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Ghazālī and the Ash'arites

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ABSTRACT *It has been widely accepted that the thought of al-Ghazālī was broadly in line with the Ash'arite approach to theology, which came to have a dominant role in Islamic thought for the last thousand years. Recently, though, many commentators have argued that this is a misconception, and that there are many instances where Ghazālī produces arguments and opinions which are not compatible with Ash'arism. It is argued here that these examples do not establish that the general line of Ghazālī's thought is not Ash'arite. The fact that on occasion he is prepared to use the language of his opponents does not invalidate the Ash'arite basis of his thought. It is quite possible to adhere to a philosophical view about how reality is and at the same time use the language of those who have a different view without committing oneself to that different form of expression. Although the revisionist approach to the interpretation of Ghazālī is interesting and often perceptive, it does not lead to any necessity to question his adherence to Ash'arite principles in general.*

One of the notable features of Islamic philosophy is the close relationship which exists between philosophy and theology. Although some of those philosophers who were very much influenced by Aristotle came to be rather dismissive of much of what comes under the label of theology or *kalām*, there was a persistent tendency for philosophers to use philosophy to help make sense of some of the main controversies in theology, and vice versa. One of the most determined exponents of this approach is the great Muslim intellectual, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111). The theological position which he employed enthusiastically in defence of his general critique of philosophy was Ash'arism, the doctrine that places the whole of reality in an entirely contingent relationship with respect to God. The Ash'arites were subjectivists, in the sense that they emphasised the dependence of everything, even the meaning of ethical statements, on the will and decision of God. Their opponents, the Mu'tazilites, argued on the contrary that God is constrained in his actions by objective standards of justice. The *falāsifa*, the philosophers in the Islamic world who were influenced by the Peripatetic tradition, tended to be hostile to both sides of the debate, arguing that neither was capable of understanding how to use language with sufficient rigour to enable a proper grasp of how to resolve such issues in the first place. The Islamic philosophers, and especially those who followed the teachings of ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) replaced the objectivism of the Mu'tazilites with an objectivism of their own, and argued that although the world is contingent on God, it is co-eternal with him and has a nature and structure which it has to have given its internal logic. Until recently, it was generally accepted that Ghazālī sought to reject both Mu'tazilism and Avicenna by establishing a general account of the nature of reality which is more in line with the Ash'arite school, and indeed from an historical perspective it is often argued that the influence of Ghazālī was crucial in overturning objectivism itself in Islamic culture for many centuries, perhaps right up to today.

Ghazālī seems to be an Ash‘arite thinker, and his various critiques of philosophy, Ismā‘īlism and particular thinkers in the Islamic world appear to be based upon the desire to defend the main doctrines of the Ash‘arites. Indeed, some have argued that Ghazālī is so fervent an Ash‘arite that the genuineness of writings whose authorship by him is in question can be addressed by examining how Ash‘arite they are [1]. They are acceptable as by Ghazālī only if they accord with the main principles of the Ash‘ariyyah, although of course this could never be a sufficient condition. He was operating during a period quite distant from the original controversy between the Mu‘tazilites and the Ash‘arites, but Ghazālī obviously felt that the issues which had been raised during that controversy were still important in his own time, and the continuing popularity of the writings of the *hujjat al-Islam* or “proof of Islam” (a common title for Ghazālī) suggest that many of these issues remain important today, and certainly for a considerable period during the intervening years.

The Problem

Despite what had grown to become something of a consensus on the issue of Ghazālī’s Ash‘arism, there were commentators who were prepared to point out that Ghazālī seems to incorporate in his thought principles which are hardly compatible with Ash‘arism, principles which bear a much closer resemblance to the views of those philosophers, and in particular ibn Sīnā, with whom he is usually taken to be at odds. Lenn Goodman and Michael Marmura have argued persuasively that if we examine Ghazālī’s arguments we find an approach to causality and scientific explanation which is far closer to the variety of *falsafa*, established by ibn Sīnā than to the Ash‘arite *kalām* [2]. These arguments have more recently been extended into detailed analyses of his work which bring out decidedly awkward implications for the view that he was concerned throughout his writings to defend Ash‘arism. Abrahamov, Frank and Nakamura have argued that there are significant divergences of view from Ash‘arism in a whole range of Ghazālī’s writings, and this should lead to a reassessment of the character of his thought as a whole. [3] George Makdisi has gone further, and even argued that Ghazālī never was an Ash‘arite [4]!

