

THE INCOHERENCE
OF THE PHILOSOPHERS





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Al-Ghazālī

The Incoherence
of the Philosophers

تهافت الفلاسفة

*A parallel English–Arabic text
translated, introduced, and annotated by*

Michael E. Marmura

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إلى أخي عزيز

To my brother Aziz

—*M. Marmura*

Contents

Foreword	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Translator's Introduction— <i>English</i>	xv
Translator's Introduction— <i>Arabic</i>	xxix

♦ ♦ ♦

Author's Introduction: [<i>The religious preface</i>]	1
[A first] introduction	4
[A second] introduction	5
[A third] introduction	7
[A fourth] introduction	8
[Author's table of contents]	10

[Part One]

[First] Discussion: <i>On refuting their doctrine of the world's past eternity</i>	12
The {philosophers'} first {proof}	13
[The philosophers'] second proof . .	30
[The philosophers'] third proof . . .	39
[The philosophers'] fourth proof	40
 [Second] Discussion: <i>On refuting their statement on the post-eternity of the world, time, and motion</i>	47

[Third] Discussion: <i>On showing their obfuscation in saying that God is the world's enactor and maker . . .</i>	55
Regarding the first [aspect]	56
The second aspect	60
The third aspect	64
[Fourth] Discussion: <i>On showing their inability to prove the existence of the Maker of the world</i>	78
[Fifth] Discussion: <i>On showing their inability to prove that God is one . . .</i>	84
[Sixth] Discussion: <i>[On the divine attributes]</i>	96
[Seventh] Discussion: <i>On refuting their statement that the First cannot share with another in terms of genus . . .</i>	110
[Eighth] Discussion: <i>On refuting their statement that the existence of the First is simple . . .</i>	116
[Ninth] Discussion: <i>On showing their inability to sustain a proof that the First is not a body</i>	119
[Tenth] Discussion: <i>On their inability to show that the world has a maker and a cause</i>	123
[Eleventh] Discussion: <i>On showing the impotence of those among them who perceive that the First knows other[s] and knows the genera and species in a universal way</i>	125
[Twelfth] Discussion: <i>On showing their inability to prove that He also knows Himself</i>	131
[Thirteenth] Discussion: <i>On refuting their statement that God . . . does not know the particulars divisible in terms of temporal division into what is, what was, and what will be</i>	134
[Fourteenth] Discussion: <i>On their inability to set a proof [to show] that heaven is an animal that obeys God . . . through its circular motion</i>	144

[Fifteenth] Discussion: <i>On refuting what they mentioned concerning the purpose that moves heaven</i>	149
[Sixteenth] Discussion: <i>On refuting their statement that the souls of the heavens know all the particulars that occur in this world . . .</i>	153

[Part Two: The Natural Sciences]

[Introduction]	161
[Seventeenth] Discussion: <i>[On causality and miracles]</i>	166
[Eighteenth] Discussion: <i>On their inability to sustain a rational demonstration [proving] that the human soul is a self-subsistent spiritual substance . . .</i>	178
The first [proof]	182
A second proof	185
A third proof	187
A fourth proof	188
A fifth proof	189
A sixth proof	191
A seventh proof	193
An eighth proof	194
A ninth proof	196
A tenth proof	198
[Nineteenth] Discussion: <i>On refuting their statement that it is impossible for human souls to undergo annihilation . . .</i>	201
[Twentieth] Discussion: <i>On refuting their denial of bodily resurrection . . .</i>	208
The Book's Conclusion	226
♦ ♦ ♦	
Notes to the English Text	229
Notes to the Arabic Text	245
Index	249

Foreword

The Islamic Translation Series: Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism (hereafter ITS) is designed not only to further scholarship in Islamic studies but, by encouraging the translation of Islamic texts into the technical language of contemporary Western scholarship, to assist in the integration of Islamic studies into Western academia and to promote global perspectives in the disciplines to which it is devoted. If this goal is achieved, it will not be for the first time: Historians well know that, during the so-called Middle Ages, a portion of the philosophical, scientific, and mathematical wealth of the Islamic tradition entered into and greatly enriched the West. Even Christian theology was affected, as is brilliantly evidenced in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and other scholastics.

