AL-GHAZÂLÎ'S USE
OF AVICENNA'S PHILOSOPHY

BY

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In their *Introduction to Muslim Theology*, L. Gardet and G. Anawati state that al-Ghazâlî (d. 505/1111) dominates the history of Muslim thought, and even though so categorical an assertion may be subject to qualification, there is no denying that he was the most important sunni theologian at a crucial turning point in the history of orthodox Muslim theology. Of those Muslim thinkers who continued and elaborated that tradition of neo-Platonised Aristotelianism which has been the philosophical koiné of late antiquity, on the other hand, Avicenna (d. 428/1037) had a greater influence on the subsequent development of Muslim thought than any other philosopher. That al-Ghazâlî was strongly influenced by the philosophers and especially by Avicenna has long been recognised, albeit the question of the exact extent and effect of this influence has not been adequately studied. What I wish to do here is to look briefly at some aspects of the evidence of al-Ghazâlî's use of Avicenna. The focus of the present remarks is quite narrow ; we shall consider only a small area of al-Ghazâlî's theology, apart from the larger context and from a particular perspective. The view, thus, will be somewhat distorted with respect to the overall scope of al-Ghazâlî's thought, but as things appear more clearly when their salient features are viewed against a contrasting background, so the present inquiry may serve to bring certain elements of al-Ghazâlî's theology into clearer focus and al-

low us to raise questions that may serve as a basis of subsequent investigation[1].

We should begin by clarifying the terms of the question, what we shall take as al-Ghazâlî's "heritage" and what as the alien element and also what we may understand by "borrowing" in this context.

To begin with the last term, can one speak of borrowing here ? If so, in what sense ? Whatever is borrowed never, in principle, becomes truly one's own. He is obliged to give it back and makes no more use of it afterwards. This, at any rate, is the proper sense of the word. With the goods of the mind and the spirit, however, in giving and receiving the giver retains what he has given and the receiver has full possession of what he receives, to use permanently as he will or to discard. Yet even in this context, merely to borrow implies that one makes only temporary or incidental use of what he borrows. He makes what use of it he will and subsequently sets it aside. One may speak of borrowing, thus, when what is received is taken apart and the parts used transformed in one way or another by their integration into a context intentionally different from that of the integral whole of which originally they were parts. Borrowing is not appropriating. Appropriating is to make one's own – to take as one's own – what is not, or was not originally, properly his own. We should speak of appropriation, thus, when what is taken – whether whole or part – is taken over so as intentionally to retain the significance it had in its original context. Al-Ghazâlî's account of his study of philosophy, as presented in his autobiography, can be read as talking of a borrowing. Clearly he comes to use and to incorporate into his own thought certain elements, language, concepts, constructs, as well as principles and presuppositions, from Avicenna's philosophy, but explicitly rejects others that are fundamental to the whole which he received. On the other hand, when one reads al-Ghazâlî's theological works carefully, it becomes apparent that he may well have done more than simply to borrow elements of Avicenna's philosophy, adapting them to his own use, for he seems to have appropriated, even if not fully and integrally always, a number of things in such a way as to have a significant effect on his understanding of traditionally held dogmas.

For defining what we should consider al-Ghazâlî's – something about which he is uncommonly silent – the major elements are clear. That is to say, however he might have been willing to classify himself expressly, he was and ever remained a master of Shâfi'ite law and an Ash'arite theolo-

gian[2]. At a certain point in his career he took up the doctrine and practice of some of the sufis, but his writing in the primary fields of law and theology continued, almost without interruption, till the end of his life. His connection with the Shâfi'ite and Ash'arite schools is well established. We know the masters with whom he studied ; and as the teaching of the leading Ash'arites of the fourth and fifth centuries of the hegira comes to be better known, more specific aspects of his links to the tradition become ever more manifest. Less clear is his relationship to the sufi tradition. Certain literary dependancies are plain enough in his exploitation of the works of al-Muhâsibî (d. 243/857), Abû Țâlib al-Makkî (d. 386/996), and Abû l-Qâsim al-Qushayrî (d. 465/1072), for example. Of his direct connections with the sufi masters of his own day however, we know verty little. In any case, whatever may have been his private practice subsequent to his temporary retirement in 488/1095, his later writings are addressed not to a sufi audience but to the community at large ; and in the historical context this means primarily to the scholars, the ulema, and realistically, whatever his hopes for universal acceptance, to those who were not opposed to speculative theology as such. I do not mean to suggest that he did not envisage a wider audience beyond the circle of the orthodox religious scholars, but only that the latter had to be his natural and primary audience. He was a populariser of sufi doctrine, in no way a sufi master.

