# Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on Creation and the Divine Attributes

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Early in the history of Islam, in the eighth and ninth Centuries, theologians discussed the nature and implications of the divine attributes, and did so with increasing sophistication as the growth of Islam led to a rapid absorption of Greek philosophy. Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd ("Averroes", 1126–1198) continued the debate, developing models of God that they took to be compatible with the Qur'an and the spirit of Islam. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd disagreed significantly, however, on God's nature and His relation to the world, and on the appropriate way to proceed when philosophizing about God.

## Reason, Revelation, and Interpretation

A Muslim who lacks knowledge on matters metaphysical, moral, or spiritual may feel that Islam provides more than enough guidance on its own. There is the Qur'an, God's message to humanity, which is the primary source of guidance; the *sunna* or "tradition", consisting of reports of the sayings (*ahadith*) and practices of the Prophet Mohammed; and the principles of Islamic law (*Shari'a*) built upon these sources. However, the mention of these sources naturally invites questions about their reliability and interpretation. There is, of course, the question of why we should accept the Qur'an as God's creation. As much as Muslims are unlikely to doubt that the Qur'an is God's word, they are just as likely to claim that we have good reasons to believe that God exists and that the Qur'an is God's message to humankind. There is also the more openly discussed question of how to interpret the Qur'an. A well-known passage in the Qur'an mentions that it contains both "clear" and

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"ambiguous" verses (3, 7). Naturally, there is disagreement regarding which are the ambiguous or allegorical passages, and whether and how to interpret them.[1] The authenticity and interpretation of reports of practices and sayings of the Prophet are also a matter of debate.

Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali regard demonstrative arguments as secure means to the truth. They both accept the rule that when the conclusion of a demonstrative argument conflicts with a literal interpretation of some passage in the Qur'an, the passage is to be taken figuratively. Consider, for example, the passages that characterize God in overtly anthropomorphic language. There are references to God's sitting on a throne (7, 45; 20, 5), to his face (55, 27) and hands (3, 66), to our perception of him on the Last Day (75, 22), and to his seeing and hearing all (42, 9; 58,1). While there were theologians who took all these descriptions literally, most, including al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd, did not. Beings that have a bodily form, that are perceiving and that can be perceived in the ordinary sense, have characteristics incompatible with a perfect being: they have finite spatial dimensions, are subject to change and decay, and can be affected by other things. Having divested God of such features, however, how much further should we go? Can we even say that God has will, power, and intellect, in any sense that we can understand? For the Qur'an also says that "there is nothing like him" (42, 9), and this (together with the influence of elements in Neoplatonic thought) led some to accept the method of negative theology according to which we can only say what God is *not*. This view leaves much to be desired, and both al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd hold that a positive and awe-inspiring notion of God is available, even if God's nature will in some ways forever be beyond our grasp.

There is, then, a general problem confronting philosophical accounts of God's nature and relation to creation in Islam, the problem of conceiving of that nature in a way that places an appropriate distance between God and humans. On the one hand, we want a notion of God that preserves his transcendent nature, one that is not overly anthropomorphic, or that does not make Him to be too much like us. On the other hand, we want to be able to say something positive and substantive about God, something that we can admire and identify with to some extent. And we want to do this while preserving the harmony of reason and revelation, of philosophy and religion, as much as possible.

## Divine Creation

*Tahafut al-Falasifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers),* perhaps al-Ghazali's most famous work, is an attack on the Neoplatonic Islamic philosophy of al-Farabi (c. 870–950) and Ibn Sina ("Avicenna", 980–1037). Although it is a religiously

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[1] Passages from the Qur'an are taken from the Arberry (1964) version, with the sura number followed by the verse number.

motivated work intended to show that the philosophers contradicted the central tenets of Islam, the main strategy is to beat philosophers at their own game, to show that their conclusions did not follow from the premises they themselves accept, or to uncover problematic assumptions in their arguments. Far from being dogmatic or unphilosophical, it provides clear explanations and incisive criticisms of many of the philosophers' theses and arguments. In other works, like *Al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad (Moderation in Belief)*, written shortly after *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, al-Ghazali presents positive philosophical arguments for his own view, including arguments for the temporal finitude of the world and the existence of God. Ibn Rushd's *Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)* is a detailed critique of al-Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifa.* While Ibn Rushd disagrees with Neoplatonic philosophers like Ibn Sina in some significant respects, the critique is a response to al-Ghazali on behalf of a broadly Aristotelian or Neoplatonic philosophy. In works written relatively late in his life, al-Ghazali develops a mystical view that is similar in some ways to the philosophical views criticized in his *Tahafut*. We will focus primarily on al-Ghazali's more orthodox view as reflected in the *Tahafut* and other closely related works, and turn to his mysticism in the section on "Al-Ghazali's Mysticism".

