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Reasoned Piety:

A summary and explication of discussion of one of al-Ghazālī's Incoherence of the Philosophers

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There is perhaps no better way to open a paper on Abu Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ṭusī al-Ghazālī's *Incoherence of the Philosophers* than to quote his opening prayer. It reveals both a man in search of the truth, devoted to his God and endowed with the skill to communicate it beautifully:

We ask God in his majesty that transcends all bounds and His munificence that goes beyond all ends to shed upon us the lights of His guidance and to snatch away from us the darkness of waywardness and error; to make us among those who saw the truth as truth, preferring to pursue and follow its paths, and who saw the false as false, choosing to avoid and shun it. . . and that He may bestow His prayers and His assured peace upon our prophet, the chosen, Muhammad, the best of men, and upon his virtuous family and his companions pure, keys of guidance and lanterns in the darkness.¹

Ghazālī, born in 1058 in northeast Persia, grew to be one of the greatest minds of his time. A leading theologian educated him; and he mastered theology of al-Asharī at a young age. By his thirties, Ghazālī taught at the university of Baghdad—one of the most prestigious academic institutions of the time.² A devoutly religious man, he

1 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 1.

2 W. Montgomery Watt, "Introduction," in *The Faith and Practice* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953), 11.

considered God the source of all creation and the root of all causation. Yet, he came to question the validity of his knowledge and the motives of his success. Two intellectual crises drove Ghazālī to seek mystical understanding. In the first, he strove to find the validity of reason. He feared his senses misrepresented the world and voided his reasoning of it. He describes this in his autobiographical work, *Deliverance from Error*, saying, “I investigated the various kinds of knowledge I had, and found myself destitute of all knowledge. . . .except in the case of sense-perception. . . .”³ He concluded, however, that even sense cannot yield undeniable truth. After two months in this state, God restored peace to him. A second period of skepticism followed, in which Ghazālī determined that he achieved his worldly success for vainglory—rather than genuine religious impulse.⁴

In reaction, he wandered in isolated asceticism seeking divine intuition before returning to teaching. However, mysticism remained his focus in the latter part of his life—as is evident in his autobiography. In it he praises mystics as “men who had real experiences, not men of words. . . .”⁵ However, he always attempted to reconcile his mysticism with the tradition that worship practices of Islam developed. Indeed, he opposed the philosophers in *The Incoherence* because their teachings violate the common practices of religion. Ghazālī died in 1111 but so impressed the world that some have called him “the greatest Muslim after Muhammad, and he is by no means unworthy of that dignity.”⁶

The Incoherence is very specific both in purpose and scope. Ghazālī began and completed it in the 1090s. With the advent of Greek, specifically Aristotelian philosophy, new perspectives on religious practices developed. Ghazālī loathed the arrogance of those who assert philosophy as if it had some inherently elevated status over religious tradition and truth therein. He went so far as to accuse philosophy of encouraging compromise in the followers of God.⁷ *The Incoherence* meets

3 Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error, in The Faith and Practice*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953), 22.

4 Michael E. Marmura. “Translator’s Introduction,” in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), xviii

5 Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 55.

6 Watt W. Montgomery, “Introduction,” 14.

7 Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 72-73.

these arrogated philosophies and responds with basically theological arguments worded like philosophy: “[I] will dispute with them in this book in their own language—I mean, their expressions of logic.”⁸ In so doing, Ghazālī made no attempt to refute the Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Galen etc...). Rather, he opposed their translators: Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and al-Farabī. The work’s title refers to those Muslim philosophers whom Avicenna and al-Farabī inspired to new thought—but chiefly these two. Regardless, in refuting their claims, Ghazālī attempted no complete philosophical/theological system in response. In writing *The Incoherence*, he endeavored no resolution to these debates but only to show the ineptitude of the opposing side. In essence, he attempted to deflate the pride and inherent sense of superiority contemporary culture gave the philosophers.

The work discusses twenty major points and subdivides them into more specific disputes. Of these the longest and the focus of this paper is the argument concerning the pre-eternity of the world. Put simply, is the world as old (co-eternal) as God? The philosophers argue yes—that the world has no temporal beginning. Ghazālī, divides their position into four major proofs and systematically refutes each of them. He constructs the work as a dialogue: the philosophers claim this, and he rebuts; they counter-rebut, and Ghazālī responds to that and so on.⁹ One can perhaps think of the structure as an overly planned out coffee shop conversation. This paper simplifies and condenses the dialogue and furnishes examples more familiar to the modern mind.

