ULUSLARARASI MODERN ÇAĞ VE GAZZÂLİ SEMPOZYUMU

International Symposium on Modern Age
and al-Ghazzali

12-14 Mayıs / May 2011

BİLDİRİLER KİTABI

ISPARTA 2014

Deborah S. NASH

Introduction

Ghazali’s skeptical attack on causality in Discussion 17 of the Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-Falāsafiya) is both powerful and subtle. Powerful, because makes clear that there is little reason to hold that the relation between cause and effect is a logically necessary one, and thus raises the issue of whether or not he has thoroughly undermined the foundation of knowledge; subtle, because what exactly his intentions were with respect to the development of any systematic philosophy—metaphysics, ontology or epistemology—seem to have been left open for debate. It raises, for example, the metaphysical/ontological issue of whether he intended to deny causality altogether. Many commentators argue, successfully, I believe, that he does not. Hence, I will here assume the general correctness of their interpretations and instead turn my attention to what I take to be a second major problem posed by Discussion 17. It is itself twofold. I will be asking whether, for Al-Ghazali, human knowledge is possible, and if so, under what conditions.

The solution offered here to this problem is somewhat unconventional as it draws on primary sources other than the Tahāfut. It should be taken as provisional and subject to revision and further clarification. To begin, a brief overview of the main claims of Discussion 17:

---

* Marquette University

1 S. Riker concludes his article, “Al-Ghazali on Necessary Causality in the Incoherence of the Philosophers” by describing it as a “powerful philosophical argument” that is also a “two-edged sword, that can be used against religion by leading to further skepticism or against philosophy in leaving room for faith in the omniscient God.” (p. 6)
Discussion 17 of the Incoherence of Philosophy: A Synopsis

Recall that Ghazali opens Discussion 17 by claiming that

The connection between what is customarily believed to be cause and what is believed to be effect is not necessary according to our opinion; but each of the two (namely cause and effect) is independent of the other. The affirmation of one does not imply the affirmation of the other, nor does the denial of the one imply the denial of the other; the existence of one does not necessitate the existence of the other, nor does the non-existence necessitate the non-existence of the other. 2

He then goes on to elucidate this with the well known example of the burning of cotton: We consider it possible that there should be contact between the two without burning and we also considerate possible that cotton should be turned into ashes without having contact with fire. The philosophers deny the possibility of this. 3

That is, whereas his opponents, the ‘philosophers’, assert that the active cause of burning is fire, Ghazali argues that they actually have no basis for this claim except ‘observation’. 4 As he also notes, “… observation only proves that one occurs together with the other, but it does not prove that one occurs through the agency of the other. “ He subsequently concludes, “… there is no other cause than God.”

This is a devastating critique of the notion of natural causality as he would have inherited it from his predecessors (e.g. Al-Farabi, Avicenna), and ultimately from Aristotle. And, as noted, on those systems, the assumption that logical necessity does attach to relations between cause and effect is fundamental to our being able to make any claim to know things in this world. Ghazali seems to have identified the nervus probandi of these philosophies. Still, that he does not want to deny the possibility of knowledge altogether is clear from an ensuing passage in this Discussion. 5

The critique of causality in Discussion 17 aims, instead, I propose, to show what philosophy cannot do, i.e. that it cannot make good on any definitive claims to the effect that there is a certain foundation for human knowledge. In his article, “Ghazali and Demonstrative Science” M. Marmura comments at length on Al-Ghazali’s logical treatise (Miyar). Al-Ghazali’s exploration of Aristotelian logic in this

---


3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 284

5 Evidently at some point in his life, someone claimed that his denial of the necessary connection between cause and effect and his attribution of effects to the will of the Creator could lead to ‘abomnable impossibilities’ (e.g. if one left a slave at home, one might return and find that he had turned in to a dog). Al-Ghazali responded, "God has created knowledge in us that he will not bring about everything that is possible and we do not assert that everything possible will come to be. On the contrary, we have asserted that they are possible whereby we mean that they may happen or they may not happen. But if something happens habitually time after time, its habitual course will be firmly rooted in our minds in accordance with the habitual past occurrence in such a way that it cannot be removed from the mind." (Hyman & Walsh, p. 286).

