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Creation in Time in Islamic Thought with Special Reference to Al-Ghazali

Eric L. Ormsby

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Abstract

No distinction is so fundamental to Islamic thought nor perhaps so all-encompassing as that between the eternal and the created-in-time. The eternal is applied properly only to God, whereas the created-in-time applies to everything else without exception, from the stars in their seemingly enduring courses to the least scratching of an ant upon a stone at our feet. It is the contrast, the opposition itself, which is instructive and fertile for reflection. “Things are explicable through their contraries” (*bi-diddiha tatabayyan al-ashya*).¹ Through the created and contingent we come to recognise the eternal and self-subsistent. The impermanence of the world reminds us unceasingly that there is another permanent and unceasing world. The contrast between the eternal God and mere transient and contingent being is nowhere more vividly and poignantly expressed than in certain old Muslim graveyards where the grey, tilting, columnar tombstones are exquisitely incised with the stark and confident affirmation: “God is the enduring one” (*huwa al-baqi*). Mere dust, the hidden remains of the pious bear witness by their very insubstantiality to an equally invisible but unchanging reality which cannot decay.

Key words:

Hadith, *qadim*, Islamic theology, Qur’an, *wujud*, essential contingency, temporal contingency, *Zad al-musafirin*, divine will (*iradah*), al-Ghazali, *kalam*, *mujid*, Ash‘arite.

The vast disparity between eternal and temporal prompted a number of questions which traditional Muslim thinkers pursued with great interest over centuries. It is not possible to explore the topic in any exhaustive way here; instead, I wish to trace certain aspects, if only briefly.

In traditional Islamic theology, especially as it came to be codified from around the twelfth century onwards, creation-in-time is denoted by the Arabic word *huduth*, and anything created in time is termed *hadith*. This contrasts with *qidam*, or “eternity,” and that which is *qadim*, “eternal” The distinction is Qur’anic, though different terms are used there, e.g., “All that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet still abides the Face of thy Lord, majestic, splendid” (55:26; trans. Arberry). Or, as in the beautiful and famous verses: “God, there is no God but He, the Living, the Everlasting

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[*alqayyum*]. Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep; to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth” (2:255).

The term *hadith*, though non-Qur’anic, from an early date came to denote the “created-in-time” and that which may be termed “contingent” (also represented by the term *mumkin*, among others), i.e., that which can both be and not be, equally. In the Thomistic formulation: *quod potest esse et non esse* (S.T., Ia, q. 86, a. 3). Further, the noun *huduth* is defined as “a thing’s needing something other than itself in order to exist.”² This is, of course, pre-eminently true of the world itself, the very contingency of which serves to signal the existence of an eternal and self-subsistent originator- a *muhdith* or *mujid* who brings something into existence for the first time, or who produces existence (*wujud*) - and this can only be God.

The term *huduth* is glossed in other, related ways. It is explained as that which has a beginning, a “firstness” (*awwaliyah*); it is that which commences after it was not. It is that the existence of which is preceded by nonexistence. And so, *huduth* means “to exist after not existing,”³ It is “an existence preceded by non-existence.”⁴ This is termed “essential contingency” (*huduth dhathi*)⁵ and, in the words of a glossator, it denotes “temporal contingency” (*huduth zamani*),⁶ i.e., the term emphasises a thing’s appearance in time, rather than its mere causation. The created-in-time is characterised essentially by this “being-preceded-by-non-existence” (*masbuqiyah bi’l-‘adam*). The great philosopher and theologian Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1274) expresses the distinction with unsurpassed succinctness when he notes that what is “not preceded by anything else, and not by non-existence, is eternal; otherwise, it is contingent (*hadith*)” (Tusi, *Tajrid* in Shirazi, *al-Qawl al-sadid*, 41). It is in the very nature of what is *hadith* that it be preceded, for its existence is not conceivable except as the result of some “preceding thing” (*amr sabiq*).

The great “Scholastic” theologian Adud al-Din al-Iji (d. 1355 CE) summed up the matter in his usual magisterial fashion in his *Mawaqif* where he states:

Hadith is something that is preceded by non-existence, i.e., its non-existence was before its existence. Hence, it possesses a first, before which it was non-existent. And this is termed ‘the temporally contingent’ [*hadith zamani*]. (4.2, 3)

By contrast, the eternal is “that the existence of which is not preceded by non-existence.”⁷ Furthermore, the eternal entails a “negation of firstness” [*awwaliyah*, i.e., “commencement”].⁸ Moreover, again in the words of al-Tusi, “non-existence is inconceivable in connection with it, either because of its intrinsic necessity or because it depends on [something intrinsically necessary].” As his commentator explains, *qadim* may apply either to God, who is necessarily existent in Himself, or to something necessarily existent *propter aliud*, e.g., the world (Shirazi, *Qawl*, 67).