Despite the conflict inherent in such a work, and Ghazālī’s scathing report of those who blindly adhere to philosophy, he and the philosophers share a surprising amount of common ground. Ghazālī, at least in the first discussion, makes no attempt to refute Aristotelian science.¹⁰ He uses it as support or illustration in many of his arguments.

8 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 9.

9 One should bear in mind the arguments of the philosophers come from Ghazālī. Averroes responded to Ghazālī’s work with *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, which contains a more balanced defense of the philosophers.

10 For more on Ghazālī’s treatment of Aristotelian science in regard to occasionalism versus Aristotelian causation see: Taneli Kukkonen, “Possible Worlds in the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*: Al-Gazālī on Creation and Contingency.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38, no. 4 (2000), <http://muse.jhu.edu>.

In particular, he continually draws parallels to the Aristotelian perspective of space and compares it to his conception of time.

Further, the two sides argue over the nature of the material world—not of God. Each side attempts to support its conception of the universe without compromising certain qualities of the Divine. First, they both uphold the existence of the Divine. There are no atheists in this debate. Both contend that God created the material world but disagree about its temporal origin.¹¹ Neither position will yield to accepting a weak God. He must be unchanging and omnipotent—as will be seen in the opening proof.¹² Many of the arguments on both sides support the nature of the Divine while claiming the other side does otherwise. Basic logical ideas unite them further. Neither of them will accept an argument ending in an infinite regress, i.e., an endless row of dominos falling and causing one another to fall but having no beginning. Lastly, despite arguing over the definitions of possible, impossible, and necessary, which arise in the fourth major proof for the pre-eternity of the world, the opposing sides show a surprising amount of agreement in logical terminology.

Proof I.

Proof one addresses the philosophers' argument that the eternal cannot produce the temporal. For the sake of ease, the dialogue here is divided into two major sections. The philosophers question God's motivation in creating the world. Pictures when discussing the supernatural always present a danger, but for a moment think of this God sitting in nothingness. This Being is unchanging and all-powerful. No one and nothing could exist to ask Him, "Would you care to make man and the world today?" Thus, the only thing that can change in opinion or action is this God Himself. However, if God's eternal character cannot change, than what stimulated the world's creation? Nothing besides God could exist to motivate creation. Any change of will within

11 Creation here means God is related to creation as a cause is to its effect. A cause need not come before the effect. For example, a muscle causes one's limbs to move. Yet, the muscle and the limb move simultaneously.

12 However, omnipotence has a narrower definition here, which neither party states specifically. It does not mean God can do "anything," rather, that He can do anything in the realm of possibility. They both imply that God acts in coherence with logic. Neither resort to claiming God's illogicality as explanation for his actions. I will discuss this further in the footnotes.

God would defy His character—one of omnipotence and immutability: “To project a change of state [in the eternal] is impossible.”¹³ They argue, if all the conditions for a cause are met, its effect should come immediately. Further, if He had always willed the world’s creation, it should be coeternal with Him: having no beginning but nonetheless being caused by Him. The philosophers illustrate this by comparing it to a divorce. A man desiring divorce, who has fulfilled all the necessary paper work, will not delay in leaving his wife—since all the necessary conditions have been fulfilled. Similarly, in the state of pre-creation, only God’s will could inhibit His action. Hence, if he had always willed creation, all the “conditions” for the effect (creation) would be fulfilled. If so, this establishes the world’s eternity with Him. This idea of an effect proceeding immediately from its cause, the philosophers argue, is supported by “logical necessity, “ which seems to mean the logical conclusion of any unbiased mind.

