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GHAZĀLĪ AND AVERROES ON MEANING

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One tends to regard Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd, d. 595/1198-9) as irretrievably opposed to each other on a wide range of topics, and especially on issues of philosophical methodology. After all, Averroes devotes a long book to a point by point refutation of Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, and in many of his other works he takes subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, digs at the ideas of his predecessor. Ghazālī, the great enemy of *falsafa*, argued that many of the basic principles of the sort of philosophy produced by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1036-7) were both opposed to Islam and also fallacious by the standards of that philosophy itself. Averroes had a difficult task to perform, since he also objected to a great many of the arguments and conclusions produced by Avicenna, yet he objected even more strongly to the ways in which Ghazālī sought to refute that whole way of doing theoretical investigation.¹ Averroes was confident enough about philosophy to think that it embodied the answer to most of the important questions about reality, and religion was just another way of putting, more popularly, the sorts of points which philosophy was capable of discovering.

There are many levels on which Averroes and Ghazālī clash, and here I want to concentrate upon their different understandings of meaning. There are two main areas of conflict here. One relates to the nature of the thought-experiment. Ghazālī constantly seeks to challenge the sorts of situations which the *falāsifa* claim are impossible by producing

counter-examples, experiments which prove that we can think about that which the philosophers say we cannot. The point of these thought-experiments is to show that the realm of possibility is far wider than the *falāsifa* think. Ghazālī agrees with them that God cannot do the impossible, but he restricts impossibility to logical impossibility. God cannot do that which is self-contradictory, for example, but anything which does not involve such problems is available to God. By contrast, the *falāsifa* tended to argue that the range of possibility is far wider than can be encapsulated just within the principles of consistency. Things have natures, and they cannot just act in any old fashion, since those natures are aspects of the meaning, of the definition, of the things, and even God cannot interfere with that relationship.

To give a famous example, Ghazālī claims that there are no logical difficulties in thinking of a headless person writing a book. We can form a picture of such an event in our mind, and if God were to enable people to operate quite normally, albeit without their heads, this could take place.² There is no reason to think that he would do it, nor that it is desirable for it to happen, but if he wanted it to happen, then it would happen, and if it would happen, then it could happen. The *falāsifa*, on the other hand, would deny such a possibility. How could anything human operate without a head? We can indeed form an image of such an event, and our imagination is capable of operating by putting together novel and previously unexperienced phenomena, so that we can think about camels with twenty humps, for instance, or flying pigs. Yet we must be careful in how we describe what we imagine. Are we really able to say that we are thinking about the same thing operating in different ways, or would it be

better to say that we are thinking about something different operating in ways which bear some resemblance to what we already understand? The *falāsifa* argue that meaning has to be restricted to the range of experiences with which we are familiar, since those experiences actually limit what we can say about meaning. Ghazālī argues by contrast that we should not be dogmatic about the limits of meaning, and it is possible for God to extend these experiences and the attributes of things so that we have to extend what we think meaning is. In this sense, then, Ghazālī advocates a looser notion of meaning, while the *falāsifa* wish to restrict it within quite close boundaries.

In other contexts, though, it is Ghazālī who is more apparently restrictive, and Averroes who is more liberal. When it comes to the question of religious texts, Ghazālī argues that these are of two kinds. Some are clear, and are to be taken at face value, while others are more obscure and require interpretation (*ta'wīl*). Who is capable of carrying out the interpretation? There are a group of people, the *mujtahidūn*, those who embody the *ijmā'* of the community. They can adjudicate on issues of meaning here, and they can be expected to produce solutions which are generally acceptable and which specify the religious limits of what is permissible. Averroes has a rather more complex system of analysis here.³ There are certainly clear texts, and these must be taken at face value. Then there are texts which require *ta'wīl*, and there are legal authorities who are capable of doing this. In addition, though, there are texts which cannot really be decisively settled by such dialectical methods, for which we require the *ta'wīl* of the *ahl al-burhān*, the philosophers. Only they can determine once and for all, demonstratively, what such texts really mean,

although they should be careful about interfering with the ordinary faith of the community. Their solutions should be proffered only within their own community, where they are final and certain, but the majority of the community should be encouraged to adhere to understandings of the religious texts which they find personally satisfying and which cohere with religious life.

