

Theodicy in Islamic Thought

*THE DISPUTE OVER AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S
“BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS”*

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The Perfect Rightness of the Actual

I

THE PROBLEM

“There is not in possibility anything more wonderful than what is” (*laysa fi’l-imbkān abda’ mim mā kān*). This statement, ascribed to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), engendered a controversy that lasted from his own lifetime until well into the 19th century. Opposition to the statement and all that it implied was fierce and bitter. Thus, Ibrāhīm ibn ‘Umar al-Biqā’ī (d. 885/1480), one of al-Ghazālī’s most implacable critics, would not shrink from accusing him of outright heresy.¹ In turn, al-Ghazālī’s defenders mounted a vigorous counterattack leading, on at least one occasion, to violence: in Damascus an angry mob attacked and almost killed al-Biqā’ī after the contents of his treatise against the “Proof of Islam” became known.² Nor were the disputants above spiteful gibes at opponents: one of al-Ghazālī’s lesser-known defenders would remark sneeringly that al-Biqā’ī should have entitled his treatise, not “The Triumph,” as he had intended, but rather “Onion Peels” (*qushūr al-baṣal*), because of its “stink.”³

What in this statement provoked such controversy? The fact that it was attributed to none other than al-Ghazālī, the renowned renewer of religion, is of course significant. For a possibly suspect doctrine to be affirmed by so celebrated a figure could not but elicit passionate interest, and this is a factor that must be kept in mind. Nevertheless, the debate itself, stubborn and protracted as it was and ranging from puerile taunts to ex-

¹ *Tahdīm*, fol. 44a (For al-Biqā’ī and the other disputants discussed here, see Chapter Two.)

² al-Suyūṭī, *K. al-taḥadduth bi-ni’mat Allāh* (ed. Sartain; Cambridge, 1975), p. 187.

³ M. b. Ḥāmid al-Shāfi’ī, *al-Dalīl*, fol. 133b.

ceedingly subtle and intricate argumentation, arose out of certain central issues in Islamic theology.

Thus, the statement is said to lead to "a restriction of the divine omnipotence" (*ḥaṣr al-quḍrah*) in the critics' view and so must be rejected.⁴ This is in fact the crux of the problem; for if nothing in possibility is "more wonderful," or more perfect, than what actually exists here and now, then God's omnipotence seems severely compromised. This world with all its undeniable defects and afflictions will be taken as the full and final manifestation of God's power.

This objection is well summarized by one of al-Ghazali's last champions, the 19th-century writer Hamdān ibn 'Uthmān al-Jazā'irī, as follows:

(The statement's) incompatibility with the principles of the *ahl al-sunnah* is for three reasons. First, the creed of the orthodox, which must be believed, is that the things of which God is capable (*maqḍūrāt Allāh*) stop at no limit and end; and that the order of this world, even if it is in perfect wisdom and excellent design—even so, God is capable of creating one more excellent than it, and one still more excellent than that most excellent *ad infinitum*.

But the meaning of al-Ghazālī's statement is that the creation of what is more perfect and more wonderful than this world is outside the sphere of possibility. . . . So the divine power is not connected with the creation of a world better and more excellent than this world. Rather, the divine power terminates at this limit of greatest excellence and highest perfection.⁵

This is the first and gravest difficulty with al-Ghazālī's statement, and it represents a "great audacity" (*jur'ah 'aẓimah*) on his part; indeed, it may even be termed a "breach of orthodox consensus" (*ijmā'*).⁶ And, as if to complicate matters further, al-Ghazālī has himself affirmed, in several other works, the orthodox doctrine that God's power is limitless, a fact which al-Jazā'irī and others are quick to point out.⁷

⁴ al-Yāfi'ī, *Marham al-'ilal* (ed. Ross, Calcutta, 1910), p. 17.

⁵ *Hikmat*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ So in al-Ghazālī's *K. al-arba'in* (Cairo, 1344), p. 5: "The objects of God's

The apparent constraint on God's omnipotence leads to two further difficulties noted by al-Jazā'irī. One of these is that the statement seems compatible with the condemned doctrine of the philosophers according to which God creates, not out of free choice (*ikhtiyār*), but out of a necessity intrinsic to His nature (*ijāb dhātī*). And, lastly, critics will note a perilously close kinship, both in form and meaning, between al-Ghazālī's assertion and the formulations of the Mu'tazilite doctrine of "the optimum" (*al-aṣlah*). This doctrine was repudiated by the orthodox, who found especially abhorrent its insistence upon an obligation on God's part to provide what is most beneficial and most salutary for His creation.⁸

This is but the barest summary of problems to which it will be necessary to return in later chapters. It is given here only to set al-Ghazālī's statement within the context of the debate. The bone of contention is the possible infringement of the divine prerogatives of omnipotence and free choice. The suspicion that al-Ghazālī's position reflects the influence of philosophers and the Mu'tazilites "who cling to their shirt-tails"⁹ will serve only to sharpen the acrimony of the debate.

Before considering the development of the debate itself, with its many disputants and their works, and before embarking on an analysis of the theological difficulties adumbrated above, we must examine the controversial statement in its context in the various works of al-Ghazālī in which it appears. This will enable us to form a clearer conception of al-Ghazālī's "theodicy," if it may indeed be so termed.¹⁰

We shall need further to ascertain whether this theodicy is consistent with his viewpoint as expressed elsewhere in his work, or whether it is indeed an aberration, or lapse (*zallah*) on his

power are innumerable" (*lā tuḥsā maqdūrātuhu*), as also in his *al-Iqtisād fī'l-i'tiqād* (ed. Çubukçu; Ankara, 1962), p. 82 [For these works, see Bouyges, nos. 38 and 24, respectively.]

⁸ *Hikmat*, pp. 14-15.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ According to Wensinck, al-Ghazālī's emphasis on strict predestination is so rarely reconciled in the *Ihyā'* with the "human and tender" traits of God that "one can scarcely speak of theodicy in Ghazzālī," *La pensée de Ghazzālī* (Paris, 1940), p. 17.

part, as at least one of his opponents will charge.¹¹ We shall have to keep in mind that consistency is perhaps a tenuous criterion in relation to al-Ghazālī, as has often been pointed out.¹²

Finally, we should be in a position to determine whether the disputed sentence is in fact correctly attributed to al-Ghazālī or whether, as certain commentators will claim, it is after all an alien notion interpolated (*madsūs*) into his work by later meddling or malicious hands.

II

THE TEXTS

The commentators single out four works by al-Ghazālī in which the offending statement occurs.

It appears first in the discussion of "trust in God" (*tawakkul*) in the fourth part of the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, where, in speaking of the "necessarily right order" of the world, al-Ghazālī declares: "There is not in possibility anything whatever more excellent, more complete, or more perfect than it is."¹³ This sentence, together with the entire passage in which it appears, will provide the *locus classicus* for the debate in all later discussions.

al-Ghazālī reaffirmed his position in a later treatise entitled *al-İmlā' fī mushkilāt al-Iḥyā'*. This work was in fact composed in response to critics who had attacked certain debatable points in the *Iḥyā'*. Here al-Ghazālī writes: "There is not in possibility anything more wonderful (*abda'*) than the form of this world or more excellent in arrangement or more complete in construction."¹⁴

In a third work, written after the *Iḥyā'* and paraphrasing its major doctrines, al-Ghazālī will omit the controversial sentence

¹¹ *Tahdīm*, fol. 37b.

¹² See W. M. Watt, "The Study of al-Ghazālī," *Oriens* 13/14 (1961), p. 128; and Wensinck, *La pensée de Ghazzālī*, pp. 83-85 and 98ff.

¹³ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 223, lines 6-7: *laysa fī'l-īmkān aṣlan aḥsan minhu wa-lā atamm wa-lā akmal*.

¹⁴ *al-İmlā'* (Berlin ms., Pm. 545 [Ahlwardt II, 316, no. 1714]), fol. 16a. Also printed on the margin of *Ithāf* I, 193ff. For this work (variously known as *al-Ajwibah al-muskitah 'an al-as'ilah al-mubhitah* and *al-Intiṣār li-mā fī'l-Iḥyā' min al-asrār*), see Bouyges, nos. 61 and 116; and *GAL* I, 422; *S* I, 748, no. 25.

in the corresponding passage (which is otherwise almost verbatim) but will introduce it elsewhere. This work is the *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn*, intended as a sequel to his *Jawāhir al-Qurʾān*. (The commentators, confusingly enough, often cite the *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn* merely as "*Jawāhir*.") There, in discussing the notion of "contentment with the divine decree" (*riḍāʾ biʾl-qadāʾ*), a Ṣūfī principle closely connected with *tawakkul*, he writes that these decrees "are ordered in the most perfect and most excellent of ways" (*ʿalā akmal al-wujūh wa-aḥsanihā*), such that "nothing in possibility is more excellent than they, nor more perfect" (*walaysa fiʾl-imkān aḥsan minhā*).¹⁵

The fourth work mentioned by the disputants is the *Maqāṣid al-falāsifah*, an exposition of the doctrines of the philosophers, and particularly those of Ibn Sīnā. As is well known, al-Ghazālī intended this work as an introduction to his stringent critique of philosophy, the *Tahāfut al-falāsifah*. In the Latin West, however, the *Maqāṣid* came to be mistakenly identified as a favorable presentation of the philosophers' doctrines, and "Algazel" joined the ranks of Avicenna, Averroes, and Avempace in the scholastic tradition.¹⁶ At times it will seem as though certain of his opponents in the present debate make the same mistake and confuse al-Ghazālī's position with that of the philosophers whom he elsewhere attacks.

It must be admitted that this is not wholly without foundation. Certain philosophical doctrines, such as that of the world's eternity (*qidam al-ʿālam*), were indisputably repugnant to al-Ghazālī, and he criticized them vehemently. In the case of others, however, such as the doctrine of providence (*ināyah*), it is not entirely clear that he rejected them *in toto*. There is evidence to suggest that he accepted certain aspects of such doctrines, with significant modifications, and then incorporated them in thinly disguised form in later works such as the *Iḥyāʾ*.

This, too, is a subject to which we shall be obliged to return in a later chapter. Here let us merely note that the passage in

¹⁵ K. *al-arbaʿīn*, p. 270.

¹⁶ See E. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (NY, 1955), p. 216. For the *Maqāṣid*, see Bouyges, p. 23 (no. 17), who dates it at 487, G. Hourani, "The Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings," *JAOS* 79 (1959), p. 227, dates the work at 486/1094, i.e., four years before the *Iḥyāʾ* was begun.

question appears in al-Ghazālī's discussion of providence, where he says: "All existing things, from the number of the stars and their measure, the earth's shape and that of animals and everything that exists, exist as they do only because it is the most perfect way to be (*akmal wujūh al-wujūd*). Any other possibilities are defective in regard to it (sc. the actual order)."¹⁷

All of these variations, but especially those in the *Iḥyā'* and the *Imlā'*, came to be compressed into a single rhyming formula under which the entire problem and its discussion were subsumed, i.e.: "There is not in possibility anything more wonderful than what is" (*laysa fi'l-imbkān abda' mimmā kān*).¹⁸

III

THE STATEMENT IN CONTEXT

The following passage from the *Iḥyā'* represents al-Ghazālī's most sustained formulation of theodicy. It is, moreover, the passage to which all later discussions refer; an understanding of it will be necessary in following the course of the dispute. This does not mean, however, that we shall attempt at this point to decide "what al-Ghazālī really meant." Such an attempt would be premature before the comments of his critics and supporters have been considered. Hence, we shall try to present here as fully as possible what he in fact wrote, keeping in mind the differing interpretations to which his words gave rise.

Our object at this state is exposition rather than analysis. We shall concentrate on the text of the *Iḥyā'*, bringing in citations from other of his works where they may serve to illumine his intention; we shall have particular recourse to his own comments in the *Imlā'* as well. The difficulty here will be to refrain from deciding the issue (if indeed it can be decided); no exposition, however well intentioned, can remain completely neutral. But our ultimate interest should be not only to determine al-Ghazālī's original meaning but to learn what his commenta-

¹⁷ *Maqāṣid al-falāsifah*, p. 238; cf. also p. 237: "The essence of the One is an essence from which necessarily every existing thing emanates in the most complete and perfect manner" (*alā al-wajh al-atamm wa'l-akmal 'alā tartībīhi*).

¹⁸ Most later treatises employ this formula: thus al-Suyūṭī will entitle his work *Tashyid al-arkān min "Laysa fi'l-imbkān abda' mimmā kān."*

tors made of his remarks. What we here term a Muslim version of theodicy is the product of many minds arguing pro and con over a span of centuries in an attempt to understand what is contained *in nuce* in the original text.

A. THE IḤYĀ' TEXT

It should be made clear at the outset that we are dealing, not with a systematic or even a closely reasoned proof of theodicy, but with an exhortation to a specific stage (*maqām*) on the Ṣūfī path. al-Ghazālī's defenders take his critics to task for ignoring this, and rightly so.

Thus, according to Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1791), "... his purpose in this is to incite man to the utmost in reliance on God (*tawakkul*)—that is what this question is all about—and to contentment with every decree of God . . . so that man may not despair over an evil which befalls him or a good which eludes him."¹⁹

This hortatory intent is obvious when the entire passage is seen and so it will be given here in full, despite its length, as is almost invariably done in the commentaries themselves.

In his discussion of the realization of the divine unity (*tawḥīd*), which is the basis (*aṣl*) of trust in God, al-Ghazālī states that to reach the stage of trust, it is necessary that:

. . . one believe with utter certainty in which
there is neither weakness nor doubt that if
God had created all creatures with the intelligence
of the most intelligent among them and the
knowledge of the most learned among them; and (5)
if He had created for them all the knowledge
their souls could sustain and had poured out
upon them wisdom of indescribable extent; then,
had He given each one of them the knowledge,
wisdom, and intelligence of them all, and (10)
revealed to them the consequences of things
and taught them the mysteries of the transcendent
world and acquainted them with the subtleties

¹⁹ *Ithāf*, IX, 450, line -3ff.

of divine favor and the mysteries of final
punishments, until they were made well aware (15)
of good and evil, benefit and harm; then, if
He had ordered them to arrange this world and
the transcendent world in terms of the knowledge
and wisdom they had received, (even then)
that act of arrangement on the part of all of (20)
them, helping each other and working in concert,
would not make it necessary to add to the way in
which God has arranged creation in this world and
the next by (so much as) a gnat's wing, nor to
subtract from it (by so much as) a gnat's wing; (25)
nor would it raise a speck of dust or lower a
speck of dust; (their arrangement) would not
ward off sickness or fault or defect or poverty
or injury from one so afflicted, and it would not
remove health or perfection or wealth or advantage (30)
from one so favored.

But if people directed their gaze and considered
steadfastly everything that God has created in
heaven and earth, they would see neither discrepancy
nor rift. (35)

Everything which God apportions to man, such as
sustenance, life-span, pleasure and pain, capacity
and incapacity, belief and disbelief, obedience
and sin, is all of it sheer justice, with no in-
justice in it; and pure right, with no wrong in it. (40)

Indeed, it is according to the necessarily right
order, in accord with what must be and as it must
be and in the measure in which it must be; and
there is not in possibility anything whatever more
excellent, more perfect, and more complete than it. (45)

For if there were and He had withheld it, having
power to create it but not deigning to do so, this
would be miserliness contrary to the divine gener-
osity and injustice contrary to the divine justice.
But if He were not able, it would be incapability (50)
contrary to divinity.