Ibn Sina accepted the Neoplatonic theory of emanation, according to which all that exists "flows" or emanates, necessarily, from God's nature. Given that God is eternal and the world and everything in it flows necessarily from His nature, it seems to follow that the world is eternal as well. Some might find it odd to call God the *creator* of the world if the world is eternal. Absent some argument, however, it is far from clear that God's creation of an eternal world is incoherent. After all, many who hold that the world has a beginning in time (including al-Ghazali) claim that it could not persist unless God continually *re*creates it or preserves its being. On Ibn Sina's emanationist view, creation is a continuous process with no beginning, a process in which God's pure and eternal activity of self-contemplation gives rise to a first intellect. The first intellect thinks of God as the necessary existent, of itself as a necessary consequence of God, and of the difference between the two. These three cognitive acts give rise to three further entities, and the process continues, creating levels of reality of descending perfection until we eventually reach the world of generation and corruption in which we live. God is thus the First whose activity causes all else, and the relation of each cause to its effect is one of necessary connection.

This version of Neoplatonism does have some features that make it very attractive to the Islamic philosophers. God is the only necessary being and the ultimate efficient cause. He is a single, unified being, untainted by the imperfections of our world. But the unity affirmed of God is a radical departure from orthodoxy. While there is a strong emphasis on the unity and oneness of God in orthodox Islam—God is The One or The Unique (*al-Waahid*)—the primary concern is to deny any claim that He has partners or that any share His power. Ibn Sina's concern is that affirming multiple, distinct attributes in God compromises his transcendent, absolute unity, and so holds the stronger claim that divine attributes such as knowledge, power, and will are not really distinct in God. God is an absolute unity; while essence and existence are distinct in all contingent beings, so that in a sense they are all composed

of essence, existence, and accidental qualities, God's existence is part of His essence. There is in fact no real distinction in God between attributes, no real distinction between essence and existence, or even between subject and predicate.

Al-Ghazali agrees that God is the only being necessary in itself, upon which everything else depends for its existence. But he argues that the Neoplatonic philosophers strip God of all positive attributes, and that their claims that He is the agent and maker of the world is mere metaphor, not reality (al-Ghazali 1997, 56). As we shall see, he also disagrees with Ibn Sina in holding, among other things, that the world is not eternal, but has a beginning in time; that the existence of the actual world does not follow necessarily from God's nature, but is rather an outcome of God's free choice to select a particular world from all possible worlds grasped by his intellect; and that connections between apparent causes and effects in the world are not necessary, but rather a result of God's decision to create them "side by side" (1997, 170).

Al-Ghazali argues that the world could not be eternal, for an infinite regress of discrete temporal phenomena generates logical absurdities (1997, 18). For example, if the revolutions of the planets are infinite in number then no sense could be made of the claim that they revolve at different rates. The ratio of the number of revolutions of the Sun to that of Jupiter is 1/12, and of the Sun to Saturn is 1/30. If the revolutions are infinite, they cannot be different in number, contradicting the claim that the planets are revolving at different rates. Given that such temporal phenomena could not be infinite, the world must have a beginning. Since something cannot come into existence from nothing, there must be something eternal which determines that the actual world exists as opposed to not, and that it exists as opposed to any other possible world. Only an agent with the will and power to choose one possibility among many can play that role, and that agent is God.[2]

Al-Ghazali also defends the coherence of the view that God created time itself (1997, 31–2). He accepts, for sake of argument at least, the Aristotelian view of time as a measure of change, and asserts that what we mean in saying that God is prior to the world and to time is just that he existed without the world, and then existed with the world. The tendency to think of the relation of priority or the relation referred to by 'then' as a temporal relation is due to a trick of the imagination, a trick al-Ghazali compares to that which the imagination plays on us when we attempt to conceive of the world's being spatially finite, with nothing beyond it, and the imagination cannot help but fill in that nothingness with empty space. Despite difficulties of imagination, there is no logical impossibility in the finitude of the spatial world, and similarly no logical impossibility in the finitude of the past.

Al-Ghazali's view of God's creation and preservation of the world is illustrated nicely by his example of the water-clock (1971, 98–102). To make a working water-clock, one must first come up with a design or plan for it, then build it, and finally supply a constant flow of just the right amount of water through the clock. God's creation of the world similarly involves coming up with a design for the world, i.e., selecting one of all possible designs of the world to be actualized, bringing it into existence, and providing it with a constant source of "being". In our case, coming

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[2] See Craig 1979 for a detailed discussion of the Kalaam Cosmological Argument.

up with a design plan and deciding to implement it is something that takes time and effort, and involves deliberation, whereas for God the plan and the decision to execute it is eternal, even if that which is designed and brought into existence is not.

Unlike al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd rejects the traditional view that the world has a beginning in time. It might be thought that this conflicts with the Qur'an. Interestingly, as Ibn Rushd points out, nowhere in the Qur'an does it say that God at one point existed with pure nothingness or that he brought everything into existence from nothing.[3] He objects to al-Ghazali's attempt to establish the non-eternity of the world on the basis of the impossibility of an actual infinite. He does not deny, as some modern philosophers would, that positing an actual infinity of discrete entities leads to absurdities. Rather, he relies on the Aristotelian view that there is no actual infinity here, only a potential infinity. While the world has no beginning and no end, this does not make it actually infinite, for the past is no longer and the future is yet to be (Ibn Rushd 1954, 10).