Here the position seems to be reversed, in that Averroes seems to be advocating a looser notion of meaning as compared with Ghazālī. The latter is suggesting that there are strict rules of what is acceptable from a religious point of view, while Averroes is appealing to a broader notion of meaning. In the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, for example, Ghazālī claims that what is meant by God's knowledge is very much what we mean by our knowledge, except more so. That is, for knowledge to be knowledge, God must be able to do the same sort of things which we can do, and so he must be able to know everything which goes on in the universe, in much the same way that we know everything which takes place within a far more limited context. Then the *falāsifa* who have difficulty in accepting that God has knowledge of particulars are guilty of denying that God has knowledge, since knowledge just is, *inter alia*, knowledge of particulars. Averroes argues that on the contrary we have to extend the notion of knowledge when we are talking about God, because God's knowledge must be very different from our knowledge, and yet it can still be called knowledge. He has producer's knowledge, since he creates what he knows, whereas our form of knowledge is passive, we are restricted to finding out what is already there, and to identify our knowledge with his knowledge is to demean what he can do. But, Ghazālī argues, to deny that he can do what

we can do is to take away from him power while pretending to accept that he is far more powerful than we are. The sort of knowledge which survives as God's knowledge is not really knowledge, it does not fit the criteria of what we can call "knowledge", and so must be rejected as a possibility.

This results in something of a dilemma. First of all we suggested that Ghazālī had a broader notion of meaning, which enabled him to criticise the philosophers for being unduly parochial where meaning is concerned. Yet it now seems that he insists on a narrower notion of meaning, and criticises the philosophers for extending the meaning of particular concepts beyond the types of expression which limit their sense. Is he being consistent, or is this yet another example of Ghazālī changing track, something for which he was rather notorious even nine centuries ago. It is certainly quite possible that what we have here is Ghazālī changing his mind, or just not thinking through properly the central ideas which he is propounding. It would be remarkable given the very different labels under which he wrote, as theologian, mystic, religious leader, politician, and even philosopher, if everything he had to say fitted in nicely with everything else. Perhaps here we just have yet another example of Ghazālī being unable to reconcile one set of his ideas with another. We do not have to come to such a conclusion, though. The positions of Ghazālī and Averroes are not as far apart as they might *prima facie* seem.

According to Averroes, when we talk about God having an attribute, we mean that he has it in a paradigmatic or perfect way, and in so far as we have it, we have it in a weaker and imperfect manner. Take the concept of power (*qudra*), for example, a concept which Ghazālī uses a

lot. God is powerful and he exemplifies supreme power, so the ways in which we are powerful are a pale reflection of the way in which he is powerful. There is a semantic link between our power and his power, but it would be inappropriate to expect that link to be anything more than analogous or ambiguous. He gives a wonderful example of an ant creeping over a sheet of paper, and noticing that there is ink on it. The ant asks the paper what brought about the blackness, and the paper tells it to ask the ink. The ink suggests asking the pen, the pen suggests asking the hand, and the hand answers that although it did carry out the actions, it does not have within itself the power to act, but has to be directed by a will. After different human faculties are questioned, we end up with the *mālik al-jabbār al-wāḥid al-kabīr*, the One Mighty Great King, the deity.⁴ So there is a hierarchy of senses in which we can observe something happen through the exercise of power. There are applications of power which we can see. There are applications which we cannot see, but which can be traced back to things going on in human beings. There are applications which we cannot see and which are outside human control, being the preserve of divine intermediaries (the Divine Pen - *qalam ilāhī*, for example). Finally, there is the working of the divine attributes, the power of God.

We can interpret the world to get some idea of the essence (*ḥaqīqa*) of things, and so their meaning (*maʿnā*). The more spiritual (*rūḥānī*) we become, the more we can appreciate the spirit (*rūḥ*) of things which represents their definition (*ḥadd*) or what they are. In a sense, then, we can appreciate the nature of things by looking at them in our world, but to gain a deeper and more accurate understanding, we need to be able to understand higher levels of reality than those which are present to us in

this world. Ghazālī gives the example of an architect's design of a building in accordance with a plan (*nuskha*) and a pattern (*ṣūra*). Once we understand the plan, we know more than what is available to us through just trying to understand the events of the world of generation and corruption, but there is a route open to us to gain such higher knowledge. It lies through religion and mysticism, and involves interrogating the facts of everyday life in accordance with a technique and a body of theoretical knowledge. Ghazālī uses another interesting example, that of interpreting dreams. Events apparently take place in our dreams, and we can understand these events at a certain level as being as they are represented. On the other hand, once we know how to interpret dreams (*taʿbīr*), we can understand what they mean in far more appropriate ways, through being able to see what is behind them, what in fact they mean.⁵