Nevertheless, in the strict sense, “there is no eternal other than God” (Tusi, *Tajrid* in Shirazi, *Qawl*, 66). Just as God is the only naturally necessary being, so, too, is He alone the uniquely eternal being. What exists may be divided into God and all that which is not God (*ma siwa Allah*). “What is not God” is everything transient, evanescent, contingent, everything temporal; as though all mutable and



transitory reality might best be described purely by what it is not- the “not-God,” a kind of apophatic theology in reverse. In the creedal affirmation of the great theologian Abu Ishaq al-Isfara’ini (d. 1027 CE) whose work has now been made available by Professor Richard M. Frank, one must “believe that ‘world’ [*alam*] is the term for everything but God.”⁹

Everything except God is subject to certain inevitable laws. Everything that is not God is radically perishable. At its root, it is mere fictive being. What we are pleased to call “reality” is for much of Islamic theology a “supreme fiction” - to borrow the expression of the poet Wallace Stevens. According to the great theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (about whom more later), God represents the only genuine (*haqiqi*) reality; all else is merely “figurative” (*majazi*).¹⁰

The essential “nonexistence” of the world - the notion that intrinsically and of itself, the world has no basis for existing – is explored in certain of its implications by the great theologian Sayf al-Din al-Amidi (d. 1233 CE) in the following syllogism:

Since the world is contingent (*mumkin*) with respect to its essence, then its existence is an accident derived from another, while its nonexistence is essential to it [and] derived from its own nature (*dhat*). Whatever is essential to a thing precedes what is accidental in relation to it. Therefore, the world in its existence is preceded by an existence which is necessarily existent *per se* and whose priority is established because of its very nature (*li-dhatihi*). But whatever possesses beginning and whose existence is preceded by non-existence in an essential precedence - how can its existence be coterminous with an existence which has no beginning to its existence and which non-existence does not precede? (*Ghayat al-maram*, p. 259)

But, of course, the issue is not so simple. What is not God may possess only figurative reality in contrast to God, whose existence alone is genuine; but it does possess nonetheless a certain form of reality. Questions about creation arise in part because of the ambivalent nature of reality. If contingent creation were sheer illusion and nothing more, certain of these issues would immediately lose all significance.

Islamic theology often seems poised most fruitfully on certain prolific antinomies. The complicated and perennial debate over the import of human acts is perhaps the most conspicuous example; one of the earliest, and most divisive, of theological issues in Islam, it continued to inspire debate and discussion for centuries up until modern times. The present instance may provide another example, though the issues are rather more tacit. Contingent creation is insubstantial and virtually fictive over against God, and lacks even the semblance of self-subsistent reality. To be contingent, after all, means that it is absolutely equal whether a thing be or not be. What is not God can be and it can not be, and there is no reason whatsoever within the contingent - there is no compelling intrinsic factor - why a thing should be or not be. This is the real import of contingency - not merely that a thing be caused in its existence or nonexistence by another, but that *within itself*, in its very nature, there be no impelling reason for its existence or nonexistence.

On the other hand, this non divine “reality” may be figurative, or fictive, but it would be wrong to term it illusory. It is real enough, but what reality it possesses it receives from God, and only from Him. It is the work of His hands. It issues from Him. It is specifically designated by His will. It is effectuated by His power. Because of this, so contemptible a contingency as the world, so drastically evanescent an entity as the whole of created being, is also inescapably necessary. In itself contingent, in itself, as it were, inert to the possibilities of existence and non-existence, the creation is

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nevertheless necessary because of the prior will and knowledge of its Creator. To suppose otherwise is either to posit a defect in divine foreknowledge, as though God hesitated or were uncertain or imperfectly foresighted in His creation; it is to inject a suspicion of inadvertence into what must be consummate omniscience. Or (and even worse), it is to suppose that the world is itself necessary and coeval with God. The world is necessary because it results from God's eternal decree; the world is contingent because it requires another for its existence which has been preceded by nonexistence.

The insight into the world's double nature - contingent *per se*, necessary *propter aliud* - goes back to Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d.1037 CE) and was later elaborated in a new direction by al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), to whom I shall return shortly.