Manuscripts submitted to ITS for consideration are, of course, evaluated without regard to the religious, methodological, or political preferences of the translators or to their gender or national origins. The translator of each text, not the editors of the series nor the members of the advisory board, is solely responsible for the volume in question.

On behalf of Daniel C. Peterson, the managing editor, and members of the advisory board, I wish to express deep appreciation to the cosponsoring institutions for their gracious support of this project. Special thanks are due to the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts of Brigham Young University and to the Institute of Global Cultural Studies of Binghamton University and its director, Ali A. Mazrui.

—PARVIZ MOREWEDGE
Editor-in-Chief
Binghamton, New York

♦ ♦ ♦

Brigham Young University and its Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts are pleased to sponsor and publish the Islamic Translation Series: Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism (ITS). We wish to express our appreciation to the editor-in-chief of ITS, Parviz Morewedge, for joining us in this important project. We are especially grateful to James L. and Beverley Sorenson of Salt Lake City for their generous support, which made ITS possible, and to the Ashton Family Foundation of Orem, Utah, which kindly provided additional funding so that we might continue.

Islamic civilization represents nearly fourteen centuries of intense intellectual activity, and believers in Islam number in the hundreds of millions. The texts that will appear in the ITS are among the treasures of this great culture. But they are more than that. They are properly the inheritance of all the peoples of the world. As an institution of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Brigham Young University is honored to assist in making these texts available to many for the first time. In doing so, we hope to serve our fellow human beings, of all creeds and cultures. We also follow the admonition of our own tradition, to "seek . . . out of the best books words of wisdom," believing, indeed, that "the glory of God is intelligence."

—DANIEL C. PETERSON
Executive Editor
Brigham Young University

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A NOTE ON SPELLING

In this work, terms of Arabic derivation found in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* generally follow the first spelling given therein and are treated as regular English words. Otherwise, Arabic or Persian words and proper names have been transliterated following, with few exceptions, the standard recommended by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

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I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to my older brother Aziz who, very many years ago, was the first to instill in me a love of philosophy and whose sacrifices made my university education possible. It is to him that this work is dedicated.

—MICHAEL E. MARMURA
Toronto, February 2000

Translator's Introduction

I

Al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (The incoherence of the philosophers) marks a turning point in the intellectual and religious history of medieval Islam. It brought to a head a conflict between Islamic speculative theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) as it undertook to refute twenty philosophical doctrines. Seventeen are condemned as heretical innovations, three as totally opposed to Islamic belief, and those upholding them as outright infidels. Not that the philosophers it condemned were atheists—far from it. Their entire philosophical system rested on affirming the existence of God, from whom all other existents emanated. But, according to the Islamic philosophers, these existents emanated as the necessary consequence of the divine essence. As al-Ghazālī saw it, this meant that God produces the world by necessity in the same way that an inanimate object like the sun was said to produce its light by its very nature—by its essence, necessarily. It meant for him the denial of the divine attributes of life, will, power, and knowledge. Denuded of these attributes, he maintained, the God of the philosophers was not the God of the Qurʾān. At issue was not the question of God's existence, but the nature of the godhead.

The *Tahāfut* certainly put Islamic philosophy on the defensive in a way that it had never been before. Paradoxically, however, it also served to make it better known in the Islamic world. It brought to the fore the conflict between philosophy and more traditional Islamic belief. But perhaps more to the point, in order to refute the Islamic philosophers, al-Ghazālī had to explain them. He explained them so clearly and so well that he rendered philosophical ideas accessible to nonphilosophers. Inadvertently, so to speak, the *Tahāfut* helped spread philosophical ideas, as it also set a new tradition in *kalām*. After al-Ghazālī, no Islamic theologian worth his salt avoided detailed discussion of the philosophical theories

al-Ghazālī had criticized. *Kalām* thereafter became, as it had never been before, thoroughly involved with the theories of the *falāsifa*.

