

## Al-Ghazali and Averroes: Islamic “Nominalism” vs. Islamic “Realism,” Pt. I

While I’m not sure if the characterizations of “nominalist” and “realist” properly apply to the 11th and 12th century Muslim philosophers Al-Ghazali and Averroes,“(Indeed, over the past several years I have found myself increasingly having to revise my early thoughts on both “nominalism” and “realism,” because both are far more complex than I realized during my early studies.)”: it seems evident to me that the two were working with some of the same categories as Medieval Christian “nominalists” and “realists.” In my next entry I will offer an exposition and commentary on a section of Averroes’ famous work *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. This will represent (courtesy of a course at the University of Dallas) my first foray into Medieval Islamic philosophy.

In this entry I will offer a very brief introduction to these Arab thinkers. The first thing to understand is that the great project of “faith seeking understanding,” of the attempt to rationally explicate, as far as is possible, revealed religion, is common to all three major monotheistic religions of the world – Medieval Christians, Muslims, and Jews all engaged in it, and all were working with various construals of the Aristotelian heritage. Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas stand in their various ways on the Christian side; Al-Ghazali, Avicenna, and Averroes stand in their various ways on the Muslim side; Philo, Isaac Israeli, and Moses Maimonides stand on the Jewish side.

To me, just getting into Medieval Islamic thought for the first time, I would like to say that (provisionally) Al-Ghazali is a kind of Tertullian figure and Averroes a kind of Clement of Alexandria figure. That is, Al-Ghazali was very cautious about the utility of Greek philosophy in Muslim theological discourse. While he did not quite issue a scathing diatribe like Tertullian’s, namely, “Away with a mottled Islam...our instruction comes from the porch of Mecca,” he strongly believed that many of the Arab philosophers had compromised Islamic doctrine through uncritical acceptance of pagan ideas. On the other hand Averroes was the great Arab champion of the doctrines of Aristotle, holding, in essence, I think, that Aristotle’s philosophy was the “handmaiden” of the Koran. Again, while I wouldn’t press these parallels too far, they do seem useful at this initial stage of inquiry.

**Al-Ghazali (1058-1111):**“(The following provisional sketches are drawn loosely from John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* [London and New York: Routledge, 2007], and *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed., Jorge J.E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone [Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2003.]”:

Al-Ghazali was initially a renowned legal scholar, but having studied the *kalam* tradition (the tradition that theological truth should be found by dialectical arguments between different sects), he was well placed to evaluate the works of the Arab Aristotelian philosophers (*falasifa*). His major target was Avicenna (980-1037), and his major work against the syncretizations of such men was called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

Self-described as a passionate seeker after truth, there is some evidence that Al-Ghazali went through a similar crisis of skepticism as that of Descartes some 550 years later, but he tells us that this only lasted for a few months and that God cured him of it. After this bout, he came to see three options open to him: Ash’arite theology, Aristotelian (Avicennian) philosophy, and Sufi mysticism. His chief area of concern regarding Avicennian philosophy was the defective principles of causality which it drawn from Aristotle – especially causal necessitarianism and the lack of freedom of choice which it implied about God. Al-Ghazali was jealous to preserve God’s freedom to act in any way he wished rather than in

subservience to philosophical ideas about his nature and the demands of reason. To this end, he adopted a form of “occasionalism,” which is the idea that God is the real cause of every event, those things which we tend to think of “causes” being merely conventional or accidental connections.

It is this element in particular of Al-Ghazali’s philosophy, and Averroes’ scathing response to it, which will occupy my next entry.

### **Averroes (1126-1198)**

Also known as Ibn Rushd, Averroes spent his early life studying the religious law of Islam (the *Shar’iah*). His public introduction into the world of philosophy came at the behest of the elderly polymath Ibn Tufayl, who referred his prince to Averroes for a learned exposition of Aristotelian doctrine. If for Medieval Christian Scholastics Aristotle was often known simply as “The Philosopher,” Averroes’ expository and analytical output on practically every aspect of Aristotle’s corpus earned him the nickname “The Commentator.”