This familiar but profound perception serves a double purpose. It is satisfying and has a certain logical elegance about it. At the same time, it forms part of an effort to reconcile warring conceptions of created reality: on the one hand, the ancient doctrine of the world's eternity, on the other, the orthodox Islamic belief in creation *ex nihilo*. The world thus assumes a borrowed necessity; it is intrinsically contingent but extrinsically necessary. It is hardly surprising that this notion took deep root in Islamic theology, especially following the work of al-Ghazali. The world as the product of an omniscient and omnipotent creator cannot be dismissed as a meaningless trifle, or as something created whimsically and out of caprice; as the Qur'an notes, God did not create "frivolously" ('*abathan*: 23:115). Nothing He does is without its hidden wisdom or purpose (though Ash'arite theologians recoiled vehemently enough from Mu'tazilite insistence on God's unfailing purposefulness to deny that He acted out of any discernible motive).

If the world did not always exist - and the very supposition of the world's eternity was profoundly repugnant to orthodox Muslim theologians - then at some moment in time it began to exist when previously it had not. This apparently indisputable fact prompted a series of questions. For example, what did God do in His beginning-less eternity before He created the world? Was He somehow prompted to create the world? Conversely, if nothing prompted, or could prompt, Him to create at one moment but not another (either earlier or later), why was He not always and incessantly creating? Was there some reason, some "preponderating factor" (*murajjih*), which led Him to select one moment rather than another? Furthermore, did God "defer" creation? Did He create "later" than He might have? In fact, is not any creation in time inescapably a "deferral" of creation (*ta'khir al khalq*)?¹¹ And does not this putative deferral cast a shadow of suspicion across the radiant munificence of God? If creation was a good - and may we suppose otherwise? - was it not miserly, was it not tight-fisted, to withhold creation? Did God "hoard" His creation the way a miser hugs wealth? Unthinkable, and yet....

Such questions, and many others, occupied theologians concerned with the doctrine of creation in time. Let me deal briefly with certain of these here, before turning to a discussion of how the very notion of contingency underwent a certain characteristic alteration at the hands of al-Ghazali.

The question as to what God did before He created the world is an old and bitter chestnut which Western theologians from Augustine onward have felt compelled to dismiss with some petulance. Albertus Magnus might remark mildly that "this seems to me a foolish question" (*videtur mihi esse stulta quaestio in Opera omnia* [Paris, 1893], 36.391), but the poet John Milton, full of *ira theologica*, would snap: "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], 6.299). The great Isma'ili poet and philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw also records the dismissal of



the question as “meaningless palaver” (*guftar bi-ma’na: Zad al-musafirin* [Berlin, 1341], p. 276) on the grounds that before the creation of the world, time did not exist. Time itself begins with creation, and the succession of moments up to that Last Hour, when time and the world will cease, has been foreseen and foreordained by an all-powerful Creator.¹² Time, itself created, is resolutely linear and terminal.

But the response to the question among Muslim thinkers may have had other causes. To ask what God did before creating the world may be a legitimate question, but it smacks of a possible impiety. The question seems full of presuppositions, not all of them well concealed. In discussing such questions, one must always be aware of what larger and more threatening issues lie just out of sight. In this case, it is clearly the whole vexed question of the world’s eternity, or, more broadly, the question of whether anything might be coeternal with God. First of all, the question raises the disturbing dilemma of whether God was inactive and then became active, i.e., whether a change took place within the divine nature. Secondly, it suggests that God prior to the creation of the world had not realised His full creative power, and that creation in some obscure way “fulfilled” Him. Thirdly, it presupposes a temporal continuum, as though creation occurred at one instant in an unceasing succession of such instants. It thus posits a “before” to creation when something other than God existed with Him. The question in this sense reveals possible affinities with such doctrines as those repudiated beliefs of the “materialists” or *dahriyun*, who upheld the eternity of entities other than God: the soul (*nafs*), prime matter (*hayula*), space (*makan*) and time (*zaman*) (cf. Nasir-i Khosraw, *Zad al-musafirin*, p. 275).

The question bears as well on the doctrine of contingency. Implicit in the notion of creation in time is the distinct sense that God chose one moment rather than another. According to al-Ghazali, “God knows that the world’s existence in the moment in which it existed was possible and that its existence after that or before that was equal to it in possibility because these possibilities are equal” (*Iqtisad*, p. 92). And, as we know, God does nothing frivolously; but did He choose this moment, and no other, for some wise purpose? Creation in time seems to confer upon the actual moment of creation a distinction not enjoyed by other possible moments.

Discussion of this question leads directly to the doctrine of the divine will (*iradah*), as presented in traditional Ash‘arite *kalam*. I wish to present here a synopsis and brief discussion of this doctrine as it appears in the systematic theological treatise of al-Ghazali entitled *al-Iqtisad fi’l-i’tiqad*. I will then seek to show how al-Ghazali modified this doctrine – or rather, made it peculiarly his own – in certain of his later mystical (Sufi) works.