Although Ibn Rushd at one point accepted the Neoplatonic theory of emanation, he ultimately rejects it, for he cannot see how God's thinking only of himself can give rise to anything distinct from God. After all, the philosophers accept that when it comes to God the subject and predicate, the thinker and thought, are identical (1954, 107–8). He attempts to account for the order and activity in our world without regarding the relation between God and the world as one of emanation or direct efficient causation. He defends an Aristotelian theory according to which God is the final and formal cause as opposed to the efficient cause of the immaterial world and, ultimately, of the material world. God is the First Principle who contains in some way the forms of all other things. The immaterial heavenly bodies move out of love of God and out of a desire to emulate His perfect nature, to live up to the standards or principles of their own nature contained in Him. Things in the material world in turn move and act in accordance with their forms, contained in the heavenly bodies. Ibn Rushd likens God's rule over heaven and earth to the rule of a good monarch over a well-ordered state, a state in which all citizens, at various levels of authority, obey His commands (1954, 111).

## Divine Will and Omnipotence

We saw above that one reason for thinking that the world is eternal is that the world is a necessary effect of an eternal God. Another reason some Islamic philosophers held this is that otherwise God would have to decide when to bring the world into existence, and no reason could be given for delaying this worthwhile act or for

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[3] See Ibn Rushd 1961, 16. The Qur'an mentions that God "created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was upon the waters" (11, 7) but this does not imply that everything was created from nothing. Indeed, it suggests that time and God's throne were already in existence. The Qur'an also says that God "lifted himself up to heaven, when it was smoke…so he determined them as seven heavens" (41, 10), implying that heaven was made by giving form to some pre-existing matter.

choosing to create the world at one time as opposed to another. God must surely have a reason for the decision he makes, but no such reason is available. As we have just seen, al-Ghazali's view is that God creates the world and time together. But he grants for sake of argument that time is eternal in order to show that there is no good reason to deny that God could freely decide to create the world at a certain point in time. He gives the example of a hungry man who is presented with two identical dates but is unable to have them both, and so must decide which one to eat, which he has no trouble doing (al-Ghazali 1997, 23–4). Al-Ghazali takes the concept of the will or agency to involve the ability to differentiate and choose between two things, even when there is no reason to choose one over the other.[4] Why, then, couldn't God have decided to create the world at one time as opposed to another?

Ibn Rushd objects that the man presented with the dates makes a choice between eating a date and not eating at all (1954, 22–3). He makes a choice between two alternatives, whether to eat or go hungry, and he does have a reason to pick one of these alternatives as opposed to the other. Moreover, Ibn Rushd thinks that relying on such examples makes the divine will too much like the human will. In the example, the man lacks something and is affected by the presence of the dates to act. But God has no deficiency and is not affected by anything. That God cannot go wrong or make an inferior or arbitrary choice is no limitation on His will. Al-Ghazali might reply, first, that the man still makes an arbitrary choice between the dates, even if there is a background condition that applies to the man and not to God, the condition of needing or desiring to satisfy his hunger. Second, while God's will is like our own in that it essentially involves the ability to choose between alternatives, this is compatible with affirming that there are significant differences between His will and ours. God does not have emotions like anger, hate, or love in the literal sense of these terms that involve the ability to feel pain and pleasure and to be affected by other things.

Ibn Rushd would complain that this is still unsatisfactory. It makes no sense to speak of an agent as choosing between alternatives when there is no desire for the objects of choice and no resulting change in the agent. God does not have mental states like desire for there is nothing he lacks, and he is unchangeable. If we take seriously how different an eternal and independent being would be from us, we must not think of His will in this way. This is not to say that God has no will or has a will in only a metaphoric sense. For Ibn Rushd, God has will in the most complete and perfect sense, for it proceeds from his complete knowledge and is not limited by the contingencies that apply to our will (1954, 87–90).

This concern with preserving God's transcendence and immutability motivates Ibn Rushd's treatment of the divine attributes more generally. 'Knowledge', 'will', and 'power' are not univocal as applied to God and ourselves, though they are

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[4] As we shall see, however, al-Ghazali denies that we have genuine free will. He could be understood as claiming that our concept of will or agency, of what genuine agency would be for us *if* we had it, is not different from what it is for God, except that His will has a much greater scope by virtue of his omnipotence and omniscience.