The *Tahāfut* also marks a high point in the history of medieval Arabic thought because of its intellectual caliber. Although its motivation is religious and theological, it makes its case through closely argued criticisms that are ultimately philosophical. A logical critique, largely of the emanative metaphysics, causal theory, and psychology of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037), it is incisive and thorough. It is true that theological criticism of philosophy was not entirely new in medieval Islam: one does encounter prior to al-Ghazālī *kalām* criticisms of philosophical ideas. But one does not encounter anything like the comprehensive, sustained critique of the *Tahāfut*—a work entirely devoted to refuting the philosophers. Whatever its failings—some of these shown by the answer Averroës (Ibn Rushd, d. 1198) gave to it in his *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (The incoherence of the Incoherence)—it remains a brilliant, incisive critique.

II

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī, perhaps the best known of medieval Islam's religious intellectuals, was trained as an Islamic lawyer (*faqīh*) and theologian (*mutakallim*) and became a noted Islamic mystic (*ṣūfī*). He was born in 1058 in the city or district of Ṭūs, in northeast Persia. He studied in *madāris*, religious colleges that focused on the teaching of Islamic law, first in Ṭūs, then for a short period in Jurjān on the Caspian Sea, and then in 1077 at a major *madrasa* in Nishapur. There he was taught by Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), a noted lawyer of the school of al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820) and the then leading theologian of the school of al-Ash'arī (d. 935). In law, al-Ghazālī was a Shāfi'ite; in *kalām*, he was an Ash'arite.

Ash'arism, by the eleventh century, was becoming the dominant school of *kalām*. It subscribed to a metaphysics of transient atoms and accidents, from which material bodies are composed. It regarded all temporal existents as the direct creation of God, decreed by His eternal attribute of will and enacted by His attribute of power. What humans habitually regard as sequences of natural causes and effects are in reality concomitant events whose constant association is arbitrarily decreed by the divine will. Between created things, there is no necessary causal connection—indeed, no causal interaction at all. God is the sole cause: all events are His direct creation. There is no inherent necessity in the uniformity of nature. Hence, when at certain times in history God interrupts this

uniformity by creating a miracle on behalf of a prophet or holy man, no contradiction ensues. In his works of *kalām*, al-Ghazālī ardently defended this atomist-occasionalist doctrine on logical and epistemological grounds.

For some six years after the death of al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazālī spent much of his time at the court-camp of Nizām al-Mulk (d. 1092), the vizier of the Seljuk sultans, but seems to have also taught in Nishāpūr. He became known as a distinguished scholar and author of works on Islamic law. In 1091, at the invitation of Nizām al-Mulk, he became the professor of law at the *Nizāmiyya* in Baghdad. This was the most prestigious of a number of *madāris* instituted by Nizām al-Mulk (hence their name *Nizāmiyyas*) in various eastern Islamic cities for the teaching of Islamic law according to the school of al-Shāfiʿī. These colleges were intended in part to train scholars to counter the religious propaganda of the rulers of Egypt, the Fāṭimid caliphs. For in the eleventh century the Islamic world was divided, with two opposing caliphates—the “orthodox” Sunnī Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, and the Shiʿite Fāṭimid caliphate in Cairo. The caliph in Baghdad, who wielded moral and religious authority rather than actual political power, stood as a symbol of Sunnī Islam. Real power rested with the Seljuk Turks, nomadic warriors who had occupied Baghdad in 1055. But the Seljuks had converted to Islam in its Sunnī form, and their power was legitimized by the Sunnī Abbasid caliph. There was hence an Abbasid-Seljuk establishment, and al-Ghazālī’s appointment at the *Nizāmiyya* of Baghdad made him part of it. Significantly, one of works he wrote during this period was *Faḍāʾih al-bāṭiniyya* (Scandals of the esoterics), a critique of the esoteric (*bāṭini*) doctrine of the Ismāʿīlī Fāṭimids. This work was also entitled *Al-Mustazhirī*, after the Abbasid caliph, al-Mustazhir, who had asked al-Ghazālī to write a refutation of Ismāʿīlī doctrine.