The treatise in question is a product of al-Ghazali’s “middle” period, and was written around 488 AH (i.e., 1095 CE). He was then at the height of his public renown; he enjoyed great esteem and official favour. He lectured regularly to enthusiastic crowds of students in the Nizamiyah *madrasah* in Baghdad, a position to which he had been appointed by the Seljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk. It was during this period, however, that al-Ghazali was also exploring a variety of schools of thought in a restless quest for certainty – a quest prompted by an early siege of skepticism in which he came to doubt all the bases of knowledge.¹³

The treatise is also important in the history of the development of *kalam*, and represents something of a turning point. Many influential arguments presented in the work will become normative for later theologians; the form and arrangement of the treatise will also have a strong influence on later treatises.¹⁴

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The divine will (*iradah*) is one of seven “attributes of essence” (or “existential attributes”).¹⁵ Like the attributes of power (*qudrah*) or knowledge (*‘ilm*), will is said to be “superadded” (*za’id*) to the divine nature. In the customary formulation, God wills “by virtue of a will” (*bi-iradatin*). That is, His will is not indistinguishable from His nature (as the philosophers would hold), but is separate and distinct. On the other hand, it is not created simultaneously with its object; it is not a “created” will (*iradah hadithah*), as certain deviant sects would aver. In the characteristic formulation, the divine will “is not God and is nothing other than God.” For al-Ghazali, the essential character of God’s will is conveyed in the statement: “What He wills, is and what He does not will, is not.” This maxim has certain far-reaching consequences, as we shall see.

The divine will serves a precise function. Possibilities are by their very nature equal with regard to existence and nonexistence; they have within themselves no predisposition either to be or not to be. Hence, there must be something extrinsic to them that determines their status. This cannot be the divine nature itself for it, too, is “one in relation to opposing alternatives.”¹⁶ Nor can it be divine power, for it is undifferentiated and does not determine at what moment a thing may be or not be: power merely effectuates existence or nonexistence. There is thus a need to posit for some attribute the function of determining when and how things shall be; and this attribute is will. Its unique function is termed “the specifying action of the will” (*takhsis al-iradah*).

Now the philosophers asserted that the world exists through God’s very nature (*bi-dhat Allah*). They denied that there is any attribute such as will superadded to His nature. Since God’s nature is eternal, the world is also eternal. It is related to the divine as effect to cause: it is like light cast by the sun or the shadow which a person projects.

Against this, Ash‘arite theology, and al-Ghazali particularly, affirmed that “the world comes to be at that time when the eternal will stands in nexus with its coming-to-be.” And yet, the will of God is eternal and suffers no alteration *qua* eternal attribute when it determines the creation of the world in time. Al-Ghazali formulates the underlying problem as follows:

Why does the divine will stand in nexus with temporal creation at a specific time (*fi waqt makhsus*), neither earlier nor later, despite the fact that the relations of [various] times to the will are equal?¹⁷

With their doctrine of the world’s eternity, the philosophers could avoid this difficulty. But they could not escape the evidence for the “specifying effects of the divine attributes” (*khusus al-sifat*), for these are plainly manifest in the world itself. “The world is specified in a specific measure and a specific position” (*al-‘alam makhsus bi-miqdar makhsus wa-wad makhsus*).¹⁸ The eternal nature cannot be said to conform better to some possibilities than to others. Even so, the world as we experience it is in fact “specified.” Certain things exist but not others. The fact that certain things exist, and in a certain specified way, demonstrates that the world has indeed been specified. Therefore, there must be something which specified the existence of things as they are, as well as that which does not exist and remains as a mere possibility in the mind. It is this specifier that we call “will.” Through will, things

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created in time come to be when they do.¹⁹ The will distinguishes these things from other similar or opposite things.

The world bears witness to the determining and discriminating action of the divine will. But a further perplexity arises. Why does this will choose one thing and not another? Are not both opposing things equal with respect to possibility? In his reply, al-Ghazali provides the answer to his first and more fundamental question: why does the will act at one time rather than another? The question, he claims, is itself misguided. It is like asking, why does knowledge entail disclosure of the knowable (*inkishaf al-ma'lum*)? This is tantamount to asking, why is knowledge knowledge? The acts of distinguishing and specifying are the acts of the will par excellence.