The mix of traditions is complex. By the time of al-Ghazâlî the Ash'arite teaching had become the common school theology for the Shâfi'ites and for the Mâlikites as well, i.e., for that considerable number of them – the majority in fact – who were not in principle opposed to formal, speculative theology. There were also a number of sufi masters who were Ash'arites in theology. These too often neglected connections are important for understanding the intellectual integration of the religious life of sunnî Islam, particularly as it developed in the fifth/eleventh century. The relationship betxeen the Ash'arites and the sufis is particularly important in our present context. Of the theology of the first generation of Ash'arite sufis, such as Abû Sa'd al-Ṣu'lûkî (d. 369/980), we know very little. A generation later, however, with Abû Ishâq al-Isfarâ'înî (d. 418/1027), who had close contacts with sufi circles, one detects an enlargement of the usual scope of the Ash'arite theology that envisages a problematic posed by certain elements of orthodox sufi teaching and which, moreover, foreshadows al-Ghazâlî's treatment of several important questions. In the next generation, with the work of al-Qushayrî, we find Ash'arite doctrine set out in a specifically sufi context. Some Ash'arite theologians, to be sure, were wary of sufi teaching as also were a number of legal scholars, just as, on the other

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1   The problems raised and alluded to here are too complex to deal with fully in the space of the present context. I shall therefore simply indicate some of the more radical questions that they pose, postponing a full discussion of them for a later study.

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2   Al-Ghazâlî's relation to the Ash'arite school is not without certain ambivalences, but he is nonetheless well within the tradition. This is a problem that requires separate treatment.

side, a number of important traditionists and jurisconsults rejected systematic theology and some sufis were disdainful of it.

The main point, however, is this : the three central areas of Muslim religious and intellectual life, law (and with it, tradition), theology, and orthodox ascetical and contemporative theology were closely associated in some leading circles ans specifically in one that lay directly in the background of al-Ghazâlî.

We should note that the common assertion that al-Ghazâlî legitimated sufism for orthodox Islam has little or no substance. These three elements of al-Ghazâlî's "heritage" had not, however, as yet been brought together theoretically and fully integrated in a common theological framework. Al-Ghazâlî brought them systematically into a unified theoretical system, following which sufi teaching is taken account of in contexts in which earlier it had been generally neglected.

In this connection we may suggest that any generalised theological synthesis had to take serious account of, if not perhaps to take as its point of departure, the sufi theology. This is not so much on account of the sufi's claim to a higher theological insight or of there mere fact that in some cases they did pursue the formal examination of a number of theological questions beyond the limits usually sought and attained by most dogmatic theologians. It is, rather, that it was in sufi circles primarily that moral theology properly speaking was elaborated and elaborated in a broader theological context, one in which the legists' elaboration of the revealed law and the theologians' speculation concerning basic doctrines were important. A significant number of scholars, moreover, were sufis and consequently were aware of the need to understand their disciplines within a more comprehensive theological context. The movement towards a general integration of theology on a broad scale is clearly seen, e.g., on the work of al-Qushayrî and of al-Kalâbâdhî (d. 380/990). We have already mentioned al-Isfarâ'înî, who had close contacts with a number of leading sufis. That al-Ghazâlî was led – in part, at least – to his discovery of the wider significance of sufi thought by this quest for a cognitive certitude that lay beyond the reach of any "conceivable" doubt is irrelevant to the basic fact that in the doctrine of a number of sufis, particularly those associated with the Ash'arite school, the ground was already well prepared for a generalised synthesis on the scale undertaken by al-Ghazâlî. Concommitant with this, within the larger intellectual ambience, was the need for dogmatic theology to take more explicit account of natural phenomena, i.e., to state and to explain how the basic theological doctrines are coherent with the appearances of both human nature and of the physical world as they were commonly understood. This brings us to our third term.