It was during this period, which extended from 1091 to 1095, that al-Ghazālī wrote his *Tahāfut* and three other works closely related to it. The first of these was *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa* (The aims of the philosophers), an exposition in Arabic that closely follows Avicenna’s Persian work, *Dānesh nāmeḥ ʿAlāī* (The book of science dedicated to ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla). In the introduction of this work and at its conclusion, al-Ghazālī states that he wrote this work of exposition to explain the philosophers’ theories as a prelude to his refuting them in the *Tahāfut*. (Strangely enough, in the *Tahāfut* there is never any mention of the *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*, nor any allusion to it.) The second work, *Miʿyār al-ʿilm* (The standard for knowledge), is an exposition of Avicennan logic, the most comprehensive of such expositions that al-Ghazālī wrote. This logic, for al-Ghazālī, was philosophically neutral, no more than a tool for knowledge, differing

from the logic used by the theologians only in its vocabulary and greater elaboration and refinement. He urged his fellow theologians and lawyers to adopt it. The *Miʿyār* was written expressly as an appendix to the *Tahāfut*. For, as al-Ghazālī proclaimed in introducing his *Tahāfut*, he would be using the very logic of the philosophers in refuting them. The third work, a sequel to the *Tahāfut*, is his *Al-iqtisād fī al-iʿtiqād* (Moderation in belief), an exposition of Ashʿarite theology. In the *Tahāfut* al-Ghazālī intended to refute and negate; in the *Iqtisād*, to build and affirm what he declared to be true doctrine, a point to which I will shortly return.

Probably around the time of his move to Baghdad, al-Ghazālī underwent a period of skepticism. As he recorded in his autobiography, written a few years before his death, he examined the various sciences he had studied but found that they did not yield certainty. Nor could he trust the senses, which, he maintained, deceive us. The faculty of sight, he wrote, “would look at the star and would see it small, the size of a dinar, but then astronomical proofs would show that it is greater in magnitude than the earth.” Distrust of the senses, he then relates, extended itself to reason. He began to doubt the basis of all reason, the self-evident truths of logic. For two months, he states, he remained in this “illness,” until in His mercy God restored to him his faith in reason.

In 1095, al-Ghazālī underwent another spiritual crisis that changed the course of his life. This came to a head in July when, for a period of time, he lost his ability to speak. Part of the reason, he stated in his autobiography, was that he came to realize that his motivation in pursuing his career was worldly glory, rather than genuine religious impulse. But he also hinted at a dissatisfaction with the purely doctrinal and intellectual approaches to religion. These, he maintained, bypassed the heart of the matter, that which is directly experiential in religion: the *dhawq*, a Sufi term that literally means “taste.” He had read the works of the Islamic mystics and become convinced that their path was the one that led to true knowledge. He made the decision to forsake his career and follow their path.

After making arrangements for his family, he left Baghdad and went first to Damascus, where he secluded himself in the minaret of its great mosque. Next he went to Jerusalem, where again he secluded himself in the Dome of the Rock. He then traveled to Hebron, to Madina, and to Mecca. For some eleven years he lived the life of asceticism, pursuing the mystic’s way. It was also during this period that he composed his magnum opus: his *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (The revivification of the sciences of religion). In this work, as well as other shorter treatises he wrote, he strove to reconcile traditional Islamic beliefs with Sufi teaching. This involved

his reinterpretation of what Sufis declared to be the ultimate mystical experience: "annihilation" (*al-fanā'*) in the divine essence, a declaration that for the more traditional Muslim violated the fundamental Islamic concept of divine transcendence. For al-Ghazālī, the end of the mystical experience is proximity (*qurb*) to the divine attributes, which in Ash'arite dogma are "additional" to the divine essence. The divine essence, at least in this world, remains for al-Ghazālī beyond any human experience, although he adheres to the Ash'arite doctrine that God can be "seen" in the hereafter. He further suggests that the mystical experience of "annihilation" consists in seeing nothing in existence except the unity of all things and hence losing experience of oneself. In the *Ihyā'* he also sought a synthesis between Islamic theological principles, the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, and the virtues expounded by the Sufis, the highest of which is the love of God.