40 THE PERFECT RIGHTNESS

Indeed, all poverty and loss in this world is a diminution in this world but an increase in the next. Every lack in the next world in relation to one individual is a boon in relation to someone else. For were it not for night, the value of day would be unknown. Were it not for illness, the healthy would not enjoy health. Were it not for hell, the blessed in paradise would not know the extent of their blessedness. In the same way, the lives of animals serve as ransom for human souls; and the power to kill them which is given to humans is no injustice. (55)

Indeed, giving precedence to the perfect over the imperfect is justice itself. So too is heaping favors on the inhabitants of paradise by increasing the punishment of the inhabitants of hell. The ransom of the faithful by means of the unfaithful is justice itself. (60)

As long as the imperfect is not created, the perfect will remain unknown. If beasts had not been created, the dignity of man would not be manifest. The perfect and the imperfect are correlated. Divine generosity and wisdom require the simultaneous creation of the perfect and the imperfect. (70)

Just as the amputation of a gangrenous hand in order to preserve life is justice, since it involves ransoming the perfect through the imperfect, so too the matter of the discrepancy which exists among people in their portion in this world and the next. That is all justice, without any wrong; and right in which there is no caprice. (75)

Now this is a vast and deep sea with wide shores and tossed by billows. In extent it is comparable to the sea of God's unity. Whole groups of the inept drown in it without realizing that it is an arcane matter which only the knowing comprehend. Behind this sea is the mystery of predestination where the many wander in perplexity and which (80)

(85)

(90)

those who have been illuminated are forbidden
to divulge.

The gist is that good and evil are foreordained.
What is foreordained comes necessarily to be after
a prior act of divine volition. No one can rebel (95)
against God's judgement; no one can appeal His
decree and command. Rather, everything small and
large is written and comes to be in a known and ex-
pected measure. "What strikes you was not there to
miss you; what misses you was not there to strike you."²⁰

1. *The Perfect Rightness of the Actual* (lines 1-40)

The world as it is and not otherwise, the actual state-of-affairs, is superior to any merely hypothetical alternative order. This is true of the least detail: the gnat's wing or the speck of dust. Not one iota of the actual may be changed for the better.

The striking opening lines of the passage, with its extended hypothetical sentence, are based very closely on a passage in the *Qūt al-qulūb* of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996).²¹ As is well known, the *Qūt al-qulūb*, together with works by 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), were favorite Ṣūfī sources for al-Ghazālī in composing the *Iḥyā'*. Indeed, al-Jazā'irī for one will see the entire passage above as little more than a commentary on al-Makkī's text.²²

The original passage in the *Qūt al-qulūb*, corresponding roughly to lines 1-26 of the above translation, begins with the same premise as al-Ghazālī's. For both authors, this world is not only right and just as it is, it is insuperably so. Even if God were to increase human knowledge and wisdom to the fullest extent

²⁰ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 222-223; cf. also the translation by H. Wehr, *al-Ġazzālī's Buch vom Gottvertrauen* (Halle, 1940), p. 37. The final quotation in the passage is from *ḥadīth*; see Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* V, 183, 185, 189, and Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, I, 30 (no. 77).

²¹ *Qūt al-qulūb* (Cairo, 1351/1932), III, 52. al-Ghazālī's indebtedness to al-Makkī was well known; it is noted, for example, in *Iḥyā'*, IX, 450. See also Wehr, *al-Ġazzālī's Buch vom Gottvertrauen*, p. 111, note 164. For al-Ghazālī's dependence on his predecessors, see P. Nwyia, *Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh*, pp. 8-9: "Ibn 'Abbād noted it already in the 14th century: Ghazālī borrowed the best part of his *Iḥyā'* from Muḥāsibī and from the *Qūt al-qulūb* of Makkī."

²² *Ḥikmat*, p. 39.

imaginable and grant man unlimited freedom to rearrange the cosmos, even then it could not be improved. al-Makkī intensifies this assertion with a sentence omitted in al-Ghazālī's reworking: "Even if God were to assist and strengthen" man, his attempt to redesign the world order would be unavailing.²³

As noted earlier, the passage is part of an exhortation to trust in God, and the same is true of al-Makkī's text as well. In a sense we may regard the entire long opening sentence as the reply to an unexpressed but ever-present question: Why is the world as it is? It would plainly be improved if. . . (and indeed, such questioning, though for different motives, will appear in al-Biqā'ī's attack.) This dissatisfaction with things as they are forms an obstacle to the trust in God which both authors are eager to inculcate. Elsewhere al-Makkī points out that the very particles of the hypothetical conditional and of the future may become instruments of impiety:

If a person says, "Were it not for so-and-so, I would have perished," "Were it not thus, it would be so,"—this is polytheism (*shirk*) . . .

sawfa is one of the armies of Iblīs.²⁴

Such statements reflect an assumption that agents other than God exist; they suggest that things might have been otherwise, and so they undermine trust in God. Furthermore, the human self is by nature presumptuous and arrogantly eschews its proper subservience. In his discussion of fortitude (*ṣabr*), al-Ghazālī notes that "there is no self which does not have hidden within it what Pharaoh openly proclaimed, i.e., 'I am your lord the most high!' " for "the self by its very nature shuns servanthood (*'ubūdīyah*) and craves lordship (*rubūbiyah*)."²⁵

This apotheosis of the self, to which human beings naturally

²³ *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 6. Cf. Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, I, 31: *law taftahu 'amal al-shayṭān*. According to Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī, as reported by al-Tawhīdī, when one submits without question to divine law, " 'why?' falls away, 'how?' is invalidated, 'why not?' vanishes and 'if only' and 'would that' disappear in the wind!" *al-Imtā' wa'l-mu'ānasah* (ed. Amin; Beirut, 1953), II, 6-7. [*sawfa* is the future particle in Arabic.]

²⁵ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 61.

tend, along with a false reliance on worldly means, make a genuine trust in God impossible. The aspirant to *tawakkul* must crave not lordship, however, but to be “like an infant who knows no refuge other than his mother’s breast.”²⁶ Or, as another famous saying has it, he must be “in God’s hands like a corpse in the corpse-washer’s hands who turns him however he wishes, for there is no motion or self-direction in him.”²⁷ But it is not enough to be *Kadavergehorsam*; the aspirant must achieve a changed perception of the world, and this entails more than mere “resignation to the course of fate’s decrees,” even if this is a prerequisite.²⁸ What is ultimately required is “good opinion of God,”²⁹ leading to complete faith in the divine mercy and wisdom. Whereas “the recognition of God’s oneness produces contemplation of the Causer of causes, . . . faith in the divine mercy and capability . . . produces trust in the Causer of causes. *Tawakkul* is imperfect without trust in the agent (*wakīl*) . . . and peace of mind in the contemplation of the Protector.”³⁰

The aspirant to trust in God must therefore learn to see the world as it really is—not as the product of blind chance or of any series of causes and effects, nor as the arena of his own endeavors, but as the direct expression of the divine will and wisdom, down to the least particular. Trust in God presupposes the recognition of the perfect rightness of the actual. The world is to be viewed, not from the personal perspective of hope and fear, but “from above.” “Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī said, ‘When you see things from above, you discover another flavor (*taʿm*) in them.’”³¹

From this vantage point the aspirant sees world and self without reference to self; whatever befalls him is perceived not in terms of his own natural desires but in terms of the divine wis-

²⁶ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyah* (Cairo, 1966), I, 375.

²⁷ al-Qushayrī, I, 368.

²⁸ al-Qushayrī, I, 372. Cf. al-Kalabādhī, tr. Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 92.

²⁹ *ḥusn al-ẓann*. “Abd Allāh ibn Dāwūd said: ‘I consider *tawakkul* as good opinion of God,’” cited in B. Reinert, *Die Lehre vom tawakkul in der klassischen Sufik* (Berlin, 1968), p. 44. See also P. Nwyia, *Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh*, p. 105.

³⁰ *Iḥyāʾ*, IV, 222.

³¹ Cited in *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 53.

dom which dictates it. This permits him to realize that this world is indeed the best possible world, for the existence of everything in it is the result of the divine will. Not even the least thing—a gnat's wing—can be added or subtracted without detriment.³²

a. *The Divine Wisdom: The Natural Order.* The example of the gnat's wing is introduced for a purpose. To be sure, this is in one sense no more than saying "the least trifle" (as Wehr brings out in his translation: "die geringste Kleinigkeit").³³ But something more is involved as well.

A signal characteristic of most attempts at theodicy is the belief that no aspect of the world, however insignificant it may seem, is without some redeeming reason. This is a result of the so-called "principle of sufficient reason" which often goes hand-in-hand with theodicy. The classic formula for this principle was stated by Christian Wolff (1679-1754): "*nihil est sine ratione sufficiente, cur potius sit, quam non sit*,"³⁴ i.e., nothing is without a sufficient reason why it is rather than is not; or, in Schopenhauer's terse translation: "Nichts ist ohne Grund warum es sei."³⁵ (It is this principle, of course, which occasions some of the most telling satire at the expense of Leibniz in Voltaire's *Candide*.)

In following this principle, the proponent of theodicy will be compelled to discover the sufficient reason for the existence of such manifestly destructive, noxious, or at best nugatory creatures as bedbugs, flies, lice, etc., as well as of such catastrophes as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and the like. Debates over the role of such creatures or events in the divine scheme were common from antiquity on. The Stoic Chrysippus (c. 280-206 B.C.), for example, is often credited with the defense of a wise providence. Max Pohlenz, a leading historian of Stoicism, has paraphrased some of the justifications imputed to him: "The wild

³² On the connection between *tawakkul* and the view of this world as the best possible, see also Reinert, *Die Lehre*, p. 45 (with reference to the early Šūfi Sahl al-Tustarī).

³³ Wehr, *al-Ġazzālī's Buch vom Gottvertrauen*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Philosophia prima sive Ontologia* (2d ed.; Frankfurt, 1736; rpt. Hildesheim, 1962), p. 47, cited in Schopenhauer, *Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde*, in *Werke*, V, 17.

³⁵ Schopenhauer, *Werke*, V, 17.

beasts are there to test the power of humans, the poison fangs of the serpents furnish medicine, the mice teach alertness, and the bedbugs take care that we not sleep too long.”³⁶ Of course, the defender of this view may select just such examples at the outset; for if the divine wisdom can be made plain in gnats and flies, then how much the more so in admittedly noble and worthwhile beings?³⁷

The unalterable rightness of the actual is evinced in the least things. al-Makkī, in commenting of his own choice of the gnat as an example, states: “The gnat and the mustard seed are the smallest of animate and inanimate things which God created, but in each of them are 360 instances of wisdom (*hikam*).”³⁸ The gnat is, of course, commonly used as an example of something small or trivial (cf. *Qur.* 2:26), but it is in just such despicable objects that the wonders of divine wisdom are revealed. Thus, for al-Jāhiz, the gnat’s wing is an object lesson for the thoughtful who can perceive in its “long scrolls” an “abundance of wonders.”³⁹

In various passages of his later works, but especially in the *Iḥyā’*, al-Ghazālī delights in demonstrating the marvels concealed in the tiny, the commonplace, and the familiar. If the divine wisdom may be made apparent in such banal objects, how much the more will it shine forth in the undeniably grand and majestic aspects of creation? It is al-Ghazālī’s guiding principle that “the lowest is explicatory of the highest.”⁴⁰ In this, he follows a well-established tradition, common from antiquity and perhaps best exemplified in Galen’s *De usu partium*, which was

³⁶ Pohlenz, *Die Stoa*, I, 100 (citing *SVF* II, 1173, 1163); cf. also W. Capelle, “Zur antiken Theodicee,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 20 (1907), esp. pp. 178-179 and 188. For Talmudic parallels, see H. Goitein, *Das Problem der Theodicee in der älteren jüdischen Religionsphilosophie* (Königsberg, 1890), p. 34. For comparable Islamic discussions, see al-Māturīdī, *K. al-tawḥīd*, p. 108, and al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, I, 266.

³⁷ See, for example, al-Jāhiz, *K. al-ḥayawān*, II, 109.

³⁸ *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 52.

³⁹ al-Jāhiz, *K. al-ḥayawān*, I, 208-209.

⁴⁰ *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, p. 41: *al-adnā bayyinah ‘alā ‘l-a’lā*. The procedure is comparable to the Rabbinic *kal wa-homer*, or conclusion *a minori ad majus*; see M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (NY, 1971), p. 436.

translated early into Arabic and from which, indeed, many of his examples of wisdom ultimately derive.⁴¹

At the same time, such lowly creatures as the gnat are themselves inexhaustible mines of wonder, before which the human intellect must confess itself checked and baffled. "Indeed," says al-Ghazālī, "even if we wished to mention the marvels in a bed-bug, an ant, a bee or a spider—for these are the tiniest animals—in the way they construct their dwellings, gather their food, consort with their mates and store provisions, . . . we would be unable to do so."⁴² In resorting to such examples, al-Ghazālī wishes to rekindle the sense of amazement which is dulled by familiarity; for when "we see an unfamiliar creature, even if it is a worm, the mind's amazement is renewed."⁴³ It will be one of his favored strategies, therefore, to present familiar creatures as though they were to be seen afresh for the first time. When man's sense of amazement is stimulated, he is driven to reflection; through reflection, he comes to recognize the unalterable wisdom of things as they are.

A meticulous wisdom is revealed in the actual placement of things within creation, and the order of the world discloses a

⁴¹ Galen's influential work was translated into Arabic in the 3d/9th century by Hubaysh ibn al-Ḥasan and then revised by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 260/873), under the title *K. fī manāfi' al-a'dā'*. See M. Steinschneider, *Die arabischen Übersetzungen aus dem Griechischen*, pp. 286-287; G. Bergsträsser, "Hunain ibn Ishāq über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-Übersetzungen," *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 17:2 (1925), p. 27; and M. Ullmann, *Die Medizin im Islam*, p. 41.

In regard to al-Ghazālī's purpose in the example of the gnat, compare Galen's remark à propos of the flea: "If the Creator's skill is such when displayed incidentally . . . in insignificant animals, how great must we consider his wisdom and power when displayed in animals of some importance!" *De usu partium* (ed. Helmreich), II, 449; tr. May, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, II, 732.

⁴² *Iḥyā'*, IV, 375. Cf. Galen, I, 5; tr. May, I, 71. See also, *De usu partium*, II, 448 [tr. May, II, 731]: ". . . any other animal you may care to dissect will show you as well both the wisdom and skill of the Creator, and the smaller the animal the greater the wonder it will excite, just as when craftsmen carve something on small objects."

