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Exemplified Through *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*

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“When God wishes good to a man He opens to him the gate of action;
When God wishes ill to a man He opens to him the gate of dialectic.
- Ma`ruf al-Karkhi, 815

The *Metaphysics* of Aristotle assumes much. There is something to be known. It can be known. The human intellect can know it. That knowing is the fullness of perception. Aristotle assumed all of these before pen hit paper on his *Metaphysics* and the west inherited these assumptions. When Greek philosophy was exported south-east, however, these assumptions met stiff resistance in the form of al-Ghazali. Logic, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and the myriad of sciences imported from the Hellenistic advance did flourish in the areas newly consolidated under the banner of Islam. It must be clear then that the rejection of these assumptions is not the same as some form of anti-intellectualism on the part of Muslim thinkers. Ghazali, rather, would come to represent the normalized and proper Islamic philosopher. His mode of knowledge, his epistemology, radically separates both him and all later Islamic thought from similar western (European) speculations. This is seen clearly in his modified Ash`arite causal theory put forth as a multi-faceted polemic in his famous *Tahafut al-Falasifa* which is commonly translated as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (henceforth referred to as the *Tahafut*). In other words, Ghazali, in the *Tahafut*, makes use

of a modified Ash`arite causal theory and seeks to refute and reject the fundamental assumptions, those of epistemological certainty, the claim that knowledge of ultimate things is possibly, made by contemporary philosophers and through a form of mystical skepticism both undermines the Hellenizing of Islamic metaphysical speculation and normalizes mystical inquiry. His *Tahafut* then becomes important and enduring not in what it says particularly (the polemic against Farabi and Ibn Sina) rather in what it says generally and the mode by which it speaks to all generations concerning the possibility of intellectual engagement of the divine.

Abu Khamid Ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad al-Tusi al-Shafi'i al-Ghazali was born, as his name indicates, in the city of Tus (near modern Khorasan/Mashhad) in Iran-Persia in the year 1058 CE. His name further indicates that he was born into a family of yarn spinners (*ghazzal*). He was educated in Tus, after the death of his father, in a religious school (*madrassa*). He attended a college of jurisprudence in which he excelled studying theology only secondarily. His excellence in matters of *fiqh* provided him a position in the royal courts of Baghdad and a distinguished role of professor at a major college. By the age of thirty-three he was one of the most influential men in the Islamic world (Watt 86). He composed, at this time, many works on jurisprudence and composed a short summary of Ash`arite doctrine. Around this time, c. 1091, al-Ghazali collapsed into a nearly catatonic state. He did not eat or speak. His auto-biography reveals that he fell into a profound period of skepticism. He slowly began to emerge and began his famous search for truth. Inquiring of the four methods of knowing (rational philosophy [*falasifa*], rational theology [Ash`arite and other

Mutakallimun-dependent Kalam¹], those that gave only instruction [ta`lim or Isma`ilism], and the mystical way [Sufism]), Ghazali systematically found all methods, save the Sufi path, wanting. When offered a job as professor in Nishapur in the year 1106 at the prestigious Nizzamiyya College, he declined in order to become that century's *mujaddid*, or "renewer," and it is during this time that he composed his *magnus opus*. He died on December 18, 1111 shortly before morning *salat*. It is the phase of his life directly before his breakdown that is of interest in this paper. It was here that he launched his polemic against rational philosophy in the books *The Aims of the Philosophers* and *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

By the time of Al-Ghazali, orthodox Sunni kalam was torn on four fronts. The rise of Mu`tazilite rationalism had reached a great deal of popularity. It was the official court Kalam in Baghdad and even administered a *mikhnah*, or "ordeal" perhaps even "inquisition," two centuries before the birth of Ghazali. This method of thought sought a middle method of dealing with the doctrinal issue of the grave sinner² by withdrawing (*mu`tazila*) from the argument. This withdrawal would become one of the chief doctrines of the movement. However, the issue of the fate of the grave sinner would ultimately cause yet another split within Sunni kalam. Al-Ash`ari and similar thinkers presented serious critiques of the more rationalistic form of kalam put forth by the Mu`tazilite thinkers³. To the Ash`arite thinkers the final destination of the sinner, like all things, is

¹ Kalam is the Arabic term which roughly translates to "Theology." It is better translated as "discourse concerning divine matters."

² This issue deals with the notion that if a person performs a grave enough sin there is no method of recompense. Certain sects even put to death those they considered grave sinners believing they were already condemned to hell.