In 1106 al-Ghazālī returned to teaching, first in Nishāpūr and then in Tūs, until his death in 1111. His writings during this period included theological and mystical works, his autobiography, and a major book in Islamic law, *Al-mustasfā min uṣūl al-dīn* (The choice essentials of the principles of religion). Needless to say, all the works he wrote after he left Baghdad, which include the voluminous *Ihyā'*, are basic for understanding the religious views of this remarkable thinker and are certainly not without intrinsic philosophical interest and value. But speaking strictly from the point of view of the history of philosophy, the pivotal work remains his detailed critique of the Islamic philosophers, his *Tahāfut*.

III

In the *Tahāfut*, al-Ghazālī singles out for his criticism al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Avicenna (d. 1037) as the two most reliable Islamic exponents of Aristotle's philosophy. It should be stressed, however, that while these two philosophers were Aristotelian, they were also Neoplatonists who had formulated two closely related but quite distinct emanative schemes. There are, moreover, differences between these two thinkers, not only in their emanative schemes, but also in their theories of the soul, epistemologies, and eschatologies. At the same time, however, there is overlap in their ideas, so that many of al-Ghazālī's criticisms apply to both.

The main criticisms of al-Ghazālī, however, have Avicenna's philosophy as their direct target. Thus, to give only a few concrete examples, the third discussion includes a detailed critique of Avicenna's triadic emanative scheme, not the dyadic scheme of al-Fārābī. The doctrine

that God knows only universals, or, rather, particulars “in a universal way,” criticized and rejected in the thirteenth discussion, is a distinctly Avicennan theory. Again, al-Ghazālī devotes the last three discussions of the *Tahāfut* to a detailed critique of Avicenna’s theory of an immaterial soul that denies bodily resurrection, not the theory of al-Fārābī. There are differences between the psychological theories of these two philosophers that include a marked difference between their eschatologies. Both maintain that it is only the immaterial soul that is immortal. But while Avicenna maintains that all human souls are immortal (living a life of bliss or misery in the hereafter, depending on their performance in this life), al-Fārābī in his extant writings confines immortality to the few.

The *Tahāfut* divides into two parts. The first, consisting of the first through sixteenth discussions, is devoted to metaphysical questions; the second, containing the seventeenth through twentieth discussions, covers the natural sciences. Two of the philosophical theories that al-Ghazālī condemns as utterly irreligious (not merely heretical innovations) are discussed in the metaphysical part. These are the theory of a pre-eternal world and the theory that God knows only the universal characteristics of particulars. The third doctrine condemned as irreligious—namely, the Avicennan doctrine of the human soul that denies bodily resurrection—belongs to the second part. It is debated in the eighteenth through twentieth discussions but more specifically in the twentieth discussion. This second part on natural science begins (in the seventeenth discussion) with al-Ghazālī’s famous critique of causality and concludes with the lengthy discussion of Avicenna’s psychology. In including psychology as part of natural science, al-Ghazālī follows the practice of the Islamic philosophers, who in turn follow Aristotle.

The theory of the world’s pre-eternity debated in the first discussion is the longest in the *Tahāfut*. At the heart of this debate is the question of the nature of divine causality. As al-Ghazālī explains it, the philosophers maintain that the world is the necessitated effect of an eternally necessitating cause and hence must be eternal. At issue here is the question of whether God acts by the necessity of His nature or voluntarily. For al-Ghazālī, the doctrine of an eternal world means the denial of the divine attribute of will. The philosophers must demonstrate the impossibility of a world created in time by an eternal will, but he tries to show that they fail. At most, their theory of a pre-eternal world has not been demonstrated. It also leads to absurd consequences, he argues. Al-Ghazālī affirms that the world and time were created together at a finite moment in the past through the choice of the eternal divine will.