Whereas jurisprudence, the Ash'arite kalâm, and orthodox sufism had grown and taken shape as distinctly Islamic movements, the falsafa, the philosophical tradition, had been introduced and originally developed as the deliberate appropriation of a prior, non-Islamic tradition of thought. Avicenna, to be sure, had gone a long way towards adapting this tradition to the Islamic context, but the system steadfastly retained essential elements from its pagan origin which are basically incompatible with fundamental Muslim religious insight and doctrine. Even so, the Aristotelian construction of the universe and of the nature and order of things had gained wide acceptance in various intellectual circles and Avicenna's particular elaboration of what Prof. Gutas has termed "the metaphysics of the rational soul" offered ready to hand a highly sophisticated scheme whereby to explain the nature and occurrence of religious phenomena, including "mystical" experience as such. Furthermore, an elaborate form of neo-Platonic philosophy was being propagated in the teaching of the Ismâ'îliyya, a Shî'ite sect against whose rapidly growing influence Sunnî Islam had to defend itself. In short, the historical moment for al-Ghazâlî's "borrowing" was at hand.

As was the case with al-Ash'arî before him, al-Ghazâlî's theology is made up almost entirely of parts that were already there. It contains little, if anything, that is really new and is uniquely his. The success of his work, its widespread and enduring popularity is due to the apparent cohesiveness and the conviction with which he has put the various elements together and to his ability to ground his teaching in the Koran and the tradition.

One of the most interesting facets of Avicenna's apparent influence on al-Ghazâlî, and the least tangible, is to be seen in certain of his basic attitudes. Among these is his overweaning confidence in the power of the Aristotelian logic and in the scope of "demonstrative science" that is presumed to be accessible to those endowed with superior intellect. Knowledge attained by rational demonstration differs from divinely inspired knowledge only in the mode of its achievement. For al-Ghazâlî there is no question concerning any proposition of theology that cannot, in principle, be demonstratively resolved by reason under the guidance of revelation. The need for prophetic guidance, it should be noted, is not due to any intrinsic limitation of the power of the intellect, according to al-Ghazâlî, but to men's natural tendency to draw unwarranted conclusions by associative reasoning ; his opposition to the doctrine of the Ismâ'îliyya precludes his acceptance of the absolute (or continuing) need for extraordinary revelation[3]. More important for our present considerations, however, is al-Ghazâlî's attitude towards the school traditions upon which he depends. Contrary to the usual practice of

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3   That is, for intellectual guidance and instruction mediated by prophets or by some divinely inspired imâm and that are not naturally accessible through the usual operation of the intellect. Note, however, that following Avicenna, al-Ghazâlî tends to blur the distinction between knowledge and insight that are rationally grounded and those that are "revealed".

Muslim scholars, he does not acknowledge his masters and sources, even when he draws on them directly and verbatim. Like Avicenna, he seems at times to set himself no only apart from, but also above his predecessors and speaks as if what he has to present were in some way originally and uniquely his own. The impression that he distances himself from the tradition is partially effected by his language, as often it does not recall, either to acknowledge or to claim, traditional contexts of the topic discussed. Because of this, one can have the impression that what he says is new and somehow more profound by comparison with the work of prior theologians than in fact it is. That he was convinced of the great superiority of his own intellectual powers is clear in his autobiography, which likely may have been composed in imitation of and, to some extent, as a response to, Avicenna's autobiography. It is evident too in other works, where one detects a kind of intellectual pretentiousness. This attitude is not unimportant, since it has a bearing on what statements he may feel obliged to explain or to justify. On the other hand, there is doubtless, in his failure to claim or to acknowledge his links to the school traditions to which he belongs and his obscuring his dependance on them by the language he employs, a deliberate effort to gain a wider hearing. He really did wish to reduce divisions and heterodoxy within the Muslim community, as has been pointed out by Prof. Laoust and Prof. Watt. These two facets of his writings need not be wholly separable from one another.

Of what al-Ghazâlî took from the philosophers, the ethical elements and the psychological (i.e., those that belong to the psychology associated with physics in the classical tradition) are probably the least important. By far the most significant of his "borrowings" with regard to their impact on his theology are in the areas of logic and metaphysics, including Avicenna's "metaphysics of the rational soul". In *Ihyâ' 'ulûm al-dîn* (1, p. 23) he says that logic and metaphysics are parts of *kalâm* and later, in the *Mustaṣfâ* (1, pp. 5 f.) he describes *kalâm* as metaphysics, a metaphysics governed by logic and in accord with divine revelation.