Averroes paid extremely close attention to Aristotle’s texts, and oftentimes took exception to the philosophical interpretations of them which had been given by his tenth / eleventh century predecessor Avicenna. Unlike other Muslims more concerned with the primacy of the Koran than philosophy, Averroes believed that Aristotle was nature’s model for final human perfection. In keeping with this, he enthusiastically embraced ideas of Aristotle’s which other pious Muslims rejected with horror – such as the eternality of the world, the non-immortality of the human soul, and God’s ability to know finite particular things.

Averroes was deterministic in his philosophy, and believed that if causal necessity of an Aristotelian type did not obtain, no knowledge of the world could be had and not just the world itself but human society in it would descend into voluntaristic (will-driven) chaos.

The major work of Averroes’ with which my next entry will be concerned is his refutation of Al-Ghazali’s *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which refutation Averroes titled, appropriately enough, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. In the selection from that work on which I will comment, I believe the seeds of what I am with great cautiousness calling “nominalism” and “realism” are clearly present.

## **Al-Ghazali and Averroes: Islamic “Nominalism” vs. Islamic “Realism,” Pt. II**

In the last entry I cautiously described the Medieval Arabic philosophers Al-Ghazali and Averroes as, respectively, an Islamic “nominalist” and an Islamic “realist.” Strictly speaking, I suppose the characteristic of Al-Ghazali with which I am here dealing is actually “voluntarism,” for as my exposition of portions of his text below will show, he was deeply concerned with the freedom of God’s will. Now in scholarly works of philosophy “voluntarism” is often paired with “nominalism,” but to be honest, at this point I’m not entirely sure what the relationship of the two is. At any rate, if I occasionally slip between calling Al-Ghazali’s ideas “voluntarism” and calling them “nominalism,” I beg the reader’s indulgence.

In what follows I will be citing from selections of Averroes’ treatise *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, in which he extensively cites the work he is refuting, Al-Ghazali’s *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.:“(These selections may be found in Richard N. Bosley and Martin Tweedale, eds., *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy: Selected Readings Presenting the Interactive Discourses Among the Major Figures* [Broadview Press, 2006], pp. 22-36.)”: Al-Ghazali, being concerned with God’s freedom against the determinism he saw in Aristotelian philosophy, is cited by Averroes as follows:

According to us the connexion between what is usually believed to be a cause and what is believed to be an effect is not a necessary connexion; each of two things has its own individuality and is not the other, and neither the affirmation nor the negation, neither the existence nor the non-existence of the one is implied in the affirmation, negation, existence, or non-existence of the other, e.g. the satisfaction of thirst does not imply drinking, nor satiety eating, nor burning contact with fire, nor light sunrise, nor decapitation death, nor recovery the drinking of medicine, nor evacuation the taking of a purgative, and so on for all the empirical connexions existing in medicine, astronomy, the sciences, and the crafts. For the connexion of these things is based on a prior power of God to create them in a successive order, though not because this connexion is necessary in itself and cannot be disjoined – on the contrary, it is in God’s power to create satiety without eating, and death without decapitation, and to let life persist notwithstanding the decapitation, and so on with respect to all connexions. The philosophers, however, deny this possibility and claim that it is impossible.”(Ibid., pg. 26.)”:

Al-Ghazali here sounds a lot like the Scottish skeptic David Hume, who, some 600 years later would mount a withering attack on the concept of causality as part of his larger attack on religion. It is interesting, then, that Al-Ghazali sounds this note against causality in the service of religion! Indeed, Al-Ghazali goes on to say that even in the case of fire burning a piece of cotton, the agent of the burning is not the fire, but God, “through His creating the black in the cotton and the disconnexion of its parts.” For it is God “who made the cotton burn and made it ashes either through the intermediation of angels or without intermediation.” Repeated human observations of fire burning cotton “proves only a simultaneity, not a causation, and in reality, there is no other cause but God.””(Ibid., pg. 27.)”:

Of course, Averroes the enthusiastic Aristotelian thinks this is simply ridiculous. He begins his refutation of Al-Ghazali by noting that it is not necessary – and indeed, it is illogical – to deny *all* causal links simply because one does not wish causal links to be reduced merely to those types of efficient causation.”(Efficient causation is one of the four kinds of causes for Aristotle, referring to that which makes a thing happen.)”: which are perceptible to humans:

Those things whose causes are not perceived are still unknown and must be investigated, precisely because their causes are not perceived; and since everything whose causes are not perceived is still unknown by nature and must be investigated, it follows necessarily that what is not unknown has causes which are perceived. The man who reasons like the theologians does not distinguish between what is self-evident and what is unknown, and everything Ghazali says in this passage is sophistical.”(Ibid.)”:

Averroes is not done, though. After a somewhat abstruse recitation of why the denial of causal connections is equivalent to a denial of being, and thus equivalent to an affirmation of nihilism, he says:

Logic implies the existence of causes and effects, and knowledge of these effects can only be rendered perfect through knowledge of their causes. Denial of cause implies the denial of knowledge, and denial of knowledge implies that nothing in this world can be really known, and that what is supposed to be known is nothing but opinion, that neither proof nor definition exist, and that the essential attributes which compose definitions are void. The man who denies the necessity of any item of knowledge must admit that even this, his own affirmation, is not necessary knowledge.”(Ibid., pg. 28.)”:

No doubt in his first phrase, “Logic implies the existence of causes and effects,” Averroes is referring to

the Law of Noncontradiction, which says that a thing cannot be and *not* be at the same time in the same way. If we say that a thing exists, it cannot at the same time in the same way *not* exist. But, as the Aristotelian tradition has long held (see Avicenna on the Muslim side), if a thing exists, it exists either necessarily or contingently – that is, it either exists in such a way that it cannot *not* exist (this is how this tradition of argument, which appears also in Christian apologetics, thinks of God) or it exists because it was caused by another. If it exists necessarily, then it itself is the cause of all contingent existents. If it exists contingently, it is ultimately dependent for its existence on the necessary existent. Thus does logic imply the existence of causes and effects.

The second phrase, “knowledge of these effects can only be rendered perfect through knowledge of their causes,” comes from Book II of Aristotle’s *Physics* (194b18-20), which says that “Knowledge is the object of our inquiry, and men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the ‘why’ of it (which is to grasp its primary cause.”:”(In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon [New York: The Modern Library, 2001], pg. 240.)”: On this definition, obviously, a denial of cause and effect would entail a denial of knowledge, which would further entail that all so-called “knowledge” was really only “opinion.” This is an intolerable position for Averroes, and, he implies, it ought to be intolerable for Al-Ghazali as well.

Al-Ghazali reveals his fundamental concern for the freedom of God by discussing the issue of miracles. For him, Aristotelian determinism destroys the possibility of God performing miracles. For, since for the philosophers “[all] events proceed from [natural] principles not by deliberation and will, but by necessity and nature,” it becomes impossible to imagine that of two pieces of cotton brought into contact with fire God could cause one of them not to burn. Likewise, apparently citing a story from the Koran, Al-Ghazali says that given their principles the philosophers must

deny that Abraham could fall into the fire and not be burned notwithstanding the fact that the fire remained fire, and they affirm that this could only be possible through abstracting the warmth from the fire (through which it would, however, cease to be fire) or through changing the essence of Abraham and making him a stone or something on which fire has no influence, and neither the one nor the other is possible.”(Ibid., pg. 29.)”:

Averroes is ready to meet this objection, and I suspect that his way of stating it is one reason why his later Latin readers got the notion of “double truth” from him:

As to the objection which Ghazali ascribes to the philosophers over the miracle of Abraham, such things are only asserted by heretical Muslims. The learned among the philosophers do not permit disputation about the principles of religion, and he who does such a thing needs, according to them, a severe lesson. For whereas every science has its principles, and every student of this science must concede its principles, and may not interfere with them by denying them, this is still more obligatory in the practical science of religion, for to walk on the path of the religious virtues is necessary for human being’s existence, according to them, not in so far as he is human, but in so far as he has knowledge; and therefore it is necessary for every human to concede the principles of religion and invest with authority the human who lays them down...”(Ibid., pp. 29-30.)”:

Averroes goes on to say that none of the philosophers discuss miracles despite knowing about them, for miracles are the foundational principles of religion, and even if a religious man eventually becomes a philosopher he may say of the religious principles only that “we believe in it, it is all from our Lord.”:”(Ibid., pg. 30.)”:

Above I said that passages such as this might be where certain Latin readers of Averroes got the notion

of “double truth.” This is the notion that a thing which is true in philosophy can be false in religion, and vice versa, so that there is no concord between philosophy and religion. This view was long attributed to Averroes, and gave birth to a school in Western Christendom called “Latin Averroism,” but so far, in my limited readings, I am seeing indications that Averroes himself did not hold to the doctrine of “double truth.” Further discussion of this subject will have to await a future entry, but in any case, as this entry has gone on too long I am going to stop it here. The next, and final entry of this quick set will get more deeply into Al-Ghazali’s “nominalism / voluntarism.”