The second "irreligious doctrine" debated in the thirteenth discussion is Avicenna's theory that God knows particulars only "in a universal way." It should perhaps be said here that Avicenna makes a distinction between celestial and terrestrial particulars. (The distinction is implicit but is not explicitly discussed in al-Ghazālī's otherwise masterly exposition of Avicenna's theory). For Avicenna, a celestial particular like the sun, unlike a terrestrial particular, represents the only member of its species. As such, God knows that one sun exists and knows its universal qualities. In this sense, one might be able to argue that God knows the particular sun. But the concern is with the terrestrial world, where the particular is not the only member of its species. More specifically, the concern is with the individual human and the individual human act. These, as al-Ghazālī pointedly shows, cannot in Avicenna's system be known by God individually. This theory, he argues, has not been demonstrated and plainly contradicts Qur³ānic assertions about divine omniscience.

The case is similar with Avicenna's doctrine of the soul that denies bodily resurrection. Al-Ghazālī argues in detail that the theory of the soul's immateriality, on which Avicenna's denial is based, has not been demonstrated. He then argues that even if one were to concede that the soul is immaterial, bodily resurrection would still be possible. The language of the Qur³ān affirming bodily resurrection, he points out, is explicit and must be accepted literally, not metaphorically. The interpretation of scriptural language as merely metaphor is incumbent if and only if scriptural assertions are demonstrated—in the strictest sense of demonstration—to be impossible. Otherwise they must be accepted in their literal sense. (Elsewhere in his mystical writings al-Ghazālī insists that these statements have a deeper metaphorical and symbolic sense, beyond the literal. But this deeper sense must be based on their literal acceptance.) This criterion of demonstrability underlies the whole argument of the *Tahāfut*.

IV

Al-Ghazālī explains the purpose for his writing the *Tahāfut* in a religious preface and four short introductions. These relatively brief statements are extremely important for understanding the intention of this work. The religious preface reveals a "proximate cause" for his writing the book, as he inveighs in it against certain pseudo-intellectuals of his time. These, he says in effect, have been so impressed by such "high-sounding names such as 'Socrates,' 'Hippocrates,' 'Plato,' 'Aristotle,' and

their likes" that they have become mere imitators of such philosophers and their followers, without having any real knowledge of their thought. Moreover, they have used the example of philosophers to rationalize their own disregard for the rituals and obligations imposed by the religious law, opting, in effect, for unbelief (*kufi*). He thus has undertaken to write this book, he states, to show "the incoherence of [the philosophers'] beliefs and the contradiction of their metaphysical statements, relating at the same time their doctrine as it actually is, so as to make it clear to those who embrace unbelief in God through imitation that all the significant thinkers, past and present, agree in believing in God and the last day." In a tone of accommodation, adopted perhaps to stress the point that the "imitators" of the philosophers have totally misunderstood them, he states that his differences with the philosophers "reduce to matters of detail extraneous to those two pivotal points." These "matters of detail," however, turn out to be quite fundamental: they include the three philosophical doctrines he condemns as utterly irreligious, whose supporters, as he declares, should be punishable by death.

In the introductions that follow, he makes a number of basic points. His quarrel, he states, is not with the philosophers' mathematics, astronomical sciences, or logic, but only with those of their theories that contravene the principles of religion. His task, he further states, is not to defend any specific theological doctrine. On the contrary, in refuting the philosophers he will use against them arguments of various Islamic theological schools. His task, he explains, is simply to refute the philosophers, to show that, contrary to their claims, their theories contradicting religious principles have not been demonstrated; they have failed to fulfill the conditions for demonstration which they themselves had set down in their logical works. His assertion that the *Tahāfut* is intended only to refute is repeated at the conclusion of his critique of the philosophers' four proofs for the world's pre-eternity. He writes:

We have not endeavored to defend a particular doctrine, and as such we have not departed from the objective of this book. We will not argue exhaustively for the doctrine of the temporal origination [of the world], since our purpose is to refute their claim of knowing [its] pre-eternity.

As regards the true doctrine, we will write a book concerning it after completing this one—if success, God willing, comes to our aid—and will name it *The Principles of Belief*. We will engage in it in affirmation, just as we have devoted ourselves in this book to destruction.