Considered by itself, the material contribution of the Aristotelian logic to al-Ghazâlî's theology, and to Muslim theology in general, is in some respects less that has sometimes been suggested. That is to say, although its introduction had a considerable effect on the language and the form of analysis in certain works and in certain areas of theology, that al-Ghazâlî's theological reasoning is any more rigorous than that of his predecessors or that his theological insight is any more profound is highly questionable. Al-Ghazâlî's use of Avicenna's metaphysics, on the other hand, had a profound effect on his theology as viewed against the background of his tradition. The integration of the new material is by no means homogeneous and complete throughout the corpus of his writing. There are problems with regard to the consistency and problems, too, with regard to the compatibility of some of

his assertions with certain basic tenets of the established Ash'arite and sunnî orthodoxy.

In order to illustrate the problem concretely, it is convenient to take as our point of departure al-Ghazâlî's *al-Maqṣad al-asnâ*, a work of moderate length on the exegesis of the divine names and in which his use of earlier writers is relatively easy to discern. One sees on the one hand his dependance on the prior Ash'arite tradition, particularly al-Qushayrî, parts of whose *Tahbîr* he paraphrases or takes over verbatim. On the other hand, his use of Avicenna is equally conspicuous, as we find paraphrases of passages of the *Metaphysics of the Shifâ'* and of the *R. al-'Arshiyya*, as well as the appropriation of larger, more general constructs. What I shall do here is to point out one or two notable examples of al-Ghazâlî's "borrowing" and to indicate some of the problems they present.

In some cases, his use if Avicenna effects only an alteration of language. This in the section on "The Truth" (pp. 137 f.) as a divine name, he paraphrases a passage from the *Metaphysics of the Shifâ'* (p. 356), but the general content conforms entirely with earlier Ash'arite teaching. Where he discusses "The First and The Last" (pp. 146 f.), however, he instroduces the neo-Platonic notion of emmanation and return and speaks of God as the source of "the ordered chain of beings" and of the degrees and ranks by which the "knowers" (*al-'ârifûn*) rise back towards Him. Here, though the concept of the creation and return can easily be understood so as to conform with Ash'arite and with orthodox sufi doctrine, by speaking of the "ordered chain of beings" al-Ghazâlî introduces an element which seems totally foreign to the way in which earlier orthodoxy speaks of the universe. Al-Ghazâlî, moreover, lays considerable stress on this concept, both in the *Maqṣad* and in other works.

That there is no true agent other than God is common Ash'arite doctrine ; but al-Ghazâlî's account of how God's agency is exercised and is manifest in phenomena is not what we normally find with earlier theologians. The universal determinism, to be sure, is in no way mitigated, so that the basic doctrine can to this extent be said to remain constant. The alteration of context and concept, however, are not without serious consequences. Against earlier treatments of events as essentially discrete and disconnected, al-Ghazâlî presents the universe as an integrated system of entities and events bound together by "causes" and "intermediaries" and in which God is "the one who makes the causes to function as causes" (*musabbibu l-'asbâb*). Lower, proximate and immediate causes are governed by higher, "universal and enduring causes" (p. 98), of which the first is God's Throne, sc., the outermost sphere of the heavens. He says that "the universe has the character of a single individual composed of many members" (pp. 81 ans 152) and compares its operation to that of a water-clock, in which the final event is

determined by the structure of the apparatus and is effected by the flow of
the water through it (pp. 99 ff.). The whole is constructed by God, and the
flowing water somehow corresponds to His activity. We cannot enter here
into a discussion of secondary causation in the teaching of al-Ghazâlî, but I
would call attention to two points. First, there are elements in al-Ghazâlî's
Ashʿarite background that contribute significantly to the way he construes
this univresal system. Secondly, the overall conception is clearly neo-
Platonic. Against Avicenna and with his Ashʿarite tradition, al-Ghazâlî
empties the concept of the natures of created things ; things in their different
kinds are generally depicted as empty receptacles of God's action, determi-
nantly limiting conditions of what can be received and so of what God can
do. On the other hand, his commitment to the neo-Platonic framework
transforms the sense of some earlier doctrines.

Within the basic framework of his theological cosmology, al-Ghazâlî
presents God's relation to the world schematically – sometimes explicitly
and sometimes by allusion – as a hierarchy of three principal terms, which
appear repeatedly and in many contexts, though not invariantly. Each is re-
ferred to, described or alluded to, by a variety of expressions drawn from
the common Muslim vocabulary.

