

CHAPTER 9

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S (D. 1111) INCOHERENCE OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

FRANK GRIFFEL

THE relationship between the movement of Greek and mostly Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy in Arabic (*falsafa*) and the different trends of Islamic theology (*kalām*) is a complex one that cannot be easily described. Since the beginning of *falsafa* in the third/eighth century, philosophical thinkers were engaged in dialogues with theologians even if we often have little direct evidence for exchanges between these groups. Al-Kindī (d. ca. 250/865), for instance, shows a keen interest in *kalām* to the extent that there are links between Muʿtazilism and his teachings (Adamson 2007, 55, 104–5). In the case of some Baghdad Peripatetics we have evidence of direct exchanges, like the famous debate in 326/938 between the philosopher Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 328/940) and the grammarian Abū Saʿīd al-Sirāfi (d. 368/979), who was trained in Muʿtazilite *kalām*, on the merits of studying logic (Endress 1986) or ʿĪsā b. Zurʿa's (d. 398/1008) letter to a contemporary Muʿtazilite (Starr 2000). Abū Bakr Zakariyā' al-Rāzī (d. 313/925) was engaged in a direct exchange with Muʿtazilites of his time on questions of metaphysics and cosmology (Rashed 2000). Al-Fārābī (d. 339/950–51) was well aware of *kalām* teachings on the vacuum, for instance, and responded to them (Daiber 1983). Some of his philosophical concerns, like the one on human free will, are curiously similar to ones held by Muʿtazilites (Griffel 2009, 139). In the case of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 428/1037), we now have valuable analytical studies that document the complex interplay between *falsafa* and early *kalām* (e.g., Wisnovsky 2004).

Similarly, on the side of *kalām* we see Muʿtazilites as well as early Ashʿarites discuss and refute teachings of the *falāsifa*. They appear under various labels sometimes associated with the movement of *falsafa*, sometimes presented as teachings of groups that bear other names. The Ashʿarite *mutakallim* al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), for instance, discusses and subsequently refutes Aristotelian teachings held by people whom he identifies as “those who believe in natures” (*aṣḥāb al-ṭabāʾiʿ*: al-Bāqillānī, *al-Tamhīd*, 53–66). Also,

in another book devoted to the refutation of Ismāʿīlī Shīʿites but unfortunately lost, al-Bāqillānī included a chapter on people he calls *dahriyya*, *falāsifa*, and dualists (Griffel 2000, 169, 178f.). Overall, however, these early stages of the interplay between *falsafa* and *kalām* are not well researched. In the case of Ibn Sīnā, for instance, it is still unclear how much he took from Muslim theologians—mostly Muʿtazilites such as his contemporaries al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) or Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044)—and how much Muslim theologians before al-Ghazālī took from Avicenna. The latter were mostly Ashʿarites, such as al-Ghazālī’s teacher al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), but also Twelver Shīʿites with Muʿtazilite leanings, such as al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), who discusses Ibn Sīnā’s arguments in his works (*Rasāʾil*, 147–52).

Polarized contrasts between the movement of *falsafa* and Muʿtazilite as well as Ashʿarite *kalām* may therefore not be adequate even for the period before al-Ghazālī. With his oeuvre such contrasts are no longer acceptable. With al-Ghazālī, the engagement of *kalām* with *falsafa* enters a new phase that is very different from the one before. On the parallel side of the *falāsifa*, his works trigger an engagement with teachings in *kalām* that is equally very different from what happened before al-Ghazālī (Griffel 2011).

During the fifth/eleventh century, the philosophical system of Ibn Sīnā became the most potent challenge to the various theological schools of Islam that had developed in the centuries earlier. Coping with the views of Ibn Sīnā and his followers was a long process that continued for many centuries. A significant part of theological literature in Islam in its postclassical period after the fifth/eleventh century was devoted to discussing the merits and the errors of the Avicennan system. Ibn Sīnā found defenders among Muslim theologians as well as critics. Learning the system of “the philosophers” (*al-falāsifa*)—a word that came to mean Ibn Sīnā and his followers—was part of almost every advanced madrasa education up until the thirteenth/nineteenth century. What is more, right from the beginning of the discussion about Ibn Sīnā among Muslim theologians, we see that some of his teachings had a very significant influence even among those theologians who rejected his general direction of thought and who argued against it. Ibn Sīnā’s explanations of prophecy, divination, and the quicker insight of some humans compared to others, for instance, were soon adapted by Muslim theologians. In this adapted and slightly changed form they had an enormous influence on how Muslims thought about prophecy and the superior insights of Sufi saints (*awliyāʾ*) or about the Shīʿite imams (Griffel 2010).

This chapter looks at a crucial stage in the early engagement of Muslim theologians with the Avicennan system that began with al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). Al-Ghazālī was the first Muslim theologian we know of who explicitly engaged with the Avicennan philosophical system by discussing it extensively and trying to refute some of its elements. Al-Ghazālī was born around 447/1056 in Ṭābarān, a town in the district of Ṭūs in north-western Iran, close to the modern city of Mashhad. He grew up in a poor family, though with some scholarly and maybe even Sufi background. Early on he moved to the intellectual center of Nishapur, where he became a student of al-Juwaynī, the most prominent Ashʿarite teacher of his time. The school of Ashʿarite theology had slowly grown

out of the teachings of its eponym al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935), who started out as a Mu'tazilite *mutakallim* but was then drawn to the more scriptualist teachings of a Baghdad circle that followed Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). Subsequently, he developed *kalām* arguments to defend some of these scriptualist teachings against their Mu'tazilite detractors. Early Ash'arism, which remained a relatively insignificant school until it was promoted in the early fifth/eleventh century in the Iranian merchant-city of Nishapur, is characterized by its usage of Mu'tazilite argumentative techniques and a Mu'tazilite ontology, while at the same time defending the teachings of a group that self-consciously identified as "Sunnīs," that is, followers of the *sunna* of the Prophet Muḥammad, meaning his actions as well as his views and teachings as they are recorded in the corpus of *ḥadīth*.