It might be thought that these arguments are not very interesting, since the precise doctrinal attitude of a particular thinker, even one as important as Ghazālī, does not appear to be an especially exciting issue. One would expect of an important thinker that there would be some variation in his explication of the central doctrines to which he was attached in any case, since only mediocre and minor characters do not try to reconstruct such doctrines in their own image. In addition, the attempt to find out what was going on in the mind of someone a thousand years ago is not a promising task, and some of the commentators on Ghazālī see their role as doing precisely this, as though they were involved in a sort of psychology at a distance. This ambition is surely not worth realising, even if it could be, since what is of interest in Ghazālī’s work is not the contents of his mind and what the work displays concerning the latter, but the logical connections between the arguments in different parts of his work. If the presentation of Ash‘arism does not mesh well with other parts of his theoretical views, then this suggests that there are underlying philosophical principles which he wished to hold at the same time, yet with apparent logical strains in doing so. We might then come to see that he was obliged to present the combination of views which he did present because they are connected in a way which he could not clearly identify, yet they represented ideas and arguments which he thought were true and valid. He was too honest a thinker

to trim his writings to make it accord with what falls neatly into place—his personality as revealed in his autobiography makes that clear—and so we should respect the apparent inconsistencies in his work and try to work out whether they are apparent or genuine.

Two additional methodological points are worth making here, which clearly are linked to the question of how we deal with a thinker who is generally allied to a particular doctrine but who occasionally strays from it. The first point to make is that a complex doctrine such as Ash'arism is not univocal, there are varieties and versions of it. It is hardly surprising that some thinkers should emphasise some aspects of it at the expense of others, since as we have already argued, it would be a boring thinker who merely repeated the main formulations of the principles of Ash'arism. One would expect that Ghazālī would move the doctrine around in a creative way, so that it expressed some of the points which he wished to make, while leaving him close enough to the general thesis for his views to remain within the framework of the Ash'ariyyah. The interesting question here is whether his attempt to be creative extends his views to such an extent that it is impossible to reconcile them with the Ash'ariyyah. This is a question which should definitely be tackled. Thinkers do quite often start off with the intention of arguing within the limitations of a particular theory, and do not notice that they have during the course of the argument gone further than the theory will permit. We shall have to see whether this is something which Ghazālī has done.

A second, and related question, is whether Ghazālī is hiding his real views, which are that the principles of philosophy are radically inconsistent with *kalām*, while accounting for philosophical principles as though they were consistent with it. He does suggest in much of his work that what he is importing into the Sunni *kalām* is just an improved version of the rules of reasoning which had always been employed in the past, and yet some have argued that what he was engaged upon was a far more insidious activity. The assumption is that the logical techniques which he introduced are far more than technical in their scope, so that they overturn the Ash'arite interpretation of Islam. Either he realised this, and did not think it advisable to point it out for obvious reasons, or he was so carried away by the power of the conceptual scheme with which he was working that he omitted to notice the danger of what he was doing for what he wished to preserve. We should be careful about adopting the former assumption, that he knowingly set about to deceive his readers, since once we take on board the idea that he might have written in such a way as to conceal his real views we are on the brink of an interpretative quagmire. [5] Before we undertake this serious step, it is worth spending some time in looking at whether the inconsistency which has been noted between Ghazālī's views and Ash'arism really exists.

