

*Al-Ghazālī*

**The Incoherence  
of the Philosophers**

تهافت الفلاسفة

*A parallel English–Arabic text  
translated, introduced, and annotated by*

**Michael E. Marmura**

©1997, 2000 by Brigham Young University Press. All rights reserved.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

*Ghazzali, 1058–1111.*

[*Tahafut al-falasifah. English*]

*The incoherence of the philosophers = Tahafut al-falasifah:  
a parallel English-Arabic text / translated, introduced, and annotated  
by Michael E. Marmura. — 2nd ed.*

*p. cm.—(Islamic translation series)*

1. *Philosophy—Early works to 1800.* 2. *Methodology—Early works to 1800.*

3. *Faith and reason—Islam—Early works to 1800.* 4. *Islam—Doctrines.*

I. *Marmura, Michael E., 1929–* . II. *Title.* III. *Series.*

B753.G33T3313 2000

297.2'61—dc21

97-21195

CIP

ISBN 0-8425-2466-5

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

3 4 5 6 7 8 9 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

*Second Edition*

## [Nineteenth] Discussion

*On refuting their statement that it is impossible  
for human souls to undergo annihilation  
after [having come] to exist; that they are  
everlasting, their ceasing to exist inconceivable*

(1) A proof for this is hence demanded of them. They have two proofs.

[ (1) ]

(2) One of [these proofs] is their statement that the annihilation [of these souls] must be either [(a)] due to the death of the body, [(b)] due to the occurrence to it of a contrary, or [(c)] through the power of the one endowed with power.

5

(3) It is false [they argue] that [the soul] should cease to exist with the body's death. For the body is not a receptacle for it but is a tool which the soul uses through the mediation of the faculties in the body. The corruption of the tool does not necessitate the corruption of the user of the tool, unless [the latter] inheres in it and is imprinted [therein], as with bestial souls and bodily faculties. Moreover, because the soul has an act without the participation of the tool and an act that participates with it, the act it has with the participation of the tool—[consisting] of imagination, sensation, appetite, and anger—no doubt comes to corruption with the corruption of the body, ceasing as it ceases. Its act by itself [on the other hand] without the participation of the body, consists of apprehending the intelligibles abstracted from material things. In its being a perceiver of the intelligibles, it has no need of the body; on the contrary, its

10

15

preoccupation with the body impedes it from [apprehending] the intelligibles. As long as it has an act independent of the body and an existence independent of the body, it does not need the body for its subsistence.

5 (4) It is [likewise] false to say that it ceases to exist because [of the occurrence] of a contrary, since substances have no contraries. For this reason, nothing in the world is annihilated except accidents and forms that come to exist successively over things. For the watery form is annihilated by its contrary—namely, the airy form—while matter, which is the receptacle, is never annihilated. [In the case of] every substance which is not  
10 in a receptacle, its annihilation through a contrary is inconceivable, since there is no contrary for that which is not in a receptacle. For the contraries are those [things] that succeed one another in one receptacle.

(5) It is [also] false to say that [the soul] is brought into nonexistence by power. For nonexistence is not a thing, such that its occurrence  
15 through power is conceivable. This [it should be added] is the same thing [the philosophers] have mentioned concerning the problem of the world's post-eternity, which we have discussed and settled.<sup>1</sup>

(6) The objection to this [is made] in a number of ways:

20 (7) The first is that [this proof] is built on [the theory] that the soul does not perish with the death of the body because it does not indwell in a body. This is based on [their argument] in the first discussion,<sup>2</sup> but we may not concede the point.

(8) The second is that even if it does not, according to them, indwell  
25 in a body, it nonetheless has a connection with the body whereby it only comes into existence when the body comes into existence. This is what Avicenna and the exacting among [the philosophers] have chosen. They disavowed Plato's statement that the soul is pre-eternal but happens to undergo preoccupation with bodies, [pursuing their refutation] through a demonstrative, ascertained method—namely [as follows]:

30 (9) If the souls preceding the body were one, how did they undergo division, when the division of that which has neither size nor quantity is unintelligible? If it is then claimed that [the soul] did not divide, this would be impossible, since it is known necessarily that the soul of Zayd is other than the soul of 'Amr. If it were one, then the cognitions of Zayd  
35 would be known to 'Amr; for knowledge is one of the essential attributes of the soul, and the essential attributes are included with the essence in every relation. If [on the other hand] the souls are multiple, then by

what means have they been rendered multiple? They have not been rendered multiple through materials, places, or [different] times, nor through attributes, since they possess nothing that necessitates a difference in attribute, unlike the souls after the death of the body, which have been rendered multiple by a difference of attributes (for those who uphold their survival). [These] have acquired from bodies different characteristics, whereby no two souls are similar; for their characteristics result from moral dispositions, and moral dispositions are never at all similar, just as visible characteristics are not the same. Had they been similar, we would confuse Zayd with ʿAmr.<sup>3</sup>