Al-Ghazālī was the most talented Sunnī theologian of his generation. This was acknowledged when in 484/1091 the vizier of the Grand Seljuq Empire, Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), appointed him to the position of head teacher at the Baghdad Nizāmiyya madrasa. Al-Ghazālī tells us in his autobiography *The Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*; *Deliverer*, 77 f.) that he also became a keen reader of Sufi literature. The high moral standards he found there made him contemplate his close relationship to the state authorities of the Grand Seljuq Empire. This process led to his flight from Baghdad and the abandonment of his position at the state-sponsored Nizāmiyya madrasa. In 488/1095 he began a two-year period of travels that ended at his hometown Ṭabarān, where he settled and taught at a small, privately funded madrasa and where he maintained a Sufi lodge (*khānqāh*). His newfound devotion to a moralistic lifestyle that was influenced by Sufi notions as well as an Aristotelian virtue ethics found its expression in his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*), a multivolume work that he wrote soon after his departure from Baghdad. Later in life, in 499/1106, al-Ghazālī returned to teaching at a state-sponsored teaching institution and took the position of the head teacher at the Nizāmiyya madrasa in Nishapur. At this point, however, al-Ghazālī had already broken with the Seljuq state and its institutions, and he tells us that he filled that post only begrudgingly and under severe pressure (*Deliverer*, 90–92). He died in 505/1111 at his madrasa and *khānqāh* in Ṭabarān-Ṭūs (Griffel 2009, 19–59).

Al-Ghazālī's early relation to *falsafa* is difficult to reconstruct. His later adaptation of philosophical ideas prompted much criticism, and this made him disavow whatever early attraction there may have been toward the teachings of Ibn Sīnā and other *falāsifa*. There are, however, also statements in his works that might be read as an admission that he studied the books of Ibn Sīnā early in his life, maybe under the direction of al-Juwaynī, and that they fascinated him right from the start (Griffel 2009, 30f.). Modern scholars suggest that there was a period in al-Ghazālī's early career when he was himself a follower of Ibn Sīnā. If so, his seemingly neutral report of Ibn Sīnā's teachings, *The Doctrines of the Philosophers* (*Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*), may come from that period and was later adapted as an introduction for his students that would prepare them to fully understand al-Ghazālī's refutation of Ibn Sīnā (Janssens 2003). *The Doctrines of the Philosophers* is an Arabic adaptation, thoroughly reworked at times, of one of Ibn Sīnā's Persian textbooks of logic, the natural sciences, and metaphysics, the *Book of Knowledge*

for 'Alā' al-Dawla (*Dāneshnāmeḥ-yi 'Alā'ī*). There is, however, no clear proof that al-Ghazālī went through such an Avicennan period early in his career. Neither his biographers nor his enemies mention it, although the latter complain that al-Ghazālī studied *falsafa* before he had fully mastered the religious sciences. It is also possible that al-Ghazālī composed *The Doctrines of the Philosophers* later in his life, after his refutation of *falsafa*, because he realized that his students needed a more thorough preparation than what he had written before. *The Doctrines of the Philosophers* became a very successful textbook in its own right, particularly in its Hebrew and Latin translations (al-Ghazālī, *Metaphysics* and *Logica et philosophia*; Lohr 1965; Steinschneider 1893, 1:298–326).

The earlier view that al-Ghazālī composed his *Doctrines of the Philosophers* in the time period immediately before writing his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*)—a view that is based on his own comments in his autobiography—is now largely dismissed. Al-Ghazālī's autobiography is a highly apologetic work, written in 500/1106 or shortly after in response to attacks—from both friends and foes—for taking up the teaching position at the Nizāmiyya madrasa in Nishapur. Here al-Ghazālī tries to counter the impression that he is too deeply influenced by philosophical literature. His presentation that he studied *falsafa* for two years while teaching at the Nizāmiyya madrasa in Baghdad 484/1091–488/1095, and that he needed a third year to write his refutation, is not credible (al-Ghazālī, *Deliverer*, 61). It is more likely that al-Ghazālī's occupation with Ibn Sina's philosophy began much earlier in his life and that he worked on his response for years and maybe even decades. His appointment to the very prominent teaching position at the Nizāmiyya in Baghdad may be one of the fruits of his studies of *falsafa* rather than the beginning of it (Griffel 2009, 30–36).

One of the manuscripts of al-Ghazālī's *Incoherence of the Philosophers* mentions that the book was finished in Muḥarram 488 / January 1095. At this time, al-Ghazālī was a highly respected teacher at the Ash'arite Nizāmiyya madrasa. He was close both to the caliph's court in Baghdad and to that of the Seljuq sultan in Isfahan. Apart from a few shorter books in legal theory and a textbook on Ash'arite *kalām* (al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*), this was al-Ghazālī's first major work that he put on the book market. Together with it or soon after, he published a number of books on logic and epistemology (al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār* and *Miḥakk*), aimed as preparations for studying the *Incoherence*, but also produced because al-Ghazālī wished to establish the study of philosophical logic at Muslim madrasas, a project that would prove to be successful.

There was once the impression among modern readers that al-Ghazālī changed some of his teachings after his flight from Baghdad later in the year he published the *Incoherence*. In the early 1990s, however, Richard M. Frank argued that there was no notable theoretical development or evolution in al-Ghazālī's theological and philosophical thought between his earliest works and his last (Frank 1994, 87, 91). Indeed, in the *Incoherence* al-Ghazālī lays down the philosophical foundations of much of what he later expresses in his theological works. Soon after the *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī published his second major book of refutation. This was directed against the Ismā'īlī Shī'ites and

has the long title *The Scandals of the Esoterics and the Virtues of the Party of [the Caliph] al-Mustaẓhir* (*Faḍā'il al-bāṭiniyya wa-faḍā'il al-Mustaẓhiriyya*). The two books pursue similar goals insofar as they both aim to establish in a legal argument that the *falāsifa* as well as the Ismā'īlis are clandestine apostates (*zanādiqa*) from Islam who can be killed if they publicly teach or propagate their positions. The *Scandals of the Esoterics* is also important since it is in this book that al-Ghazālī addresses the *falāsifa*'s teachings about the authority of revelation and the political function of prophecy (al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'il*, 153–54, partly translated in al-Ghazālī, *Deliverer*, 228; Griffel 2000, 292–97), a subject left untouched in his *Incoherence*. Comparing these two books, however, reveals that the *Incoherence* is a much more thorough work than the *Scandals of the Esoterics*, with wider-ranging aims. The legal condemnation of the *falāsifa* in that book takes only a single page, and it appears almost as an afterthought to a highly philosophical engagement with the teachings of Ibn Sīnā.

9.1. THE OVERALL STRATEGY OF THE INCOHERENCE OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

Scholars point out that the word “incoherence” is not an accurate translation of the Arabic *tahāfut* and does not reflect the gravity of the accusation leveled against the *falāsifa* (Treiger 2011, 108–15). The Arabic term describes the philosophers' jumping into unwarranted and ill-founded conclusions that do not result from their arguments. “Precipitance” might be a more accurate translation, in the sense that the book describes the overhasty construction of a philosophical edifice that cannot last. Al-Ghazālī clearly thought of the *Incoherence* as a refutation (*radd*). The overall goal of the book is to show that the *falāsifa*'s claim of being able to prove their teachings through demonstrative arguments is unfounded and no more than a delusion.

Al-Ghazālī begins his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* with a preface and with four different introductions. Here he clarifies what prompted the writing of the book and what he wishes it to accomplish. In the preface he describes his annoyance with a group of Muslims who think they are smarter and more intelligent than the rest and who therefore believe they are not bound to perform religious duties such as praying. These people claim that they follow the teaching of the ancient philosophers Socrates, Hippocrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their likes whom they regard as masters of all sciences. This group of Muslims says about these ancient philosophers that

concurrent with the sobriety of their intellect and the abundance of their merit is their denial of revealed laws and religious confessions and their rejection of the details of the religions and faiths, and they are convinced that the [religious] laws are composed [by humans] and that they are embellished tricks. (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 2)

This “group” (*ṭāʾifa*), however, is not the philosophers themselves, as al-Ghazālī clarifies, or at least not their heads and leaders. Later on he will mention “the *vulgus* of the philosophers” (*jamāhīruhum*: al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 12), and he seems to have these in mind here. The “prominent and leading philosophers” are explicitly exempt from the accusation of neglecting religious duties, denying revealed religion, or teaching that religions are embellished tricks (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 2). The group al-Ghazālī complains about at the very beginning of his *Incoherence* creates a false philosophical tradition, based on the idea that the ancient philosophers were the masters of all sciences, and they follow teachings that were never popular among the prominent philosophers. The leaders among the philosophers, however, are not entirely innocent when some followers misinterpret their teachings. The leaders themselves create a myth, namely that their own teachings are proven through demonstrative arguments that render them indubitable. The *falāsifa* create the impression that they have a way to truth that is superior to all other groups and even superior to revelation.

Al-Ghazālī does not dispute the possibility of demonstrative arguments that prove their conclusions beyond any doubt. On the contrary, he endorses demonstration in his own writings on logic and he urges his peers in the religious sciences to accept this method. In an important passage in the second introduction that will be often quoted by later Muslim scientists, al-Ghazālī mocks religious scholars who dismiss the astronomers’ explanation of a solar eclipse as an alignment of sun, moon, and earth. This explanation is demonstratively proven, and denying it creates more harm for religion than what its enemies could ever inflict (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 6).

Al-Ghazālī knew well that the demonstrative method is taught in books that take their teachings—and often also their titles—from Aristotle’s logical works, most importantly his *Posterior Analytics*. There demonstration is described as the combination between (1) correct forms of arguments and (2) indubitable premises that are either self-evident or that have themselves been proven in earlier demonstrations. The fourteen correct forms of arguments, the syllogisms, are again described in the *falāsifa*’s books that present the teachings of Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*. Finally, how to form correct definitions and premises is clarified in books that are equivalent to Aristotle’s *Categories* and the *Isagoge* of Porphyry (d. ca. 305), a book with which the study of Aristotelian logic in the *Organon* begins. Al-Ghazālī accepted this so-called instrument or tool (Greek *órganon*) of reasoning, and he adopted the demonstrative method for his own. He also accepted that it yields indubitable results in mathematics, geometry (like explaining a solar eclipse), and the natural sciences. When it comes to philosophical metaphysics (*ilāhiyyāt*), however, al-Ghazālī concluded that many teachings of the *falāsifa* could not be proven demonstratively. Metaphysics is the philosophical discipline most closely aligned with theology. It deals with ontology, asking how the world is structured and what are its most basic constituents, with cosmology, looking into how the basic constituents relate to one another, and finally it deals with God, His attributes, and how He relates to His creation.

In the fourth introduction of his *Incoherence* al-Ghazālī explains the overall goal of this book. He addresses the *falāsifa*'s claim that all or most of their teachings are supported by demonstrations and responds:

We will make it plain that in their metaphysical sciences they have not been able to fulfill the claims laid out in the different parts of the logic and in the introduction to it, i.e. what they have set down in the *Posterior Analytics* on the conditions for the truth of the premise of a syllogism, and what they have set down in the *Prior Analytics* on the conditions of its figures, and the various things they posited in the *Isagoge* and the *Categories*. (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 9)

Philosophical metaphysics, al-Ghazālī continues to argue, is not based on demonstrative arguments. Rather, the arguments the *falāsifa* claim as demonstrative are faulty and do not fulfill the conditions for demonstration set out in their own books of logic. The problem lies in their premises. These are, despite the *falāsifa* claims, not indubitable. The *falāsifa* neglect to critically examine the foundations of their own thinking but accept them on the authority of their teachers and their leaders. All this amounts for al-Ghazālī to a quasi-religious attitude. The leading *falāsifa* ask their students and followers to agree on the premises they postulate without, in fact, being able to prove them. A science that uses formally correct arguments and employs premises that are unproven but agreed upon by everybody who shares in that science is, according to Aristotle, not demonstrative but merely dialectical. The religious sciences, for instance, are all dialectical since they are based on premises taken from revelation. The point al-Ghazālī makes in the above passage is that philosophical metaphysics is not superior to religious theology. Both are dialectical sciences, based on premises that its practitioners have agreed upon. But while the *falāsifa*'s agreement is a case of blind emulation (*taqlīd*) of what has been passed down from generation to generation of philosophers, the basis of theology is divine revelation.

Showing that the *falāsifa*'s arguments in metaphysics are not demonstrative serves a number of purposes for al-Ghazālī. First, it destroys the conviction of the "vulgar" followers of the philosophical movement that the *falāsifa* were masters of all sciences and more intelligent than everybody else. Rather, their arguments are far from perfect and quite often wrong. Second, it destroys the conviction of those who follow the "prominent and leading philosophers" that their metaphysics is superior to theology and can replace it. Rather, while the former is based on mere *taqlīd* of bygone authorities (Aristotle, etc.), the latter is based on divine revelation. Third, and this is not fully mentioned in the introductions but only later on in his *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī also wants to show that many teachings of the *falāsifa* that are correct are not based on demonstrative inquiries but taken from earlier revelations, such as those of Moses or Jesus, or from the inspirational insight of the *awliyā*', "friends of God" or saints who already existed in the religions before Islam. This third goal is most clearly expressed in a passage from the fifteenth discussion of the *Incoherence*. That discussion addresses the *falāsifa*'s teachings on the celestial souls and why they move the spheres of the heavens. Al-Ghazālī

disagreed with the rational explanation of the heavenly movements only on minor points, limited to *why* things are the way they are. He does, however, object that the arrangement of the heavens is a subject where rational insight is limited. Humans know what they know about the celestial movements not from observation or mathematical calculation but from another source:

The secrets of the heavenly kingdom are not known with the likes of these imaginings. God makes them known only to His prophets and saints by way of inspiration (*ilhām*), not by way of inferential proof. (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 152)

This point is supported elsewhere in al-Ghazālī's oeuvre, like in his autobiography, where he draws on an older argument that other Muslim theologians such as the Ismā'īlī Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934) had applied against *falsafa* (al-Ghazālī, *Deliverer*, 85). How can the knowledge in astronomy be drawn from observation and calculation given that some celestial events are so rare that they occur only once in a thousand years? The mathematical pattern between such rare events can only be deduced with the help of divine inspiration. The same applies to medicine. How can experience lead to an understanding of how drugs work, given that quite many kill the patient if applied before humans have medical expertise? Medical knowledge comes to humans through divine inspiration, not through experiments or logical deductions.

This third goal explains why al-Ghazālī "refutes" some teachings in his *Incoherence* that he later applied in his own works. He addresses, for instance, the *falāsifa*'s explanation of the movement of stars through spheres (fifteenth discussion) or Ibn Sīnā's view that the celestial souls have knowledge of the future that some humans might be able to connect to (sixteenth discussion). In some of his later works, al-Ghazālī adopts both these teachings as his own. In the *Incoherence*, the dispute is not about the truth of these teachings but whether the *falāsifa* are able to prove them demonstratively. Unproven teachings can still be true. Al-Ghazālī aims at forcing the *falāsifa* to admit that these teachings cannot be deduced in philosophy but are taken from revelation or the insights of saints. He says in the sixteenth discussion, "The only way for this to be known would be from revelation (*al-shar'*) not from reason (*al-aql*)" (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 157). The rational justification in philosophy is a mere construction that happened after teachings were adopted, and it does not withstand a critical investigation of the kind al-Ghazālī undertakes in his *Incoherence*.

The fact that al-Ghazālī criticizes teachings he later adopts has led to much confusion among some of his readers. Philosophers such as Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 595/1198) accused him of being inconsistent (Ibn Rushd, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, 22). Some modern scholars think that al-Ghazālī fielded a "pseudo-refutation" (Treiger 2011, 93). A close reading of the *Incoherence*, however, reveals that al-Ghazālī is very careful in his language and nowhere takes a position that is inconsistent with those of his later works that are unanimously believed to express his opinion. It is true that in the *Incoherence* he is often polemical and sometimes unfair. There is, however, consistency among the works

unanimously ascribed to him, even if he shouted out his criticism of the *falāsifa* and whispered when he thought they were correct.

After the preface and the four introductions, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* is divided into twenty discussions and these again divided into sixteen that fall in the field of metaphysics and four in that of the natural sciences. Even those in the natural sciences, however, are mostly concerned with questions of metaphysics and epistemology. If we follow the headings of the twenty discussions, then there are eight where al-Ghazālī sets out to show that the teachings discussed in that chapter are not supported by valid demonstrations and where he leaves open whether they are true or not (nos. 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 14, 18, 19). In the remaining twelve discussions, he sets out to show that the philosophical teachings are unproven *and* wrong. Often, however, they could be easily mended if one gives up wrong premises such as the pre-eternity of the world. In some cases he accuses them of deceptively misrepresenting (*talbīs*) their teachings in ways that make them look Islamic. In three cases (nos. 1, 13, and 20) the error of the *falāsifa* is so grave as to warrant accusations of unbelief (see below).

Even in those discussions where he aims at refuting the truth of the *falāsifa*'s teachings, he often does not argue in favor of the position he thinks is true. "I do not enter into objecting to them except as one who demands and denies, not as one who claims and affirms," he writes in the third introduction of his book (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 7). Behind this strategy lies al-Ghazālī's conviction of the truth of revelation. This becomes manifest in his "rule of interpretation" that al-Ghazālī explains in some of his later works and that I will fully explain below. According to that rule, statements in the apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) of revelation can only become subject to allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) and be given an inner meaning if they are contradicted by demonstrative arguments. Without such a firm proof, the authority of revelation cannot be challenged and opinions opposed to it are considered defeated. Whenever he argues that the *falāsifa* are wrong, al-Ghazālī assumes that revelation teaches something different. Were the *falāsifa* able to prove their positions demonstratively, al-Ghazālī would be willing to reconsider his opinion about the teachings of revelation. Failing that, however, the truth of the outward sense of revelation stands against the claims of the *falāsifa*, and since the latter cannot substantiate them, revelation prevails. Much of the *Incoherence* is devoted to the task of making room for the epistemological claims of revelation.

Al-Ghazālī made his refutation of *falsafa* easy for himself. Showing that their arguments are not demonstrative refutes the hubris and dismissive religious attitude of some followers of *falsafa* and also their view that philosophy is independent from revelation. He does not need to prove where and why these teachings are *false*. In fact, they do not need to be false but only unproven. Even in those cases where al-Ghazālī sets out to refute the truth of some of the *falāsifa*'s teachings, he does not need to show they are false. He only needs to show they are unproven and contradict the outward wording (*ẓāhir*) of revelation. The way he sets out his book, most of his goals are fulfilled once al-Ghazālī has proven that the arguments he criticizes are not demonstrative. They may even be persuasive, but as long as they do not reach the high standard of demonstration,

they do not, in his opinion, establish the authority of *falsafa*. The twenty discussions of this book are, therefore, often very technical disputes about the logical status of certain explanations and proofs. Their function can only be determined once the overall goal of the book as a refutation of, first, the truth of certain teachings, second, of claims of originality and the provenience of some teachings, and, third, of the exuberant self-confidence and attitude of some people is kept in mind.

9.2. THE THREE DISCUSSIONS ON THE WORLD'S ETERNITY

Although al-Ghazālī tries to give his readers the impression that he does not want to argue *for* any position in this book but merely destroy convictions held among his doctrinal enemies, the book overall does argue in favor of a certain theological position. This happens most forcefully in the first three discussions on the world's eternity. Ibn Sīnā and many philosophers before him had argued that the world has no beginning in time and will never end. Still, they maintained that the world has a Creator who is the ultimate cause of every event in this world. Philosophers like Ibn Sīnā thought of God not as someone who would create the world at one point in time out of nothing, but as the “essential cause” of the world. An essential cause is an efficient cause of a thing or event that is sufficient to bring about its existence or occurrence. Imagine a dark room with a fireplace and no other light source. Light exists in that room if and only if there is fire in the fireplace. The fire is the essential cause of light in that room; any time there is fire there is light and vice versa. The two are temporally coextensive although one is the cause of the other. Light follows with necessity from fire. This is the relationship between God and the world. The world exists as long as God exists and God cannot exist alone without the world, just as there is no fire in that room without light. God, for Ibn Sīnā, does not have a temporal priority over this world but an ontological one. He does not exist “before” the world but exists “prior” in terms of rank of being, since He causes all that is other than Him. The existence of the world follows necessarily out of God's existence.

It is this idea of God as a mere cause (*illa*) of the world that triggered al-Ghazālī's opposition. The problem can be highlighted using the example of the light from the fireplace. It is in the nature of fire to emit light, and we cannot conceive of a fire that does not emit light. The fire has no choice but to emit light. Similarly, so al-Ghazālī argues, it is in the nature of Ibn Sīnā's God to create the world. Such a God exercises no choice about whether to create or not. In fact, Ibn Sīnā's God never exercises true free choice (*ikhtiyār*), or, as al-Ghazālī phrases it, there is no delay (*intiẓār*) of God's action from His essence. God becomes a creation-automat who turns His knowledge, which may be regarded as the blueprint of creation, into the world that we live in.

None of this, however, is clearly expressed by al-Ghazālī in his *Incoherence*. Like many works from this period, the *Incoherence* is a book intended to be studied with a qualified

teacher, who might explain these connections. From al-Ghazālī's other works, however, and also from the understanding of later scholars in his tradition, it becomes clear that this is the issue addressed in the discussion on the world's eternity. The issue also comes up in other discussions and it is clear that this is the most important objection of al-Ghazālī against the teachings of the *falāsifa*. For him, they teach a completely impersonal understanding of God that reduces Him to a mere automated cause that has no real will or knowledge, a God to whom very few people can relate as the omnipotent and omniscient master of existence.

The first three discussions on the world's eternity make up almost a third of the *Incoherence*. Here, the character of the book as a refutation is most evident. Al-Ghazālī brings forward a great number of objections against the view that the world is or even could be eternal. The first discussion, the longest of the three, is devoted to refuting the teaching that the world is pre-eternal, that is, that it exists from eternity in the past. Although he never reveals his sources, al-Ghazālī brings a number of arguments that we are familiar with from John Philoponus's refutation of Aristotle's and Proclus's works on the world's pre-eternity (Davidson 1987, 86–127). John Philoponus (in Arabic: Yaḥyā al-Naḥwī) was a Christian philosopher of the sixth century who was active in Alexandria and who wrote in Greek.

In the course of the discussion, a disagreement about the nature of the modalities becomes most important. The modalities are "necessary," "possible," and "impossible." Ibn Sīnā treats the modalities as attributes of things or events. Something is possible for Ibn Sīnā, or it is necessary. The world as a whole is, for Ibn Sīnā, possible with regard to itself and necessary with regard to God, meaning it follows necessarily from God's existence. In his basic understanding of the modalities Ibn Sīnā followed Aristotle and went so far as to require a substratum (*maḥall*) for possibility and for necessity. All necessity resides in God, Ibn Sīnā teaches, who is the "being necessary by virtue of itself" (*wājib al-wujūb bi-dhātihi*). The substratum of possibility was found in the unformed prime matter (*hylē*) that underlies all physical creations. Since the world has always been possible, so one of Ibn Sīnā's arguments goes, the substratum of this possibility, namely prime matter, exists from eternity in the past.

Al-Ghazālī's response to this is radical in that he objects to the whole Aristotelian understanding of the modalities. Al-Ghazālī maintains that "possible" is not an attribute of a thing but a mere judgment of the mind:

Anything whose existence the mind supposes, [nothing] preventing its supposing it possible, we call "possible," and if it is prevented we call it "impossible." If [the mind] is unable to suppose its nonexistence, we name it "necessary." For these are rational propositions that do not require an existent so as to be rendered a description thereof. (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 42)

Al-Ghazālī confronts the Aristotelian "statistical" understanding of the modalities that has thus far reigned supreme among Aristotelian philosophers with the understanding of the modalities as it has been developed in *kalām* literature. There, "possible" has been

understood as a synchronic alternative; that is, something is possible if we can mentally conceive of it as an alternative to what exists in actuality or what will exist. We call something impossible if we cannot mentally conceive of it as an alternative. In his *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī posits “alternative worlds” to the one that exists (Kukkonen 2000). This is a very powerful argumentative device, and it is applied throughout the book. If we can conceive of the world as being created at one moment in time—or sooner or later than that moment—then an omnipotent God must have the ability to actualize these possibilities. This is quite plausible for us; for reasons that we cannot get into here, however, it is hard to swallow or even to comprehend for someone trained in an Aristotelian understanding of the modalities. In the history of philosophy, al-Ghazālī’s *Incoherence* was an important step in moving away from that understanding toward the modern view of possibility as a synchronic alternative.

The *falāsifa* not only argued that the world is pre-eternal, they also claimed they can prove this demonstratively, setting all doubts to rest. If al-Ghazālī is able to convince his readers that the world *can* be created in time, he has already achieved what he set out to do, namely to show that there is something wrong with the *falāsifa*’s assumed demonstrations. In this particular case, however, he goes further and provides arguments that the world is, in fact, created in time. His main argument is that every action (*fiʿl*) must have a temporary beginning, which is again an argument developed in *kalām* literature from philosophical predecessors, such as John Philoponus. In the long discussions on the eternity of the world, al-Ghazālī aims at showing philosophically—meaning without recourse to the authority of revelation—that the world must be created in time.

9.3. BODILY RESURRECTION AND GOD’S KNOWLEDGE OF PARTICULARS

Elsewhere in his *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī is quite content to rely on the authority of revelation. In the twentieth discussion, for instance, he tries to show that there can be a creation of bodies in the afterlife. His philosophical argument is again based on mental conceivability. We can conceive of an afterlife where the souls of humans exist entirely without bodies. This is the position al-Ghazālī ascribes to the *falāsifa*, and it is possible. We can also conceive, as an alternative to this, that at one time during the long afterlife, a body—any kind of body—will be created for every soul (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 219). The fact that we can conceive of such a process means it is possible. The Qur’ānic descriptions of bodily pleasures and pains that we experience after our deaths are therefore not impossible. Here al-Ghazālī tries to force the *falāsifa* to acknowledge the authority and the truth of revelation.

Al-Ghazālī confronts the Aristotelian tradition with a nominalist or at least conceptualist understanding of the modalities, and this is an important event in the history of Western (i.e., Mediterranean) philosophy. Equally important was his novel

understanding of knowledge—novel at least for the Aristotelian tradition—introduced in the thirteenth discussion. Ibn Sīnā had argued that God is characterized by total unity and therefore cannot change from one state to the next. This implies that God's knowledge only contains eternal truths, which were understood to be “universals” (*kullīyyāt*). These are genera, species, or eternal concepts, such as “humanity” or “horseness.” Ibn Sīnā's God knows “particulars” (*juzʿīyyāt*), that is, individual objects and their attributes, only “in a universal way.” What that meant was difficult to understand, but for al-Ghazālī it entails the—not entirely unjustified—denial of God's knowledge of individuals. For Ibn Sīnā, God cannot know individuals as individuals because if He did, His knowledge would change with each change that occurs in them, whereas change in God is impossible. Al-Ghazālī rejects this vigorously, pointing out that nobody will obey God's law if they think He does not know them and does not know their transgressions (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 136). In his philosophical response, al-Ghazālī does not reject Ibn Sīnā's premise that God does not change. His own strict monotheism prevented Him from introducing a God Whose knowledge changes. Rather, he reinterpreted the relationship between the knower and the thing known, again drawing on ideas and solutions that were developed earlier in *kalām* literature. He denies the Aristotelian understanding that “knowledge follows the object of knowledge.” He replaces the identity of knower and object of knowledge with the concept of knowledge as a “relation” (*iḍāfa*) between the two. Knowledge of an object is like the relation of a stationary observer to a moving object. While the object's position relative to the knower changes, the knower does not change (al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 138). This again will turn out to be a powerful objection and influence a rethinking of what knowledge means in the works of Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. ca. 560/1165) and al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191).

9.4. THE LEGAL CONDEMNATION OF THREE OF THE *FALĀSIFA*'S TEACHINGS

Al-Ghazālī believed that some teachings of the *falāsifa* make people disregard the religious law (*sharīʿa*). Writing the book was triggered by the observation that some followers of the *falāsifa* rejected performing religious rites because they deemed their ideas and their ethics above religion. The leading *falāsifa*, said al-Ghazālī, are innocent of this. He acknowledges that they see themselves as Muslims, yet even they may have fallen into unbelief. On the last page of his *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī answers a legal question by way of a *fatwā*. Are any of the twenty teachings discussed in this book unbelief (*kufṛ*), punishable by death? Al-Ghazālī's legal concept behind this accusation is that whenever Muslims hold unbelief, they have implicitly rejected Islam and have become clandestine apostates, no matter whether they realize that or not. For al-Ghazālī the unbelief of a Muslim equals apostasy from Islam, a point that other jurists saw quite differently (Griffel 2001). According to a prophetic *ḥadīth*, apostasy from Islam is punished by

death. Al-Ghazālī thus employed the judgment of apostasy to persecute opinions he thought could not be tolerated.

