of coming to be enjoys a kind of reality because it also has a real foundation. This foundation is associated with the "first matter" as it is the underlying cause of any process of actualization.

Ash'arite Kalam did not agree with this conception of possibility, which is linked to causality. It did not admit the universe as an autonomous entity with actual and potential dimensions. Only God can endure, and things are or are not according to God's will; there is no foundation for possible existence. The notion of possibility/potentiality is thus reduced to a logical category: the possible is only what is not contradictory.

Is it, then, possible to admit the reality of "potentiality" in cases where the possible becomes existent in fact? Al-Ghazālī denied this in the following terms:

By potentiality of existence (istiqra' al-wujūd) we do not mean anything else than possibility of existence (takāf al-wujūd) and that leads to the coincidence in the same thing of the possibility/potentiality of its exist-

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[30] Tabāqāt correspond to the Greek ἀποκόροους. This is defined by Aristotle as a "demonstrative sentence" in Analytica Posteriora II, 27, 70 a 7-10. It refers to something (pragma) which happens before or after what exists or has become. A classical instance is smoke as a sign of fire. Five centuries later, Galen gave another definition: "Deductive define atomos a hypothetical sentence for a sound mind, where the first period can be grasped from the second" (Opera omnia: Note 1; c. XIX, 7, p. 235). This second definition reflects Theophrastus' and the Stoic development; and is closer to the one employed by the Kalam. As the concept fulfilled its function in Stoicism in relation to causality, so it does in Kalam.


ence and its attainment of existence in act. Its existence in act is identical with the potentiality of existence (Tahālīl, XIX, p. 343).

The distinction between ḫmā'at and qiyās is taken from Falsātā, where it proceeded from post-Aristotelian philosophy. For al-Ghazālī the distinction has no importance, because possibility and potentiality are never "real." There is only actual existence and possibility appears together with it, being only an "additional attribute" (wād al 'addi).

The polemic over this point was not merely academic; it had direct consequences for understanding the nature of the world—its necessity or eternity—as well as of Divine omnipotence. It is therefore not surprising that many arguments of the Tahālīl al-Tahālīl 35 revolve around these opposite conceptions of the possible. Let us consider, for instance, the so called "fourth proof" of the First Discussion involving the eternity of matter. Ibn Rushd condensed the Aristotelian view into these words: "everything that becomes is possible before it becomes, and that possibility needs something for its subsistence (ṣayyām bū'īn), namely the substratum (mahlūl) which receives that which is possible" (Tahālīl, p. 100; tr. p. 59). This substratum is obviously first matter. In the same passage, Ibn Rushd relates al-Ghazālī's reaction:

The possibility of which they [the philosophers] speak is judgment of the intellect (qalā'a al-'aql), and anything whose existence: the intellect supposes, provided no obstacle presents itself to the supposition, we call possible. 36

Al-Ghazālī's point was to argue that possibility belongs only to the realm of human thought and its laws. Against this Ibn Rushd raised severe objections on the basis of his realistic theory of knowledge. As in the case of causality, he launched his attack from the fact of knowledge itself:

If there were outside the soul nothing possible or impossible, judgment of the mind about this [that things are possible or impossible] would be of as much value as no judgment at all, and there would be no difference between reason and illusion (Tahālīl, p. 113; tr. p. 67).

34 See van den Bergh's introduction to his translation of the Tahālīl al-Tahālīl, pp. xxi-xxxii.
35 See e.g. pp. 86-117, tr. pp. 50-69.
36 Tahālīl, p. 102; tr. p. 60. A corollary of this proposition establishes that "there is not in possibility anything whatever; more excellent ... than it is" (Ifrīj, IV, p. 233), and it has raised a discussion about the perfect rightness of this world. See B. L. Osnessky, "Theology in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazālī's "Dears of All Possible Worlds."") (Princeton, UP, 1964), esp. pp. 32-34.

If rational knowledge is knowledge of causes, it is also knowledge of the principles sustaining them. The agent of a change, for instance, is the cause that draws the object of this change from potentiality into actuality; its acceptance is also the acceptance of its metaphysical foundations. Ibn Rushd's answer to al-Ghazālī reinforces the Aristotelian line, though he acknowledged certain difficulties with it. 37 In this as in other respects, Ibn Rushd stands as the representative of the Aristotelian tradition in Islam more evidently than his predecessor, Ibn Sina. For example, with respect to causal efficacy, B. Kogan has recently outlined Ibn Rushd's contribution, showing how it moves away from Ibn Sina's model of emanation. For the general doctrine of causes and principles Ibn Rushd returns to Aristotle, albeit in a Neo-platonic way which affirms that the giving of unity to a sensible substance gives it existence. 39