It is now possible to see the basis of Ghazālī's objections to the restrictions which the philosophers wished to place on the meanings of concepts. They argued that there were things which God could not do, since that would involve changing the nature of the objects under discussion. What Ghazālī would say to this objection is that there is a basic misunderstanding here of what it is for an item in our world to have a particular meaning. We think that it is possible to define such an item in terms of the properties which we perceive it to have, and the type of object that it is. But we are mistaken. Behind the appearance of the phenomenon lies its real meaning, a meaning which exists at a much higher metaphysical level than can be experienced during this life. It is certainly true that the events during this life provide us with clues as to their relationship with *al-wujūd al-ḥaqīqī* (real being), and we can use our

imagination (*khayāl*) in order to approach that level. To insist, as the *falāsifa* do, that the nature of everyday objects is completely open to us through our experience and reflection is to deny the need for a metaphysical level which transcends this world. Hence Ghazālī's criticisms of the sorts of necessity involving everyday things and their qualities which the *falāsifa* urged. This is far too parochial an argument, he suggests, since it implies that the door of interpretation with respect to these things is closed. From an Aristotelian point of view, this might well be taken to be the case, especially if one thought that the scientific description of the world was complete and a good indication of the rationality of existence. Ghazālī highlights this as a major obstacle to religion, and he is right to do so. Of course, the way in which he puts his argument is to oppose the philosophical view with Islam, which is the form of religion with which he is most familiar, but the point is an entirely general one. The philosophical approach, on his view, is blatantly areligious because it interprets meaning in entirely secular terms, and this is to ignore that whole dimension of reality which is religious and which points to the influence of God in the world.

Both Ghazālī and Averroes argue that the use of ordinary language only makes sense when it is conceived as a pale reflection of the ways in which that language is used when applied to God and his qualities. Yet for Averroes the ordinary meanings have a life of their own and a level of necessity which belongs to them as the meanings of ordinary things. Ghazālī is quite right to suspect that the philosophical view in effect rules out a significant role for God. For God to have such a role, he must be able to control the nature of ordinary life, his thinking and intentions have to

structure that life. If that thinking and will changes, then ordinary life would have to change as well. So while the dispute between Ghazālī and Averroes is indeed one to do with meaning, it is not really about whether meaning is determinate or not. It is more to do with who is to be in control of meaning. For the philosophers, control seems to be ceded to the nature of reality, a reality which indeed has its source in the deity yet which operates in an eternal and automatic way in accordance with general principles of rationality. As a result, the nature of meaning is very much part of that reality, and reflects it accurately. For Ghazālī, control has to be identified with God, since it is only God who can keep it in existence in a way which makes sense of its religious nature.

Let us give an example which makes this clearer. We normally talk about power, in the sense that we can do things, there are activities which are within our capacity. We also talk of God being powerful, but his power is very different from ours, in that he is omnipotent. When ordinary people think about God, they probably think about him as rather like Superman, someone rather like us, but much more powerful. When they think of themselves, they think that their ability to act is dependent upon themselves, it is part of them and constitutes what they are. Yet, strictly speaking, this is not the case, according to Ghazālī. The power we have is only there if God decides to confer it on us, and when we speak of our power, really we are speaking loosely. We should really talk about our acquisition of power from God, not suggest that what we can do is entirely up to us. What is the semantic link between "our" power and power itself? Basically, what we call human power has as a necessary condition its connection with the deity. That is what the concept of power really

means, that is the essence of power which lies beyond the sensible ideas we have of it. For Ghazālī, unless we inhabit a world which we see in that way as being a world of analogies (*amthāl*) and symbols (*mithāl*) we are not interpreting the world from a religious point of view. If it could exist independently of the meanings which lie behind it, as it were, then those meanings would become superfluous.

In spite of his defence of the connection between ordinary meaning and religious meaning, one cannot help thinking that Averroes illustrates the point of Ghazālī's argument. What is the semantic link between our ordinary notion of power and power as a divine attribute? The latter is the paradigm, and our usage is a reflection of the paradigm, only a pale reflection since we are characterised by all manner of finitudes which do not affect God. Suppose God went away, in the sense that he no longer concerned himself with our world. What difference would that make to what we call "power"? Surely none whatsoever. He would be like the architect who left instructions for a building and saw it built, and then lost interest in it. The building would continue in existence even after the architect lost interest in it, since his continuing interest is not important for its continuing existence. It is still certainly the case that the building would not have been built had it not been for the architect and his plan, yet once it is built, it is independent of him ontologically and takes on a life of its own. Ghazālī identified this far weaker relationship between our notion of power and God's power as a sign of a profoundly areligious attitude to our world, and surely he was right to do so. Despite the apparent similarities between their theories of meaning, Averroes is far

less successful than Ghazālī in developing a theory which does justice to the religious point of view.

Notes

¹ There are accounts of this discussion in my *Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1985) and *Averroes and his Philosophy* (Oxford, 1988).

² *Averroes' Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, trans. S Van Den Bergh (Cambridge, 1978), p.535.

³ See in particular his *Faṣl al-Maqāl, Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, trans. G. Hourani (London, 1976).

⁴ Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Cairo, n.d.), IV: 243-6. This is splendidly discussed in Kojiro Nakamura, "Imam Ghazālī's cosmology reconsidered with special reference to the concept of *jabarūt*", *Studia Islamica*, 80 (1994): 29-46.

⁵ Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, IV: 23-4.