Ghazālī on causality

Let us look at the comments which have been made on what Ghazālī has to say about causality. A standard Ash'arite view would be that the apparent causal necessity which relates discrete events in the universe is misleading. What is real is the determination of those events through the will of God, who not only gives us the impression that there is such causal necessity, but who also constructs the appearance of the events from the atomistic structure of reality. Even the objects, the medium-sized dry goods which we observe, are not in reality as they are in appearance. We are only able to form the ideas we have of them due to the grace of a deity who is prepared to hold the atoms together in such a way that we can talk about objects and relationships between objects. Several

commentators have drawn attention to the fact that Ghazālī seems to use language very close to ibn Sīnā's metaphysics when describing the facts of the world of generation and corruption, and they point out 'that all sublūnary events are caused by the operation of a host of secondary causes through the operation of the cosmic system in accord with an unalterable program built into the system at its creation and that it is impossible that God act save through the system'. [6] It is accepted that what Ghazālī is presenting here is not exactly the same as the system of the *falāsifa* since the nature of the objects and events themselves have no independent status. They are only as they are because of the will of God, and so there is nothing in the nature of the things and events which are possible which makes them inevitable. God could have not brought them into being, and there is no compulsion on him to have created the world in the way in which he did, or at the time that he did.

Frank does not think that the view which Ghazālī holds of possibility is essentially distinct from the views of the *falāsifa*. Like them, he is taken to argue that although God might be thought to have complete power over what he chooses to create, the nature of his will as representing his omniscience and benevolence make it inevitable that he will create in a particular way. As one might expect, Frank is only able to offer this as the opinion of Ghazālī in one of his books, the *Maqṣad al-asnā*, since it quite explicitly is not his view in the celebrated *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, in which he argues openly against this philosophical account of possibility. The mistake which the philosophers make, he there argues, is that they conflate two notions of possibility, the logical with the metaphysical. According to the former, what is possible is what is in accordance with the laws of logic, and these do not in any way constitute a limitation on the power of God, since it would be unreasonable to expect even God to be able to flout the laws of logic. Even God cannot affirm two contradictory propositions at the same time, and it would be wrong to expect him to do so. [8] What the philosophers mean by possibility is an idea in accordance with the principle of plenitude, so that something is possible if and only if it will at some time be actual. God is the cause of everything, and the mode of creation is emanation. All things emanate from God ultimately, and they represent his perfect knowledge and concern for his creation, albeit to different degrees. The world has a rational and necessary structure, and so is the best possible world. God could only create the best possible world, since it would hardly be fitting for a perfect God to create in any other way. Not only would he not create in a different way, he could not, given the sort of being that he is.

This makes the philosophers' view seem very close to that of the Mu'tazilites, who also tended to argue that the conditions of justice made it inevitable, and indeed compulsory, for God to have created a particular kind of world, this kind of world. Of course, the philosophers would have no need to accept the position of the Mu'tazilites on the meaning of ethical terms, according to which these terms have an entirely objective meaning abstracted from the role of the divine. In the conflict between the Ash'ariyyah and the Mu'tazilah the meaning of such terms was a site of considerable struggle, with the latter arguing for the notion that they are as they are because there are objective standards of ethical value, while their Ash'arite opponents argued on the contrary that there can be no sensible restriction on God on the basis of independent and objective standards of right and wrong, justice and injustice. Although the ways in which the argument was joined owed more to theological than to philosophical techniques, there is little doubt that the philosophers on this topic anyway were much closer to the Mu'tazilites than to the Ash'arites. [7] It is perhaps surprising, then, that the arch-critic of the Mu'tazilites, Ghazālī, should come out with claims such as:

...there is beside Him no existing thing which is not created by His act and which emanates from His justice in the best, most perfect, most complete and most just way. Indeed, he is wise in His acts and just in His determination... (*Arba‘īn* p. 19—translation adapted from Nakamura, 1993, op. cit., p. 10).

In his book on *Theodicy in Islamic Thought* [8] Ormsby considers passages like this and argues that Ghazālī still manages to distinguish his position from that of the Mu‘tazilites and the *falāsifa*, but it has to be admitted that there does not seem to be much of a difference. Saying that what the *falāsifa* call natural necessity (*ijāb dhātī*) is replaced by what Ghazālī calls divine predestination (*qaḍā’*) does not take us very far. It looks as though he is offering theological language to represent precisely those philosophical principles of which he disapproves so heartily in other parts of his work.

Ghazālī on Atomism

Nakamura suggests that it is surprising that Ghazālī speaks disparagingly of atomism, a doctrine on which both the Ash‘ariyyah and the Mu‘tazilah are agreed,[9] but here Frank really does have a point in being sceptical of how far the *Tahāfut* represents Ghazālī’s own views. It is clear from that work that Ghazālī undertakes to disprove the *falāsifa* using principles which they themselves accept, so it is not inevitable, to put it mildly, that the views expressed in that work are Ghazālī’s. The work is dialectical, and operates from the premisses which have been established elsewhere, and if Ghazālī can show that they do not succeed in proving the conclusions which the philosophers intend, then he has shown that they are not entitled to derive those conclusions, but he has not shown that the premisses themselves are untrue. Nor has he shown that they are acceptable. He uses them so as to criticize the arguments which the philosophers produce, but not to establish which arguments they should produce. Dialectical reasoning has this weakness that it does not in itself establish the strength of the premisses which it examines, but it has the strength that it operates from precisely those premisses and principles which the philosophers claim are correct, so it strikes at the heart of the issue. The philosophers cannot then complain that the refutation of their views only works because their opponent uses principles and premisses which are contrary to their own, although of course Ghazālī does bring in such additional ideas in his analysis of the arguments of the philosophers.

Nakamura is appropriately hesitant in claiming that Ghazālī adopts the philosophers’ critique of atomism, but when it comes to discussing the nature of the soul he argues that Ghazālī seems to go some way from the principles of Ash‘arism. According to the latter, the soul of a human being (*nafs, rūḥ, dīl, jān*) is a combination of atoms and accidents, and is only distinct from physical bodies in that it is a subtle body which cannot be perceived through sensation. This is important for Ghazālī, since he argues in the *Tahāfut* that one of the signs of heresy which are to be found in *falsafa* is the apparent denial of a physical resurrection of the soul and body in a way which makes sense of the various accounts of the afterlife which the Qur’ān embodies. Of course, he produces what he takes to be appropriately philosophical objections to the theory of the soul which ibn Sīnā in particular holds. In the *Ihyā’* he identifies the soul with the heart (*qalb*) in two ways. There is the physical heart, a part of us which can be observed, and an immaterial heart, which represents the mind, and this is linked with the material organ in a way which we cannot grasp. He describes it in ways which are similar to the

approach of the *falāsifa*, as the essence of humanity (*ḥaqīqa al-insān*) and a divine thing (*amr ilāhī*) which distinguishes us from mere animals and links us potentially with God.

What is intriguing about this sort of account is that it represents the soul as a permanent and continuous thing, something which is completely distinct from the human body and apparently a simple spiritual entity. He goes on to describe its relationship to the body in rather Platonic language as like the relationship between “the user of a tool to the tool” (*Iḥyā’* III, p. 3) and as something which has a distinct status from the body which it inhabits and governs. If the soul is an incorporeal, self-subsistent thing which takes up no space (and so cannot be identified with an atom), what is there to distinguish Ghazālī’s conception of the soul from that held by the philosophers? We should have to exempt ibn Rushd from the philosophical view here, since he tries to resuscitate a far more Aristotelian notion of the soul, but if we have to compare Ghazālī’s view with the Neoplatonic thinkers such as ibn Sīnā, often the focus of his criticisms, then we are left in the perplexing position of acknowledging that there appears to be strong similarities between Ghazālī’s opinion and the opinions of the philosophers. This throws doubt on his role as the critic of *falsafa*, on the one hand, and as a champion of the Ash‘ariyya on the other.

Attempted Solutions

There are a number of ways of explaining the problem away. We could say that Ghazālī just changed his mind, and there is certainly a good deal of evidence from his own writings that he changed his views throughout his life, as we should expect of any significant thinker. He would be uninteresting were he to stick throughout to a single set of doctrines, come what may. Why should not Ghazālī have just come to change his mind, so that he had an Ash‘arite phase, a philosophical phase, a sufi phase, and so on? The trouble with taking this approach is that it would also tend to trivialise his thought, since in that case any apparent inconsistency between two texts could be resolved by appealing to the fact that he may have been going through a new phase in his thought. When we examine the works of major philosophers we frequently ask of them whether one aspect of their thought contradicts another aspect, and we do not, on finding such apparent contradictions, necessarily claim that they reveal a change of mind. What we tend to do is to look at the nature of the issues which they consider and then see how they give rise to a number of potential solutions which are related to the issues themselves. That is, the ways in which a particular thinker has tried to resolve a problem are interesting because they reveal something of the depth of the problem. They are not essentially interesting because they reveal something of the psychology of the philosopher.

This is not to suggest that the thought processes of the philosopher are uninteresting, but the focus of attention in philosophy, as opposed perhaps to the situation in the history of ideas, is to the arguments themselves, and not to the arguers. Ghazālī may have come to change his mind, but the interesting question is whether the nature of the issues which he was considering make it inevitable that we contemplate such a change of mind. It will be argued here that the answer is no, but before we see why, it is worth looking at other explanations for the variety of views which can be found in the work of Ghazālī. He could be practising dissimulation (*taqīya*) so that he wrote in one way when arguing with intellectuals, and another way when writing for the public at large. This is not the place to rehearse the arguments which have been provided both for and against such an approach to Islamic philosophy.[10] It should be noted, though, that

the dissimulation approach, like the change of mind approach, is an easy option. Once we take seriously the idea that what our author writes, he may not really believe, then anything goes. Anything he writes may be insincere, and we have the task of deciding what, if anything, represents his real view. The focus of attention yet again is on the author and not on his works, for the latter can only be understood in terms of the former. In the same way that the detective tries to find the criminal when confronted by confusing and contradictory evidence, so the interpreter of Islamic philosopher tries to find the philosopher's real views when confronted by confusing and contradictory arguments.

When one looks at Islamic thought there appears to be a good deal of evidence for the truth of the dissimulation approach. This is especially the case when we examine the writings of Ghazālī, who in some places actually talks about dissimulation, and the important contrast between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric (*bāṭin*). For example, when he defends the very physical description of life in paradise in the Qur'ān, he certainly does not wish this to be taken as a description of the sort of paradise which he himself seeks to attain, which is a far more spiritual end. Some of his books are clearly prepared to particular audiences, and he intended to get over a message in a specific way to meet the needs and abilities of those audiences. It would have been entirely inappropriate to have addressed the whole of the community of Islam in precisely the same way, since different members of the community find different forms of expression more amenable to comprehension. This is hardly an issue limited to the forms of writing of one thousand years ago. It still is the case that it would be unwise to expect everyone in an audience to react in the same way to a form of expression which might alienate or attract particular parts of that audience. Any sensible author varies the form of his expression to take account of the variations which exist in his audience. Ghazālī was no exception here, and before we accept the idea that he deliberately set out to hide his real (philosophical) views behind his apparent (theological/Ash'arite), it would be useful to see if the variety of arguments which he produces have to be resolved in this desperate fashion.