Ghazālī first responds to the philosophers’ conception of Divine will and then to their epistemological claim to know these things by “necessity.” Ghazālī illustrates the difference between Divine and human will saying human will “designate[s] that which has an objective [fulfilling a need] and there is never [such] an objective in the case of God.”¹⁴ He contends that Divine will differs from human will just as the philosophers argue that Divine and human knowledge differ. They uphold that the “eternal knowledge is not to be compared with created [knowledge],”¹⁵ because they consider God a simple entity and contend that his knowledge does not count as a complexity in Himself. The philosophers define a “simple entity” as singular with no attributes within itself. Thus, to retain God’s simplicity and knowledge, the philosophers claim that knowledge is not an attribute—which would compromise His simplicity.¹⁶ Since human and godly knowledge differ, so also can human and godly will differ. Therefore, the philosophers cannot claim that godly will and action must happen simultaneously—as happens in human

13 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 14.

14 Ibid, 23.

15 Ibid, 18.

16 Ghazālī disagrees with this perspective of God but chooses not to argue against it to any conclusion.

will. Ghazālī seems to imply here that God wills creation eternally, and integral in that will was a certain time for creation.

From this conception of God as both omniscient and simple, Ghazālī confronts the philosophers' understanding by "logical necessity" and expands with two other examples. Ghazālī asserts that omniscience necessitates complexity. Indeed, people attribute intelligence or ignorance to each other frequently. While older age keeps such comments quiet or masked with nicer language, elementary school children will say things like, "He's so dumb." Certainly, saying so seems as much an attribution as indicating the color of one's shirt. Thus, how can God be simple and omniscient? As an alternative, the philosophers may argue God has no knowledge of the world. However, "a maker who does not know his handiwork is necessarily impossible."¹⁷ Yet, the philosophers claim their conception of God is known by "logical necessity."

Ghazali refutes the philosophers' claim of knowledge by necessity by citing other concepts they claim as known by "logical necessity." They hold (by "logical necessity") that all numbers must fall on an even or odd position. Yet, the world's coeternity with God necessitates an infinite number of planetary rotations; and infinity has no designation of even or odd. It is neither. Earth must have a number of rotations, but it will be neither even nor odd. Therefore they erroneously claim by "logical necessity" that all numbers fall as even or odd. Further, Ghazālī cites Plato's conception of the soul, which the philosophers uphold as known by "logical necessity." They claim each separate soul will eventually reunite to the one God and become part of His simple essence. Ghazālī's claims that "logical necessity" cannot comprehend this idea once put in other terms. How, he argues, can individuated self-aware beings be brought together in one simple aggregate? The soul and seawater differ. Souls clash; they do not cohere as water does. Hence, Ghazālī reflects this idea of knowledge by "logical necessity" in opposition to the philosophers.¹⁸

The second section of this first proof, which I have divided for the sake of ease, analyzes the nature of time and further discusses Divine

¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 18.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

will.

Ghazālī begins by stating that God created both time and the material world through pure power of will; and that will discerned between moments of time to determine the proper time of creation.

The philosophers counter Ghazālī by citing his illogical definition of will and the indiscernible nature of time. Will does not determine between similarities. By similarities, the philosophers mean indiscernible things—like pitch-blackness. Trying to divide blackness into groups and categories is ridiculous. One cannot divide truly similar things. So also dividing time—like pitch-blackness—into categories of pre- and post-creation is ridiculous. “For the similarity of [temporal] states is known by [rational] necessity.”¹⁹ The philosophers give no specific definition of will but contend that reason chooses between two similarities that can be divided.²⁰ Thus, a thirsty man with two identical glasses of water in front of him will select the one closest to his dominant hand. Will does not distinguish the two here; nor can it in the case of time. ²¹ Things are differentiated from one another by specifications: i.e., red and blue are both colors. Their redness or blueness specifies them. Nothing specifies one moment of time from another. Since will cannot differentiate between similarities, how can one claim God’s differentiation of time—something that lacks specification? Because he cannot, time and material with it must be eternal.

Ghazālī continues to define will as “being an attribute whose function is to differentiate a thing from its similar.”²² Further, he claims that to maintain their perspective of the world, the philosophers must agree that time has differentiation. Ghazālī claims the will does function when faced with similar things. Again, the thirsty man with two identical

19 Ibid, 24.

20 This actually bears a striking resemblance to the ancient and current debate over free will versus determination. To support free will demands that one define will, which proves very difficult. For more see: James Rachels. “The Debate over Free Will,” in *Problems from Philosophy, Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2008), 478-486.