On the last page of the *Incoherence* he singles out three opinions as unbelief: that the world is pre-eternal, that God does not know particulars, and that there is no resurrection of bodies in the afterlife. The latter two directly concern people's observance of the religious law. People will not fear the punishment of God in the afterlife if they think He doesn't know them or these punishments are mere metaphors and only apply to the souls and not the bodies. Making people observe the religious law is a very important motivation in al-Ghazālī's oeuvre. It is not entirely clear, however, why he also included the first point about the world's pre-eternity. It is, of course, closely connected to the idea of a very impersonal God who creates automatically rather than by deliberation and free will. The Muslim revelation, however, nowhere explicitly teaches creation out of nothing, and al-Ghazālī was most probably aware of that. In later repetitions of his condemnation this point is often left out (al-Ghazālī, *Deliverer*, 138). Wherever he mentions it, he stresses that all Muslims agree on the world's creation in time. He may have regarded its denial as too grave a challenge to Islam and the consensus of its scholars.

Al-Ghazālī denied that the consensus (*ijmā'*) of the Muslim community could establish the truth of a certain teaching, such as the one that the world is created in time. For that one would still need to produce a valid demonstrative argument. At the same time, he thought it is possible to establish a legal verdict on the unbelief and apostasy of someone who denies creation in time based on the consensus of a scholarly community (al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*, 207 f.). Later, Ibn Rushd understood that al-Ghazālī had condemned the teaching of a pre-eternal world because it violates the consensus of the Muslim community (Griffel 2000, 429–32). For Ibn Rushd, however, this was unacceptable because when the assumed consensus was established the opinions of the *falāsifa* among the Muslim scholars had not been taken into account (Ibn Rushd, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, 12 f.).

Al-Ghazālī probably realized that the legal justification he gave for his harsh verdict at the end of the *Incoherence* was thin, and in a later work he addressed the criteria that make a Muslim become an apostate in a systematic way. It is noteworthy that in this book, *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Clandestine Unbelief* (*Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayna l-Islām wa-l-zandaqa*), the pre-eternity of the world is not mentioned. Here al-Ghazālī argues that clandestine unbelief and apostasy from Islam is established if a Muslim denies certain "foundations of what-to-believe" (*uṣūl al-ʿaqā'id*), which are defined as the belief in God and in the truthfulness of His messenger Muḥammad (al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal*, 53 f., Engl. trans. in *Deliverer*, 137). The denial of God's knowledge of particulars, as well as any denial of the revealed predictions about the afterlife, violates these two foundations. Few other examples, however, are given, and the claim of a pre-eternal world never comes up in this book. In this book, al-Ghazālī also clarifies that all positions that are not condemned as apostasy are explicitly tolerated. Already on the last page of his *Incoherence* he had said that other teachings of the *falāsifa* than those three explicitly condemned may be called false, wrong, or even "undue innovation" (*bid'a*), but they give no reason for legal charges. In his *Decisive Criterion* he reiterates this and says, "No group should tax its adversary with unbelief simply on the ground

that they consider him mistaken” (al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal*, 48, Engl. trans. in *Deliverer*, 135). In those cases one may call one’s adversary “led astray” (*ḍāll*) or an “innovator” (*mubtadi*), but these terms have no legal relevance and would not allow other Muslims to persecute them on account of their views. All scholars who are not accused of unbelief (*kufṛ*) enjoy the legal protection of the Muslim community and should not be harmed (*Fayṣal*, 75–94, Engl. trans. in *Deliverer*, 143–49).

9.5. THE “RULE OF INTERPRETATION” (QĀNŪN AL-TA’WĪL) AS AN UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE OF REFUTATION

In his *Decisive Criterion*, which he wrote five to ten years after the publication of the *Incoherence*, al-Ghazālī also explains an important element in the strategy of refutation that he applies in that latter work. Al-Ghazālī formulates a general rule that permits the allegorical understanding of certain passages in the Muslim revelation. Here and in a second, much shorter work he calls this the “rule of interpretation” (*qānūn al-ta’wīl*), and as such it became known among later Muslim scholars (Griffel, 2015). It forms the bedrock of what al-Ghazālī does in his *Incoherence* even if it is not explicitly spelled out there. While the condemnation on the last page of that book determines the boundaries of tolerated positions in Islam, the rule of interpretation determines what are the correct convictions. In his *Decisive Criterion* al-Ghazālī approaches the distinction between what he sees as a correct belief and what is an incorrect one from the perspective of Qur’ān interpretation. Which verses, he asks, can and should be interpreted in a way that deviates from the literal meaning, and which verses must be understood in their literal sense? In order to establish a correct balance between the authority of the literal text of revelation and other competing sources of knowledge—most importantly the human capacity for reason—al-Ghazālī presents his “rule of interpretation” (*qānūn al-ta’wīl*). In his *Decisive Criterion* he says:

Hear now the rule of interpretation: You learned that with regard to interpretation (*ta’wīl*) the different groups [of Islam] . . . agree that allowing [a reading that deviates from the literal meaning] depends on the production of a demonstrative proof (*burhān*) that the literal meaning (*al-ẓāhir*) is impossible. (al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal*, 47, Engl. trans. in *Deliverer*, 137)

Invoking this kind of agreement among all Muslim scholars is not only a rhetorical device. Al-Ghazālī is convinced that disputes about the meaning of revelation go back to disagreements about what can and what cannot be considered certain knowledge. All groups of Islam acknowledge that certain knowledge exists apart from revelation

and may come in conflict with it. Even the most scripturalist groups among the Muslims must sometimes understand a passage in revelation in opposition to its literal wording (*Fayṣal* 41–43, Engl. trans. in *Deliverer*, 135). Most groups, however, are not aware how certain knowledge is established, and they follow no clear method. All doctrinal disputes in Islam would end, so al-Ghazālī claims, if all would acknowledge that certainty is established by demonstrative proof (*Fayṣal* 49f., Engl. trans. in *Deliverer*, 136). The criterion for applying a figurative reading depends on the “production of a demonstration” (*qiyām al-burhān*) that proves the impossibility of the outward meaning (*istiḥālat al-ẓāhir*). If an argument can be produced saying that the words in the passage in question cannot be valid in their outward meaning, and if this argument reaches the high standard of a demonstration, then these words must be understood as symbols or metaphors.