(10) [To proceed, then, with our objection:] In terms of this demonstration,<sup>4</sup> once [the soul's] creation with the creation of the sperm in the womb and the disposition of its bodily composition to receive the governing soul is affirmed, then the specific [attachment of the soul to the body] would only be due to a particular relation between the particular soul and that particular body. [The sperm] receives the soul, not simply because it is soul (for in one and the same womb two sperms may become disposed in the same receptive state [to receive] twins, whereby two souls are attached to them, coming into being from the First Principle, either with or without mediation, where neither would the soul of this [twin] manage the body of that, nor the soul of that twin manage the body of this). This special relation can arise only from a special affinity between a particular soul and a particular body. Otherwise, the body of one of the two twins would have no greater claim than the other for receiving this [particular] soul. For then two souls would have been created simultaneously and two sperms would have become disposed to jointly receive the governing [of two souls]. What, then, is that which specifies [the attachment of one particular soul to a particular body]? If this thing that specifies is the [very] imprinting [of the soul in the body], then it would cease with the ceasing of the [existence] of the body. But if there is another mode in terms of which the relation of this specific soul to this specific body obtains, such that this relation is a condition for the soul's creation, why should it be unlikely for it to be a condition for its durability so that, when the relation ceases, the soul ceases [to exist], never returning thereafter except through its being returned by God, praised and exalted be He, by way of resurrection and revivification as conveyed by the revealed law concerning the hereafter?

(11) [To this the philosophers may] say:

(12) Regarding the relation between soul and body, this only obtains by way of a natural inclination and an innate desire created in it for this body in particular, this desire for it distracting it from any other body and not leaving it for one moment so that it remains, by this innate desire, 5 fettered to the specific body, turned away from [any] other. This does not necessitate [the soul's] corruption with the corruption of the body, which by its innate disposition it desires to manage. Yes, this desire may persist after [the soul's] separation from the body if in this life its preoccupation with the body and its turning away from overcoming the appetites and 10 from seeking the intelligibles had taken full control. [The soul] thus becomes harmed by this desire, with the loss [after separation from the body] of the instrument through which the desire attains its end.<sup>5</sup>

(13) As for assigning the soul of Zayd to the individual Zayd, when first coming into existence, this is inescapably due to a cause and a relation of adaptability between the body and the soul, so that this body, for 15 example, is more suitable for this soul than [another] due to a greater adaptability between them, rendering preponderant the specifying [of this particular body for this particular soul]. It is not within human power to apprehend the specific relations of adaptability. Our lack of 20 knowledge of their details, however, does not make us doubt the basic need for something that specifies; nor does it do damage to our statement that the soul does not cease to exist with the perishing of the body.

(14) [To this] we say:

(15) As long as the relation of adaptability—it being the one that 25 determines specification—is hidden from us, it is not improbable that this unknown relation is of a mode that renders the soul in need of the body for its existence so that, if [the body] is corrupted, [the soul] is corrupted. For with what is unknown, one cannot judge whether or not there is a requirement of concomitance [between this relation and the 30 soul]. For it may well be that this relation is necessary for the existence of the soul so that, if [the relation] ceases to exist, [the soul] ceases to exist. Hence, one cannot rely on the proof they have mentioned.

(16) [Our] third objection is that it is not improbable to say [that] 35 the soul ceases to exist through the power of God, exalted be He, in the manner we established in the discussion of [the theory] of the world's post-eternity.<sup>6</sup>

(17) The fourth objection is to say: “You have stated that the three ways concerning [the impossibility of the soul's] nonexistence [exclude

other alternatives].” This is not admitted. What proof is there that the thing’s nonexistence is conceivable in only one of these three ways? For if the disjunction is not [confined to] revolving between affirming and denying, it is not improbable for it to be in excess of three or four [alternatives]. It may well be that there is a fourth and a fifth way, other than the three [you mentioned], for nonexistence to come about. Restricting the ways in this to three alternatives is not known through demonstration.

[(2)]

(18) A second proof, on which they mainly depend, is that they say:

(19) For any substance that does not exist in a receptacle, nonexistence is impossible. Indeed, the simple elements are never annihilated at all. This proof establishes, to begin with, that the body’s death does not necessitate the soul’s nonexistence, for the reasons given [before]. After [maintaining] this, one will say that it is impossible for it to cease to exist due to [some] other cause.