21 This argument causes one to question what the philosophers and Ghazālī mean by “omnipotent.” If omnipotence can do anything, how then should it have trouble differentiating moments of time? Thus, it seems omnipotence refers only to the realm of logical possibility.

22 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 22.

glasses of water before him, both of equal distance from both the man's hands, could not decide between the two based on logic or anything else. Nor would he sit there, frozen with indecision, because of his reason's inability to distinguish an advantage between the two. Rather, he would simply choose one. This, Ghazālī argues, is the function of will. Since will can logically discern between similarities, creation in time—with time preceding it—is possible.

He goes on to rebut the philosophers' argument about the indiscernible nature of time in spatial terms. The shape of the world before creation could have been anything, even a triangular Earth. Conversely, the philosophers maintain that the Earth could not be any shape other than spherical, and that shapes do have a sense of differentiation that time lacks. Ghazālī then references and uses as argument a shape they consider simple without differentiation: a sphere, as they suppose, is similar with no unequal parts, and this is known by "rational necessity." This equality of the sphere is a vital part of their conception of the universe. The simple and ascending spheres indicate a God of infinite simplicity, which aligns with the Neo-Platonist perspective of God. Ghazālī attacks this by observing that the sphere has parts: in the case of the lowest sphere, it has poles. Thus, what the philosophers call similar in parts is not. They claim the same of time: that its equal parts allow no differentiation. By attacking their conception of a sphere's equality, Ghazālī also steals support from their contending for time's equality of parts, both of which are supposed to be known by "rational necessity".

Ghazali further claims that the rotation of a sphere or planet "being circular and opposite are equivalent."²³ Either direction would yield little change in the world. The philosophers counter saying east to west differs from west to east obviously. Ghazālī ends this argument by comparing the philosophers' notion of the difference in contrary motions of the spheres to the obvious difference inherent in the "priority and posteriority in terms of the world's [coming into] existence...."²⁴ Since they maintain that the spheres' motion to the west or east counts as a

²³ Ibid, 27.

²⁴ Ibid, 27.

contrary, Ghazālī claims that creation at one time or another also counts as a contrary; and will can differentiate between contraries.

Ghazālī's last rebuttal to the philosophers analyzes causation, and should resound with familiarity to anyone well read in the foundations of western philosophy. He asserts that the philosophers' argument must resort to an infinite regress.²⁵ The world, by the philosophers' logic, does not proceed from the Eternal but is eternal with Him. The world is thus composed of an infinite chain of temporal events: i.e., the grass grows because it has rained a lot lately. It has rained because the wind currents have brought humid air from the equator. The winds act as such because of consistent high- and low-pressure fields in the world, etc. And this causation has gone on for all eternity with temporal events causing one another without any beginning. Ghazālī maintains, however, that an eternal causation must begin this chain of events, i.e., that a first (eternal) domino must fall to knock over the rest. And without that eternal domino, no effects or causes (other dominos falling) can come about. To this, the philosophers have no answer.

Proof II.

The second proof deals primarily with time. Proof one takes for granted that time existed before creation and attempts to show that time has differentiation. Ghazālī now confronts the philosophers concerning God's relation to time. They consider Him prior to creation in essence and cause—but not in time.²⁶ Ghazālī opposes them by explaining God as prior in cause and time. He contends that “[t]ime is originated and created and before it there was no time at all.”²⁷

The philosophers counter Ghazālī by citing that one cannot conceive of something existing before time. Indeed, to say something exists “before” something else implies time. Thus, they claim Ghazālī has no real notion of his own argument. They continue their argument with an example of material creation before time. In this hypothetical, planets

25 As stated in the introduction, accepted contemporary logic rejected infinite regression. David Hume in the 18th century argued otherwise, and it continues as a philosophical contention up to the present: David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1907), 119-122.

26 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 30.

27 *Ibid.*, 31.

exist, but time does not. “Years” in this scenario are meaningless. They choose instead to cite the rotations of planets: planet “one” is made; it rotates 500 times, then planet “two” is created moving with equal speed and an equal distance as “one”. Given this distinction, neither can have the same number of rotations. This reasoning demands that a sort of demarcation exists even in the absence of time.