The first of these is God, considered as Creator (al-Khâliq), and specifi-
cally His knowledge as determinant of creation. It is referred to as His
"judgement" (ḥukm) and His "wisdom" (ḥikmah) and also His "ordaining"
(taqdîr) and His "ordering" (tadbîr). It is also referred to as His "command"
('amr) and accordingly also as His eternal "speaking" (kalâm), which al-
Ghazâlî takes to be identical with His knowledge ('ilm). His failure to men-
tion God's will where he discusses these terms in the Maqṣad is conspicuous.

The second term is God's causing the existence of things, specifically
the creation of the "causes which are universal and enduring" (p. 100) in ac-
cord with His knowledge. This is identified with God's general providence,
sc., with His unrestricted "generosity" (jûd) and with His universal
"enactment" (al-qaḍâ'). Accordingly, it is equivalent to God's "mastery"
(istîlâ'), i.e., His governance of the universe through the universal causes,
preëminently represented by the Throne. The Throne is conceived analo-
gously to the first, universal intellect of Avicenna's neo-Platonic system, for
al-Ghazâlî says that no form comes to be in the world that is not first crea-
ted in the Throne (Iljâm, p. 20). Lower spheres are moved each by an ange-
lic intelligence and there is also an angel that plays the role of the "agent in-
tellect" in Avicenna's system. The second term is also described as God's
"power" (qudrah), i.e., the power through which His creation of particular
events in the world is exercised.

The third term is God's "ordering the forms of created beings accor-
ding to the most beautiful ordering" ('aḥsana l-tartîb : pp. 81 and 109) and

"His forming them according to the most beautiful informing" ('aḥsana l-
taṣwîr : p. 81), i.e., His causing the coming of particular events. This direc-
ting of antecedent causes to their ultimate effects is God's qadar and is iden-
tified with His "justice" ('adl). Particular events are His "signs" ('âyât).

The identification of the references of these expressions is readily made
on the basis of the Maqṣad and once grasped can be recognised as operative
in various places in other works as well, so that what may superficially ap-
pear as ordinary use of traditional religious rhetoric is often loaded with
meaning that is anything but traditional. What the scheme represents is no-
thing less than a systematic organisation of common Muslim religious and
theological terms so as to conform to a neo-Platonic model and one which,
as is evident in the texts, derives principally from Avicenne.

One has to be cautious, however, in trying to assess how radical a de-
parture al-Ghazâlî has made from what we have called his heritage. The
prior Ashʿarite theology was extremely conservative. Their focus was care-
fully restricted to very specific questions and theses as defined in the tradi-
tion and the assertions they were willing to make are narrowly circum-
scribed. Al-Ghazâlî does not offer a full explanation of how the causation of
particular events is effected through the various intermediate agents and
causes. In the few places where he does explain the role of secondary causes,
what he has to say follows established Asʿarite teaching. Furthermore, that
angels play a role in bringing about various events is common Muslim doc-
trine, even if it is seldom mentioned or discussed in the manuals. Abû Ṭâlib
al-Makkî, moreover, one of al-Ghazzâlî's sources, commonly speaks of
(secondary) "causes" and of angelic "intermediaries" and also of God as
"musabbibu l-'asbâb". (Avicenna too uses the latter expression, probably
following a source such as Abû Ṭâlib or an earlier common source.)

Concerning our general problem there are several things that should be
mentioned here. Although al-Ghazâlî sometimes explains the relationship of
a "cause" to its "effect" in a way that conforms to common Ashʿarite doc-
trine (e.g., Iḥyâ' 4, pp. 86 f.) the examples he offers are restricted and
traditional and their applicability to other causal relationships he mentions is
unclear and unexplained. (E.g., how do the various angelic intelligences and
intermediaries, celestial and terrestrial, operate as causes ?) He speaks also
of "necessitating causes" and of effects that are "generated" (mutawallidah),
employing expressions that belong characteristically to non-Ashʿarite con-
texts where they are commonly used to express a concept of secondary cau-
sation that is rejected by Ashʿarite orthodoxy. One must conclude, thus,
either that al-Ghazâlî sometimes does not mean to assert what he seems quite
plainly to say or that he is inconsistent, drawing on a diversity of theological
and philosophical contexts whose disparate conceptions and presuppositions
he has not succeeded in harmonising. Either way, it is clear that he has not