analogous and so not utterly equivocal either.[5] God has these attributes in the most complete sense (Ibn Rushd 1954, 121). He provides the primary or paradigmatic sense of these terms, what Aristotle calls a "focal meaning," relative to which other, derivative senses of the term as they apply to God's creatures can be fixed. For example, our knowledge of particulars involves perceiving the world, being affected and changed by it, and an unchangeable being cannot know the world by observing or perceiving it in the way that we do. In order to preserve the immutability of God, philosophers like Ibn Sina seem to limit God's knowledge to that of universals and abstract principles. Al-Ghazali complains that this conflicts with the Qur'an's message that God knows everything that happens in the world, including our actions and intentions.[6] While Ibn Rushd rejects Ibn Sina's limitation of God's knowledge to knowledge of universals, he complains that al-Ghazali compromises God's transcendent and unchangeable nature by making His knowledge too much like our own. God does not know the world by observing or perceiving it directly; rather, he knows the world by knowing His own essence, which contains the essence of all that exists. Even 'existence' is not univocal as applied to God and His creatures; that which is self-sufficient, which does not depend on anything else, has perfect existence, whereas all other things exist in a derivative sense (1954, 179; 222–4).

Al-Ghazali is worried that Neoplatonic views strip God of his omnipotence, if not genuine agency or will altogether, by denying God alternative choices. He would no doubt complain that Ibn Rushd's God is even less like an agent given that He is regarded as the final and formal cause, as opposed to the efficient cause, of the world. On al-Ghazali's view, God is omnipotent in the sense that he can bring about any state of affairs that is logically possible. It is possible that all the heavenly spheres move in the opposite direction; that the world be larger or smaller than it is; that fire come in contact with cotton without burning it; and that bodies be resurrected after death. While there is an observed conjunction or correlation between certain kinds of causes and their effects, there are no observed or demonstrable necessary connections. To admit the above as genuine possibilities and yet say that God could not actualize them is to say that He is not omnipotent.

Ibn Rushd is very skeptical of our ability to figure out what is possible in this way. We can imagine fire coming into contact with a ball of cotton without burning it, but if it were to actually happen we would seek some explanation for why the cotton did not burn. Perhaps it was wet, for example. But if we stipulate that no such explanation obtains, we would not know whether to say that this is really a case of fire coming into contact with cotton. Similarly, if a decapitated body continues to walk and behave in otherwise normal ways, we would not know whether to call it a 'person'. On Ibn Rushd's view, much of what a thing does or is able to do is essential to what it is, and we cannot simply sever the one from the other in the way that al-Ghazali's thought experiments allow. While the masses rely on imagination, those who are well-trained in thought do not (Ibn Rushd 1954, 153).

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[5] See, for example, Ibn Rushd 1954, 88; 213; 222–3; and 269.

[6] God knows the weight of every atom (34, 3) and knows our thoughts (50, 1).

Ibn Rushd has a point in warning philosophers not to lean uncritically on imagination, and al-Ghazali himself admits, as we have seen, that the imagination can play tricks on us. It is worth noting, however, that what al-Ghazali needs for his criticism is quite modest: there are *some* non-actual possibilities, some possibilities that God did not actualize, and claiming that He could not have actualized them does seem to be a constraint on omnipotence. On his view, the essence of a thing is independent of its existence, and we can, within certain limits perhaps, rely on our abstract ideas to grasp the essences of things and determine what is possible, regardless of what actually exists. For Ibn Rushd, on the other hand, the existence of a thing is part of its essence, even for things that owe their existence to something else, and nothing is really possible unless it actually exists at some point in time.[7] Abstract ideas are a guide to genuine or real possibility only if they are grounded in the way things actually are, tied to what actually exists and what causal properties existing things have.

## Divine Justice and Omnipotence

In seeking to secure God's agency and omnipotence al-Ghazali runs the risk of leaving little room for causation within the world. According to the dominant interpretation, al-Ghazali accepts the occasionalist doctrine that God is the only true efficient cause, and there are no genuine causal connections between separate created things. It is conceivable and hence possible that a fire come in contact with a ball of cotton without burning it. The apparent observation of a fire's burning a ball of cotton does not involve any observation of a causal connection; all that is observed is that one sort of event follows another. It is God who decides to set these kinds of events "side by side" (Al-Ghazali 1997, 170), and the observed temporal order and regularity misleads us into thinking there is a genuine causal connection between events when in fact no such connection exists. God can and does do more on this view than on the Neoplatonic or Aristotelian views, but the worry is that He does too much and the world nothing at all. As we have seen, Ibn Rushd complains that such a view divorces things in the world from the causal properties essential to them. More troublingly, if God is the sole cause of human actions, it is exceedingly difficult to make sense of our being responsible for our actions in a way that makes rewarding good actions and punishing bad ones legitimate.

There is, perhaps, another interpretation according to which al-Ghazali wanted at least to leave open the possibility of genuine causal connections in the world, while denying that causal connections are *necessary*.[8] He seems to allow for the

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[7] This Aristotelian view of possibility is at odds with common sense, and difficult to motivate. One motivation is that it might seem strange to suppose that humans have some ability that they would never exercise, not even given infinite time. Perhaps the underlying idea is that there is no ability or potentiality in nature without some purpose, and the existence of an ability or potentiality that never was and never will be actualized would be without a purpose.