(20) [This is] because whatever ceases to exist by some cause, whatever the cause, has the potentiality of corruption before [its] corruption. In other words, the possibility of annihilation precedes annihilation, in the same way that, with any event whose existence occurs, the possibility of existence precedes existence. [Now,] the possibility of existence is called the potentiality for existence, and the possibility of nonexistence the potentiality for nonexistence. And just as the possibility of existence is a relational description that must subsist in something so as to be a possibility in relation to it, the same [holds] for the possibility of nonexistence. For this reason, it is said that every temporal event needs a preceding matter wherein lies the possibility for the existence of the event and its potentiality, as has [been argued] in the discussion of the world’s pre-eternity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the matter which has the potentiality for existence is receptive of the occurring existence. The recipient, however, is other than the thing received. The recipient, hence, exists with the thing received when it occurs but is other than it. Similarly, the recipient of nonexistence ought to exist when nonexistence occurs, so that something in it would cease to exist in the same way as something had come to exist in it. That which ceases to exist is other than that which endures. And that which remains is the thing which possesses the potentiality for nonexistence—its reception and possibility—just as that which remains when existence occurs is other than the thing which occurs, [the former] having in it the potentiality for receiving the occurring event.

(21) It follows necessarily that the thing to which nonexistence has occurred is composed of something that has ceased to exist and a recipient of nonexistence which continues to exist [after] the occurrence of nonexistence, it having been the bearer of the potentiality of nonexistence prior to the occurrence of nonexistence. The bearer of the potentiality of [nonexistence] would be like matter, the thing that ceases to exist like form. But the soul is simple, being a form denuded of matter, having no composition. If one supposes it to have a composition of form and matter, we will transfer the explanation to matter, which is the origin and first fundament, since [the explanation] must end up with a first fundament; we will then show that nonexistence is impossible for that fundament which is called soul, just as we will show that nonexistence is impossible for the matter of bodies. For [matter] is pre-eternal and post-eternal. It is only that forms come to exist and cease to exist in it, there being in it the potentiality for the occurrence of forms and the potentiality for the forms to cease to exist. For it is equally receptive of the two contraries. From this it becomes clear that every existent, unitary in essence, cannot be annihilated.

(22) This can be explained in another way: the potentiality for a thing's existence is prior to the thing's existence and thus belongs to something other than that thing, [which,<sup>8</sup> when it comes into existence,] does not itself constitute the potentiality for existence. A demonstration of this is that one says of a person with sound eyesight that he is a seer in potentiality—that is, that he has the potentiality of seeing. This means that the attribute necessary for the proper [function] of seeing to take place exists. If seeing is delayed, this is due to the delay of another condition. Thus, for example, the potentiality to see blackness would exist in the eye before the seeing of blackness in actuality. If the seeing of blackness takes place in actuality, the potentiality for seeing blackness does not exist with the existence of that seeing. For it is impossible to say that, so long as seeing takes place, then, in addition to its being actually existent, it exists in potentiality. Rather, the potentiality of existence never impinges on the reality of the existent that is realized in actuality. If this premise is established, then we say: "If the simple thing were to be annihilated, then the possibility of nonexistence prior to existence

would have occurred to that thing, [this possibility] being what is intended by potentiality. Thus, the possibility of existence would also have been realized." For that whose annihilation is possible is not necessary of existence. It is thus possible of existence. We do not mean by the potentiality of existence other than the possibility of existence. This would thus lead to the combination in one thing of the potentiality for its own existence and the actual realization of its existence. Its existence in actuality would be identical with the potentiality for existence. But we have shown that the potentiality of seeing, which is other than seeing, exists in the eye, not in the seeing, since this would lead to [the conclusion] that the thing is [simultaneously] in potentiality and in action; these being contradictories. Rather, as long as a thing is in potentiality, it is not in action; and, as long as it is in action, it is not in potentiality. To affirm the potentiality of nonexistence for what is simple prior to nonexistence is to affirm the potentiality of existence in the state of existence, which is impossible.

(23) [We answer:] This is the very thing which we have established as [their argument] in their pursuit [to prove] the impossibility of the temporal origination of matter and the elements and the impossibility of their annihilation, [when we discussed] the problem of the pre-eternity and post-eternity of the world. The source of the obfuscation is their positing possibility as a characteristic requiring a receptacle in which to subsist. We have said what is convincing about this, and we will not repeat ourselves. For it is one and the same problem. There is, thus, no difference between the thing discussed being a material substance or a psychological substance.