I think we can see ways in which Ghazālī may be saved from the accusation of being inconsistent and also retained as an Ash'arite. No doubt there are many occasions upon which he did contradict himself in other works, and indeed even within the same work, as this is quite normal practice among considerable philosophers. No doubt also there are passages which are difficult to reconcile with Ash'arism, but we need not conclude as a result that he was not really an Ash'arite, nor that he presented a generally inconsistent theory. When he used the language of the philosophers, and in particular of ibn Sīnā, what he was doing is just that, using their language. He is operating within the conceptual framework which they have created, rather like someone coming to a foreign country and using the language which is in operation there. This is not to suggest that he necessarily agrees with that conceptual framework. It was at his time the language of philosophy, it embodied the ways in which philosophy could be pursued, and anyone who was going to participate in that activity would have to use it. But, it will be said, surely Ghazālī was an enemy of philosophy, at least in its Peripatetic sense, and if he happily used philosophical language to express himself, then this suggests even more strongly that his real views might be very different from those with which he is normally associated.

This conclusion is not inevitable. When he used philosophical language, Ghazālī wanted to show how far that language could be taken to establish the truth. So, for example, in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) he does not just state

that the conclusions of the philosophers are heretical, or at the very least innovations (from a religious point of view), and so they can be rejected tout court. On the contrary, he tries to show that the philosophers' conclusions do not follow from their premisses using the principles which they themselves claim to uphold. He accuses them of inconsistency, logical inconsistency, as well as of impiety. To take another example, his *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa* (The intentions of the philosophers) presents the views of the philosophers, according to his understanding of those views. When it was translated into Latin its Christian readers assumed that 'Algazel' was a philosopher, since here he was presenting clearly and accurately a range of philosophical views. Yet we know that he wrote this work in order to try to get clear on the views which he saw as inimical to Islam, and also to reason. We can make similar remarks on all those contexts in which Ghazālī speaks of causality in rather Avicennan ways, which as we have seen has aroused the interest of some modern commentators. Does this mean that he thought that the Avicennan approach to causality is the correct approach? There is no reason to accord with such a view. The Avicennan approach is an acceptable means of understanding causality *up to a point*. Really, what lies behind the philosophical model of reality is a world which is structured along Ash'arite lines, a world which is radically dependent upon the will of the deity. Yet when we look at the world as a system of natural forces and reactions, we can certainly use the picture of causality which the philosophers defend, and if we want to do science, then we have to bear in mind the sorts of things which they say about natural laws and causal connection. What we need to do, though, is to recognise that we have here nothing more than a partial and essentially incomplete description of a form of reality which has its basis outside of the world entirely.

Let us try to get clearer on this by examining a different philosophical theory and how its adherents use it. Scepticism is the doctrine that we cannot know anything about the material world. Most sceptics are prepared to talk about knowing the material world when engaging upon practical activities, or even in their theoretical work when it was useful to assume that there is such knowledge. The Greek sceptics caused much amusement, apparently, among their companions when they actually lived their scepticism, and took no measures to preserve themselves, since they believed that there is no reason to think that what one takes to be the basis to self-preservation rests on any stronger foundation than any other action. This meant that they sometimes had to be followed by friends who would ensure that they did not walk off cliffs, and who obliged them to eat and drink, activities which they doubted were conducive to life! Most sceptics did not follow such practices, though, and their scepticism is an approach to their theoretical, as opposed to practical, understanding of the world. Even when doing philosophy, a sceptic does not always have to work from sceptical premisses. She can work with non-sceptical premisses if she wants to work out the implications of such premisses. This does not mean that she has suddenly abandoned scepticism, nor that she does not think that behind the realist language which we can use of our world, there lies a reality which we can never really know. The sceptic, like Ghazālī, has a theory about the world which does not accord with the way in which it is ordinarily represented. Having such a theory does not mean that one must always employ it. There are many occasions upon which it would be interesting, or even necessary, to describe the world in ways which, strictly speaking, are not accurate.

What we have to remember here is that the language of ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) was not just an optional philosophical language at the time when Ghazālī was writing. Rather, it was the language of philosophy, and if Ghazālī was going to engage with philoso-

phers, he had to employ that language. Even if he was going to try to overthrow that language and replace it with another, preferable, form of expression, he had to work with the language first before he could supersede it. This was even the case for ibn Rushd (Averroes) who in his reply to Ghazālī, the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* (*Tahāfut al-tahāfut*), was obliged to object both to Ghazālī and ibn Sīnā using language which insidiously made it difficult for him to escape from the Avicennan form of philosophy. [11] Ibn Rushd could not just say that he was going to abandon the Neoplatonic approach and replace it with a more Aristotelian metaphysics, since that very attempt only makes sense within the logic of Neoplatonism itself. There has to be some mechanism for transforming the 'old' language into the 'new' language, and that can only come about through utilising the grammar of the former to ensure that the latter makes sense. One is reminded here of the example famous in this century of conceptual change being like repairing a ship while it is still afloat. One cannot rip out all the old planks, since then the ship would sink, so one has to replace the wood plank by plank, using the old wood to support a gradual replacement with the new wood.

This is surely the enterprise upon which Ghazālī is engaged. He wishes to work gradually to a new way of interpreting reality, and he realises that this can only be done piecemeal. For example, in the *Maqṣad al-asnā* which Frank discusses in his recent book, he uses the sort of language about causality which ibn Sīnā uses, yet he also tries to make room for its ultimate dependence upon the deity by arguing that the existence of the universe need not necessarily proceed from the first cause eternally. In the examples of causal language which Goodman quotes in the writings of Ghazālī, the latter argues that there are rules which apply to our use of causal language and these are largely as specified by ibn Sīnā. This does not mean that he agrees with ibn Sīnā on the nature of causality, though. What it does mean is that he agrees with the latter on the ways in which we should talk about causality when we use that concept to describe our world. But what causality really is, how it really fits in with the way things are, these are questions which can only be settled through establishing a direct relationship of the events in our world with God. This is how things really are, but it does not follow that this is how things always have to be described. There is scope to use language which does not directly refer to the connection with God, but that does not imply that that connection is not really essential to any full understanding of the subject of discussion.

This might seem to be an enormous evasion. Surely, one might think, if Ghazālī genuinely adhered to Ash'arism, then he would quite bluntly reject out of hand alternative ways of operating. He would state that the non-Ash'arite view of the nature of reality, or at least what he took such a view to be, was not accurate and should be replaced with his version of the Ash'arite doctrine. All this talk about causes and souls as substantial, all this attempt at describing the world in a non-atomistic manner would be condemned as just wrong. It fails to involve God and his will in the nature of the world as strongly as should happen, and any such alternative view should be rejected on the grounds of its mistaken nature. Of course, from an ordinary point of view we accept, for example, the substantiality of the world around us, since God has through his grace provided us with the idea of such stable and continuing matter,[12] but in reality we understand that all that exists is a stream of atoms with only a claim to existence because of the will and power of the deity. We might expect that Ghazālī would throughout all his work produce this sort of line of explanation, and yet, as we have seen, he does not. He often seems to dabble in the form of expression which he in other places wishes to denounce. It is hardly surprising that even in his own time he was accused of inconsistency, and when ibn Rushd came to attack his views he starts

off by commenting on the variability of Ghazālī's theses, with the implication that he was treading on familiar ground here in the world of Islamic thought.

This is far from fair, though. In his mature thought Ghazālī came to argue that the only genuine route to certainty is through *dhawq*, literally 'taste', i.e. personal religious experience. This lies at the basis of real knowledge, and the whole of religion can be seen as leading up to this experience and being founded on this experience. Yet not everyone can be expected to be able to enjoy this sort of experience. It is only available to those who have undergone a long and rigorous training process, one which puts them in contact with the way things really are. Lesser mortals are not as a result totally excluded from such religious knowledge. They also have routes to the truth, albeit less perspicuous and direct routes, and it is important that in a religion there should be a variety of paths to God. Some Muslims will find their path to salvation through adhering to the normal practices of their faith and not thinking deeply about their meaning. Many Muslims will find the mystical route impossible or difficult for them, since they are not prepared or able to make the sort of intellectual and personal commitment which Ghazālī recommends.[13] So Ghazālī has to present arguments at a variety of levels. Some of these arguments reflect and adopt the sort of language which different kinds of Muslims employ in trying to understand the world. Ordinary believers who are fairly unsophisticated will use the figurative language of the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*, and Ghazālī is certainly prepared to use that sort of language. Philosophers will use the Avicennan and Neoplatonic language which dominated the philosophy curriculum, and Ghazālī is keen to show that he can use that language too. Ghazālī is also prepared to use theological language which is not Ash'arite, to try to present what he sees as the most acceptable use which can be made of that language. But none of this compromises what is clearly a deep and lasting commitment to the principles of Ash'arism. The occasional foray into foreign territory did not mean that Ghazālī was in any doubt as to where his intellectual home was. There is a consistent and constant trend throughout his works to defend (and also extend) the main principles of Ash'arism.

The work of those who present a 'revisionist' interpretation of Ghazālī is immensely important, since it reminds us what a creative and exciting thinker he is. No simple category such as 'Ash'arite', 'occasionalist', 'subjectivist', and so on, is able to encompass the whole of his mature thought. On the other hand, this does not mean that these categories are not broadly satisfactory as descriptions of his main theories and doctrines, because they are. The fact that occasionally he is prepared to dabble in the language of his opponents is evidence of his intellectual flexibility, not his indecisiveness. If there is a theme in Ghazālī, it is his opposition to Muslims being satisfied with *taqlīd*, conformism, and he himself was not going to conform to any simple idea of how things are.[14] He was going to try to use a whole variety of means of expression in order to come closer to what he regarded as the truth. So Ghazālī's Ash'arism is not the same doctrine as that which was dominant then in the Islamic world—it is a similar doctrine adapted by him to what he took to be a more genuine and searching approach to reality, to God. His magnum opus, the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (revivification of the sciences of religion) is precisely that, an attempt at breathing new life into religious doctrines which had, in his view, come to bear little relationship to the living experience of the followers of Islam. He argued that it is not enough to conform to the ways in which things have always been done or how the world has always been interpreted—we need to revive the traditional forms of religion in order to come closer to their original purpose, our relationship with God. It is not surprising that some commentators should

have interpreted this enterprise as an attempt at going beyond the traditional approach to religion.

To challenge the revisionist approach fully one would need to go through the main arguments of Ghazālī’s works, which is far beyond the ambitions of the argument here. All that has been attempted is to show that the basis of the revisionist project is flawed, since the inconsistencies which it identifies as contrary to Ash‘arism are all compatible with an Ash‘arite perspective, broadly interpreted. There is no need, then, to challenge the Ash‘arite credentials of Ghazālī.

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NOTES

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- [4] MAKDISI, G. (1986) The non-Ash‘arite Shafi‘ism of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 54, pp. 239–57.
- [5] See on this point LEAMAN, O. (1985) *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) and his (1988) *Averroes and his Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press) passim.
- [6] FRANK, op. cit., p. 83.
- [7] It should be remembered, though, that the Mu‘tazilites were often very hostile to the *falāsifa*, LEAMAN (1985) p. 12, note 5.
- [8] ORMSBY, E. (1984) *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazālī’s “Best of all Possible Worlds”* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- [9] NAKAMURA, op. cit., pp. 12–14, note 3.
- [10] On this point, see LEAMAN, O. (1980) Does the interpretation of Islamic philosophy rest on a mistake? *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 12, pp. 525–38.
- [11] LEAMAN, *Introduction*, op. cit., pp. 39–40, note 5; *Averroes*, op. cit., pp. 67–71, note 5.
- [12] LEAMAN *Introduction*, op. cit., pp. 84–6, note 5; *Averroes*, op. cit., pp. 52–63, note 5.
- [13] LEAMAN, O. (1992) Philosophy vs. mysticism: an Islamic controversy, in: M. MCGHEE (Ed) *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) pp. 177–88.
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