As an aside, I note that P. Adamson notes in his article, “Al-Ghazali, Causality and Knowledge” that Ghazali’s successor, Averroes, criticized him on precisely this point: “By denying causality, Ghazali has also rejected the possibility of knowledge” – clear evidence of the fact that Ghazali has been misunderstood on it over the centuries, even by thinkers of considerable stature.
work seems to proceed on two levels. According to Marmura the work is either merely an exposition of the logic of demonstration as it is outlined in the *Posterior Analytics*, or, it is a critical commentary on that logic itself and ultimately leads Al-Ghazali to conclude that the premises of both what in Latin are termed *propter quo* and *propter quid* arguments are unproven and unprovable, and so do not allow philosophers to draw the conclusions they wish to draw with any ultimate certainty. In other words, Al-Ghazali has observed that, when the classical test of an argument’s ability to yield truth (i.e. “Do the premises do indeed imply the conclusion?”), is applied to the Aristotelian logic of demonstration, it is clear that they do not. This mirrors and, I would argue, reinforces the skeptical epistemological conclusion that Discussion 17 points to, namely, that there is no indisputable foundation for knowledge.

But, as Marmura also observes, Al-Ghazali held that, whereas Avicenna might have thought that the regularity of events in nature was due to the inherent nature of things (i.e. that they have essential natures that connect them causally and essentially to each other), he himself (Al-Ghazali) denies this. For him, the regularity of events in nature is not due to “the existence of permanent natures inherent in things and necessary causal connections (between them). There is order, to be sure; indeed there is a connection. But the source of this order and of the connection is elsewhere” (than in this world) (my addition).6

Adamson clarifies Ghazali’s position on this succinctly: “What Ghazali denies is that such knowledge (i.e. scientific knowledge or knowledge in terms of natural causation) constitutes necessary knowledge – scientific discourse is partial because it cannot establish whether a given natural cause will be superseded by supernatural intervention. Thus Al-Ghazali does not reject scientific or philosophical knowledge altogether. What he does is show that it does not measure up to the rather high standard that philosophers have set for themselves, namely that knowledge be of

6“Al-Ghazali, Causality, and Knowledge”, p. 195ff. In this same context, Marmura also here cites an illuminating passage from Ghazali’s logical treatise, *Miṣṣār*:

“Someone may say: How do you consider this certain when the theologians have doubted this, maintaining that it is not decapitation that causes death, nor eating, satiation, nor fire, burning, but that it is God, the exalted who causes burning, death and satiation at the occurrence of their concomitant events, but not through them.

We answer: We have already directed attention to the depths and true nature of this problem in the book *Tahāfut al-Falāsifya*. It is sufficient here to say that when the theologian informs the questioner that his son has been decapitated, the theologian does not doubt his death – no rational man would doubt this. The theologian admits the fact of death, but inquires about the manner of connection between decapitation and death.

As for the inquiry as to whether this is a necessary consequence of the thing itself, impossible to change, or whether this is in accordance with the passage of the custom (ṣunnā) of God, the Exalted, due to fulfillment of His will that can undergo neither substitution nor change, this is an inquiry into the mode of connection, not the connection itself. Let this be understood and let it be known that to doubt the death of someone whose head has been severed is nothing but seductive suggestion (of the devil) and that belief in the death of such a person cannot be doubted.

I take this passage to further confirm the point I am making here, namely that Al-Ghazali is not attempting to deny the reality of causal relations, nor is he claiming that scientific knowledge is impossible; rather he wants to ensure that both are understood within the larger framework of religious faith.
relationships which are logically necessary.” 7 In other words, Ghazali was concerned to ‘keep philosophy in its proper place’.

A Proposed Alternative Interpretation of Al-Ghazali’s Epistemology

If Ghazali was neither denying causality nor human knowledge, they under what conditions does he think that knowledge is possible?

To answer this, I begin by suggesting that the actual strategy behind his critique of causality in Discussion 17 is twofold: First, and most obviously, as noted, he is exposing the questionable nature of the philosophers claim that cause and effect relations are undergirded by logical necessity. And, he shows, effectively, that and this need not be the case. But there may be a second, less explicit agenda at work in Discussion 17 as well, namely that he is attempting to frame the problem of knowing primarily, and most fundamentally in terms of revelation. In other words, I take it to be the case that he would affirm that there is a mode of knowing available to us other than the ‘scientific’ (in the Aristotelian sense), one that does not rest either directly or entirely on the logic of the relation between cause and effect, but rather on human common sense, revelation and prophecy.

In the final section of “Ghazali and Demonstrative Science” Marmura succinctly summarizes what he takes to be the conclusions that Al-Ghazali’s draws from his study of the Aristotelian logic of demonstration: “Probable premises yield probable conclusions”. He also comes to the general conclusion that, “To be sure, Ghazali has a theory of probable knowledge.” 8

That this sort of theory of knowledge is operative in his thought can, I believe, be discerned from his discussion of prophecy in the Deliverance from Error as well as from a remark he makes about the nature of prophetic knowledge 9 in the Tahāfut.