[8] See Griffel 2009 for a recent discussion of the debate over al-Ghazali on causation. See also Fakhry 1958; Kogan 1985.

possibility of a contingent causal connection, one that depends in part on God, but that also depends in part on proximate causes. To return to the water-clock analogy, the fact that one has built a water-clock and maintained a constant flow of water through it does not make one the sole cause; the parts of the water-clock have a causal role to play in directing the flow of water so as to represent the correct time. Similarly, the fact that God creates the world in time and provides it with a constant flow of energy or being does not rule out that there are some secondary causes.

This does not completely solve the problem of human responsibility for action, however. In discussing human actions, al-Ghazali uses explicitly causal terminology, characterizing actions as effects of our volitions, volitions as effects of motives and convictions, and these in turn as effects of experiences, external forces, the influence of scripture and revelation, and so on (Griffel 2009, 221). Whether we interpret al-Ghazali as an occasionalist, as an advocate of contingent causal connections, or as agnostic with respect to these two options, it is clear that he followed the Ash'arite school's doctrine of predetermination, and that he took the impression humans have of being genuinely free to be an illusion. He does accept that alternative human choices are possible *in themselves*, but adds that they are necessary *given God's choices* (Griffel 2009, 216). If God determines, whether directly or indirectly, what actions humans end up performing, how could he also *justly* reward good actions and punish bad ones?

One of the earliest scholarly debates in Islam revolves around this question. The Mu'tazallites and Shi'ites held that humans are endowed with free will to choose between good actions and bad ones, and that God's justice *requires* that he reward the former and punish the latter. The motivation for this conception of divine justice is the idea that the standards of good and evil are not merely conventional or arbitrary; they are objective standards accessible to reason. God cannot simply stipulate what goodness and badness consist in; goodness and badness have a more or less fixed character. God's essentially rational and just nature, coupled with this objectivist, rationalist view of morality, implies that he cannot punish the innocent and reward the guilty.

Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arites took this as a challenge to God's omnipotence. After all, there is no difficulty in conceiving of God assigning punishments and rewards in different ways, while there is great difficulty in conceiving of God as making it false that $2+3=5$. The latter, unlike the former, is logically impossible, and so is no constraint on His omnipotence. The rationalist Mu'tazallites would object that God cannot *justly* reward and punish in just any way, much as God cannot make $2+3=7$. Rather than deny that God was moral or just, Al-Ghazali seems to have followed the Ash'arites in identifying morality or justice with the His judgment. To do what is right or moral just *is* to act in accordance with God's commands or dictates, and to do what is wrong or immoral just *is* to fail to act in accordance with His commands. One concern with this divine command theory or divine subjectivism about ethics is that moral principles applied in ordinary life do seem to have a rational grounding. Moral actions are ones that contribute to, or at least aim at, what is good, and goodness for humans consists in their happiness and flourishing. While God has greater knowledge about the nature and sources of human goodness than we do, and so is a legitimate authority and source of guidance on moral matters

for that reason, it is strongly counterintuitive to hold that what counts as good or bad is merely a matter of His decree.

Al-Ghazali seems at times to give a different answer.[9] He apparently concedes, in a way that the Ash'arites do not, that it makes sense to ask why, for what reason, God did not simply create beings who always do good and then put them into paradise, or simply put them there to begin with. His answer is that doing so would not result in the best arrangement, the best possible world. The harms and local imperfections that exist are necessary for the existence of, and our recognition and appreciation of, the greater perfections in the world. Even the creation of impious humans and the corresponding allotment of punishments is part of the best arrangement, for the goodness of the pious and of the reward which is their due is thereby enhanced. Since God freely chooses the best of all possible worlds, our knowledge of this choice arises not from our knowledge of His nature, but from our observation and study of His creations. Insofar as the best of all possible worlds is not trivially whatever world God chooses to create, the standard for what counts as best, including the standards of moral behavior and its consequences in the afterlife, are independent of God's decree. But then, even granting for sake of argument that this does not limit God's omnipotence, the fact that God punishes bad actions and rewards good ones when these are actions predetermined by Him seems again to conflict rather directly with the idea that God is merciful and just, whether essentially or by choice.

## Ibn Rushd on Revelation and Truth

Ibn Rushd holds that many demonstrations conflict with the literal or most straightforward interpretation of the Qur'an, and the truth seems far from the ordinary believer's grasp. God cannot literally perceive the world, for perception entails a causal relation; He has knowledge of everything, not by observing the world and its creatures, but by knowing his own essence and the form of the world contained therein; He has will and power over all, but only in the sense that all things "obey" or emulate their abstract forms contained in His nature. 'Knowledge', 'will', 'power', and even 'existence' and 'substance' are not univocal as applied to God and ourselves, though they are analogous and so not utterly equivocal either. We know that God has knowledge and will, but we can't know exactly how or in what way he has such qualities. This view has no hint of anthropomorphism, and it does preserve something of the traditional idea that God is unknowable. But to many, Ibn Rushd's God is too transcendent, too far from the descriptions of Him given in the Qur'an and the tradition.