adopted or otherwise built up a consistent and unambivalent, formal lexicon of his own nor, concommitantly, has he managed to establish for himself a clearly consistent theoretical framework in terms of which one may readily discern what precisely he means to assert or to deny in the formulations he employs. His language, in short, evokes in various places – and in one and the same work – various prior contexts and the disparate meanings of others without establishing a unified context of its own as that in which its meaning is achieved and presented. Thus it is that sometimes, even when we are able to determine from other places in his work what most likely he means to assert, serious problems remain unanswered. In others, where the form of expression directly recalls the context and teaching of Avicenna and the philosophers, one may have reason to doubt that al-Ghazâlî means to assert what his language seems to state or to imply, but is unable to find any satisfactory basis on which to determine exactly how his words are to be understood if not as saying what they seem manifestly to say. Whatever latitude one will allow for internal consistency and for comptabilility with prior sunnî orthodoxy, problems remain with regard to the integration of al-Ghazâlî's "borrowings" and his "heritage". The brief indication of several examples will have to suffice here.

Al-Ghazâlî identifies God's speaking (kalâmu-hu) with His knowledge, implicitly in the Maqṣad (e.g., p. 98) and unequivocally in the Iljâm (p. 20). The two are closely associated by Abû Isḥâq al-Isfarâʾînî, who is followed by al-Ghazâlî's master, al-Juwaynî. Their complete identification, however, is inconsistent with the common teaching of earlier Ashʿarite maᶁsters and seems, furthermore, to be at variance with what al-Ghazâlî himself has to say in his two doctrinal summaries, al-Iqtiṣâd and R. al-Qudsiyya, at least when these are read within the context of the Ashʿarite tradition, in which they are ostensibly meant to be read. He goes well beyond al-Isfarâʾînî without explanation of any kind.

Again, he says that God's "hand" in the Koran (e.g., 38.75) refers to angels (Fayṣal, p. 40). This too is an exegesis which differs from and is incompatible with prior Ashʿarite teaching. If the matter be looked at carefully, the relationships prove to be far more complex than first appears. What I wish to point out here is simply that al-Ghazâlî's exegesis is governed by the neo-Platonic model he adopted. In order to make this adjustment he takes "hand" here as a live metaphor, something that is also against earlier Ashʿarite exegesis.

Following Avicenna and against prior Ashʿarite teaching, al-Ghazâlî states repeatedly that this is the best of all possible universe. "[God] is the existent whose existence is necessary in itself, from which is realised the existence of everything whose existence is in possibility in the best modes of order and perfection" (p. 47), towards "the fulfillment of the utmost good

whose existence is possible in accord with what has been decreed by the divine generosity" (p. 152). So also, in a notorious passage, "It is the ordering that is necessary and right according to what has to be and as it has to be and in the measure that has to be ; there is not at all in possibility anything better and more complete and more perfect ; if there were..., [this] would be an act of miserliness that is incompatible with [God's] generosity and an injustice that is icompatible with [His] justice" (Iḥyâʾ 4, p. 252)[4]. Evil, thus, is not willed by God as such and for its own sake, but only as it must occur inevitably in the complex interaction of the panoply of secondary causes that operate in this optimum universal system[5].

Here we encounter a number of more serious problems. As it stands in the context, the phrase "everything whose existence is in possibility" is ambivalent, since "possibility" can be taken either as absolute or as limited by the determination of God's foreknowledge of what He will create. So too, the following "in the best modes of order and perfection" is ambivalent, as it can be read either with "is realised" or with "is in possibility". "In accord with what has been decreed..." in the succeeding citation is similarly ambivalent. What is at stake in these ambivalences is far from trivial and one can only wonder why he has not, here and in other places, chosen to express himself more clearly.

When he speaks of the "best", the "most perfect", and the "most beautiful" he not only seems to posit a best and most perfect with regard to what lies absolutely within the power of God, but also to assert that this absolute best is in fact relaised in the universe of which we are parts. This is contrary to Ashʿarite teaching and several of al-Ghazâlî's contemporaries make a point of denying it, probably against Avicenna. The language itself, "good", "perfect", "beautiful", "right" fix al-Ghazâlî's context as neo-Platonic. He may – and elsewhere does – make distinctions so as to understand these expressions in a way that can be integrated with the traditional understanding of them, but his use of them in the present passages remains alien to the tradition. The Ashʿarites, that is, will insist that "good", "perfect", and "right" as al-Ghazâlî here uses them are meaningful only as the created entities described are viewed exclusively with reference to themselves from within the framework of creation. Absolutely speaking, however, they are meaningful and true only with reference to God's judgement ; but God's judgement cannot be rationalised from a perspective that originates in a consideration of the nature of His creatures. Al-Ghazâlî, in short, says

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4   This passage and the controversy surrounding it has recently been made the subject of a lengthy study by Eric ORMSBY in his Theodicy in Islamic Thought, Princeton, 1984.