The former (DE) is, albeit, an autobiographical text and the argument which he outlines there is an analogical one (if it is intended as a philosophical argument at all), so to appeal to it to answer the question of what sort of theory of knowledge is operative in his work overall is, I would concede, to rely upon a somewhat oblique interpretive strategy. Nevertheless, the remarks he makes there on the nature of prophecy do need to be taken seriously because in working out an interpretation of his epistemology, a) one needs to take into account the full trajectory of his spiritual and intellectual development, including his turn to Sufi mysticism, if one is to understand him correctly, and b) the remark made in DE represent an attempt to work out his thinking on the nature and stages of human knowing, if not in systematic or strictly philosophical terms, at least in general schematic terms. I summarize his claims below.

---

7 Adamson, p. 8
8 Marmura, p. 201
9 I am cognizant of the fact that, in the context of Islamic philosophy and theology, the notion of prophecy is heavily laden with meaning, historic, political and methodological. This is both intriguing and puzzling given that such layers of meaning to not attach to it in the Western theological and philosophical tradition. Therefore, it I have misunderstood this in any way further clarification would be valuable.
The latter portion of *Deliverance From Error*, (“The True Nature of Prophecy and the Compelling Need of All Creation for It”) focuses on the phenomenon of ‘prophecy’. 10 He begins by outlining what he takes to be the various levels of human intellectual development:

The first thing created in man was a sense of touch, and by it he perceives certain classes of existents such as heat and cold…

And,

Next, there is created in him the sense of sight, and by it he apprehends colors and shapes. This is the most extensive of the worlds of the sensible. Next hearing is implanted in him, so that he hears sounds of various kinds. After that, taste is created in him, etc.

Subsequent to this, the human being begins to acquire powers of abstract thought:

When he is about 7 years old there is created in him discernment (تَمْيِيز) or the power of distinguishing … He now apprehends more than the world of the sensible, and none of these additional factors (relations, etc.) exist in the world of sense.

And,

From this he ascends to another stage and (intellect) (or reason) (‘اِلْلَغِيَّة) is created in him. He apprehends things necessary, possible, impossible, things which do not occur in the previous stages.

Then, there is the much quoted claim that

Beyond intellect there is yet another stage. In this another eye is opened by which he beholds the unseen, what is to be in the future and other things which are beyond the ken of the intellect in the same way as the objects of intellect are beyond the ken of the faculty of discernment and the objects of discernment are beyond the ken of sense.

To which he adds a striking critical remark,

Moreover, just as the man at the stage of discernment would reject and disregard the objects of intellect, so some intellectuals reject and disregard the objects of prophetic revelation. That is sheer ignorance. They have no ground for their view except that this is a stage which they have not yet reached and which for them does not exist. Yet they suppose that it is non-existent in itself.

Finally, he goes on to argue that belief in prophecy is justified by the fact that

The proof of the possibility of their being prophecy and the proof that there has been prophecy is that there is knowledge in the world the attainment of which by reason is inconceivable, for example, in medicine and astronomy. 11

His initial observations here speak for themselves. To the latter, I would note that this is a point which is still not by any means beyond dispute in philosophy, even scientists who are wholly committed to defining knowledge in purely empirical terms

---

10 *Deliverance from Error*, p. 280 ff. Reprinted in Hyman & Walsh
11 Ibid.
have to concede that there are some types of knowledge that are not gotten at empirically. As the twentieth century British empiricist philosopher, Bertrand Russell, would claim, “empirical generalizations” need to be accounted for.

As concerns the alternative interpretation I am advancing here, another textual passage is thought provoking as well. Al-Ghazali comments in the Tahāfut that

*It is possible that a certain prophet may know, in the manner mentioned by the philosophers, (who, as Al-Ghazali had noted earlier, concede that foreknowledge is possible) that someone will not return from his journey tomorrow. Even though this return is possible, (the prophet) knows that this possibility will not be realized. Even if you consider an ordinary man and you are aware that he does not know any of these strange things nor can he apprehend the intelligible unless he is taught them, yet it cannot be denied that his soul and estimative faculties have the ability to apprehend what the prophets apprehend, in so far as the prophets are aware of the possibility of this event, knowing at the same time that this possibility will not be realized.*

I take it to be the case that his observation here supports the first argument I made here, namely that there are such levels of human intellectual development, that they encompass the most basic operations of the sense and intellect and even extend to the special prophetic powers of intuition, and that an analogical relation pertains between each of them. If the man of common sense is able to understand the insight of the prophet (in any degree, even partially or indirectly) by employing his ‘estimative’ faculties, then human powers of knowing are such that they are not limited to the empirical. We do have glimmers of insight, sometimes only vague and barely discernible, of some other world beyond this one. And, in moments when we are blessed with such insights we do realize that, ‘beyond intellect’ there is a different, far more advanced level of understanding to be had about the ‘why and wherefore’ of things here. To claim that, as those imbued with the spirit of epistemological optimism might want to, that any of us, as human beings is immune from having to confront such moments of wonder and engaging in such leaps of intellectual faith, seems less than realistic. Human experience confirms this as Al-Ghazali himself notes. In his words, “In general, the man to whom He has granted no immediate experience at all, apprehends no more of what prophetic revelation really is than the name.”