Departing still further from tradition, Ibn Rushd denies, or is at the very least doubtful, that the individual soul is immortal.[10] Al-Ghazali (1999, 66) holds that the afterlife involves *bodily* resurrection, and Ibn Rushd would agree that the afterlife does not involve our continued existence as purely spiritual individuals. As we have

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[9] See Griffel 2009, 225–234 for an interpretation along the following lines.

[10] See Leaman 1998, 82–116 for a defense of this interpretation.

seen, however, Ibn Rushd rejects apparent conceivability as a guide to possibility, and so the conceivability of bodily resurrection would not be for him a good reason to assert its real possibility. He agrees with Aristotle that individual humans cannot exist without matter, for there would be no way to distinguish different persons without some matter to individuate them. He seems to regard the imaginative faculty in each of us, the ability to think and remember things by use of images, as essential to our individuality and as requiring some physical matter. The less imagistic our mental representations—the more our thinking is abstract and universal—the less we are individuals. To the extent that humans have a spiritual, immaterial soul, it is just *one* immaterial soul shared by all, a soul constituting the form of the human species, and the more we perfect our natures the closer we are to that one soul (1954, 15). Ibn Rushd seems at times to leave open, at least as an epistemic possibility, that multiple souls exist in the afterlife, but he is clearly very far from affirming, even tentatively, the sort of afterlife involving bodily existence and sensory pains and pleasures depicted in the Qur'an (Leaman 1998, 92–96). This lack of enthusiasm, if not skepticism, with regard to individual immortality allows him to avoid the problem of divine justice, at least as it arises for al-Ghazali, but the resulting view is contrary to traditional Islamic thought and to the faith of the ordinary believer.

Ibn Rushd has some things to say in reply to these worries. According to him, only *philosophers*, those who are trained in logic and metaphysics, are qualified to interpret the Qur'an. He distinguishes between demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical forms of reasoning (1961, Ch. 3). Philosophers are able to establish truths by demonstrative arguments. Dialectical or logical reasoning is suitable for use by theologians and lawyers, and rhetorical or persuasive reasoning is the mode of reasoning suitable for the masses. Ibn Rushd regards departures from this division of labor to be very dangerous. Theologians who interpret the Qur'an as they see fit and who present philosophical arguments to the masses are not only likely to arrive at false conclusions, but to undermine the faith of ordinary believers by giving rise to doubts that their minds are ill-equipped to examine in a clear and rational manner. The philosopher knows better than to take the relevant passages literally, but ordinary believers ought to accept these at face value, for they are in that way more likely to become and remain good and moral citizens. It may seem that the motivating factors at work here are too self-interested, for good people do not act merely out of a desire to reap rewards and avoid punishment. However, the self-interested desires need not preclude the development of an interest in the goodness of others for their own sake, and a desire to do one's duty. Indeed, ordinary believers, acting initially out of self-interest, are more likely to develop the discipline and habits of thought and action that lead to their being virtuous persons and good citizens.

But is this not terribly elitist? And haven't we basically split the difference between the philosopher and the ordinary believer, giving the former the impersonal, purely abstract truth, and the latter something that is personal, something that is a means to important moral and social goals, but for all that, something strictly false? Ibn Rushd often speaks of there being more than one way to get to the truth, and this suggests an interesting response to the problem. The idea is a radical and quite modern one: that the philosophical perspective and the religious or theological perspective are independent means to the truth; that demonstrative reasoning and

rhetorical or religious reasoning are each sound forms of reasoning, even though each perspective judges the other to be false. It is controversial whether Ibn Rushd held such a radical view, a view that rejects the law of the excluded middle, according to which every proposition is either true or false. The proposition that God has thus-and-such attributes would be true as judged from one perspective, and false as judged from another perspective. On this view, Ibn Rushd's insistence that only philosophers should interpret the ambiguous passages in the Qur'an is not to claim that the ordinary believer accepts falsehoods, but to deny that the ordinary believer can get to truth by the philosopher's means.[11]

It is not clear that the solution is a stable one, for demonstrative arguments are supposed to arrive at the truth in a clear and conclusive way, and on the view under consideration the philosopher must be willing to admit that other perspectives that do not employ demonstrative reasoning yield truth not only when they are incomplete or imprecise formulations of truths that can be demonstrated, but even when they conflict with these demonstrations. It strikes me as odd to say that Ibn Rushd's insistence that philosophers should not, for example, think of God in anthropomorphic terms amounts to saying that they should not think of Him in these terms *as philosophers* or *as employers of demonstrative reasoning*, where this has nothing to do with the superiority of demonstrative reasoning *as a means to truth*.

While reason has its limits, especially in understanding God's nature, Ibn Rushd is confident that much can be understood and demonstrated regarding God and the world. The result, however, is that what the Qur'an says of God and the afterlife is highly allegorical and of practical as opposed to theoretical significance. Many Muslims would welcome the idea that much of the Qur'an is to be interpreted as allegorical and as a guide to life and salvation as opposed to literal truth. But many are also likely to find Ibn Rushd's view to be too radical an interpretation of Islam—a view, moreover, that makes God's nature metaphysically and, for most, epistemically too distant. And so they may find themselves attracted to the thought of al-Ghazali, who attempted (at least until his mystical turn—see below) to remain more clearly within the bounds of orthodoxy. They will then be faced with the problem of making sense of God as having a will, but an eternal and timeless will that chooses without deliberation or desire; and, more generally, the problem of conceiving of God's nature without compromising his transcendence. There is also the problem of squaring omnipotence and predetermination with divine justice. These problems may recommend moving to a subtle position in between Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali.

## Al-Ghazali's Mysticism

Al-Ghazali himself eventually moved to a position in Ibn Rushd's direction, though this move was motivated by a mysticism for which the latter apparently had no sympathy. Al-Ghazali's later works (1971, 1998, and 1999) reflect a

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[11] For a defense of this view, see Leaman 1998, 179–96, and 2009, Ch. 9.

strong influence of Sufi thought. His autobiography (1999) tells the story of a person who, from a young age, had a burning desire for the truth, and who was dissatisfied with the conformism and blind obedience of authority displayed by those around him. He decided to search for the kind of knowledge that is not open to any doubt. This eventually led to a period of skepticism, probably occurring before setting to work on *Tahafut al-Falasifa*, in which he came to regard not only the senses but even apparently self-evident principles of reason as subject to doubt. These doubts afflicted him like a "sickness" for almost two months until he once again "accepted the self-evident data of reason" not by argument or proof, but rather by "a light which God Most High cast into my heart," a light which "is the key to most knowledge" (al-Ghazali 1999, 57). Thus, while al-Ghazali generally sees demonstrative arguments as a legitimate source of truth, there is a sense in which, for him, these arguments are secondary to and ultimately depend on a gift of divine grace. Indeed, for him it is the heart (*qalb*), not the intellect (or not the intellect alone), that can provide the highest, most genuine knowledge of God, the sort of knowledge that preserves his oneness and transcendence. This knowledge is essentially experiential, consisting of a "taste" (*dhawq*) of ultimate, divine reality. While our hearts are predisposed to respond to the divine, true knowledge of God requires that we accept the heart's invitation to seek Him, and develop qualities of character and intellect that make such knowledge possible.

If we have not already succeeded in finding God—if we are, in al-Ghazali's terms, still "on the way" and have not yet "arrived"—how do we know what qualities we need to develop in ourselves in order to find him? Al-Ghazali's answer is that we should look to the Qur'an and the Prophet Mohammed for guidance. His treatise on the 99 names of God (1962) is based on the custom of Muslims to recite a traditional list of names taken from the Qur'an, a ritual that the Sufis understood as a way of opening their hearts to God. The Prophet Mohammed recommends not only the recitation of these names, but the development of qualities referred to by them. The Qur'an tells us that God is, for example, The Good, The Benevolent, the Merciful, The Holy, The Faithful, The Flawless, The Powerful, The Just, The Omniscient, and The Patient. We should accordingly develop the corresponding traits of goodness, mercy, benevolence, piety, power, knowledge, patience, and so on in ourselves. Al-Ghazali is explicit that, strictly speaking, the characterizations are ambiguous or equivocal; we cannot have the exact likeness of these attributes as they apply to God (1962, 156). Reflection on the names of God serves to remind us of His transcendence and of the dependence of all on Him, while also guiding us in the improvement of our intellect, character, and actions. In this way, those who seek God prepare their inner self for "arriving".

Al-Ghazali discusses the different ways people have thought of God and the divine attributes in the famous "veil section" of the *Niche of Lights* (1998), a section devoted to interpreting the following *hadith* of the Prophet: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everybody whose eyesight perceives him." Al-Ghazali classifies people into four main kinds. First, there are those veiled by darkness. These are atheists, including

those who say "with their tongues" that there is no god but God, but who do not truly believe.

The second group are veiled by mixed light and darkness. These all accept some deity but make errors of identification. They include those who are impressed by some light, e.g., that of the beauty and greatness of things in nature, but the darkness of sense perception misleads them, and so they worship idols, fire, nature, the planets, the Sun, or physical light. Others recognize that a true deity transcends the things perceived, but they are still veiled by the darkness of imagination, since they identify the deity with some corporeal being, and so take literally the Qur'anic passages that refer to God as "above" and as "sitting on a throne". Finally, there are those who deny any corporeality, but are misled by the darkness of "false syllogisms of the intelligence" to affirm that God has will, intellect, and power of the same kind as our own (but with a wider scope).