⁴³ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 376. Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī seeks to stimulate wonder by noting a microcosmic correspondence between creatures; thus, the gnat is no less wonderful than the majestic elephant, for the Creator endowed both with trunks! See *Iḥyā'*, IV, 273; and for an earlier source for this comparison between gnat and elephant, see Jāḥiẓ, *K. al-ḥayawān*, VII, 169.

fundamental justice in its very structure. In this, al-Ghazālī adheres to a traditional Islamic notion of justice (*ʿadl*), by which is meant the proper placement of things, each in its own most fitting place. In propounding the alliance of justice with wisdom in the very design of the world, al-Ghazālī follows earlier, “orthodox” theologians: al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) had already countered the Muʿtazilite doctrine of the optimum (*al-aṣḥaḥ*) with a concept of wisdom which he defined as “appositeness” (*iṣābah*), or the proper placement of things.⁴⁴

The notion of divine wisdom is central to an understanding of the Ghazālīan theodicy; at the same time, it should be noted that this concept, which plays so large a part in his thought, was repugnant to many of his fellow Ashʿarites, for whom any attempt to rationalize God’s actions was suspect. In the dispute, objections will be raised to al-Ghazālī’s reliance on the notion of wisdom. Moreover, to members of other theological schools, Ashʿarism was to appear dangerously lacking in any appreciation of the importance of divine wisdom in the scheme of things; the criticism was to be levelled not only by Muʿtazilite and Shīʿite theologians, but even by more strictly traditionalist schools, such as the Ḥanbalite. Two centuries after al-Ghazālī’s death, for example, the great Ḥanbalite theologian Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728/1328) will fault the Ashʿarites for their neglect of the principle of divine wisdom; the Ashʿarites, he states, “affirm will without wisdom, and volition without mercy, love, and approval.”⁴⁵ In this light, al-Ghazālī’s pronounced emphasis on the role of wisdom may have represented an attempt—not entirely successful, in any case—to modify the strict Ashʿarite doctrine of God’s sovereign unaccountability, or, at least, to rationalize and render palatable this doctrine.

For al-Ghazālī, the divine wisdom pervades each creature. The gnat may seem an eccentric example, but it is one to which

⁴⁴ *K. al-tawḥīd*, p. 97. This notion of justice will be further discussed in Chapter Five below.

⁴⁵ *Majmūʿat al-rasāʾil al-kubrā* (Cairo, 1323), I, 333. For Ibn Taymīyah’s own understanding and use of the concept of wisdom, see Joseph N. Bell, *Love Theory in Later Ḥanbalite Islam* (Albany, 1979), p. 69ff.

he frequently has recourse.⁴⁶ God's wisdom is such that human intelligence, even acting in concert with all the creatures of heaven and earth, is incapable of fathoming its wonders in the structure of a noxious insect. For within these minuscule creatures "are such marvels that if the first and the last were to join together [to attempt] to comprehend their natures, they would be unable to grasp the truth."⁴⁷ The gnat confutes human presumption. How much the more futile will a concerted action prove, on the part of all humanity, to envisage, let alone realize, another order of things?

For al-Ghazālī, nothing in creation is more indicative of the divine wisdom than the human body itself. Each of our limbs and organs displays the perfect rightness of the actual. The human body is a particularly apt and persuasive example. It is most immediate and most familiar to us; it is also most revelatory of the Creator's grandeur. Man, however, persists in remaining brutishly unaware of this. "Man," states al-Ghazālī, "is the most amazing of animals, and yet he is not amazed at himself."⁴⁸

In his zeal to awaken a sense of amazement, al-Ghazālī dwells in detail on specific features of the human body, and he does so dramatically. At times it is as though he were peeling back be-

⁴⁶ *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, p. 39; *Iḥyā'*, IV, 273. There is a strikingly similar passage in the work traditionally ascribed to al-Ghazālī and entitled, fittingly, *al-Ḥikmah fī makhlūqāt Allāh* (Cairo, 1352/1934), p. 54; however, I now think this work incorrectly ascribed to al-Ghazālī. There are not only pronounced stylistic differences between *al-Ḥikmah* and al-Ghazālī's indisputably genuine works, but the former work displays throughout a decisively Mu'tazilite cast of thought and expression; see, for example, pp. 7, 9, 12, 13 and 17. Furthermore, the work espouses a highly anthropocentric doctrine of providence, which al-Ghazālī expressly rejects. It may be noted, too, that none of al-Ghazālī's commentators alludes to, or cites from, *al-Ḥikmah fī makhlūqāt Allāh*; nor does he himself refer to it. The ascription of authorship to al-Ghazālī was probably due to the important role he reserves for wisdom in his later work, which made him seem a likely author, as well as to the fact that many passages in *al-Ḥikmah* parallel passages in the *Iḥyā'*. These parallels, however, are due to a common reliance on Galen and other scientific authors and are, in any case, hardly unique to al-Ghazālī. (I am grateful to Professor George F. Hourani for his comments, which have prompted me to this conclusion.)

⁴⁷ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 274.

⁴⁸ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 376: *al-insān a'jab al-hayawānāt wa-laysa yata'ajjab min nafsihi*. In commenting on this passage, Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī cites the following verse: "Do you think that you are [merely] a little mass (*jirm ṣaghīr*), when the greater world is enfolded within you?" *Ithāf*, X, 204.

fore the eyes of startled onlookers the various intricate layers and components of their own bodily forms. His examples derive from the medical texts, but he infuses them with a sense of the marvelous. Beneath such demonstrable marvels as the number and structure of the bones, the intricacy and elegance of the nerves and muscles, the manifold actions of tendons and ligaments, or even the complex orchestration of the tiny muscles that move our eyelids, lie unsearchable depths of divine wisdom. This awareness of hidden dimensions of meaning in the very sinews and tissues of our bodies enables al-Ghazālī to turn the brute facts of the physician and the anatomist to telling effect. As he himself notes: "The physician considers these [sc. the bones] so that he may know a way of healing by setting them, but those with insight consider them so that through them they may draw conclusions about the majesty of Him who created and shaped (the bones). What a difference between the two who consider!"⁴⁹

Thus, there is a rigorous justice and rightness in the least aspect of our bodies. Nothing could have been different, nothing could have been better; no limb or organ could have been arranged or appointed in other than its actual form and position. For example, God "composed the eye of seven layers, each of which has a specified characteristic and a specified shape, and if one of these layers were missing or removed, the eye would be deprived of sight."⁵⁰ The human eye could function properly in no other position than that in which it actually is:

He placed the eye in the place in the body most fitting for it. Had He created it on the back of the head or on the leg or on the hand or on top of the head, it would be obvious what shortcoming would befall it, and what exposure to injuries.⁵¹

Even the design and positioning of the nose display wisdom, for

. . . you must know that nothing has been created in a place without being specifically intended for it. If (the nose) were to the right or to the left, or lower or higher, it would be defective

⁴⁹ *Ihyā'*, IV, 372.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; see also *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, p. 82.

⁵¹ *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, p. 106.

or useless or ugly or disproportionate, displeasing to the sight. Therefore, He created the nose in the center of the face. Had He created it on the forehead or on the cheek, defect would attend its uses.⁵²

al-Ghazālī discusses the human skin, the various muscles of the body, the nerves, veins, and arteries; he dwells on the twenty-four muscles necessary to move the pupil and the eyelid.⁵³ He enumerates and describes the 248 bones of the human body; he discusses their various sizes, shapes, and functions. Not a single bone could be added or subtracted from the body without detriment.⁵⁴ His descriptions are precise, for he wishes to emphasize the meticulous rightness of things as they are.

Certain bodily features, such as the human hand, compel special admiration. Our opposable thumb reveals great ingenuity of design:

He placed the fingers on one side and the thumb on the other side, so that the thumb could curve around them all. Now if the first and the last cooperated to devise by subtle thought another way of placing the fingers except as they have been placed—with a distance from the thumb to the fingers and a difference in the fingers' length and their order in a single row—they could not do this. For by this arrangement the hand is best suited (*ṣalahat*) for grasping and letting go.⁵⁵

Man's very fingernails are of crucial importance, for if they "were lacking in man, and an itch befell him, he would be the most impotent and the weakest of creatures. Nothing could take the (nail's) place in scratching his body."⁵⁶

After he has laid bare the integuments of that most obvious and immediate source of amazement, the human body itself, al-

⁵² *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, p. 107; *Iḥyā'*, IV, 373. Cf. Galen, *De usu partium*, II, 153; tr. May, II, 530. There is a parallel passage in *al-Ḥikmah fī makhluqāt Allāh*, p. 21.

⁵³ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 372.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 373, line -4. Cf. Galen, I, 7; tr. May, I, 72. See also, *al-Ḥikmah fī makhluqāt Allāh*, p. 22. A similar line of reasoning may be found also in Job of Edessa, *Book of Treasures* (ed. Budge), p. 321 [Syriac text], p. 45 [translation].

⁵⁶ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 374. Cf. *al-Ḥikmah*, p. 22.

Ghazālī reminds his reader that all of this grew from a turbid drop of semen within the secret darkness of the womb.⁵⁷ And he exhorts his reader:

Turn now to the drop of semen and consider its state at first and what it then becomes. Reflect that if *jinn* and men had joined together to create for the drop of semen, hearing or sight or intellect or power or knowledge or spirit, or to create in it bones, veins, nerves, skin, or hair—would they have been able to do that? Assuredly not! Even if they wished to know its real nature, and how it took shape after God created it, they would be incapable of that.⁵⁸

The human body is marvelous and perfectly right in every particular. Nevertheless, it is not the highest example of the wonders of divine wisdom. al-Ghazālī rejects anthropocentrism; even the least speck of dust (*dharrah*) in the realm of the heavens is not only “most wise in its creation and most perfect in its construction,” but also includes “more marvels than the human body.”⁵⁹ Indeed, “on earth there is no relation to all the wonders of the heavens.”⁶⁰ The gnat, small and lowly as it is, prompts astonishment and reveals the marvels of higher creatures; so, too, does man, in all the manifest wonder and beauty of his form, serve to lead reflection to still higher and more amazing realms of divine wisdom:

Consider now man’s outward and inward aspect, and his body and its features; for in these you see wonders and craft that compel amazement. All this God made in a drop of dirty water. From this you see His craft in a drop of water and what He made in the realm of the heavens and the stars, and His wisdom in their positionings, forms and magnitudes.⁶¹

b. *The Divine Wisdom: The Social Order*. The perfect rightness of the actual extends not only to the natural world, it obtains with equal force in the world of human affairs (lines 36-40, 80-

⁵⁷ *Iḥyā’*, IV, 374.

⁵⁸ *Iḥyā’*, IV, 373.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* See also *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, p. 107.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Iḥyā’*, IV, 372, line 3.

83). There is complete justice and right in every condition of life. At times, little distinction seems to be made between the natural and the social orders; for, indeed, both are the result of the divine will. This encompasses the most mundane objects: one of God's greatest blessings toward man, says al-Ghazālī, lies in the creation of the *dirham* and the *dīnār*, since the world is supported by them. They are mere metals without any intrinsic benefit and yet all are compelled to use them.⁶²

The doctrine that God directly wills whatever occurs—indeed, He is the only real agent—makes this unavoidable; every action of man is the result of God's will.⁶³ Moreover, nothing simply "happens" to man; there is neither caprice nor carelessness in the administration of the world. Whatever happens is intentional and not random; and it is God who intends it. The navigator believes that the wind drives his ship through the sea; the scribe thinks that his hand guides the pen to form letters on the page; the king issues edicts in the belief that it is he who incites to action. All three are deluded.⁶⁴ Whatever occurs in this world, from "the creeping of a black ant on a hard stone in a pitchdark night" to the "atom's motion in the open air," God knows,⁶⁵ and it is the direct expression of His will. It is He, and only He, who causes actions.

This is not to say that for al-Ghazālī man has no sphere of action or of choice. Indeed, he praises the Ash'arite school of theology, to which he adhered, just for steering a middle course between more extreme schools on this subject, and for teaching that actions are from God in one sense and from man in another.⁶⁶ He rejects as absurd the teaching of the Jabrīyah, who in the effort to avoid any constraint on God's power hold that human beings are on the level of inorganic matter as regards free choice. One who questions them, he says, "should strike them and rend their garments and turbans, claw their faces,

⁶² *Ihyā'*, IV, 79.

⁶³ See al-Ash'arī, *al-Ibānah 'an uṣūl al-diyānah* (Cairo, 1977), p. 23.

⁶⁴ I have here paraphrased *Ihyā'*, IV, 213-214.

⁶⁵ *K. al-arba'in*, p. 5; cf. *Ihyā'*, I, 96, *paen*.

⁶⁶ *K. al-arba'in*, pp. 10, 13.

pluck out their hair, their mustaches, and their beards, and then excuse himself as these fools do" (i.e., by claiming that all acts are from God alone).⁶⁷ At the other extreme, however, both the Qadarīyah and the Mu'tazilah are also to be rejected, for in their insistence on man's free will they tend to render God powerless.⁶⁸

This is a complex question and requires fuller discussion than is possible here.⁶⁹ It should be noted that in the *Iḥyā'* passage (and indeed in treatments of *tawakkul* generally), greater stress is placed on the sole agency of God than usual; the *mutawakkil* must recognize no agent other than God (though this will not absolve him from responsibility, in the legal sense, for the consequences of his actions).

The divine agency extends to all facets of human existence, such as sustenance, span of life, pleasure and pain, etc. It is God who allots to man all that he has; and it would be false to assume, for example, that a man could increase or decrease his allotted share of nourishment (*rizq*) in this life. The sustenance of each creature is foreordained and is as inevitable as death: "If a man were to flee from his allotted nourishment, it would overtake him just as death, if he were to flee from it, would overtake him."⁷⁰

al-Ghazālī describes the role of the divine will in human life, in a passage which reinforces his position in the *Iḥyā'*, as follows:

God wills existing things and sets things created in time in order, for there occur in this world and in the transcendent world neither few nor many, small nor great, good nor evil, benefit nor harm, belief nor unbelief, recognition nor denial, gain nor loss, increase nor diminishment, obedience nor disobedience, except as a result of God's decree and predestination and wisdom and will. What He wishes, is; what He does not wish, is not.

⁶⁷ *K. al-arbaʿīn*, pp. 9-10, 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ On the question of free will, probably the most vexed topic of early Islamic theology, W. Montgomery Watt's *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London, 1948) is still the standard introduction.

⁷⁰ al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 27.

Not even the casual glance of a spectator nor the stray thought in the mind come to be outside the sphere of His will. He is the originator; He causes recurrence (*al-mu'īd*); He is the effector (*fa'āl*) of what He wills.⁷¹

And, once again, al-Ghazālī has recourse to the kind of hypothetical statement employed in the *Iḥyā'* text as he tries to clinch this point: "Were men, *jinn*, angels, and devils to join together in order to set in motion a single atom in this world, or to bring it to rest, without God's will and volition, they would be incapable of that."⁷²

In his summary of human conditions, al-Ghazālī makes no effort to present pain, incapacity, illness, or poverty as anything other than the evils they are. Nor are such misfortunes the result of social inequity or accident or human wickedness. God intends poverty or pain or disbelief for certain individuals, just as He intends wealth, well-being, and belief for others. No attempt is undertaken here to absolve God from responsibility for these circumstances. This does not mean that al-Ghazālī will not offer a variety of explanations for evil, and particularly the evil of suffering, but that the question of the ultimate authorship of evil does not arise, or at least does not occupy the central position, in his version of theodicy, that it occupies in Western versions.

A bizarre form of optimism, this, that can look on disease, destitution, social inequity, and the like, and unflinchingly pronounce it right and just! The later discussions will be quite specific and consistent in pursuing this theme. To note but one example: it is right, indeed God desires, that certain people be relegated to the so-called "base professions" (*al-ḥiraf al-khasī-sah*, such as tanning, for this contributes to the perfect orderliness of the world as it is. The perfect rightness of the actual encompasses the status quo.⁷³

⁷¹ K. *al-arba'in*, p. 6.

⁷² *Ibid.* See also al-Ghazālī's *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk* (ed. Humā'i; Tehran, 1315-17), p. 5, for a parallel passage in Persian; tr. F.R.C. Bagley, *Ghazālī's Book of Counsel for Kings* (London, 1964), pp. 8-9.

⁷³ So al-Samhūdī, *Idāḥ al-bayān*, p. 134, and al-Suyūṭī, *Tashyīd al-arkān*, fol. 3b. Indeed, even cupidity and the "profit motive" serve; according to al-Ghazālī, God utilizes merchants who are driven by love of money and the lust for profit

It would be a mistake to conclude from this that al-Ghazālī is blind to the realities of existence or that a kind of Panglossian obtuseness dictates his remarks. The point would seem to be rather the Ashʿarite insistence that there is no intrinsic good or evil in any of these conditions.⁷⁴ So, for example, in disputing the contention of certain Muʿtazilites that the religious obligations (*taklīf*) enjoined on man by God are good in themselves (on the ground that an earned reward in the hereafter is more satisfying than a gratuitous one), al-Ghazālī denies that there is any intrinsic merit in *taklīf*:

How can any intelligent man say that there is benefit in a creation where *taklīf* exists? Benefit has meaning only if *taklīf* is absent. For *taklīf* is in its essence the imposition of constraint (*ilzām kulfah*), and that is pain.⁷⁵

True benefit would in fact presuppose the complete avoidance of this earthly life:

There would be benefit for man had he been created in paradise without pain or grief; but as for the existing state-of-affairs, all intelligent men desire non-being. One says, "Would that I were oblivious and forgotten!" Another says, "Would that I were nothing!" And still another, "Would that I were this piece of straw that is swept from the earth!" And yet another says while pointing to a bird, "Would that I were that bird!"

These are the words of prophets and saints who are intelligent men. Some of them desire the cessation of existence while others desire the cessation of responsibility in order to be inanimate matter or a bird.⁷⁶

to bring together and make available, even at peril of their lives, the foodstuffs widely scattered over the earth. See *Iḥyāʾ*, IV, 102. For a general treatment of the theme, see J. Viner, *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (Princeton, 1972).

⁷⁴ In his Persian correspondence, al-Ghazālī notes that all things at all times enjoy only a figurative (*majāzī*) existence, whereas God's existence alone is real (*ḥaqīqī*); thus, each thing's "non-existence and existence are not from itself, but rather from the divine nature." *Makātib-i fārsi-yi Ghazzālī* (ed. Iqbāl; Tehran, 1333), p. 20.

⁷⁵ *al-Iqtisād fi'l-i'tiqād*, p. 176. For a Muʿtazilite discussion of the question, see ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, XIV, 137ff. The matter is also treated, as Professor Michael Marmura kindly informed me, in Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*, I, 248.

⁷⁶ *al-Iqtisād*, p. 176.

This passage will be cited by his critics as evidence that al-Ghazālī does believe in the possibility of a superior world; and they will claim that on this point, as on others, he contradicts himself.

Leaving this question in abeyance for the moment, let us note that al-Ghazālī here wishes to refute the notion, dear to certain Mu'tazilites, that God enjoined the religious obligation upon man because it was good in and of itself; and, further, that He enjoined it for the ultimate benefit of each individual. The notion rests on the Mu'tazilite belief in the autonomy of the human intellect to discern good and evil, unaided by the directives of the divine law. And it is this which al-Ghazālī, in good Ash'arite fashion, here strives to refute. For him, as for Ash'arism generally, good and evil have no objective validity. God did not impose *taklīf* because it was good in itself; it is good only because God established it. Indeed, God could abrogate the current obligations and command other obligations contrary to those now in force; and these newly ordained obligations would be immediately normative.

Furthermore, while the actual order of things is insuperably right and just, as the *Iḥyā'* text proclaims, it is so "from above," i.e., from the divine perspective, and not from the limited (and interested) viewpoint of each individual. All that exists in the natural world as well as in the sphere of human affairs is "most excellent" and "most perfect," but this supreme excellence is disclosed only to the gaze schooled in "trust in God." It is perhaps for this reason, too, that examples such as that of the gnat recur so frequently in such works, not only because it is a small and contemptible creature but exactly because it is obnoxious to man. The perfect rightness of the actual must be demonstrable in what plagues and pesters man, as well as in what benefits him.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Such pestiferous creatures swarm through the wisdom literature, especially in the early hexaemeron works. St. Basil the Great, for example, deals with scorpions and other poisonous creatures, as well as with carnivores and such oddities as the elephant's trunk and the camel's neck, see S. Giet (ed.); *Homélies sur l'Hexaéméron* (Paris, 1968), 200b. St. Basil states his guiding principle thus: "Nothing is without cause. Nothing is by chance. Everything possesses some ineffable wisdom" (*ibid.*, 113a). See also St. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*

c. *The Intrinsic Superiority of Existence*. The doctrine that any actual existent is intrinsically superior to any non-existent or possible is seen by at least one of al-Ghazālī's supporters as explaining his affirmation of the perfect rightness of the actual. This doctrine al-Ghazālī expresses in the dictum: "Existence is *per se* better than non-existence."⁷⁸

The application of this dictum leads to obvious difficulties. Hostile commentators will charge that in this view the *kāfir's* disbelief is superior to his possible future belief.⁷⁹ In reply it is pointed out that whatever exists, exists only because God has determined that there will be a preponderating good (*maṣlahah rājiḥah*) in its existence. The fact that certain things, such as the *kāfir's* belief, do not exist simply indicates that the preponderating good lay in their not coming to be.⁸⁰

The *shaykh al-Islām* Zakarīyā' al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520) will interpret al-Ghazālī's statement in accord with this dictum.⁸¹ al-Jazā'irī, who transmits his interpretation, comments:

I say that the meaning of al-Ghazālī's expression is that those possible worlds which have not sniffed the scent of existence are numerous but the world which is honored with the light of existence is more perfect, more wonderful, and more excellent than they, since existence is superior to non-existence.⁸²

Nevertheless, al-Jazā'irī immediately qualifies this interpretation by stating that it does not really fit the context of al-Gha-

(Paris, 1972), III.xv.24—xviii.28; and the 9th-century Syriac author Moses Bar Kepha, in L. Schlimme, *Der Hexaameronkommentar des Moses Bar Kepha* (Wiesbaden, 1977), II, 496ff. An extreme, later example: in 1738, F. C. Lesser published his *Insecto-Theologia* in which the ravages of insects are seen as "so many marks of the power, the justice, the wisdom, and even of the goodness of God," cited in Viner, *The Role of Providence*, p. 23.

⁷⁸ *Maqāṣid al-falāsifah*, p. 237: *al-wujūd khayr min al-'adam fī dhātihi*. Cf. the Scholastic precept that *ens et bonum convertuntur* in, e.g., Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1A.5.3. See also, St. Bonaventura, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VI. 2: "Omnino melius est esse quam non esse." For a discussion, see J. Hirschberger, "Omne ens est bonum," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft* 53 (1940), pp. 292-305.

⁷⁹ *Ithāf*, IX, 449.

⁸⁰ *Ithāf*, IX, 450.

⁸¹ Cited in *Hikmat*, p. 31.

⁸² *Ibid.*

zālī's remarks; and also, presumably, because of the dictum's origin in the doctrines of the philosophers.

d. The Hiddenness of the World's Perfection. The perfect rightness of the actual is emphasized, on at least one level, as a check to human presumption and as an incitement to trust in God. But it may also suggest some overriding necessity in the nature of things to which even God is subject. Does not al-Makkī state that even "with God's assistance" man would be unable to devise a better world? To be sure, the intention may be only, as one commentator will rather lamely suggest, "to glorify the creator's work."⁸³ This would, indeed, be consistent with al-Ghazālī's emphasis, in the *Iḥyā'* and other works, on "the perception of God's wisdom in each existing thing which He created, since He created nothing in the world without wisdom in it."⁸⁴

Nevertheless, this suggestion would be more plausible had al-Ghazālī continued to follow his source-text for the remainder of the *Iḥyā'* passage. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī avoids any imputation of constraint on God by declaring that the excellence of the world is simply imperceptible to most people. Thus, for him, it is more a question of the limited nature of the human intellect; the presumption that a better world is possible is only a result of that limitation. Any reflection on the divine power remains unexpressed:

God lets (the world order) take its course in conformity with the intellect's own order and the meanings of the customary and usual course of events, through well-known means and accepted instrumentalities, to the measure of that with which intellects are imprinted by nature and for which they have an innate propensity.

So God conceals the ends and veils mysteries . . . hence, the excellence of the world-order and the beauty of the divine decree are by their very nature hidden. Most people are ignorant

⁸³ Badr al-dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) offers this reading; cited in *Ḥikmat*, p. 19.

⁸⁴ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 78

of the underlying principles (*hikam*) except for those who trust in God.⁸⁵

The world is aligned with the human mind in such a way that the mind cannot see it except in terms of its habitual perspective.⁸⁶ Moreover, God has the world follow this course intentionally, and He conceals its true excellence. Man is not apt to perceive this excellence in the normal pattern of events because the world and the mind are attuned in such a way that he cannot. But if man, through attainment of trust in God, were to see the world as it is, he would recognize its supreme excellence and beauty; and he would know that neither “illuminated intellects” nor mystic knowledge can “necessitate anything other than this world-order.”⁸⁷ He would know the true perfection of things as they are, which is a hidden perfection.

Now what is merely latent in al-Makkī’s text—what indeed is not at issue there at all, the question of God’s power—is cast into rather bold relief in al-Ghazālī’s reworking. In the face of this, certain commentators would be tempted to return to al-Ghazālī’s source and to propose that perhaps nothing more was meant than what al-Makkī had originally put forth, i.e., that the human mind is simply incapable of conceiving a better order of things because of its own limitations. al-Jazā’irī considers, but quickly rejects, this interpretation:

If it were said that (the possibility of a better world) stands in relation to those things knowable to people and to their capacities, and that they are not able to imagine anything better and more wonderful than this world, then it would be valid and conceded (*ṣaḥḥa wa-sullima*). But not in relation to God’s omnipotence.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 52. The same idea, more clearly expressed, occurs in the *K. al-yanābī’* of the early Ismā’īlī author Abū Ya’qūb al-Sijzī, in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne* (Tehran, 1961), p. 41.

⁸⁶ A similar thought (though in a wholly different context!) in Johann Peter Hebel, *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes* (Zürich, n.d.), p. 16: “The greatest wisdom is revealed in the simple and natural arrangement of things, and one does not recognize it, just because everything is so simple and natural.”

⁸⁷ *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 52.

⁸⁸ *Hikmat*, p. 12.

Whether or not al-Makkī foresaw the implications of his position and drew back to avoid a looming dilemma or whether these remained nascent and unrecognized cannot, of course, be determined. The fact is that al-Ghazālī has reworked the text in such a way as to lay bare all its hidden consequences. For both al-Makkī and al-Ghazālī the world is perfect as it is. But whereas al-Makkī concentrates on the inability of the human mind to perceive this, al-Ghazālī forces the issue. He affirms the impossibility of a more excellent state-of-affairs, and he does so in terms that could not but be controversial.

2. *The Disputed Statement (lines 41-51)*

As we have seen, it was these lines which particularly aroused the ire of critics. Even some of al-Ghazālī's admirers were scandalized. His former pupil, the Andalusian *qāḍī* Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), is said to have exclaimed:

Our *shaykh* Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī has said something stupendous for which the Iraqis have criticized him. And, as God is my witness, this is indeed occasion for criticism! For he said, "There is nothing in the divine omnipotence (*qudrah*) more wonderful than this world in its perfection and wisdom."⁸⁹

Now in al-Ghazālī's texts the word *imkān* (possibility), and not *qudrah* (power), is invariably used. This will be a crucial point in the debate. Whether Ibn al-ʿArabī's version represents a legitimate variant or a simple misreading, or whether indeed the two terms can have been taken as co-extensive, are matters that will be treated in Chapter Three below.

If read in context, and if one keeps in mind the unalterable rightness of the actual so forcefully affirmed in the opening lines, the statement seems to follow inexorably: if nothing can be added to, or subtracted from, creation without detriment, if all the circumstances of life are insuperably right and just, then indeed nothing in possibility is more excellent than what is.

And yet, the statement remains outrageous. It flies in the face of common experience. Who could not list dozens, indeed hun-

⁸⁹ Cited in almost all the discussions; see, for example, *Dhahab*, p. 473, and *Ithāf*, IX, 442, line 13ff.

dreds, of examples from his own or others' experience which are indisputably not "right and just"? Furthermore, the lines seem to lead inescapably to the conclusion that God could not change, let alone improve, the actual order of things; that, as Spinoza put it, "things could have been produced by God in no other manner and in no other order than that in which they have been produced."⁹⁰

These are the immediate difficulties; still others spring to mind. For does the statement mean merely that God has, as it were, exhausted all possibilities in the creation of this world; that in effect nothing remains unactualized in the order of existence (as Massignon, for one, understood the phrase)?⁹¹ Or does it rather mean that out of all possible things God selected the most excellent, perfect, and complete, but that there are other possible things which He did not, but could, create? Could God select other *possibilia*? Could He, for example, select *possibilia* that are less excellent, less perfect, less complete? And, if not, does this entail some constraint as well on His power or freedom of choice?

Furthermore, does the statement mean that there is some necessary order of things which alone is most excellent, perfect, and complete, an order which God Himself must respect? And, lastly, to state that something is "most excellent" or "most wonderful"—that there obtains what later commentators will term a condition of "most-wonderfulness" (*abda'iyah*)—is to imply that God's power reaches to a specific limit but no further; but on the other hand, to state that God's power stops at no limit is to

⁹⁰ *Ethics*, I, proposition 33: "Res nullo alio modo, neque alio ordine à Deo produci potuerunt, quàm productae sunt," in *Werke* (ed. Blumenstock), II, 136; tr. Gutmann, p. 68. It was partly in reaction to this proposition that Leibniz fashioned his own theodicy; for an excellent discussion, see G. Friedmann, *Leibniz et Spinoza* (Paris, 1962), esp. p. 136.

⁹¹ *La passion de Husayn Ibn Manṣūr Ḥallāj* (new ed.; Paris, 1975), III, 83, note 5. In this note, which is a capsule account of the dispute, Massignon claimed that al-Ghazālī abandoned his controversial position, and he offered the works *al-Iqtisād fī l-i'tiqād* and *al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl* in evidence (albeit without specific references). We now know, however, that *al-Iqtisād* was written before the *Ihyā'* (see Bouyges, pp. 33-34); furthermore, I find no support for Massignon's claim in the *Mustasfā* itself, a work on *uṣūl al-fiqh* completed in 503/1109 (Bouyges, no. 59).

imply that His power remains unconnected with any supreme or utmost perfection.

Dilemmas abound here. al-Ghazālī compounds them by introducing in lines 46-51 what is in many respects the classic dilemma of theodicy:

But if there were (a more excellent world possible) and God had withheld it, having power (*qudrah*) to do it but not deigning to do so, this would be miserliness (*bukhl*) contrary to the divine generosity (*jūd*) and injustice (*zulm*) contrary to the divine justice (*‘adl*).

But if He were not able, it would be incapability (*‘ajz*), contrary to divinity.⁹²

This is the familiar dilemma: if God has withheld (literally, “hoarded”: *iddakhara*) a better world which He could have created, He is miserly, but this is in contradiction to His generosity and justice; and if He could not have created a better world, He is somehow deficient in power, but this is in contradiction to the nature of divinity. Therefore, this world is the best and most excellent possible.

It is true that the question of a better possible world arises only because of our awareness of the evils of existence. If this world did not present so many obvious imperfections and disparities, alternative and superior states-of-affairs would not spring so readily to mind. al-Ghazālī’s formulation of the dilemma presupposes this fact. Nevertheless, there is a difference of emphasis. The classic formulations of the dilemma are designed to cast doubt on the goodness and/or power of the deity, or at least to raise questions about these, because of the fact of evil. al-Ghazālī’s formulation is intended to buttress his conviction that this is the most excellent world possible; the problem of the authorship of evil is sidestepped.

This is apparent if we compare al-Ghazālī’s statement with what is perhaps the earliest and most celebrated formulation of the dilemma, that attributed to Epicurus:

⁹² *Iḥyā’*, IV, 223, lines 7-8.

God either wishes to take away evils and cannot, or he can and does not wish to, or he neither wishes to nor is able, or he both wishes to and is able. If he wishes to and is not able, he is weak, which does not fall in with the notion of God. If he is able to and does not wish to, he is envious, which is equally foreign to God. If he neither wishes to nor is able, he is both envious and weak, and therefore not God. If he both wishes to and is able, which alone is fitting to God, whence, therefore, are there evils, and why does he not remove them?⁹³

The terms of both formulations are close, but it is the disturbing question "whence . . . are there evils?" (*unde . . . sunt mala?*) which is stressed in Epicurus' version for the purpose of casting doubt on the providence or the very existence of deity, whereas al-Ghazālī emphasizes the inconceivability of predicating miserliness, injustice, or impotence of God. If you deny that this is the most excellent world possible, you impugn these attributes of God. Part of the furor which the statement provoked raged about these very lines, for they seem to make God's perfection in His attributes hinge on the world's perfection; and while most would accept the former perfection, few would view the idea of the perfection of the world—a created thing, after all—as obvious or even demonstrable.

In the debate, this very emphasis of al-Ghazālī's will occupy the foreground. The problem of the nature and origin of evil will play a lesser role. What will be very much at issue is the question of whether God is capable of creating another and better world.⁹⁴

It should be noted that not only al-Ghazālī's conclusion but his very choice of words will provoke censure as well. Even if he is not actually seen as imputing "miserliness" to God, to some of his critics the very usage of such a term, even in a hypothet-

⁹³ Lactantius, *De ira Dei*, XIII.20:21, tr. McDonald *The Wrath of God*, pp. 92-93 (I have modified this translation slightly).

⁹⁴ On the related point of suffering, see the interesting generalization of J. Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 102: "Whereas in Christianity suffering occurs as a problem because it conflicts with the assertion that God is love, in Islam it occurs principally because it conflicts with the belief that God is omnipotent."

ical way, will smack of impiety. Certainly the terms had been used often enough before, and in similar discussions.⁹⁵ Then, too, the stress which he places on justice (*ʿadl*), with its Muʿtazilite connotations, would arouse suspicion.

No doubt the suggestion that God's generosity and justice might in some way depend on the perfect excellence of the world order was particularly objectionable; but we should also keep in mind that any discussion of the topic at all could seem problematic to some. This is perhaps in accordance with the saying of the mystic al-Junayd (d. 297/910): "The denial of a fault where (the existence of) a fault is impossible is (in itself) a fault."⁹⁶

3. *The Correlation of Perfect and Imperfect (lines 52-84)*

In attempting to justify the perfect rightness of the actual, al-Ghazālī will offer several closely related explanations derived from the notion that there is a correlation of perfection and imperfection (lines 73-74 above: *al-kamāl wa'l-naqṣ yuḡṣḥar bi'l-idāfah*).

At the outset (lines 52-56), this seems to involve no more than the familiar idea of compensation common to most religions: losses suffered in this life are made good in the hereafter.⁹⁷ So, too, in the *Qūt al-qulūb* we read: "Loss in this world is increase in the hereafter; increase in this world is loss in the hereafter. Whoever is given something of this world has it subtracted from his portion in the hereafter."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Cf. the discussion in al-Ashʿarī, *K. al-lumaʿ* (ed. McCarthy), p. 20ff., where God's generosity (*tafaddul*) or miserliness (*bukhl*) is debated. Later, al-Bayḍāwī (d. ca. 685/1286), commenting on *Qur.* 2:245, will claim that God is stingy (*yaqtur ʿalā*) to some, but generous to others: *Anwār al-tanzīl* (ed. Fleischer), I, 127, line 11. In some accounts, e.g., *Ithāf*, IX, 451, line 21, a line of the poet al-Mutanabbī is misquoted to this effect: "He did not lavish when He bestowed the world, but was stingy." See *Sharḥ diwān al-Mutanabbī* (ed. Yāziji), p. 14, line 9, for the accepted version of this line.

⁹⁶ Cited in Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah* (tr. Rosenthal; 2d ed., Princeton, 1967), III, 54.

⁹⁷ Cf. the New Testament parable of Dives and Lazarus in *Luke* 16:19-31; for some parallels in Judaism, see R. Mach, *Der Zaddik in Talmud und Midrasch* (Leiden, 1957), pp. 35-36.

⁹⁸ *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 40. The Ḥanbalite theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah (d. 751/1350) gives vivid expression to this belief: "Whoever drinks wine in this life

As the passage continues, however, it becomes clear that more is involved than simple reward or punishment. There is a kind of equilibrium whereby loss and gain are balanced both in this world and the next, such that gain here is counterbalanced by loss in the afterlife, and loss by gain.⁹⁹ Moreover, the loss or gain of one requires the corresponding loss or gain of another. The saying "One man's loss is another man's gain" applies here on a cosmic scale: "Every lack in the next world in relation to one individual is a boon in relation to someone else" (lines 54-56).

This is further explained by examples purporting to show that it is through opposites that we acquire knowledge; that we come to appreciate a good thing, for example, by comparison with a bad, or less good, thing: day by night, health by sickness, heaven by hell, etc. This is of course a familiar notion, and one of great antiquity: "Sickness makes health pleasant, evil good, hunger excess, toil repose."¹⁰⁰ But beyond this al-Ghazālī seems to hold that the existence of the imperfect is requisite for the existence of the perfect, and that the one without the other would not exist.

The Ṣūfī 'Ayn al-Qudāh al-Hamadhānī (d. 525/1131), who was himself influenced by al-Ghazālī, remarks in this regard:

does not drink it in the hereafter; whoever wears silk in this life does not wear it in the hereafter; whoever eats from plates of gold and silver in this life does not eat from them in the hereafter. . . . As the Prophet said, 'In this world, it belongs to them [i.e., the affluent], but in the next world, it belongs to you.' See his *Hādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrāḥ* (Cairo, 1962), p. 191.

⁹⁹ This world and the next exist in a continuum; see al-Ghazālī, *al-Qustās al-mustaqīm* (Beirut, 1959), p. 69, *paen.* According to Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, I, 205-206: "The hereafter stands in a relation to this world like the root in relation to the branch and like the body in relation to its shadow; for everything that is in this world must have its root in the hereafter, or else it is like a mirage or an idle fancy. And everything in the hereafter must have a simulacrum in this world, or else it is like a tree without fruit. . . . There must be between these two juncture, connection and affinity." Later in the same work, al-Rāzī affirms that "the life of this world is wisdom and right," and he supports this affirmation by resorting to the (Mu'tazilite) notion that "the essential natures of things do not differ by being in this world or in the hereafter," *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, VIII, 135.

¹⁰⁰ Heraclitus, fr. 111 (Diels-Kranz, I, 175). Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 430b.22-23 (Loeb ed.; p. 174), and Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, IA. 48, 1.

Wisdom is that whatever is, was, or will be is not and cannot be except that its contrary also exist. Whiteness can never be without blackness; heaven is not fitting without earth; substance without accident is inconceivable. Muḥammad cannot be without Iblīs. Virtue without vice, disbelief without belief. So with all the contraries: "Things are explicable through their contraries" (*wa-bi-ḍiddihā tatabayyan al-ashyā*).

Muḥammad's faith cannot exist without the disbelief of Iblīs (*īmān-i Muḥammad bī kufr-i Iblīs na-tavānast būdan*).¹⁰¹

It is once again the Stoic Chrysippus with whom this idea is most usually associated; thus, in his lost work *On Providence* he stated:

There is absolutely nothing more foolish than those men who think that good could exist, if there were at the same time no evil. For since good is the opposite of evil, it necessarily follows that both must exist in opposition to each other, supported as it were by mutual adverse forces; since as a matter of fact no opposite is conceivable without something to oppose it.

For how could there be an idea of justice if there were no acts of injustice? or what else is justice than the absence of injustice? How too can courage be understood except by contrast with cowardice? . . . For it is in the same way that good and evil exist, happiness and unhappiness, pain and pleasure. For, as Plato says, if you take away one, you will have removed both.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *Tamhidāt*, in *Muṣannafāt* (ed. 'Uṣayrān; Tehran, 1962), pp. 186-187. See also the statement of the later Iranian philosopher Mullā Ismā'il Khwājū'i [Mullā Ismā'il al-Māzandarānī] (d. 1173/1759) that heaven and hell exist correlatively and that neither can exist or continue without the other; his *Thamarat al-fu'ād fī nubadh min masā'il al-ma'ād*, in Ashtiyānī (ed.), *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens* (Mashhad, 1358), IV, 161.

¹⁰² Cited in Aulus Gellius, *Noctes atticae*, VII, 1; see also, SVF, II, 1169 (reference in de Vogel, *Greek Philosophy*, III, 80). For a Scholastic critique of the notion, see Albertus Magnus, *Summa theologiae*, in *Opera omnia*, XXXIV/1 (Aschendorff, 1978), p. 199ff.

The idea originates in the famous passage of Plato's *Theaetetus*, 176a, where it is said that "evils . . . can never be done away with, for the good must always have its opposite" (tr. Cornford, *Collected Dialogues*, p. 881). In his commentary on *Timaeus* 30a (ed. Diehl, I, 373), Proclus states: "If the inferior did not exist, the superior would have no place" (τοῦ δὲ χείρονος οὐκ ὄντος οὐκ ἔχει χώραν τὸ κρείττον). Aristotle, in *Cat.* 14a.8-13 (Loeb ed., pp. 96-97), rejects the notion.

Although in al-Ghazālī's use of this notion there appears no suggestion that this correlation of opposites is the result of anything other than the divine wisdom and generosity, which require the simultaneous creation of both perfect and imperfect, his introduction of it into his theodicy will draw rebuke. Why, it is asked, could not God have created only a single imperfect individual? One disfigured, diseased, or simply ugly individual would have sufficed to apprise us of the benefits and superiority of health and beauty; hosts of such afflicted individuals are superfluous.

A more troublesome objection centers on the charge that a fallacy is involved in this line of reasoning. The fallacy lies in confusing contraries (such as black/white, rich/poor, good/evil) with correlative terms (such as right/left, north/south, etc.).¹⁰³ Correlative terms are understood by reference to each other; they are mutually implicative. Contraries, on the other hand, are extreme opposites and not mutually implicative; and "perfect/imperfect" would seem to belong to this category of opposition.

If we say, "All things created by God are perfect," then its subaltern, "Some things created by God are perfect" is implied; but not its contradictory, "Some things created by God are not perfect." Between two sub-contraries, such as "Some things created by God are perfect" and "Some things created by God are not perfect," there is compatibility (both may be true), but there is no mutual implication.

The objection would thus seem to be that there is really no reason why recognition of the perfect requires the existence of the imperfect; these are not true correlatives. (And indeed, even if they were, there would be no causal connection between them.)¹⁰⁴ And, in any case, the objection will continue, why could not God simply have given us knowledge through some other means, not requiring the misery and unhappiness of so many?

al-Ghazālī nevertheless uses this concept as a means of justi-

¹⁰³ See Aristotle, *Cat.* 11b.15ff (Loeb ed., p. 80ff); also, al-Ghazali, *Mi'yār al-'ilm* (Beirut, 1978), pp. 92, 233.

¹⁰⁴ J. van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Adudaddīn al-Īcī* (Wiesbaden, 1966), pp. 381, 386.

lying virtually every facet of existence. For not only are perfect and imperfect correlated; the imperfect serves as a "ransom" for the perfect.¹⁰⁵ In this way the disturbing problem of the unmerited suffering of animals, which had preoccupied the Mu'tazilites earlier, will find its "solution": animals reveal the superiority of man by the very fact of their "lower" level of existence (lines 71-73), and they also serve as sacrifices whereby human souls are ransomed. The same applies to other forms of imperfection: the diseased, the destitute, the damned themselves. All exist solely as sacrifices for the perfect.

Obviously, such a notion may be used to justify any monstrosity. The further explanation that such a state-of-affairs is required by the "divine generosity and wisdom" will hardly serve to blunt its effect. Even such an admirer and defender of al-Ghazālī as al-Jazā'irī will find this justification of the actual hard to stomach. We may detect a pained note, and even a certain empathy, in his summary of the objections to this idea. It is, he admits, good form (*adab*) not to bring objections against God, and yet, if what al-Ghazālī asserts is true, an afflicted person could complain:

Why am I a spectacle of distress in this world or the next, just so that the healthy may enjoy health and the happy their happiness and just so that they may know the value of those blessings which they have been given?

Why am *I* not among those blessed in this world or the next, so that I might enjoy health or happiness? . . . And why is their knowledge of the degree of their favor provided for by means

¹⁰⁵ According to *hadīth*, Muslims may be ransomed from hell by Christians and Jews whom God then sets in their places; see Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 2119. The *amīr* 'Abd al-Qādir, the final commentator on the disputed statement, recounts an amusing anecdote regarding the "ransom" of the perfect by the less perfect. Thus, he writes: "Intellects differ from one another in accord with the way in which God created people; thus, the intellects of the prophets are not like those of other people. The intellect of Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā surpasses other intellects by far. It is told that al-Rāzī said one day to al-Āmidī, 'Why is the destruction and sacrifice of animals for man's sake considered proper?' al-Āmidī replied, 'The destruction of the inferior for the benefit of the superior is justice itself.' And so al-Rāzī rejoined, 'In that case, it would be just to sacrifice you for the sake of Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā!'" See his *Dhikrā al-'āqil wa-tanbih al-ghāfil* (Beirut, 1966), p. 52; tr. G. Dugat, *Le livre d'Abd-El-Kader* (Paris, 1858), pp. 37-38.

of my misery? Why isn't *my* knowledge of the value of divine favor provided for through *their* misery?¹⁰⁶

This would, indeed, seem to be an unanswerable objection, like the famous story with which al-Ash'arī silenced his former master al-Jubbā'ī in their debate over *al-aṣlah*.¹⁰⁷ The only answer offered—it is perhaps the only answer possible—is that things are so ordered by the inscrutable predestination of God. It is to this answer, which occupies the closing lines of the *Ihyā'* passage, that we now turn.

4. *The Secret of Predestination (lines 84-100)*

The world as it is, in its unalterable perfection, comes to be necessarily (*wājib al-ḥuṣūl*) but only after—indeed, only because of—a prior act of divine volition (*ba'd sabq al-mashī'ah*). al-Ghazālī's critics will lay emphasis on the “necessary” coming-to-be of the world, his supporters on the preceding act of divine will. Predestination is not at issue here; that is accepted by both sides. At issue is the implication, conveyed by the term “necessary,” that God must act in a certain way, that anything in this world may be described as necessarily coming to be.

Although elsewhere al-Ghazālī offers other arguments for the perfect rightness of things as they are, his final position is that all is just and right solely because God has willed it. The guaranty of his theodicy is the unassailable fact of the divine predestination. It is only this that permits the seeker after trust in God any certainty. Something similar was expressed by Martin Luther in his own defense of predestination: “For if you doubt, or disdain to know that God foreknows and wills all things, not contingently but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe confidently, trust to and depend upon his promises?”¹⁰⁸

Predestination is usually discussed under two aspects in Islamic theology, for which the terms are *qaḍā'* and *qadar*. *Qaḍā'*

¹⁰⁶ *Hikmat*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁷ For this oft-cited story, see, e.g., al-Ghazālī, *al-Qusṭās al-mustaqīm*, pp. 95-96; al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, pp. 151-152; al-Ijī, *Mawāqif*, VIII, 197. The version given by al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, III, 356, is translated in Tritton, *Muslim Theology*, p. 166. See also our Introduction above.

¹⁰⁸ *The Bondage of the Will* (tr. Cole), p. 44.

denotes "the eternal will and divine providence which fulfills the order of existing things according to a particular arrangement."¹⁰⁹ It is in this sense that al-Ghazālī states in the *Iḥyā'* text that "good and evil are foreordained" (*maqḍīy*, line 93).

Qadar, on the other hand, "connects that will with things at particular moments."¹¹⁰ It is God's "production of things in a particular measure and specific decree expressed through their very natures and states."¹¹¹ Although the term *qadar* serves to denote the whole subject of predestination generally, we may think of *qaḍā'* as applying to the divine foreordainment in the broadest sense, and *qadar* as applying to individual destinies. *Qadar* in this sense is well illustrated in a famous *ḥadīth*:

The Prophet said: "When one of you is created, he is held in his mother's womb for 40 days, then he is a clot of blood for that long again, then he is a lump of flesh for that long again. Then God sends the angel who is commanded to write down four words for him: "Write down his action, his term of life, his allotted nourishment, and "damned" or "saved."¹¹²

Another version adds "and nothing will be added to or subtracted from the decree."¹¹³ It is thus that nothing can be added to or subtracted from the actual, for it has been foreordained by the divine will. As such, it cannot but be more excellent than anything in possibility.

In the *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn*, al-Ghazālī quotes another *ḥadīth* to illustrate his belief that good and evil are foreordained:

God says: "I create good and I create a people for it. I create evil and I create a people for it. Happiness is for him whom I created for good, and I multiply it for him. But evil is for him whom I create for evil; I multiply evil for him."¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ *K. al-arbaʿīn*, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ al-Tahānawī, *Kashshāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn* (ed. Sprenger; Calcutta, 1862), II, 1234.

¹¹² Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, I, 29; see also, Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*, p. 54, and J. van Ess, *Zwischen Hadīth und Theologie* (Berlin, 1975), p. 1ff., for a discussion of this *ḥadīth*.

¹¹³ Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*, p. 54.

¹¹⁴ *K. al-arbaʿīn*, p. 265.

As for those who question this order of things: "Woe upon woe for whomever asks 'why?' and 'how?'"¹¹⁵

Here, however, we must pull back somewhat and note that while al-Ghazālī does offer this as the ultimate justification for the rightness of things as they are, it is simplistic to assume that nothing further in extenuation of this view is offered. In the same book of the *Iḥyā'* in which our vexed question occurs al-Ghazālī presents rather extended arguments in an attempt to reconcile this strict predestination with some highly qualified notion of free will. It must be remembered, too, that predestination was one of the most controversial questions in Islamic theology from the earliest period.¹¹⁶ The tensions inherent in the question are apparent from a saying attributed to Muslim ibn Yasār (d. 100 or 101/718 or 720): "(Free will and predestination) are two deep valleys where people stray without ever reaching bottom. Act therefore like someone who knows that only his own acts can still save him; and trust in God like someone who knows that only that will strike him which was meant for him."¹¹⁷

In lines 84-86, al-Ghazālī uses the metaphor of a vast storm-tossed sea to convey the incomprehensibility of predestination.¹¹⁸ This is a matter "which only the knowing comprehend" but which they "are forbidden to divulge."

This is the final point in the passage that will provoke censure. al-Ghazālī will be accused of disclosing secrets to ordinary people which it is impermissible to discuss. And does he not himself say, "Disclosure of the secret of God's lordship is *kufr*?"¹¹⁹ Such secrets are not part of the "practical aspects" (*mu'āmalāt*) of Ṣūfism which the *Iḥyā'* purports to detail, addressed as it is to

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ See Tritton, *Muslim Theology*, p. 54ff.; Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*, p. 36ff.; van Ess, *Zwischen Hadīṭ und Theologie*, *passim*.

¹¹⁷ Cited by van Ess, *ibid.*, pp. 152-153, who sees it as an attempt at compromise between strict predestinarians and advocates of free will.

¹¹⁸ A common metaphor in such discussions. 'Alī, for example, was credited with the remark, "Predestination (*qadar*) is a deep sea; do not set out upon it!" See G. F. Hourani, "Ibn Sīnā's 'Essay on the Secret of Destiny,'" *BSOAS* 29 (1966), p. 28.

¹¹⁹ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 213, line 1.

the average Muslim, and not to the initiate.¹²⁰ And yet, it is sometimes necessary to discuss the more esoteric, or "illuminative aspects" (*mukāshafāt*) of such mysteries as trust in God or the realization of the divine unity, in order to enable people to put them into practice in their lives. "Knowledge of the practical aspect is incomplete without (knowledge of) the illuminative."¹²¹

Later in the *K. al-tawakkul*, al-Ghazālī addresses himself to such practical concerns as, for example, how the father of a family (*mu'īl*) may strive for the kind of utter trust in God that *tawakkul* demands; or what the proper attitude is when one's property is stolen; or the course to observe in resorting to the use of medicaments, or refraining therefrom (*tark al-tadāwī*), etc.¹²² Here, however, it is his concern to establish a suitable foundation so that the aspirant will act neither blindly nor in a purely perfunctory manner in striving for trust in God.

His critics will seize on this as an example of irresponsibility at best and outright heresy at worst. This charge may seem strange in connection with the final lines of the *Ihyā'* text: nothing is affirmed there which is in any way unorthodox, let alone controversial. In fact, al-Ghazālī seems rather to pull back from entering into any discussion of the "secret of predestination" (*sirr al-qadar*).

Of course, it is true that according to certain early traditions the subject of *qadar* is best not discussed at all. "He who discusses predestination in any way will be held accountable for it on the Day of Judgement; he who does not discuss it will not be held accountable."¹²³ This may account for his critics' charges to some extent; but their chief objection is that he broaches

¹²⁰ See Wehr's remarks in the introduction to his translation, *al-Ghazālī's Buch*, p. xxii.

¹²¹ *Ihyā'*, IV, 212, line 1.

¹²² For *tawakkul al-mu'īl*, see *Ihyā'*, IV, 234ff. (Wehr, p. 66ff.); theft of property, *Ihyā'*, IV, 242ff. (Wehr, p. 86ff.); *tark al-tadāwī*, *Ihyā'*, IV, 246ff. (Wehr, p. 91ff.)

¹²³ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, I, 33; cf. the apocryphal remark in Abū Nu'aym, *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, IV, 182 (cited in van Ess, *Zwischen Ḥadīṭ und Theologie*, 153): "Do not speak about *qadar*. It is God's secret; do not give away His secret."

forbidden subjects in a work intended for the common folk (*‘awāmm*). For these critics any discussion, let alone any questioning, of such doctrines as *qadar* in such a context will appear reprehensible.

In his later paraphrase of this passage in the *K. al-arba‘īn*, al-Ghazālī states that only initiates perceive the hidden explication (*ta‘wīl*) of the world, while the common folk hold simply that “what strikes you was not there to miss you, what misses you was not there to strike you.”¹²⁴ This “predestinarian axiom,”¹²⁵ of questionable origin, found its way into at least one early form of the creed, the *Fiqh Akbar* I.¹²⁶ In the *Ihyā’* passage, al-Ghazālī cites it as a seemingly straightforward conclusion to his whole discussion, but his remarks in the *K. al-arba‘īn* reveal that this was intended only for the common folk. Those with mystic knowledge, the *‘ārifūn*, understand that in everything there is a hidden meaning which is the direct effect of God’s wisdom and will; they understand that what is “must be” (*wājib al-ḥuṣūl*) by the decree of the eternal will (*al-mashī‘ah al-azalīyah*).¹²⁷

It must be admitted that throughout his discussion of *tawḥīd* and *tawakkul* in the *Ihyā’*, al-Ghazālī will seem to waver between silence on a particular issue and disclosure. Thus, in speaking of the fourth, and highest, stage of *tawḥīd*, he briefly characterizes it but refrains from further discussion because “an explanatory treatment of this is not allowed.”¹²⁸ Nevertheless, on the same page, after remarking that “disclosure of the mystery of God’s lordship is *kufr*,” he will engage in a rather guarded treatment of a difficult point, i.e., how something can represent a unity and a multiplicity at one and the same time.¹²⁹ And in

¹²⁴ *K. al-arba‘īn*, p. 243.

¹²⁵ van Ess, *Zwischen Hadīṭ und Theologie*, p. 79ff.

¹²⁶ The axiom is seen as originating in protest to the doctrines of the Qadarīyah, advocates of human free will; see Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*, pp. 103 and 107ff.

¹²⁷ *K. al-arba‘īn*, p. 245. Elsewhere al-Ghazālī states that “everything that enters into existence enters only through necessity (*wujūb*), for it is necessary that it exist, even though it is not necessary on account of its own intrinsic nature, but necessary because of the divine decree.” *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, p. 103.

¹²⁸ *Ihyā’*, IV, 213, line 17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* (line 2ff).

describing the third stage of *tawhīd*, he presents an extensive explanation of the two chief obstacles which Satan presents to man in order to weaken belief in the divine unity: the belief in causality in nature and in the capacity for free choice in animals (*ikhtiyār al-hayawānāt*).¹³⁰

Such "disclosures" will strengthen his critics' hands but his defenders will find in them the confirmation of al-Ghazālī's status as "one of the great among the *ahl al-bāṭin*"¹³¹ (i.e., those possessing esoteric knowledge, in contradistinction to the *ahl al-zāhir*, exponents of exoteric, literal knowledge). The latter are not entitled to find fault with such authorities as al-Ghazālī "because the *ahl al-bāṭin* are most aloof from passion and closest to God-given success; and they are even more successful because of their accurate grasp of the supreme truth (*iṣābat al-ḥa-qīqah*)."¹³² According to this defense, al-Ghazālī is one of those privileged to perceive the "unity of existence" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*); and the following saying will be applied to him: "When you see all things as one thing from a single source and with a single substance, you see what you did not see before, you hear what you have not heard and you understand what creatures do not understand."¹³³ Does not al-Ghazālī state in his discussion of gratitude in the *Iḥyā'* itself that "the whole is like a single thing in which one thing is connected to the other the way the limbs of the body are connected to each other"?¹³⁴

And yet, by his own testimony, such subjects as *qadar* and *tawhīd* may not be treated in detail in a work written for the ordinary person, for these subjects belong properly to the *ʿilm al-mukāshafāt*. Such subjects dazzle the weak, the ignorant, and the unprepared: "Do not lift the curtains which hide the sun from the gaze of the bats lest they perish!"¹³⁵

It will be finally for lifting these curtains, or at least appearing to, that al-Ghazālī will be severely rebuked.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* (line -10ff).

¹³¹ *Ithāf*, IX, 459.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ithāf*, IX, 460; cf. also *Qūt al-qulūb*, III, 53.

¹³⁴ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 95.

¹³⁵ *Iḥyā'*, IV, 84.

B. AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S OWN COMMENTARY

In *al-Imlā' fī mushkilāt al-Ihyā'*, al-Ghazālī presents a brief defense of the controversial passage in the *Ihyā'*.¹³⁶ Unfortunately, the text as we have it is corrupt; in parts it is intelligible only when the Berlin manuscript, the printed version, and the citations in later treatises are collated. Rather than present it translated *in extenso* here, we shall offer a synopsis of the main arguments.

al-Ghazālī begins by repeating his original statement with some important modifications: "There is not in possibility (anything) more wonderful (*abda'*)¹³⁷ than the form (*ṣūrah*)¹³⁸ of this world."¹³⁹

¹³⁶ See note 14 above. See also, *Idāh*, pp. 72-73, *Dhahab*, p. 474 (partial text); *Hikmat*, pp. 19-20.

¹³⁷ The word *abda'* seems peculiar, though none of the disputants calls attention to it. *Badī'*, of course, denotes what is novel and surprising, "unknown before" (Lane, 166). Ahlwardt renders it accordingly as "überraschenderes" (*Verzeichnis*, II, 316). Asín Palacios takes it as equivalent to *aḥsan* or *afdal*: "más excelente" (*La espiritualidad*, IV, 11), as does Humā'i: "bihtar" (*Ghazzālī-nāmah*, p. 428).

The word is commonly used in regard to poetry: *atā bi'l-badī'*, "he produced a new saying" (Lane, 166) and also signifies a branch of rhetoric (*ilm al-badī'*). In this sense, it may be conjectured that al-Ghazālī wanted to emphasize the startling and admirable artistry of the world order, and to do so with a term not associated with the Mu'tazilites and their doctrine of *al-aṣlah*. (For an interesting hypothesis that the whole notion of *badī'* in poetry developed out of Mu'tazilite *kalām*, see Suzanne P. Stetkevych, "Toward a Redefinition of 'Badī'" Poetry," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 12 (1981), pp. 1-29.)

The word and its derivatives have other technical meanings. In *Qur.* 2:117 and 6:101, God is called *al-badī'* ("creator"), and the 4th and 8th forms of the verb came to mean "to create *ex nihilo*." See, e.g., al-Kindī, *Rasā'il*, I, 183; al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Tafṣīl al-nash'atayn*, pp. 15-16, al-Jurjānī, *Ta'rifāt*, p. 3; Aḥmadnagarī, *Dustūr al-'ulamā'*, I, 17. The term *ibdā'* is, of course, a technical term in Ismā'īlī theology as well; see, among others, Ḥamīd al-dīn al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'aql* (ed. Husayn & Ḥilmī; Cairo, 1953), p. 59.

Massignon seems to have had this latter sense in mind when he translated the sentence as "Rien de plus ne se trouve dans le possible que dans l'existentialisé" (*Passion*, III, 83, note 5), as though it meant: "Nothing more creatable *ex nihilo* remains in possibility," in accord with his interpretation of the passage.

¹³⁸ Cf. *al-Maṣṣad al-asnā*, p. 81: "The name *muṣawwir* (he who forms) is apt for God since He orders the forms of things in the most excellent order (*aḥsan tartīb*) and provides them with the most excellent form (*ṣawwarahā aḥsan taṣ-wīr*)." See also p. 79 of the same work.

¹³⁹ *al-Imlā'*, fol. 16a. In the Berlin ms., there is a lacuna where the word *abda'* appears in other texts.

It is probable that his contemporaries, the Iraqis whom Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī mentions, took particular objection to the seeming denial of God's free choice (*ikhtiyār*), for he here introduces a defense of his position in those terms.

God is a free agent (*fā'il mukhtār*); as such, He may choose to create or not to create. But when He does choose to create, His creation must be the utmost of "what wisdom demands" (*mā taqtaḍihi al-ḥikmah*).¹⁴⁰ To say that God is somehow incapable for freely choosing not to create is like accusing him of miserliness for His "delay" in bringing the world from non-existence into existence.

The question of God's deferral of creation (*ta'khīruhu bi' l-ʿālam qabla khalqihī*) is rather complicated.¹⁴¹ To claim that He did not defer creation is to make the world coeval with Him; it is thus to maintain the doctrine of the world's eternity. To assert, however, that God did defer creation is to raise the troubling question of whether He was previously unable or unwilling to create the world. Did He "hoard" a good He might have given? It also leads to the question of whether some preponderating factor (*murajjih*) influenced His will to create the world at one time rather than at another; and yet, the presence of such a factor would seem to impugn the sovereignty of the divine will.¹⁴²

al-Ghazālī's introduction of the question of God's deferral of creation is strategically astute. He wishes to equate this question with that raised by his own disputed sentence. He asks in effect: What is the difference between saying that miserliness (or in-

¹⁴⁰ For this phrase, see also al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Tafṣīl*, pp. 17 and 39, and al-Baydāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, I, 127.

¹⁴¹ This question and the related question of what God did prior to creation elicited impatient and perplexed responses from Western theologians. Typical is the comment of Albertus Magnus: "This seems to me a foolish question" (*Videtur mihi esse stulta quaestio*), *In I Sententiarum* [Dist. XLIV, B, art. 1], in *Opera omnia* (Paris, 1893), XXVI, 391. And, according to John Milton: "Anyone who asks what God did before the creation of the world is a fool; and anyone who answers him is not much wiser," *Christian Doctrine*, in *Complete Prose Works* (New Haven, 1973), VI, 299. For an Islamic discussion, see the work of the great Ismā'īlī poet and thinker Nāṣir-i Khosraw, *Zād al-musāfirin* (Berlin, 1341?), p. 275ff.

¹⁴² See the discussion in al-Ījī, *Mawāqif*, VIII, 85-86.

capacity or injustice) follows from God's creation of a less than perfect world and saying that such defects follow from His deferral of the world's creation? In other words, we know that God deferred creation, that He created the world at one time rather than another, and yet this does not lead us to accuse Him of miserliness. Why, then, should the disputed statement lead inevitably to this conclusion? God's creation of the world at a particular moment, and not sooner, results from His free choice and sovereign will, and so, too, His creation of the world in the most perfect and excellent way.

From the beginning, it would seem, critics charged al-Ghazālī with holding, or at least supporting, the doctrine of necessary creation; and this charge would recur. A consequence of this doctrine is the world's eternity, a notion inadmissible to orthodox theologians; for it not only sets up a "rival" to God but severely circumscribes His power and freedom of choice. al-Ghazālī's introduction of the question of deferral of creation is thus in part an effort to dissociate himself from such suspect doctrines. And so he replies: to hold that miserliness or impotence may be imputed to God on this basis is tantamount to holding that they also follow God's deferral of creation; i.e., it is to accept the very premises of the philosophers who do so argue.

This response will not escape censure. Aḥmad ibn Mubārak al-Sijilmāsī al-Lamaṭī (d. 1156/1742), for one, will argue that it allows God free choice before creation but strips it from Him afterward. He can choose to create or not to create, but when He does, He must create the best.¹⁴³ It is probably in anticipation of some such objection that al-Ghazālī so vigorously stresses the role of divine wisdom: it is divine wisdom which dictates that things be as good as possible, and not some necessity to which God is subject.

Other initial objections to the *Iḥyā'* passage may have dwelt on the manifest imperfections of this world, for al-Ghazālī now attempts, in the *Imlā'*, to turn these very imperfections to ad-

¹⁴³ *Dhahab*, p. 475.

vantage. This is a further elaboration of his belief in the correlation of perfect and imperfect.

To say that the world is perfectly right and just does not mean that every individual in it is equal to every other in perfection. On the contrary, it is the best possible world because it contains imperfection as well as perfection. It is the best possible world because it is in accord with what wisdom demands; and wisdom, as we know, demands the simultaneous creation of perfect and imperfect.

Furthermore, this world of perfect and imperfect beings is itself decisive proof (*dalīl qāṭiʿ*) of God's perfection. Imperfection is as necessary here as perfection:

If everything that God created were deficient (*nāqīṣ*) in comparison with something else that He could create (but did not, the lack that is brought in evidence against this existence that He did create would be obvious), just as it is obvious in those particular individuals whom He did create deficient, in order to show thereby the perfection of what He created otherwise, and all of this would be a kind of proof for the deficiency of what He did make, and decisively so; while the predication to Him of power to make the more perfect would be mere opinion (*ẓann*).¹⁴⁴

We cannot say that this world is inferior to some other possible state-of-affairs unless everything within it is deficient by comparison with that hypothetical world. If that were so, and everything that God created were deficient, we could say decisively that the present creation is less than the best possible. Furthermore, we could not know whether God is capable of creating anything better. As it is, however, we see grades of perfection. The more perfect shows what God is capable of, and we recognize the more perfect by means of what is less so. God gave human beings intellects and powers of understanding so that they would perceive this: ". . . inasmuch as He taught them a perfection that shows them defect, He also informed them of His power by means of incapacity."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ *Imlāʿ*, fol. 16b, lines 6-9. The sentence in parentheses is lacking in al-Samhūdī's citation, *Idāḥ*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁴⁵ *Imlāʿ*, fol. 16b.

It is the sign of wisdom that the perfect and the imperfect coexist; their coexistence indicates that the world is the product of wisdom, and not of any intrinsic necessity or obligation. The world would not be as good as possible if the imperfect were lacking. al-Ḥāmid al-Shāfi'ī illustrates this with an analogy:

If there were a king who had many storehouses—a storehouse of jewels, a storehouse of gold, a storehouse of silver, and a storehouse of coins—and he then gave alms from all his storehouses, he would be absolutely generous. But if he gives from one storehouse and not from the others he can be deemed miserly in relation to what he has not given.

But there is no doubt that God, in this world that He produced, gives from all His storehouses.¹⁴⁶

The king of course represents God, the jewels are His prophets, the gold His saints, the silver His believers, and the coins represent unbelievers and hypocrites. It would have been less than generous of God to have withheld the latter. Furthermore, without the coins, we would not be able to recognize the value and distinction of the gold, the silver, and the jewels.

The wisdom in God's creation is unimpeachable. Only he can find fault with it who is unaware of the "measure of the world" (*miqdār al-ʿālam*) and the way in which it is arranged in accordance with the next world. There is a continuum of perfect and imperfect, gain and loss, extending between this life and the next. Such a doubting person has not yet "glimpsed the transcendent world with the vision of the heart" (*bi-baṣar qalbihi*) nor crossed the limits to what is lowest in his own nature; i.e., he has not realized that these extremes coexist within his own nature as well.

By contrast, one who is aware that all that ultimately matters is the divine pleasure or wrath sees that

He brought forth the world in its totality from non-existence, which is sheer negation (*naḥy maḥḍ*), into existence, which is sound affirmation (*ithbāt ṣaḥiḥ*) and He measured it into levels

¹⁴⁶ *al-Dalīl*, fol. 135a, line 22ff. This is based on a similar passage in al-Ghazālī's *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, pp. 230-231.

and set an appointed term for it. Hence there exist living and dead, moving and unmoving, wise and ignorant, wretched and happy, near and far, small and large, majestic and mean, rich and poor, commanded and commanding, believer and unbeliever, ingrate and grateful, male and female, earth and sky, this world and the next, and other things too numerous to count.¹⁴⁷

And all of this, he continues, “subsists in God, exists through His power, continues through His knowledge . . . and indicates His far-reaching wisdom. There is nothing more perfect than its temporal creation except His eternity, nor (more perfect) than its administration except for His absolute rule. . . .”¹⁴⁸

This inventory of correlated opposites reinforces what was declared in the *Iḥyāʾ*. Conditions such as happiness and sadness, belief and disbelief, are placed on equal terms with male and female, earth and sky, and the like. No distinction is made between what we would regard as transitory or permanent qualities. This is, of course, because none of these subsists in itself but only in God; what reality they have is apparent and fictive.

If the objection is brought that things do change—a happy person may grow sad, a rich become poor, etc.—and so, another state obtains that must be judged either the same (then what of change?), or worse (then it is no longer the best possible), or better (then the former state was not the best possible), the reply once again will be that it is divine wisdom which dictates things as they are. Things have no intrinsic excellence; the excellence they possess proceeds from the fact that divine wisdom selected them to be. This objection, based on the undeniable fact of change, will impel al-Suyūṭī and al-Samhūdī to develop their theories of “relative perfection” in response.

The assertion that things as they are, are optimal because of the dictates of divine wisdom will provide al-Ghazālī’s defenders one of their strongest and most useful arguments. Through it they will struggle to refute the charge that he merely parrots philosophers and Muʿtazilites. But the appeal to wisdom, far

¹⁴⁷ *Imlāʾ*, fol. 16b. See also, *Iḍāḥ*, p. 73; and al-Yāfiʿī, *Marḥam al-ʿilal*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁸ *Imlāʾ*, fol. 16b.

from mitigating the disapprobation of the critics, will serve instead only to complicate and intensify the debate.

IV SUSPECT SOURCES

al-Ghazālī's immediate source for the controversial passage was, as we know, the *Qūt al-qulūb* of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī; but the critics claim that other, more insidious sources and influences shaped his viewpoint. This charge is certainly not without foundation. However al-Ghazālī's defenders will ultimately elaborate and refine his position in order to prove its conformity to orthodox (i.e., Ash'arite) doctrine, the statement reveals a certain striking affinity with various Mu'tazilite and philosophical formulations.

Thus, the early Mu'tazilite 'Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. c. 250/864), in rejecting the notion that God could provide better for man than He has already done, remarked: "It is not possible (*lā yajūz*) that God forgo anything which He can do by way of benefit in order to do some other benefit. . . . If He had something more salutary (*aṣlah*) and more excellent (*afḍal*) than what He has done for people, and He were to prevent them from having it, He would be miserly (*bakhīl*) and unjust (*ẓālim*) to them."¹⁴⁹

And Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d.c. 227/840) held the view that "there is no goodness better than what He has already done" (*lā ṣalāḥ aṣlah mim mā fa'ala*).¹⁵⁰

The Mu'tazilite doctrine of *al-aṣlah* was, of course, more nuanced than these isolated citations reveal and was by no means unanimously accepted even among the Mu'tazilites themselves, the degree of God's "obligation" to His creatures forming a point of special disagreement.

Still more troubling to al-Ghazālī's critics will be the suspicion that the doctrines of the philosophers lie at the heart of the statement. This suspicion is all the more disturbing in that al-Ghazālī was credited with the most telling critique of these doc-

¹⁴⁹ Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal*, III, 120, cited in Massignon, *Passion*, III, 83, note 5, who considers it the prime source of al-Ghazālī's statement. Cf. also, al-Bazdawī, *K. uṣūl al-dīn*, pp. 126-127.

¹⁵⁰ al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, I, 239, cited in Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*, p. 74.

trines in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifah*. For his friends, of course, this very fact will provide proof positive that he cannot have meant the statement as it was taken by hostile readers.

Tāj al-dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), for example, will declare that philosophers like Ibn Sīnā are “among the damned and so how could al-Ghazālī have relied on him? Philosophy has no place in the *Iḥyāʾ* which he wrote only after he had belittled it as a science.”¹⁵¹

Nevertheless, the charge is not so lightly to be dismissed. In his section on providence in the *Shifāʾ*, Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) states:

God knows by His nature what exists in the order of good; and is by His very nature a cause of goodness and perfection insofar as possible (*bi-ḥasab al-imbkān*) and He wills it. . . . He knows the order of the good in the widest possible way (*ʿalā wajh al-ablagh fiʾl-imbkān*) so that there emanate from Him the order and good that He knows in the widest way in an emanation most perfectly conducive to order in accord with possibility (. . . *fayadān ʿalā atamm taʾdīyah ilā al-nizām bi-ḥasab al-imbkān*).¹⁵²

Still another suspect source mentioned is the *Rasāʾil* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, and, indeed, in the section on fortitude (*ṣabr*) in that work, we learn that prophets are able to withstand calamities because they hold the conviction that “the world has a maker who is one, living, powerful, and wise and that He has arranged the world’s affairs in the most excellent order, and its order in the perfection of wisdom, such that nothing small or great occurs unless there be in it varieties of wisdom and types of benefits no one but He knows.”¹⁵³

The underlying principle in these passages (as, it would seem in al-Ghazālī’s) is that the world as a product of a perfect creator must be as excellent as possible; otherwise, defects or deficien-

¹⁵¹ Cited in *Ithāf*, IX, 442.

¹⁵² K. *al-shifāʾ*, *Ilāhiyāt*, II, 415. Cf. the paraphrase by Ibn Sīnā’s pupil, Bahmanyār ibn al-Marzubān (d. 430/1038) in his *al-Taḥṣīl* (ed. Muṭahharī, Tehran, 1349), p. 663: *hādha al-nizām huwa al-nizām al-ḥaqīqī lā nizāma afdal minhu wa-lā atamm*.

¹⁵³ *Rasāʾil* (Beirut, 1957), IV, 72-73.

cies would reflect on its maker: "from the perfect only the perfect may issue."¹⁵⁴

These formulations seem to have as their common source the famous passage of Plato's *Timaeus* (29A-30B) in which it is stated that "the work of the supremely good" cannot "be anything but that which is best" (τὸ κάλλιστον). When the demiurge shaped the universe he "fashioned reason within soul and soul within reason, to the end that the work he accomplished might be by nature as excellent and perfect as possible."¹⁵⁵ The demiurge, the "best of causes" (ἄριστος τῶν αἰτίων) fashions the cosmos "the best of things that have become" (κάλλιστος τῶν γεγόνότων).¹⁵⁶ And it is because the demiurge is good and without any jealousy (φθόνος) that he desires to make a cosmos as excellent as possible.¹⁵⁷

In Galen's compendium of the *Timaeus*, translated into Arabic by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (the Greek original is lost), the corresponding passage bears a striking similarity to al-Ghazālī's formulation:

It is not possible that (the world) be in any condition more excellent than that in which it is (*lā yumkin an yakūna 'alā ḥāl afdal min ḥālihi allatī huwa 'alayhā*).¹⁵⁸

And the compendium continues:

The reason for the creation of the world is God's generosity (*jūd*) . . . for there is neither envy nor miserliness (*bukhl*) with the generous one (*al-jawād*) toward anything at any time. Hence when he wanted to set in order the corporeal substance moving at random and without order in the best possible way (*fi ghāyat mā yumkin*) it could be ordered, he created the world.¹⁵⁹

There are certain obvious affinities here with the Ghazālīan text: the surpassing excellence of creation is predicated on the

¹⁵⁴ *Hikmat*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁵ *Timaeus* 30B; tr. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁵⁶ *Timaeus* 29A; tr. Cornford, p. 23.

¹⁵⁷ *Timaeus* 29E; tr. Cornford, p. 33. For the early Greek notion of the grudging nature of the gods, see A. J. Festugière, "Réflexions sur le problème du mal chez Eschyle et Platon," in *Etudes de philosophie grecque* (Paris, 1971), p. 8ff.

¹⁵⁸ *Galen's Compendium Timaei Platonis*, p. 5 [Latin translation, p. 39].

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

perfect generosity of its creator; to deny this excellence is to impugn the creator. His generosity is such that He acts to the very limit of the possible (*fi ghāyat mā yumkin*). In the *Maqāṣid al-falāsifah*, his exposition of the philosophers' views, al-Ghazālī explains what this means: "The One poured forth (*afāḍa*) existence upon all existing things just as it must be, and in accord with what must be without hoarding (*iddikhār*) any possible thing."¹⁶⁰ There is, therefore, good reason to assume that the *Timaeus* passage, or some variation thereof, stood as al-Ghazālī's ultimate source, and to understand the phrase "there is not in possibility" (*laysa fi' l-imkān*) as meaning that God has not hoarded or withheld any possibility.

The implications of the *Timaeus* passage were drawn out far more explicitly in another long-lived debate in the Latin West. Under the influence of the *Timaeus*, as mediated by the 4th-century commentator and translator Calcidius, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), al-Ghazālī's younger contemporary, posed the question "whether God can make better or more things than He does make, or whether He can in any way cease from making those things which He does make?"¹⁶¹ Abelard acknowledges the difficulties to which either affirmation or denial of this question leads, but he argues that "God indeed does all the things of which He is capable, and does them as well as He can."¹⁶² If we expect from ourselves the good acts of which we are capable, how much the more so shall we expect them of God, who is supremely good and for whom no action is onerous? For Abelard, therefore, this world is the best possible, for "God cannot do more than He already does, or better; nor can He refrain from doing those things He does do."¹⁶³ To say that the world could be better is to say that God is less good or just or generous than He might have been.

Abelard's question and response engendered a debate within

¹⁶⁰ *Maqāṣid*, p. 242

¹⁶¹ *Theologia Christiana*, in *Opera* (ed. Cousin; Paris, 1859), II, 560. See also Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, pp. 70-73.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, II, 561: *Facit itaque omnia quae potest Deus, et tantum bene quantum possit.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*: *plura Deus nullatenus facere possit quam facit; aut melius facere, aut ab his cessare.*

Latin Scholasticism; his position was sharply disputed at first by such theologians as Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) and Peter Lombard (ca. 1095-1160) and later by virtually every Scholastic thinker of note. Continuing comment on the issue was assured because Peter Lombard incorporated the question in the first book of his massively influential compilation known as the *Sentences*. The *Sentences* formed an integral part of the medieval curriculum, and commentary upon them was prerequisite to academic advancement.¹⁶⁴

As in the Islamic debate, objections to Abelard's position centered on the implicit curtailment of divine omnipotence; in the words of Hugh of St. Victor, such a view as Abelard's threatened "to subject divine omnipotence to a measure" (*sub mensura coarctare*).¹⁶⁵ Or, as Alexander of Hales (ca. 1170-1245), the teacher of Bonaventura, put it: "If God cannot act in a better way than He does act, then His power is limited, which is false."¹⁶⁶

The history of this Scholastic debate, which elicited extensive discussion from Abelard's time well into the 14th century and the works of William of Ockham (ca. 1290-1349) and his followers, deserves a study in its own right.¹⁶⁷ In general, Scholastic

¹⁶⁴ For the text, see *Magistri Petri Lombardi Parisiensis episcopi Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*. 3d ed. (Grottaferrata, 1971), I/2, 298-306. For the vast commentary literature, see Friedrich Stegmüller, *Repertorium Commentariorum in Sententias Petri Lombardi*. 2 vols. (Würzburg, 1947).

¹⁶⁵ *De sacramentis*, I.ii.22, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 176, p. 214. Hugh's comments are taken up by the Lombard and cited in all the later discussions. In passing, it is perhaps worth mention that Origen (ca. 185-253) did in fact hold that God's power was limited, and that through His will, God called into existence only that number of beings which He could administer; see his *De principiis*, II 9, 1 (ed. Görgemanns & Karpp, Darmstadt, 1976), p. 401.

¹⁶⁶ *Summa theologiae* (ed. Klumper; Quaracchi, 1924), I, 224; the work is traditionally ascribed to Alexander, but is in fact the work of several hands.

¹⁶⁷ In addition to those cited above, see, e.g., Albertus Magnus, *Opera omnia* (Paris, 1893), XXVI, 387ff.; Duns Scotus, *Opera omnia* (Paris, 1893), X, 742ff.; Thomas Aquinas, *In quatuor libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, in *Opera* (Parma, 1852-1873), VI, 346ff.; and *Summa theologiae*, I.25, 6; Bonaventura's discussion is one of the most extensive and impressive Scholastic treatments, in his *Opera theologica selecta* (Quaracchi 1934), I, 604-632; see also, William of Ockham, *Scriptum in librum primum Sententiarum*, in *Opera theologica* (St. Bonaventure, NY, 1979), IV, 650-660. As my friend Professor Calvin Normore kindly informs me, there is also a brief discussion by Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253) in his *De libero arbitrio*, ed. L. Baur, *Die philosophischen Werke des Robert Grosseteste* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mit-

theologians affirmed that God could indeed create a better world, or worlds, than this, but they could not satisfactorily resolve the underlying dilemma—indeed, who could? They struggled to do so by seizing on distinctions. What is actually meant, they asked, by “better” or by “world”? If by “better” one refers to God’s actions, then it must be said that He cannot act in any better way, i.e., with “better” wisdom or goodness or power; however, if by “better” one refers to the objects of God’s power, then it is true to say that things may be made better than they are.¹⁶⁸

Again, in discussion of the question a favorite strategy was to distinguish between the essential and the accidental being or goodness of things or of the world itself. The substantial being or goodness of the world or its parts could not be improved, but accidental goodness or being could become better or worse.¹⁶⁹ A man, for example, might be made stronger or more intelligent or more eloquent than he is, for these are accidental to what he is *qua* man, but he could not be made more a “rational animal” than he is, for this is his very nature. The substantial nature of a thing cannot be changed without altering its identity, and this reflects, not limitation of power on God’s part, but the very natures of things as they are.

Hence, for the consensus of Scholastics, this world in its essential nature cannot be better, for then it would not be this world, but another; on the other hand, its accidental goodness might be immeasurably improved. There could be, as Aquinas noted, the creation of further species, or the addition of further parts to the world, or the improvement of its individual constituents.¹⁷⁰

Such a solution has a certain elegance. It affirms the essential nature of the creation to be unalterably good, and so it preserves the creator’s justice and goodness; at the same time, it meets

telalters, 9), p. 180. There are very few scholarly discussions of the question, but see A. Maurer, “Ockham on the Possibility of a Better World,” *Mediaeval Studies*, 38 (1976), pp. 291-312; and F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, II/1, 299-300 (Bonaventura), and II/2, 89-90 (Aquinas).

¹⁶⁸ Alexander of Hales, *Summa*, I, 224.

¹⁶⁹ Albertus Magnus, *In I Sentent. Dist. XLIV*, in *Opera*, XXVI, 391; cf. also, Th. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I.25,6.

¹⁷⁰ Aquinas, *In quatuor libros Sententiarum*, in *Opera*, VI, 354.

squarely our common sense of dissatisfaction by acknowledging that numerous individual aspects of the world might indeed be better, if only “accidentally.” To be sure, this left the question as to why the creator did not remedy such individual defects; to such a question, as, for example, why God does not increase the capacities of finite things, Albertus Magnus (1206-1280) could only declare: “I say that in His wisdom, He was not inclined to give more, and He was unwilling to give more; but why He was unwilling, I do not know. He, however, knows.”¹⁷¹

The Scholastic debate appears clear-cut and predictable, even from this cursory glance, in comparison with the Islamic dispute. None of al-Ghazālī’s critics cites such sources as the *Ti-maeus* to support the contention that philosophical doctrine shaped his views. For such critics, a suspicious turn of phrase, a technical term, the foreign cast of the whole passage, would have been sufficient to alert them, had not the content already alarmed and outraged their sensibilities. And they proceed to attack by innuendo and by frankly *ad hominem* arguments.

In turn, al-Ghazālī’s defenders will claim that his sources are unimpeachably orthodox. They will adduce Qur’ānic precedents, e.g., “the All-mighty, the All-compassionate, who has created all things well (*alladhī aḥsana kull shay’ khalaqahu*);¹⁷² and especially, “We . . . created man in the fairest stature” (*la-qad khalaqnā al-insān fī aḥsan taqwīm*).¹⁷³

What seems to a modern reader obvious—that al-Ghazālī in some way submitted to the influence of those philosophers whom he, nevertheless, largely repudiated—is ignored or disavowed by his defenders. To admit the influence of ancient or Islamic philosophers upon al-Ghazālī was tantamount to surrender for his supporters; and this held true, even with such later defenders as Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī and al-Jazā’irī, in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively.

Thus, the notion of the correlation of perfect and imperfect will be supported by appeal to those Qur’ānic passages in which

¹⁷¹ *Opera*, XXVI, 392.

¹⁷² *Qur.* 32:7 (tr. Arberry, p. 117), cited in al-Suyūṭī, *Tashyid*, fol. 3a.

¹⁷³ *Qur.* 95:4 (Arberry, p. 343), cited in *ibid.*

the creation of things in pairs is mentioned, e.g., "and of everything created We two kinds."¹⁷⁴

Furthermore, the principle that "from the perfect only the perfect may issue" will be grounded in the verses: "And heaven—We built it with might, and We extend it wide. And the earth—We spread it forth; O excellent Smoothers!"¹⁷⁵

These are but scattered examples; and, to be sure, the critics will easily find opposing verses with which to refute the defenders. Much of the dispute will turn on such exchanges of Qur'ānic passages.

V

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE ASCRIPTION

The difficulties involved with al-Ghazālī's position and, in particular, the suspicion that it represented heretical doctrines, induced some commentators to conclude that the passage in question could not be accurately ascribed to him, but had been interpolated into the *Iḥyā'* by other hands. This suspicion was strengthened by the apparent inconsistencies (and even contradictions) between certain of his other works and the *Iḥyā'* passage. We have already called attention to two of these alleged inconsistencies: in *al-Iqtisād fi'l-i'tiqād*, his doctrinal *kalām* work, al-Ghazālī postulates a superior state-of-affairs in the absence of the religious obligation imposed upon man; and in more than one passage he explicitly upholds the accepted doctrine that the objects of God's power are endless. The thought that a figure of such authority and eminence could have subscribed to repudiated doctrines, and doctrines which he had himself refuted, gave additional support to this argument.

It was, of course, conceivable that the statement was a simple lapse (as al-Biqā'ī, not without malice, would suggest); but it was preferable to believe that the statement had been smuggled into the *Iḥyā'* in an attempt to buttress unpopular opinions with the prestige of a universally venerated authority.

¹⁷⁴ *Qur.* 51:49 (Arberry, p. 239), cited in *ibid.* al-Suyūṭī understands this to refer to the opposition of day and night, black and white, belief and unbelief, etc.

¹⁷⁵ *Qur.* 51:47 (Arberry, p. 239), cited in *Ithāf*, IX, 454.

Tempting as this theory may seem, it remains highly implausible. There can be little serious doubt that the statement is correctly ascribed to al-Ghazālī. First, we have the evidence that objections to the statement sprang up with al-Ghazālī's own lifetime, and that he himself addressed those objections in the *Imlā'*. It is hardly credible that an entire treatise, dealing with other disputed points as well, would be fabricated, and that within the supposed author's lifetime, nor that such a fabricator would then proceed to sprinkle parallel passages throughout other of al-Ghazālī's works.

Furthermore, there is the disapproving testimony of Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Ghazālī's own pupil, that he did indeed hold this position. The matter would seem to have been a subject of open discussion and debate, as ibn al-ʿArabī's reference to the "Iraqis" suggests. Then, too, al-Ghazālī did not disown the statement, as he might easily have done, but rather vigorously reaffirmed it in the *Imlā'* and included it, in paraphrase, in the *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn*.

The passage would seem to be more or less in accord with al-Ghazālī's later Ṣūfī position, as expressed in other works composed after the *Iḥyā'*. Again and again, in such treatises as *Ja-wāhir al-Qurʾān*, *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn*, and *al-Maqṣad al-asnā* (as well as in many sections of the *Iḥyā'*), we find a recurrent affirmation of the perfect rightness of the actual. These affirmations occur, moreover, in such a way as to suggest that they form an important part of his own particular mystical viewpoint.

There was a further, perhaps more urgent, consideration for al-Ghazālī's supporters in accepting the authenticity of the ascription, whatever difficulties it caused for them. If one such passage in the *Iḥyā'* were deemed spurious, others might be rejected as well. No assurance would remain that any text was free of such fabrications. According to al-Jazāʾirī:

The idea that the *Iḥyā'*, after its perfect renown in the author's lifetime, should offer an opening to the Muʿtazilites to record their machinations and mix in their invalid teachings is impossible. The possibility of this is an infringement on a matter of religion.

Were we to assume the possibility of this, no confidence in books on law and theology would remain for us, and the arguments of the *mujtahids* . . . would not remain sound for us. For it might be said in an effort to weaken them, "Perhaps this is an interpolated and forged doctrine," and as soon as the possibility entered, the argument would collapse.¹⁷⁶

For al-Jazā'irī, as for others, it was a matter of integrity as well as of evidence to accept the ascription to al-Ghazālī. To permit the suggestion of interpolation was to invite the destruction of rational discussion as well as tradition. No issue would then be faced on its merits. And, more dangerously, it might be asked, if we cannot rely on the authenticity of al-Ghazālī's works, how may we be sure of any other respected authority's works?

This is, of course, no proof of the genuineness of the ascription, but it does give some sense of the tenor of the dispute. Even those who claim to accept the theory of interpolation, such as al-Biqā'ī and al-Lamaṭī, do not content themselves with a mere dismissal of the issue on the grounds that it is spurious; rather, they pursue the question tenaciously to all its final consequences.

The issue, to be sure, had a vitality of its own. The underlying problems had never been resolved to satisfaction despite the ascendancy of "orthodox" doctrine; but, then, neither were they to be resolved in the West. It is perhaps in the nature of the case that the problem of theodicy, at least as traditionally posed, cannot be convincingly resolved.¹⁷⁷

Often it seems that the arguments for interpolation are intro-

¹⁷⁶ *Hikmat*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁷ Recently, Benson Mates has argued that "the principal traditional problems of philosophy are genuine intellectual knots; they are intelligible enough, but at the same time they are absolutely insoluble." *Skeptical Essays* (Chicago, 1981), p. 3. Mates does not deal with the problem of theodicy in his discussion, but his formulation and analysis of such "intelligible but insoluble" problems seem to me to apply with special aptness to theodicy; see pp. 3-13 of the above work for his discussion.

For other philosophers, the problem is fatally skewed; for example, the contemporary German philosopher Hermann Schmitz considers the traditional discussion of the "best of all possible worlds" to be based on a historic misapprehension and misapplication of the very notion of possibility. See his *System der Philosophie*, Bd. I: *Die Gegenwart* (Bonn, 1964), esp. pp. 364ff.

duced as face-saving gestures. It was risky to attack such an authority as al-Ghazālī whose prestige, by the 15th and 16th centuries, for example, when most of the debate took place, was well-nigh unassailable. It was more discreet to attack the position while at the same time declaring that the “Proof of Islam” had never really held it.