To ask why it distinguishes or specifies one time or one thing rather than another is to ask, why is it a will, or, why is will will? It is these actions that constitute will: “the true nature [of the will] is to distinguish a thing from what is like it.”²⁰

Whatever exists has been created by God’s power; but in order to exist at all, a thing stands in need of the divine will “in order to direct power to its object and specify [the object] for [power].” Every object of power is at the same time an object of will: *kull maqdur murad*. Things that exist in time are objects of power, or possibilities. Therefore, things created in time are also objects of will: *kull hadith mura* – “everything that is created in time is willed.”²¹

To summarise: the world is a realisation of one possibility among many possibilities, all of them utterly equal in respect to God. With respect to itself, the world could as easily not exist as exist; and this inescapable fact applies to every object and event in the world. The corollary of this is that whatever does exist is a product of the divine will: “every contingent is willed.” Nothing exists, or can exist, which God has not expressly willed, and willed from all eternity. So, too, whatever does not exist, does not exist because its nonexistence God has knowingly foreordained and willed. Nothing is random; nothing is happenstance; whatever exists, whatever occurs, is intended.

Now the consequences of this position, which I have here briefly sketched, are immense and far reaching; but they become evident only later, in those ardent writings of al-Ghazali’s “Sufi” period, i.e., the latter part of his life from his crisis in 1095 CE until his death in 1111 CE.

In July, 1095 CE, al-Ghazali suffered a severe crisis attended by disabling psychosomatic illness which led him, agonisingly and after six months of conflict, to renounce his prestigious position for a life of seclusion, poverty, and meditation. He slipped out of Baghdad intending never to return. During the next decade or so, he wrote certain of his most famous and influential works, including the *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*.

The nature and circumstances of al-Ghazali’s crisis remain puzzling, even though these have been much discussed. Whether he experienced an inner transformation or suffered a nervous breakdown or even went mad (as one of his own pupils and earliest biographer would claim) need not concern us here. What matters is that in some fundamental way he underwent an experience of momentous intensity which left its traces throughout his later works. It appears in certain cardinal themes, such as the “oneness of existence” (*wahdat al-wujud*) which would have an influence on many later mystics, and in certain seemingly personal notes repeatedly struck, e.g., the almost obsessive concern with

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sickness and with healing, a timeworn topos in religious texts to which al-Ghazali's persistent elaboration somehow lends an unexpected urgency and force. It should not be forgotten either that al-Ghazali, especially in the *Ihya'*, writes with a gaze fixed steadfastly on the swiftly approaching fifth century of Islam, that turning point which should call forth its own "renewer" (*mujaddid*). He refers explicitly to this fact in his "autobiographical" work *Deliverance from Error*, written some five years before his death.²²

The result of all this is manifest in the rather extraordinary way in which al-Ghazali appropriates whatever he deems useful for his own proselytising purposes. He draws and borrows freely from every subject at his disposal, not merely scripture and tradition but folklore and poetry, Sufi manuals and compendia, philosophy and logic, medicine and anatomy. He borrows wholesale from numerous predecessors, and not only such acknowledged Sufi masters as Abu Talib al-Makki, al-Muhasibi, and al-Qushayri, but also, and more significantly, from such philosophers as Ibn Sina.

This is not the occasion to deal with al-Ghazali's immense indebtedness to Ibn Sina.²³ The philosopher's influence permeates his later work to such an extent that one might justly claim that al-Ghazali's reading of Ibn Sina was the most decisive and formative of his intellectual experiences. This is true despite his unequivocal repudiation and refutation of Ibn Sina's principal metaphysical doctrines in the *Tahafut al-falasifah*.

During his ten years of seclusion and prayer, al-Ghazali seems in some way to have experienced a profound intuition of the unalterable justice and excellence of things as they are, what I have called elsewhere his conviction of "the perfect rightness of the actual."²⁴ He formulated this intuition in a memorable dictum, which carried echoes of various antecedents among ancient and Islamic philosophers and theologians, but which was also very much his own: "There is nothing in possibility more wonderful than what is" (*laysa fi'l-imkan abda' mimma kan*). In my view, this represents a perception on his part of what in more philosophical terms he expressed by the phrase "contingency of the world." It embodies the realization in immediate, personal terms with compelling implications for the individual.

Within the realm of possibility, or contingency, i.e., in the realm of that which can equally be and not be, whatever actually does exist at a given moment represents the best possibility that can exist. The realm of the contingent extends beyond actual existents to merely possible or conceivable entities. Possibility thus comprises conceivable beings, "what exists in the mind" (*fi'l-dhihn*): *entia rationis*. What exists in the mind does not represent a genuine alternative to what actually exists; or, rather, since it does not exist, it is already a rejected, an excluded, alternative.

Contingency is paradoxical. Whatever exists could always be other than it is. In its very nature, it is characterised by an "intrinsic possibility" (*imkan dhati*).²⁵ Furthermore, what God can do is unlimited and the objects of his power (*maqdurat Allah*) are infinite; this is axiomatic. At the same time, things could not be otherwise, for whatever is has been specified by an eternal will. A thing's very existence betokens its extrinsic necessity. Its occurrence in time signifies that it has been predestined, willed, and effected by an eternal and omniscient creator. It is thus logically correct and permissible to affirm that our world could be different than it is, but it is not theologically correct and permissible – indeed,

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it is impious – to assert that our world could be better than it is. The world in all its circumstances remains unimpeachably right and just, and it is unsurpassably excellent.

This is not in any sense to suggest that God selected the best possible world, or the best possible moment for its creation, out of an infinitude of possible worlds and possible moments (as Leibniz argued). There is no best possible world; there is no best possible moment for the world, for any world, to exist, or not to exist. The excellence justly ascribed to this world accrues solely from the fact that God created it and the moment of its creation was the “best” only because it was the moment at which God created, not because of any excellence inhering within it. (As the Bach cantata has it, “Cortez Zeit is die allerbeste Zeit”- though the context is of course different!) This world did not present itself *in potentia* to the mind of God as the best of a range of possible worlds, each of which might be ranked in terms of some intrinsic excellence. The world became, instantaneously and irrefutably, “the most wonderful” at the instant of its realisation, and by virtue solely of that realisation.

Because of this, we are justified – indeed, we are obligated – to scrutinise and to study the realm of created contingency, for within it we may discern hidden instances of the divine wisdom which will reveal to us how nothing could be better than it is. We do not study creation in order to sit back and congratulate God on His acumen and cleverness for selecting a particular set of contingencies rather than others; we approach creation after the fact to learn the depths and intricacies of divine wisdom as it discloses itself irresistibly in contingent things.

Throughout his later work, al-Ghazali draws on a number of examples taken from anatomy and natural history, among other subjects.²⁶ By these examples he seeks to show the wonders of divine wisdom in created beings. On one level, this is a familiar homiletic device used by preachers from time immemorial. But on another level, it reveals a view of the world radically contingent and yet governed in design down to the most minute and fragile particular by a necessary wisdom. The world is a “mirror of God” and what exists there reflects some fragmentary aspect of Him. Moreover, this world becomes increasingly transparent to the schooled perception. Al-Ghazali can dismiss the lore of physicians and anatomists – two of his favourite targets – with hearty contempt: “The physician considers [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!” (*Ihya'*, 4:372; cf. also 3:3).

It would be easy to adduce numerous examples of the way in which al-Ghazali raids other disciplines not merely to pluck handy illustrations for a particular thesis, but as a way of appropriating the very substance of the discipline. Often when he does this, he attempts to personalise and internalise his borrowings within a Sufi context. This characteristic procedure seems at times to take on the appearance of a spiritual exercise. To give one example: in discussing the divine name *al-musawwir* (“He who forms”) in his treatise on divine names entitled *al-Maqṣad al-asna*, he recommends a certain mental exercise through which man may realise a “share” in this divine appellation. A person, he says, should

gain within himself the form of all existence with regard to its form and its arrangement, until he may comprehend the form of the world and its order as though he were looking at it, and then descend from the whole to the specific parts (*tafasil*).²⁷

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In proceeding thus, one must come to know the human form and its organs and limbs with their measure and number; and one must come to appreciate the particular wisdom of their corporeal disposition. Then one must extend the process to the animals and the plants. And the final object of this exercise is to obtain “a picture of the all and of its form in one’s mind” (*naqsh al-jami’ wasuratih fi qalbihi*; p. 83). This is desirable because “knowledge is a form in the soul corresponding to the thing to be known” (ibid.). The human portion remains a figurative participation in the process of formation (*taswir*) in that human beings can merely create pictures of things in their minds, whereas God’s knowledge of forms effects their very existence. But the exercise of fashioning a picture within one’s mind of the world in its general and particular aspects, as a means to greater spiritual perfection and insight, constitutes a typical example of the way in which al-Ghazali drew on a well-known and traditional conception of knowledge – the correspondence theory – in order to create a rather novel form of spiritual and devotional practice.²⁸ The *Ihya’*, it must be noted, is full of examples of this “exercise” put into rather elaborate and ingenious practice.

This “internalisation” of the cosmos for mystical purposes has other reasons. There are numberless parallels between the created world and human beings. Al-Ghazali’s fondness for pointing out microcosmic affinities, which is itself a common theme in Islamic mystical literature, is carried at times to fantastic lengths.²⁹ For our purposes here, it is enough to note that such analogies are also strategically significant. It is a way of driving home in an immediate and compelling way the notion of radical contingency. Thus, in his anti-Batini treatise entitled *al-Qustas al-mustaqim*, written during his years of seclusion, he draws the analogy explicitly:

Man is not created in time by himself, for he has a cause and a creator....We know that he has a creator and that his creator is knowing. If we say, “Every possible has a cause and the specification (*takhsis*) of the world, or of man, in the measure in which he/it has been specified, is possible” (*ja’iz*); therefore, it follows from this that he/it has a cause(*al-Qustas*, p. 37)

The parallel between world and human existence is drawn so finely that the grammatical antecedent is ambiguous (the pronoun here could refer either to ‘world’ or to ‘man’). On the one hand, humanity is like the world itself: both have been created and caused, and both are essentially contingent. Human beings must acknowledge their created status. The very wonders in their bodily structure and in their nature, like those of the world itself, bear witness to this createdness. And yet, “man is the most amazing of animals, but he is not amazed at himself” (*Ihya’*, 4:376). The creation of the human race “from a drop of dirty water” compels astonishment, and creation in time is both inimitable and in the end, unfathomable:

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. (*Ihya’* 4:373)

At the same time, such a perception lends a charged significance to every aspect of human existence, for whatever occurs, whatever suffering or joy befalls one, has been willed. Everything that happens has been intended. And this encompasses even the least, seemingly inconsequential actions:

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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.

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. He is the effector of what He wills. (*Kitab al-arba'in*, p. 6)

Finally, it must be noted that however inscrutable God's purposes – if, indeed, He may be said to have “purposes” at all, from a strict Ash'arite viewpoint – His creation of the world and of human beings remains the first and paramount sign of His unique compassion. God need not have created the world at all; He need not have created human persons. He might have created no world, or a world purely of inorganic matter. And He would still have remained utterly just and generous in so doing. Al-Ghazali notes in commenting upon the divine name *al-rahman*, applied exclusively to God, that His compassion is manifest “first, in creation (*ijad*); secondly, in guiding to belief and the means of happiness; third, in making possible the bliss of the next world; and fourth, in granting the vision of His noble countenance” (*al-Maqsad al-asna*, p. 67).

The notion of contingency which al-Ghazali received from his theological predecessors emphasised the nature of the world as the temporally caused product of an eternal cause; the world served as a sign of an eternal creator. The notion of contingency had served principally in proofs of God's existence, or of God as Creator, *a contingencia mundi*. The concept was deepened and refined considerably in the work of Ibn Sina, coming to denote that which can both be and not be, as well as that which is caused by another. This notion al-Ghazali accepts outright, as in his well-known logical treatise *Mi'yar al-'ilm* (e.g., p. 249 of the Beirut, 1978 ed.), but later he seeks to apply it within a Sufi context. It seems to become almost a guarantee of the unfailing efficacy of the divine will, such that every event in human life, not merely the momentous and significant, but even the seemingly random and trivial happenings, come to be charged with meaning. Such a perception entails a constant awareness of the divine agency in the world. It also necessitates a response, a response of complete and unquestioning acceptance of whatever befalls one.

This is allied with the Qur'anic injunction to “trust in God,” e.g., “So trust (*wa-tawakkal*) in the Living One who does not die” (25:58). As is well known, the precept to “trust in God” (*tawakkul*) also became one of the principal Sufi tenets, and is discussed in all the standard manuals and treatises.³⁰ Al-Ghazali himself devotes a major book of the fourth part of his *Ihya'* to this.

It seems probable, in my view, that al-Ghazali appropriated such notions as contingency, in the Avicennian sense, not only because he was profoundly impressed with their truth, but because he found them useful. They had the force (though also the controversial reputation) of logical concepts; they appealed to the reason. Al-Ghazali is no despiser of reason, as he is so often portrayed. Demonstration (as he makes clear in the *Munqidh*) remains one of the fundamental approaches to truth. The notion of contingency, with its characteristic jargon borrowed from his philosophical predecessors, served to strengthen and to rationalise what otherwise might have remained at the level of mere exhortation. It could appeal to those of a skeptical bent more than accumulations of scriptural quotation or lists of exempla.

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Al-Ghazali wishes to persuade, to convince, to change his readers.³¹ To this end, he preaches, argues, harangues, cajoles; he relies on anecdote and legend; he draws up syllogisms; he marshalls evidence from a dozen disparate disciplines. He is an eclectic not for the sake of eclecticism, but in order to convert and transform his auditors. He is a man filled with proselytising zeal. There are states of the soul of such purifying intensity that they seem to gather and concentrate all that went before in an individual's past history and focus it on one overriding objective. I believe, though I cannot prove, that something of this sort occurred to al-Ghazali. After his own transformation, he sought to transform all that he knew into a new form of knowledge which could be experienced with all the immediacy of sense experience.

As he acknowledges, there are various ways to the truth and the validity of each differs. But in the end, the highest approach is that which reconciles action and knowledge within a single act of perception. To express this, he employs the term 'taste' (*dhawq*).³² Only those truths which are somehow "tasted," i.e., known and experienced in one's inmost being, are fully genuine. The abstract notion of contingency, of createdness-in-time, must somehow be experienced directly; it must be made one's own and internalised. It thus affords the possibility of experiencing in one's own person the blessedness of created existence.

Notes

The present paper draws on my book *Theodicy in Islamic Thought* (Princeton, 1984) but develops certain themes in a new direction, albeit tentatively. The most thorough discussion of the subjects of eternity and temporal creation is Isma'il Va'iz Javadi, *Huduth va qidam* (Tehran, 1347 AH/1968 CE), a work which should be translated into English.

1. 'Ayn al-Qudah al-Hamadani, *Musannafat* (Tehran, 1962), p. 187.
2. Zakariya' al-Ansari, *Fath al-wahhab* (Garret Arabic MS H454/4), 27a, 1. I am indebted for this reference and for those in notes 3-6 and 8 to the late Professor Rudolf Mach.
3. Al-Maturidi, *K. al-tawhid* (Beirut, 1970), p. 13.
4. Al-Baydawi, *Tawali' al-anwar* (Cairo, 1323), p. 60.
5. — —
6. — —
7. Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi'l-i'tiqad*, (Ankara, 1962) p. 39.
8. Al-Shahristani, *Nihayat al-aqdam* (London, 1934), p. 46.
9. I am grateful to Professor Frank for giving me a copy of his as yet unpublished work. The phrase occurs on p. 1 of his edition of al-Isfara'ini's 'Aqidah (creed): *al-i'tiqad bi-anna al-'alam 'ibarah 'an kull shay' siwa Allah*.
10. Al-Ghazali, *Makatib-i farsi-yi Ghazzali* (Tehran, 1333), p. 20.



11. See Ormsby, *Theodicy*, pp. 76f.
12. L. Massignon, “Le Temps dans la pensee islamique,” in *Parole donnee* (Paris, 1962), esp. p. 354.
13. See J. van Ess, “Skepticism in Islamic Religious Thought,” *al-Abbath* 21 (1968), pp. 1-18. The highly artful and self-conscious literary structure of al-Ghazali’s own account of his crisis in the *Munqidh min al-dalal* should not impugn his sincerity or the genuineness of his “crisis.” I plan to deal with the literary qualities of the *Munqidh* in another place.
14. See L. Gardet and M. Anawati, *Introduction a la theologie musulmane* (Paris, 1948), pp. 157-60.
15. See the discussion in Ormsby, *Theodicy*, pp. 192-96.
16. *Al-Iqtisad fi’l-i’ tiqad*, p. 101.
17. — —, p. 104.
18. — —, p. 106.
19. — —
20. — —, p. 107.
21. — —
22. *al-Munqidh min al-dalal* (ed. Jabre), p. 49: “God promises the revival of His religion (*ihya’ dinihi*) at the beginning of every century.”
23. This is shown explicitly in work in course of publication by Professor Richard M. Frank and should also become obvious when the long-awaited book on Ibn Sina by Professor Dmitri Gutas appears. I thank both Professors Frank and Gutas for their comments on this influence.
24. See Ormsby, *Theodicy*, pp. 32-91.
25. — —, pp. 266-67.
26. — —, pp. 44-51.
27. *Al-maqasad al-asna fi sharh ma’ani asma’ Allah al-busna*, ed. Fadlou Shehadi (Beirut, 1971).
28. For “correspondence,” see J. van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre de ‘Adudaddin al-Ici* (Wiesbaden, 1966), pp. 70-71. For knowledge as representation, see (among many possible examples!) Mitham ibn ‘Ali ibn Mitham al-Bahrani (d. 1300 C.E.), *Qawa’id al-maram* (Qum, A.H. 1398), p. 21: “husul surat al-shay’ fi’l-‘aql.”
29. See Ormsby, *Theodicy*, p. 106.

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30. The exhaustive treatment of this is Benedikt Reinert, *Die Lehre von tawakkul in der klassischen Sufik* (Berlin, 1968). See also Ormsby, *Theodicy*, pp. 43ff.

31. See V. Poggi, *Un classico della spiritualità musulmana* (Rome, 1967), p.17.

32. *Al-Munqidh*, pp. 35-41. Cf. also Poggi, *Un classico*, pp. 188, 2035. I deal with the subject of *dhawq* in a forthcoming article entitled “The Taste of Truth,” *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adam* (Leiden: E. J.Brill, 1990).