The literal and outward sense of revelation can only become subject to “interpretation” (*ta’wīl*) if a demonstration (*burhān*) shows that it is impossible. It should be clarified that for Muslim scholars like al-Ghazālī “interpretation” (*ta’wīl*) is the abandoning of the outward or literal sense. It means reading a word or a passage in revelation as a symbol or metaphor. To what the metaphor refers is again determined by a demonstrative argument. It should also be stressed that for al-Ghazālī, the text of revelation can have more than one meaning. The rule of interpretation establishes the most authoritative reading of the text and determines what kind of descriptive information the passage conveys. Once this reading is established, it allows different kind of additional meanings that may indeed be figurative (Griffel 2009, 111–16).

It has already been said that the “rule of interpretation” underlies al-Ghazālī’s strategy of refutation in his *Incoherence*. Showing that certain positions, which challenge a literal understanding of passages in revelation, cannot be proven demonstratively is for al-Ghazālī identical to showing the falsehood of that position. The authority of revelation can only be trumped by a demonstrative proof; anything less than that does not invalidate its truth-claims. In all cases where positions of the *falāsifa* come in direct conflict with the outward text of revelation, their truth depends on whether or not they are supported by demonstrative proofs. If they are, according to al-Ghazālī’s judgment, unproven, he may include these philosophical teachings in his *Incoherence* and point to their shortcomings. If positions of the *falāsifa* can be supported by valid demonstrative proofs, al-Ghazālī would not include them in his *Incoherence* but very likely adopt them in his own theological works.

9.6. CONCLUSION

Since the recent discovery of a text in an Iranian library, we now have a second example of a book of refutation directed against the school of Ibn Sīnā from almost the same period as al-Ghazālī. Rukn al-Dīn Maḥmūd Ibn al-Malāḥimī, a Mu‘tazilite theologian who was active in Kh^wārazm, a delta region in today’s Uzbekistan where the Amu

Darya (Oxus) flows into the Aral Sea, wrote his refutation, *The Gift to the Mutakallimūn* (*Tuhfat al-mutakallimīn*), between 532/1137 and his death in 536/1141, roughly forty years after that of al-Ghazālī (Ibn al-Malāḥimī, *Tuhfa*). Comparing these two books illustrates in drastic terms what al-Ghazālī does and what he does not do in his work. Both authors realized that Ibn Sīnā's philosophical system posed a threat to the authority of the theology they had grown up with. Their reactions to that threat, however, are quite different. Ibn al-Malāḥimī takes this challenge as an occasion to confront Ibn Sīnā's system with the Mu'tazilite one, to defend Mu'tazilism, and to argue for the truths of its teachings. His is a traditional refutation that rejects almost all teachings held by the *falāsifa* and aims at replacing them with those held by its author. The comparison with Ibn al-Malāḥimī's book shows how many teachings al-Ghazālī chose not to criticize. Al-Ghazālī accepts the *falāsifa*'s ontology of secondary causes that generate from the Creator-God and create a fully determined universe of causal chains and effects (Griffel 2009, 147–73). Ibn Sīnā's explanation of human acts as fully determined effects of such causal chains are equally not criticized. Ibn Sīnā's psychology is discussed only insofar as there are elements in it that al-Ghazālī thinks have come from earlier revelations. Finally, the lack of proper ethical teachings in Ibn Sīnā's oeuvre is nowhere mentioned by al-Ghazālī and Aristotelian virtue ethics never brought up as a subject that would raise critique. Ibn al-Malāḥimī includes all these points in his refutation. The comparison shows the great degree to which Ash'arite *kalām*—unlike Mu'tazilism—is compatible with Ibn Sīnā's kind of Aristotelianism. Many of these teachings in Ibn Sīnā's system will simply be adopted by al-Ghazālī and appropriated in accord with the demands of Ash'arite theology. Before doing so, however, al-Ghazālī needed to point out those elements in Ibn Sīnā's system that are unfit to be integrated into Muslim theology. This is one of the purposes of his *Incoherence*.

Philosophically, al-Ghazālī's *Incoherence of the Philosophers* was a much more significant work than that of Ibn al-Malāḥimī. It plays an important role not only in the history of Islamic theology but in the tradition of Greek and Western philosophy overall. It confronts Aristotelianism with potent challenges to its self-understanding of grounding the philosophical sciences on demonstrative proofs. Many of the argumentative objections brought forward in that book come from *kalām*, and for Aristotelians such as Ibn Rushd or Maimonides (d. 601/1204), who never mentions the book but was aware of it, the *Incoherence* remained a work of *kalām* literature. One would need to step out of Aristotelianism to fully appreciate its value. Ibn Rushd did not do that, and his own refutation of al-Ghazālī's book, *The Incoherence of the Book "The Incoherence"* (*Tahāfut al-tahāfut*) remains an often limited engagement with the latter's arguments and had little influence.

For the discourse of Aristotelian philosophy (*falsafa*) in the Islamic East, the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* was a watershed. Before it, *mutakallimūn* did not need to engage with *falsafa*. Some did, of course, but never as deeply as after the *Incoherence*. Now, *mutakallimūn* and *falāsifa* openly discussed the faults and merits of arguments current in the other discourse. The *Incoherence of the Philosophers* brings these two discourses together. It clearly identifies the three teachings that the jurist al-Ghazālī

condemned and the larger number that the theologian al-Ghazālī objected to. In doing so, it opened the way for integrating into *kalām* those philosophical positions that are not condemned.

Hardly any Islamic philosopher after al-Ghazālī mentions the book. From the mid-sixth/twelfth century on, however, all *falāsifa* and all *mutakallimūn* show familiarity with its accusations of *taqlīd* and *talbīs* against Ibn Sīnā and his followers. They also know and react to the main points al-Ghazālī makes within the twenty discussions. One can say without exaggeration that much of what will be written in Islamic philosophy and theology from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries is a response to Ibn Sīnā's philosophical system and to al-Ghazālī's critique in his *Incoherence*.

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