Ghazālī dispatches these arguments by pointing out the mind’s inability to comprehend timelessness and that the philosophers’ hypothetical misses the point of his argument entirely. Ghazālī’s rebuttal here centers on spatial relations the philosophers accept, which support Ghazālī’s temporal perspective. Ghazālī states that no effort can unbind human comprehension from time. Human estimation cannot defy our temporal understanding: This estimative faculty “is specifically related with time and space.”²⁸ However, time does not confine God. He created and masters time while humans, on the contrary, are subject to it.

As illustration, Ghazālī applies a spatial concept the philosophers consider necessary and existent: “[The philosophers] will then say, ‘beyond the world there is neither a void nor filled space.’”²⁹ Such a concept defies human understanding. Imagine a room with nothing in it yet not empty; or one filled to the ceiling with furniture yet unoccupied. The idea cannot register with human reason—or what Ghazālī calls the estimative faculty. Hence, the philosophers must either accept a principle beyond human realization or deny their perspective of the universe.

Ghazālī addresses their hypothetical and frames it again in spatial terms. He asks if God could have made the spheres any thicker or thinner.³⁰ If not, the philosophers compromise God’s omnipotence.³¹ If yes, this demands the space beyond the world have some measurement.

Measurement in a space neither filled nor empty is senseless. So also

28 Ibid, 35.

29 Ibid, 35.

30 Ibid, 38.

31 This section particularly shows a confined meaning of omnipotence. At one point the philosophers state: “We do not say that that which is not possible is within [divine] power. The world’s being greater or smaller than what it is impossible. Hence, it is not within [divine] power” (p. 38) Ghazālī does not rebut their claim that omnipotence only functions within the realm of possibility. Rather, he argues that the “world’s being greater or smaller” is possible. It seems Ghazālī and the philosophers agree to a narrow definition of omnipotence.

the rotations of the world/spheres as a measurement in place of time is senseless. The philosophers' hypothetical remains subject to the limited estimative faculty and time. Ghazālī concludes that the philosophers must admit the possible creation of time or discard vital concepts of science within their own philosophy. If God can possibly create time, this further degrades the philosophers' perspective of a pre-eternal world. Ghazālī attempts no explanation for the creation of time but only observes the flaws in the opposing position. And this is the work's focus: to observe these flaws—not adduce a perfectly sound philosophical/theological system in opposition.

Proof III.

The third proof primarily disputes the possibility of the world's creation and how it reflects on God's omnipotence. The philosophers assert that the world's creation must have always been possible. After all, things do not shift from possibility to impossibility as the wind moves from east and then to west. Can one imagine a circle-square someday becoming possible? No. Impossibility or possibility, according to the philosophers, is an eternal attribute. They move away from this to a hypothetical: if the world at one time could not exist, and then at another it could, than this compromises God's omnipotence. It implies that at some time or "temporal state," God could not create the world.³²

Ghazālī agrees with their first contention but questions its basis. Yes, the world's creation was always temporally possible; and therefore God's omnipotence remains uncompromised. However, he observes that the philosophers deny the temporal creation of the world. Ghazālī's other proofs attempt to disprove the world's non-temporal creation. And thus he ends the argument stating that "[the temporally created world alone] is the possible, no other."³³

Proof IV.

The fourth proof hinges on semantics. It presents and debates logical terminology: possible, necessary, and impossible. Impossible is either the juxtaposition of opposites (a circle square) or that which cannot ever exist. The necessary means it cannot but exist. The main

³² Ibid, 40.

³³ Ibid, 40.

arguments revolve around the possible. How does one define possible? By one definition, the philosophers argue for the world's pre-eternal nature while Ghazālī rebuts with another.

The philosophers begin explaining that possibility requires a material connection or receptacle, but that material itself is eternal. Material here means an object always preceding and stripped of particulars: no form/shape, no color, no texture, etc. They consider particulars temporally originated and continue saying that one understands particulars (colors and shapes) only by observing physical forms. For example, one comes to learn shapes and colors (particulars) from looking at pictures (material) in elementary school. “Moreover, [possibility] is a relative description. It inevitably requires an entity to which to relate.”³⁴ So the logic goes, one can only comprehend the possibility of blackness in an object if whiteness also exists. And since material—separate from any particulars—has no opposite, its origin must come before time. For the possibility in the material world is obvious since it does in fact exist before one's eyes. Remember, possibility is eternal,³⁵ but with no material receptacle, possibility would precede the world's existence. How can possibility sustain itself without a subject? For example, how could the possibility of Icarus flying into the sun exist, if he did not exist? Since possibility requires a material subject and cannot sustain itself, the material world is eternal.