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## **Al-Ghazali and Averroes: Islamic “Nominalism” vs. Islamic “Realism,” Pt. III**

Returning to his earlier example of there being no necessary causal connection between fire and the burning of a piece of cotton brought into contact with the fire, Al-Ghazali gets to the root of his voluntaristic understanding of God: “If it is established that the Agent creates the burning through His will when the piece of cotton is brought in contact with the fire, He can equally well omit to create it when the contact takes place.” (Richard N. Bosley and Martin Tweedale, eds., *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy: Selected Readings Presenting the Interactive Discourses Among the Major Figures* [Broadview Press, 2006], pg. 30.): He is aware of the “reprehensible impossibilities” which some will charge his view. His examples range from humorous to weird to absurd, and I will quote them at length:

For if you deny the necessary dependence of effects or their causes and relate them to the will of their Creator, and do not allow even in the will a particular definite pattern, but regard it as possible that it may vary and change in type, then it may happen to any of us there should be in his presence beasts of prey and flaming fires and immovable mountains and enemies equipped with arms, without his seeing them, because God had not created in him the faculty of seeing them. And a man who had left a book at home might find it on his return changed into a youth, handsome, intelligent, and efficient, or into an animal; or if he left a youth at home, he might find him turned into a dog; or he might leave ashes and find them changed into musk; or a stone changed into gold, and gold changed into stone. And if he were asked about any of these things, he would answer: “I do not know what there is at present in my house; I only know that I left a book in my house, but perhaps by now it is a horse which has soiled the library with its urine and excrement, and I left in my house a piece of bread which has perhaps changed into an apple-tree.” ...For God can do any possible thing, and this is possible, and one cannot avoid being perplexed by it; and to this kind of fancy one may yield *ad infinitum*, but these examples will do.” (Ibid., pp. 30-31.):

This is basically what Averroes, following Aristotle, had said earlier (see Part II): the denial of causes is equivalent to a denial of knowledge. To deny the necessity of the cause-effect relationship is to deny that any knowledge may be had of the events in the world. It leads, as Al-Ghazali’s own examples show, to an absurd world – a world where all manner of nonsensical events could happen at any second, merely because God *willed* them to happen. But, says Al-Ghazali, the absurd world does *not* result from the denial of causation, for “God has created in us the knowledge that He will not do all these possible things, and we only profess that these things are not necessary, but that they are possible and may or may not happen...” (Ibid., pg. 31.):

Averroes’ counter-argument is that because the theologians say that the possible opposite of any actual

thing is equally possible as the actual thing itself, they affirm of God that “there is no fixed standard for His will either constantly or for most cases, according to which things must happen.” God would, on this account of things, be like a tyrant, “for whom nobody in his dominion can deputize, of whom no standard or custom is known to which reference might be made.” Like a tyrant, God’s actions would be unpredictable and, because his will would swing free of rationality, would be in principle unknowable.”(Ibid.):

Now, this are incredibly fascinating lines of argument to me. They appear also in the Medieval Christian philosophical debates between the broad schools of “nominalism” and “realism.” In some ways, Al-Ghazali sounds not just like Hume, but like Ockham. I don’t know offhand who Averroes sounds like, but one can certainly see in his complaint about the supposed arbitrary, tyrannical God of the non rationally-necessary world the argument of many Catholics against Calvinistic predestination. Al-Ghazali, as a “voluntarist,” would stand in the same broad tradition as later Medieval Christian covenant theologians. Averroes, as a “necessitarian,” would stand in the same broad tradition as the anti-covenant theologians. But, alas, further elaboration of this point is beyond my capacity at this point.