Ibn Rushd's polemic against al-Ghazālī certainly embraces other subjects than those we have considered, as can be seen in the Tahālīl al-Tahālīl or in the Kāfī 'an Manāhib. The discussion about causality and possibility, however, takes us to the heart of their disagreement and serves to illustrate the nature of their polemical relationship, notwithstanding the important issues upon which Ibn Rushd agreed with al-Ghazālī. The issue in dispute was not al-Ghazālī's adoption of Sufism but his retention of Kāfīm. In his struggle against Falsātā, he subscribed to the Ash'arīte Kāfīm because of its rational dimension. This no doubt involved him in a contradictory situation: on the one side he rebuked Kāfīm on the other, he made use of it. His criticism of Kāfīm— as we noticed—was mainly subjective in nature, although he also pointed to the weakness of its reasoning. However, his criticism resulted not in a turn to philosophy, but to non-rational forms of knowledge and to an emphasis of the subjective world.

If we adhere to the chronology of al-Ghazālī's works, it becomes clear that he did not articulate these contradictory opinions about Kāfīm simultaneously. His Tahālīl al-Falsātā, in which he defended the Ash'arīte Kāfīm without any critique, was written before his spiritual crisis of 488/1095. 40 Later, in the Iḥyā' (written between 489/1096 and 495/1102) he set important limitations to Kāfīm and even advised its avoidance. Finally, in the Kitāb al-Ijāfim (505/1111) he expressed his complete disapproval of Kāfīm and its proponents.

37 Tahālīl, p. 68; tr. pp. 68-69.
38 Assemir and the Metaphysics of Creation, pp. 250 ff & 256 ff.
40 See Al-munāfiq, pp. 125-128; tr. McCarthy, pp. 91-93.
While this chronology helps to distinguish an evolution in al-Ghazālī’s thought, it does not resolve the contradictory nature of his evolution. Scholars take different views of this problem. Asin Palacios,43 who did not have a chronology of al-Ghazālī’s works, argued that he remained an Ash’arite throughout his life. Jabre44 also sees a continuously positive attitude towards Kalam, but with conditions. Lazarus-Yafeh45 considers that his books dealing with philosophical doctrines are not authentic, because the common medieval philosophical terms appear only in these books, and in none other of his works.

In fact, Ibn Rushd himself was the first to be aware of the problem. In the Fasl al-magāl/p. 18; tr. Hourani, p. 61), he complains that the iswāli of al-Ghazālī used “poetical, rhetorical and dialectical methods” with the praiseworthy purpose of “awakening spirits.” This resulted in internal contradictions of methodology and effect, and in an inconsistency which undermined his good intentions. In a famous passage, Ibn Rushd condenses his criticism of al-Ghazālī as follows:

In his writings he did not adhere to any doctrine, because he was an Ash’arite among the Ash’arites, a Sufi among the Sufis, and a philosopher among the philosophers.

Ibn Rushd’s criticism is impressive, but unfair. No doubt al-Ghazālī wished “the best” for his people in terms of strong faith and right moral behavior. Philosophers may affirm that rational knowledge leads to these goals in the best way, but one could object that the essence of the religious phenomenon itself lies beyond philosophy or rational theology. This was clearly al-Ghazālī’s conviction and in his search for this essence he moved between Kalam and Sufism—reason and heart—until the second became his predominant concern.44 But the subjective system which he set out in the Ḥijāj, as his most representative work, never completely superseded the rational constructions of his Ash’arite works. He may have renounced Kalam in the course of his life, but its philosophical dimensions remain objectively present in his work.

In conclusion, therefore, we may say that philosophy in the Islamic tradition continued to advance through the work of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd in the recognized manner of polemic, even if the former did not seem to be aware that he himself was engaged in philosophy. Al-Ghazālī’s ultimate personal concern was always other than Falsafa, Kalam or even Sufism—for the true nature of religious knowledge cannot be identified with any one of these disciplines of knowing.

University of Madrid
Madrid, Spain

Josef Pius Montaga

43 See Aljazzi, Dogmatique, moral, ascétique (Zaragoza, 1901) p. 226.
44 La notion de certitude, pp. 118-119.
45 Studies in al-Ghazali, pp. 249-258. She denies that the Ḥijāj, Tadlíl, Miḥari al-manqub, and Minhāj al-amal were written by al-Ghazālī.
46 Some al-Ghazālī scholars certainly insist on the contradiction being apparent and not real; e.g., P. Jabre in La notion de certitude, p. 277.