Ghazālī counters by claiming a different conception of possibility and citing three examples of possibility apart from material. He defines possibility as “a judgment of the mind.” The mind apart from material can comprehend possibility. He illustrates this with three examples. Firstly, the impossible has no material receptacle. By definition it cannot. Yet, something can (possibly) be impossible. Secondly, the mind can comprehend colors without material objects. Once learned, one cannot distinguish between colors without material objects for them to color. Lastly, the philosophers' conception of the soul will not conform to their definition of possibility, for they claim the soul subsists in itself without need of material or matter—that its possibility existed before

³⁴ Ibid, 41.

³⁵ Ibid, 39.

its creation.³⁶ How then can an immaterial soul possibly exist if all possibilities must relate to material? Thus, Ghazālī cites flaws in their logic to support the world’s temporal origin.

The remainder of the argument centers on these three examples, which each side attempts to use in support of one definition of possibility. The philosophers rebut Ghazālī’s examples and frame them to fit their own argument. The impossible does have a material receptacle. The philosophers explain that the impossible also means the juxtaposition of two contraries. For example, something cannot be red and not red at the same time. Since each contrary has a receptacle in material, so also the impossible has a receptacle in the material and thus remains possible. They maintain that to understand particulars (shapes, colors, textures, etc...) one must experience them first. Indeed, how could one comprehend a color without seeing an example of it in the material world.³⁷ They argue the soul’s material receptacle is the body. The soul’s governance over the body gives it possibility.

Ghazālī ends the discussion by countering two of the opposing examples. He seems to concede to their definition of impossible—that the existence of contraries allows impossibility as a material receptacle and thus is possibility. He further allows some leeway regarding the comprehension of color. He asserts that the mind needs material examples to first understand color. However, the intellect can realize universals—which the philosophers acknowledge. For example, one cannot comprehend and keep straight all the varying shades of blue. However, one does have an understanding of blue as a general concept applicable to all those varying shades. Ghazālī contends that these universals exist solely in the mind. If universals exist solely as a judgment of mind, than their possibility must reside in the mind as well. Thus possibility is merely a judgment of the mind—not dependent on a material receptacle.

Ghazālī ends by denouncing the philosophers’ explanation of the

36 Ibid, 42.

37 This hints at a philosophical definition for creativity: that creativity only recomposes already present material. For example, a painter cannot conjure up a fourth primary color. Rather he must work with the colors the present world offers.

body as the material receptacle for the soul. If, as the philosophers claim, the soul's possibility comes before its origination, possibility must exist without a material receptacle.³⁸ To claim the body as a soul's material receptacle is far-fetched considering that the soul, by the philosophers' definition, is "neither in a body nor matter and [is] not imprinted in matter." If the soul does not even imprint upon matter, how then can one claim the body as its material receptacle? The discussion ends here where Ghazālī affirms that the philosophers must either change their own conception of the universe and soul or accept his definition of possibility, which allows for the temporal origination of material. The first discussion here concludes with the purpose of Ghazālī's writing: "To muddy [the philosophers'] doctrine and throw dust in the face of their proofs with that which would reveal their incoherence."³⁹

Despite the rather esoteric nature of this debate, it depicts a culture more intellectually active than many would think. It produced men like Ghazālī, who show a command of both religious thought and philosophical cunning. Currently, society separates the religious and the learned. Ghazālī's writings defy this distinction. He had command of both religious and secular knowledge, yet remained a pious man. His ability to balance such delicate understanding remains rare. He held that one must poke into every dark recess, assault every problem and scrutinize the creed of every sect.⁴⁰ Monotheists, polytheists, spiritualists, and atheists alike would do well to seek understanding of their opposition as Ghazālī did in writing *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

38 Ibid, 45.

39 Ibid, 46.

40 Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 20

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