5   Note that the question of evil is very different here (and with Avicenna) from what it is in a context that recognises the existence of autonomous agents whose choices and actions are not determined by God (either immediately or through secondary causes) or by the operation of antecedent causes whose existence, action, and effects are necessary within the "system" (niẓâm) of the universe.

"good", "beautiful", and "right" on the basis of a secondary measure and according to criteria determined by a frame of reference within which the absolutely "good" and "right" cannot be presented, according to traditional orthodoxy. For al-Ghazâlî, so it would seem, God's justice and the goodness of His acts can be judged by the measure of His creatures. He appears to absolutise this frame of reference, sc., the created universe.

Furthermore, the thesis would seem necessarily to presuppose – following Avicenna – that the classes of beings that it lies within God's power to create are limited to those which actually exist in the world. Since he says nothing to the contrary, we have no grounds on which to suppose that he thought otherwise. Most Ash'arites held that the classes of beings that God has the power to create are unlimited in number[6]; al-Ash'arî and others state explicitly that it is God who makes the different kinds of things to be different. Al-Ghazâlî, by contrast, appears to absolutise the "essences" of created beings and to do so in a way that, following Avicenna and the philosophers, would seem to undermine the most fundamental notion of creation *ex nihilo*. For al-Ghazâlî, that is, creation appears to be not *ex nihilo* but *ex possibili*. Such is plainly the doctrine of Fakhruddîn al-Râzî a century later.

Again, taken by iteself, the phrase "the ordering which is necessary and right and as it has to be" presents the same kinds of ambivalence as those we noted earlier. In whatever way we interpret this, however, he ties this necessity and appropriateness to God's generosity and justice in such a way as apparently to imply that it is because of God's nature that creation must be as good and as beautiful and as perfect as possible. This, at any rate, would seem to be the obvious sense of what he says. Once again we find the general scheme of the neo-Platonism of Avicenna.

The Ash'arites, from the very beginning, were careful to explain God's generosity in such a way as to avoid the implication either that He has necessarily (or is obligated) to act in any particular way either with regard to what He creates or with regard to how His action affects His creatures. In the *Maqṣad* al-Ghazâlî speaks at one point (p. 87) of God's generosity in terms that are found in traditional Ash'arite wirtings, but even there the language and conception are conspicuously those of Avicenna. His context and meaning in the passage we are considering, however, are not compatible with common Ash'arite doctrine if we understand "justice" to be an essential attribute, as it is for almost all the Ash'arites and as seems indicated in the context, or if we understand "generosity" as an essential attribute, as it is by Avicenna, whose language and doctrine the passage directly recalls. That they are to be taken so would appear evident from other places where the terms are used analogously.

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6   Several Ash'arites are reported to have said that the classes of possibles are finite but the exact intention and significance of the reported thesis is unclear in the context.

Taking the passage in its apparent sense we can, in any case, read it to mean that it is not necessary that God create anything at all, but that given the divine nature, creation has necessarily to be exactly as it is : if God wills to create, then He wills not necessarily to create the most beautiful and most perfect universe possible. This is not inconsistent with al-Ghazâlî's vehement opposition to Avicenna's thesis of the eternal necessity of creation, expressed in the *Tahâfut* and elsewhere.

In his borrowing and adaptation of Avicenna's philosophy, al-Ghazâlî thus makes (or seems to make) a far-reaching compromise with the outlook which the latter carries over and develops from its pagan origins. The world is given as having something of the character of an absolute, in its whole, in its parts, and even in the succession of particular events. Following Avicenna and in accord with the Ash'arites, chance and free choice are totally eliminated from the world. Against the latter, however, choice is radically restricted for God, because of the constraints imposed by the requirement that the real system of possible kinds be as perfect as possible and that the occurrence of the particular instances of the possible kinds and the realisation of their specific potentialities be as good as possible.

If, however, the world is absolute as given, it is nevertheless not absolute in its givenness. It was possible that God not choose to create the world ; it might not have existed at all and existing it will come to an end. Al-Ghazâlî's discussion of God's will in the *Maqṣad* (p. 145) would seem to say quite clearly that God could have chosen not to create anything. The passage, however, is substantially a paraphrase of a passage in Avicenna's *R. al-'Arshiyya* (p. 11) and by evoking the terms and the context of the latter gives rise to questions. These questions become acute when we read in the *Iljâm* (pp. 20 f.) his assertion that things are as necessarily they must be because they "proceed from a pre-eternal and necessary volition and the result of the necessary is necessary and its contradictory is impossible".