³ The story of the three brothers represents one of the many arguments that resulted in the rift between these two schools of thought. In the story there are three brothers, two adults and one infant. One older brother does well and is dispatched heaven after this death. The other older brother died, but due to his evils done in life he was dispatched to Hell. The child also died, but due to his young age, was dispatched to Heaven.

ultimately willed by God and therefore does not necessarily follow the logic and method of man. A third front was that of formal Greek thought. The *falasifa* or “philosophers” were making use of Greek thought,⁴ as applied to kalam, well beyond the bounds of orthodox Islam. The principal philosophic ideas attacked by Ghazali are emanative creation theories put forward by Farabi and Ibn Sina which are clearly of direct Neo-Platonic inspiration. To Ghazali it is the philosophers that are the central threat to orthodox Sunni kalam. Finally, the Sufi movement was becoming very popular, if not totally accepted, across the Islamic world. It, like the previous schools of thought, had begun in the vicinity of Baghdad and spread out rapidly. It is clear that Ghazali was reared into a world in which a single answer to a single question would not resolve the complex line of questioning that had come before him. Islam could not maintain unity, a central, if not the central, Islamic value, within the body of believers if such dissention continued, and it was the philosophers with their Greek ideas that, to Ghazali, posed the greatest threat.

Al-Ghazali, in the *Tahafut*, makes clear use of Ash`arite arguments concerning the problem of causal relationship between agent and the action. This is the method he uses, although haphazardly, to refute the emanative schemes of Farabi and Ibn Sina in the first and second arguments concerning the creation, generation, and destruction of the world. It is not, however, until the seventeenth argument that he clearly posits this Ash`arite position and modifies it in a way that radically informs his later thought and is

When the hell bound brother inquired why the infant was allowed to go to heaven it was responded that the infant would have grown to be an evil man and was therefore taken before this could happen. The brother in Hell responded that this is not just for why was he not taken as an infant as well before he could lead a bad life. It is thought that this story started the intellectual rift between the schools although this is probably not the case. Ghazali makes use of this story but does not attribute it to al-Ash`ari (Denny 184).

⁴ Certainly Aristotle and Plato are meant here, but Van Den Bergh points out that perhaps even more directly it is Stoic thought that is influencing Islamic kalam at this time (Van Den Bergh xi).

also the basis for the main arguments of the *Tahafut*. This somewhat disorganized mode of presentation is characteristic of the entire text. What then is this modified Ash`arite causal epistemology?

Traditionally the Ash`arite school was atomistic in nature and their causality resembled a mixture of Democritean and Stoic elements. Earlier works tended towards a type of predestinational atomism (Van Den Bergh xx-xxi). Events are fully informed by the will of God and reality is composed of elemental atoms which provide a scheme on which the progression of causality unfolds (Marmura xxiv). Ghazali takes this system to its logical extreme. In his seventeenth book Ghazali expounds his causal theory in order to explain the occurrence of miracles. In this argument he posits that there is no necessary relationship between actor and agent or between cause and effect. Fire does not burn cotton because it is the nature of fire and it must, by the very natures of the substances at hand, act in a certain manner (*Tahafut* 170-1). The very will of God informs all action at every singularity in space and time (170). Therefore it is not the nature of the fire to burn the cotton, rather, it is the will of God, in a particular manner, informing the seemingly causal effect of the cotton burning (171). Using the example of fire, Ghazali explains that this is the method by which a prophet may be spared from being burned by fire, or any other mode of injury or death, by the direct and particular intervening of God into a space time singularity (175). This is directly opposite to the Aristotelian notion that God knows only the universal and not the particular. Ghazali is claiming that there is no universal to be known. It is this strong modification found in book seventeen that will radically inform the entire *Tahafut* and reflects the already strong mystical epistemology of Ghazali's early Sufi leanings.

How then can it be shown that this causality does in fact inform the entire book? It is possible to demonstrate this through the chief arguments which Ghazali makes. These are against the pre-eternity of the world, that God knows only universals, against emanation, and against the notion of a non-bodily resurrection.

The lengthiest section of the *Tahafut* is that concerning the world's pre-eternity. Despite the somewhat arbitrary claims he makes concerning "the philosophers" and his less than adequate arguments concerning the evolution of causal events, Ghazali makes a powerful argument against the conception of the pre-eternity of the world. The argument, in brief, is that creation and God must have temporal singularity. For the philosophers, God is pure actuality, yet they admit a notion of potentiality from which all moves towards actuality. Creation, then, is not temporally in synch with the divine as it is moving from the direction of potentiality to actuality. If God is, and always has been pure actuality, then this potentiality must have been inserted in time and creation must have begun at some point, and not eternally existed. Creation, for Ghazali, then is a great miracle as it is God interjecting into the otherwise causal nothingness (as God is pure actuality) in order to create the cosmos. He will answer the question of emanation later, however. This clearly reflects his causal theory. Creation is in fact a miracle in the sense Ghazali sets forth in his seventeenth argument.

His argument against emanative schemes is clearly deducible. The will and power of God is paramount to Ghazali. To state that anything by necessity from the very nature of its existence must act is diametrically opposite to his causal theory. To posit that God by his very nature emanates the cosmos, robs God of his will, power, and choice. This is, to Ghazali, an even greater error than the notion that the world is pre-

eternal. That God knows universals and not particulars is also clearly and diametrically opposed to this causal method put forward by Ghazali. That the cosmos exists speaks directly to the fact, in Ghazali's thinking, that the divine is intimately dealing with reality at every space time singularity. There is no evolution (unrolling) of time; rather, every moment is the direct will of God. The fourth selection, concerning the bodily resurrection, is related directly to the miracle of the Qur'an. It must be accepted without asking how (*bi-la-kayf*).