The third group are veiled by pure light. There are three subdivisions here. The first are those who recognize that the terms for the attributes are not univocal as they apply to God and humans. They refer to God relationally, believing that God is the one who transcends the meaning of the attributes, and the one who is the mover and organizer of the heavens. Those in the second group know that there is a multiplicity of levels in the heavens, that each level has a mover, an angel. They identify God as the unmoved mover of the outermost sphere of the heavens. The third group recognizes that this is not sufficient to preserve God's oneness and transcendence, and so identify Him not with the unmoved mover of the outermost sphere, but with one who *commands* the unmoved mover, this angel of the outermost sphere, to move all the rest. Al-Ghazali regards the latter subgroup (characterized by views similar to the Neoplatonists al-Farabi and Ibn Sina) as mistaken in thinking that the First who commands and whom all other intellects obey (*al-Muta'*) is God. The philosopher's God is really a spirit or intellect, an angel at the top of the hierarchy of angels, who issues commands to the rest. The real God freely chooses to create this intellect and provides it with a continual source of being.

Finally, there are those who have "arrived". They recognize that the philosopher's God is not transcendent and perfect enough to be the true God. Looking beyond the philosopher's God, they experience Him directly and see nothing else. Some of these, the "few" or the "elect", see only God and the soul that perceives God. The "few of the few" or the "elect of the elect" among them no longer see even themselves; they are annihilated and completely absorbed by God.

This is not pantheism, the identification of God with the world or some part of it—the Sufi mystic who in his zeal declares "I am God!" is strictly speaking uttering something that reason knows to be impossible (1962, 157). Rather, it is monism, the view that there is nothing in existence but God. There is a sense in which other things exist, but it is only *metaphorical*. Al-Ghazali motivates this monism partly by appeal to the suggestive language of the Quran, which characterizes God not only as the One (*al-Waahid*), but also as The Real/Truth (*al-Haqq*), The First (*al-Awwal*), and The Last (*al-Akhir*); "everything is perishing save His Face" (28, 88). Aware that this conflicts with the orthodox view that the heavens, angels, the earth, and other creatures really exist, al-Ghazali offers the following analogy in support of the

metaphorical interpretation.[12] Existence is borrowed from God much as servants may borrow the horses and robes of the King for a festival. Someone who does not know that the King has given these to the servants will take them to be very wealthy, whereas one who knows that they are borrowed sees that it is only the King who is really rich. Analogously, any being that does not have existence essentially must "borrow" it from another, and does not exist except figuratively or metaphorically. Part of the motivation for preserving a perspective that admits of levels of reality and the existence of things on each level is that a pure, simple monism would make most of what the Qur'an and tradition says false.[13] Al-Ghazali is attempting to bring the mysticism of the Sufis in harmony with orthodoxy by giving the latter a more figurative interpretation.

It is important to keep in mind that this metaphysical picture is not a replacement for the highest knowledge, which is experiential and direct, and which is impossible without a purification of the heart. The picture might provide some guidance, but to the impure or unfaithful heart it will be useless and perhaps even dangerous. Reason is also important, however, for one may easily misinterpret a mystical experience, as mystics who identify themselves with God do. Al-Ghazali may be a mystic, but he is an intellectual mystic.

Ibn Rushd would no doubt agree that such acts as reciting the names of God helps strengthen one's faith and develop one's character, but he is skeptical that there is any mystical knowledge of God. He rejects monism; things other than God do exist, and their existence and essence cannot be separated. He does hold, as we have seen, that the attributes are not univocal as they apply to God and ourselves. But while al-Ghazali's monism takes the created world to have a purely virtual or figurative existence, on Ibn Rushd's view there truly do exist created things. The sense in which we exist is not the same as the sense in which God does, but they are not utterly equivocal either, being analogous and equally legitimate and quite literal uses of the term.

## Conclusion

In different ways, Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali are thus each ultimately led to a view that places a great distance between God and humans. All hint of anthropomorphism disappears, and God's oneness and transcendence is preserved. But the metaphysical distance leads to an epistemic one. An accurate and deep awareness of God is very difficult to attain, and beyond what most ordinary believers ever achieve. In order to bring their models of a unique and transcendent God in line with revelation,

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[12] See the passage from al-Ghazali's Persian letter, in Treiger 2007. As Trieger notes, al-Ghazali's idea that other things "borrow" their existence from God seems to be inspired by Ibn Sina, though the latter would deny that the existence that is borrowed is purely metaphorical.

[13] Indeed, al-Ghazali's cosmology is an elaborate fusion of philosophical and Qur'anic language. See Griffel 2009, 256–7.

Al-Ghazali (after his mystical turn) and Ibn Rushd each take much of the Qur'an and the tradition, including characterizations and at least many of the names of God, as highly analogical or allegorical. To some extent, this is a very natural and welcome philosophical development. Islam is a religion that emphasizes God's transcendence and our inability to know anything, let alone God, in the way that only God can; this helps explains why Islam is so rich in imagery and symbolism. And, as already noted, the Qur'an itself warns that it includes allegorical or ambiguous passages. But al-Ghazali (in his later work) and Ibn Rushd clearly end up with models of God that are such radical departures from orthodoxy that it is no surprise that they each warned against purveying philosophical views to the general public.

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