Here he seems to say, and to say quite plainly, that the act of God's will in His willing to create the world as He created it is necessary : that He could not have willed not to create the world and could not have willed to create it otherwise than He did. Once again, the language directly recalls that of Avicenna. It hardly seems likely that al-Ghazâlî would say this, but then it is awkward to construe the passage in any other way.

I will not attempt to resolve these questions here. However we deal with them, we have to ask how consistent is al-Ghazâlî's theology, e.g., between the completion of the *Tahâfut* in January 1095, and the *Iljâm* several days before his death in December 1111. Again, to what extent was his ability to resolve his psychological crisis of 488/1095 tied to his coming to terms with Avicenna's philosophy – his coming to "see" God's activity in phenomena according to this model ? His sufism, itself highly rationalised, is influenced

by Avicenna's metaphysics ; how thoroughly ? His reflective understanding of his religious experience was guided by this model, with the result that, whatever other role sufi asceticism may have played in his life, it had the psychological effect of giving him unbounded confidence in the truth of his own theological speculation and in its rational certainty as well. Any model must, as such, exercise a certain degree of control in the understanding of the phenomena to which it is applied. For this reason, a number of departures from classical Ash'arite teaching were inevitable in al-Ghazâlî's theology. Their extent and significance, however, were dependant upon a number of factors, among them his grasp of the basic issues, his commitment to the traditional treatment of them, and also to his ability to think independantly of his sources, what he "inherited" and what he "borrowed". To deal with these questions one will have to cut through much of the romantic aura with which al-Ghazâlî has been invested in some studies of his work. Certainly he was no Aquinas.

His theology appears to be comprehensive in its scope. Certainly his rationalisation of Muslim dogma extends beyond anything hazarded by earlier Ash'arites. On the other hand, it appears also to be curiously incomplete. Theses are set forth in formally conceptual terms, sometimes at length, with great assurance and even eloquence, but also superficially and inconclusively, as implications are left unclarified and apparent inconsistencies unresolved. To such a complaint al-Ghazâlî would doubtless have responded – as in effect he does in a number of places – that to treat such questions more fully would be inappropriate in the particular context or, following the claims of some sufis, that it is not licit to divulge the "secrets of divine science". Such evasions seem somewhat lame, however, in the face of the difficulties[7]. To be sure, the wider implications and the corollaries of many theses and analyses often are not exhaustively pursued in the traditional Ash'arite summaries either, but in contrast to al-Ghazâlî the masters of the classical period are almost never ambivalent in their statement and exposition of the principal dogmas. One can only wonder if, in some cases, al-Ghazâlî was in fact fully aware of the difficulties or if he has thought the problem through. In a number of places – again paralleling Avicenna – he speaks of the scholastic theologians' uncritical acceptance of the teaching of their masters. Beacause his own theology was novel in the historical context, because he has laid it out for himself and had verified, to his own satisfaction, that it was open to no rational doubt, he was unaware, apparently, of how much of the doctrine of Avicenna and the philosophers he had himself uncritically received and appropriated. He frequently inveighs against the disputations of the scholars. One is tempted to think, however, that if he had

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7   That is to say, the formally speculative character of the discourse in which the difficulties present themselves constitutes a context in which it seems only appropriate, not to say required, that the discussion be carried through to its completion.

deigned to submit his own theological theses to the crucible of that rather rigorous exercise, he might have been forced to state some of his positions somewhat less ambiguously and to confront directly some issues he manages to dodge.

What al-Ghazâlî sought, in effect, was to reshape sunnî theology, to extend it in scope and in depth, and "to bring it up to date" by employing a neo-Platonic model which he took principally from Avicenna. He was unable to achieve a fully consistent synthesis. His relationships to his sources, his commitments to the tradition on the one side and to Avicenna on the other are not everywhere clear ; and on the other hand, he does not succeed in explicitly laying out a new context of his own. The full systematisation of Ash'arite theology along the new lines would be carried out two generations later by Fakhruddîn al-Râzî. With that, what al-Ghazâlî borrowed became part of the theological legacy of orthodox Islam.

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Note : All references where there is no indication to the contrary are to al-Ghazâlî's *al-Maqṣad al-asnâ*.