Why does Ghazali modify the already orthodox Ash'arite orthodoxy? Why does he find the need to push these notions to their logical extreme? The answer here is threefold. The primary answer is that by the time the *Tahafut* is being composed Ghazali is already feeling the first pangs of the extreme skepticism that will leave him silent and catatonic for some time. Ghazali seeks to develop a theology in which the mode that God works in is wholly separate from what appears to be normal causal progression. In this his skepticism is not only warranted but is the only true means of achieving a pious kalam. In other words, if the ways of God are ultimately unknowable through causal consistency, then skepticism on the part of logic, in respect to its use concerning metaphysics, is the only option of both the pious and the intellectual. Such knowledge can only be obtained through a perception of the divine which is meta-rational, a form of gnosis. The second reason Ghazali develops and accepts this mode of thought is to disrupt fundamentally the very core axioms of Greek philosopher in the Islamic world. It is clear from his several religious prefaces that Ghazali takes serious issue with the claims of the philosophers, their conformism, and the dissonance they bring to the Ulama. Fully opposite to the way Orthodox Christians dealt with the problem of philosophy, by

embracing and appropriating it, Ghazali seeks to discredit it in the face of the revelation which is the Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunna. His causal theory seriously undermined any claims, especially metaphysical ones, made by a subsequent philosophers or theologians.

The third reason bears both serious implications for the life and work of Ghazali and the development of greater Islam. Ghazali is already answering an urge to develop an epistemology which is ultimately mystical. He opens the door to this epistemology through resignation to skepticism. To see this, one must read between the lines of the *Tahafut*. To Ghazali this skepticism is not a method of dispelling God intellectually in any form but of utter reliance on God. Call to memory the utter dependence with which every moment relies on the very will of God to inform it. There is no separation between the will of God and the substance of reality. Reality is continually abiding in the will of the divine. All, including the philosopher, must rely solely on God for truth concerning ultimate matters as reason is simply inept for probing such depths. This is a mystical epistemology ultimately. It is intellectual *baqa'* or "abiding." The *Tahafut* is not only the *incoherence* of the philosophers without; it is also the *collapse*⁵ of the philosopher within.

It is clear from the rest of Ghazali's life that his leaning towards mysticism would come to fruition. He would spend the rest of his life attempting desperately to find the limit to which reason could probe, and justify the ways of the mystics to the intellectuals and religious legal authorities. The final mode in which this mystical causality and epistemology would play out practically would be in his acceptance of the way of the

⁵ The Arabic word "(Tahafut) تَهافت" can be translated in a number of ways including "Incoherence", "Inconsistency," but was first rendered into Latin as "destructio" which reflects its more common usage of "disintegration" or "collapse" (Marmura xxvi).

Sufis. The importance of this historical event cannot be underestimated. At the time of Ghazali, Sufism was felt by religious authorities to be a breeding ground for heretical theosophy and antinomian praxis. It is due to this mystical skepticism that Ghazali would turn to the Sufis in order to gain truth, as such insight is ultimately not something that philosophers, theologians or Imanists could provide. With the respectability that Ghazali would bring to Sufism, it would both become normalized in religious legal circles (bear in mind that Ghazali's training is not as a philosopher, rather as a jurist) and would allow it to exist and eventually become the heart of Islam. This is something not unlike Augustine taking the monastic movement, which was normally associated with dualistic heresy and the antinomian Egyptians, and normalizing it in the Roman church. Ghazali in his rejection of Greek metaphysical speculative philosophy⁶ did not do away with philosophy as much as he normalized the mystical Sufi mode of answering questions concerning ultimate matters.

It is often the case that great works survive not because of particular literary or narrative expressions found within them; rather, they endure because they speak to those questions which have no answer in such a way that we feel we are at least looking in the right place. Of all the works familiar in both the Christian and Islamic world composed by Ghazali, the *Tahafut* has endured for right at one-thousand years. The philosophers, Farabi and Ibn Sina, it answered are little remembered, and even the particular arguments put forward by Ghazali are read over compared to the lesson that the *Tahafut* speaks to. In this case, as many, it is not how a book reads that is important, but how the book speaks. The *Tahafut* still speaks to that great question concerning the ultimate

⁶ This is a long phrase but I want to stress that this is the only philosophy that Ghazali attacked. It, therefore, makes little sense to talk about an "end" of philosophy or intellectual undertakings in the Islamic world after Ghazali.

relationship of God to man, and it is in a language that transcends religious boundaries.

The life of Ghazali, and the greater Islamic world, did not hinge on what the *Tahafut* read literally, rather on how it spoke in the hearts and minds of the intellectual and mystical dimensions of Islam. The incoherence is still felt in the heart of the sincere philosopher attempting to reach out in the deep depths of the nature of reality and the well of truth.

The *Tahafut* never says not to seek, but with many of life's questions, it makes clear that we cannot always expect an answer or that there is even an answer to be had.

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