**Concluding Remarks**

Adamson proposes that, for Al-Ghazali, the paradigm of human knowledge “is or involves revelation”; Riker, in asking whether or not Al-Ghazali holds to an extreme occasionalism (and thus strictly occasionalist theory of knowledge), concludes that he has a more moderate ‘religious approach’ and thus an epistemology that attempts to take in to account the fact that God creates in us “the habitual impression

---

13 DE, p. 279. Reprinted in Hyman & Walsh. Recall also Al-Ghazali’s earlier discussion of his impatience with worldly affairs and his need to pursue the calling of the mystic, to “leave the mansion of deception and return to that of eternity,” a clear indication of an awareness on his part that there are various of understanding and the prophetic or mystical is of a higher order than others.
14 Adamson, p. 2
(of the link between cause and effect) through the natural working of the world, in which cause and effect are normally linked, although not necessarily." Yet he (Riker) is ambivalent as to which of these two epistemologies he takes to be operative in Al-Ghazali’s thought. Marmura’s occasionalistic view of Al-Ghazali’s thought moves him to conclude that he held that human cognitions are the direct creation of the divine will. Yet he (Marmura) is hard-pressed to account for the fact that Al-Ghazali clearly acknowledges the occurrence of miracles.

It is to these commentators that my proposed alternative interpretation is addressed. My aim with this proposed alternative interpretation has been to expand and refine their insights into Al-Ghazali’s epistemology, and, where appropriate, to provide further clarification on them. In the secondary literatures cited here, none of the commentators gives in-depth consideration to the notion of prophecy. Some acknowledge that it is a paradigm of knowledge for him, but no one claims that it is the leading one or the ideal. And, none of them ask exactly, a) how it is that the prophet comes to understand the things that he does and b) what exactly it is that ensures the veracity of his insights.

In Deliverance from Error, he states that ‘there is a ways of apprehending (such things as astronomical laws for which no confirming data can be obtained) which are not apprehended by the intellect. This is the meaning of prophetic revelation. That is not to say that prophecy is merely an expression for such knowledge. Rather the apprehending of this class of extra intellectual objects is one of the properties of prophecy.’ He then goes on to add that “The other properties of prophetic revelation are apprehended only by immediate experience (dhawq) from the practice of the mystic way” , “dhawq” being described elsewhere as ‘tasting’, and so conduction to moral change.

But, how, more exactly does prophetic insight occur? Al-Ghazali makes some intriguing and even cryptic remarks about this in the context of a discussion of miracles in the Tahāfut. He there says,

When the time appropriate for the occurrence of a miracle has arrived, the mind of the prophet turns toward it. The order of the good becomes clear through its appearance (and the miracle occurs) to preserve the order of the Law. (This need) determines its existence. In itself, (the miracle) is possible, but God’s generosity is the principle through which it comes to be. However, the miracle only proceeds from God when necessity determines its existence and good appears in it. And the good only appears in it when the prophet needs to establish his prophetic office, in order to promulgate the good.

The prophetic art is, then a kind of collaboration with the divine, a kind of caring for, or service to, humanity through the proper use of one’s intuitive gifts. Ghazali’s remarks here reflect a deep understanding of the prophetic office, one that also accords with the Old Testament view of it.

15 Riker, p. 5.
16 DE, p. 281ff.
17 Ibid.
18 DE, p. 276
Lastly, if, as I have proposed here, prophecy is in fact the leading paradigm of knowledge of Al-Ghazali (in preference to ‘scientific knowledge, but also assuming full acceptance of it), then what is to guarantee the veracity of the prophet’s insights? In other words, how would he claim to avoid falling prey to epistemological subjectivism? In his own words, one ought ‘not make the man the measure of truth, but truth the measure of the man.’

This poses little problem for Al-Ghazali since the experience of mysticism leads to, not merely to vague and dubious intimations of the existence of some other realm, but to an understanding of what is ultimately real, and so to knowledge which is unshakable in its certitude. As he says,

Just as intellect is one of the stages of human development in which there is an ‘eye’ which sees the various intelligible objects, which are beyond the ken of the senses, so prophecy also is the description of a stage in which there is an eye endowed with light such that in that light the unseen and other supra-intellectual objects become visible.

Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources

