

Al-Ghazālī

**The Incoherence
of the Philosophers**

تهافت الفلاسفة

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

Michael E. Marmura

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In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

[The Religious Preface]

(1) We ask God in His majesty that transcends all bounds and His munificence that goes beyond all ends to shed upon us the lights of His guidance and to snatch away from us the darkness of waywardness and error; to make us among those who saw the truth as truth, preferring to
5 pursue and follow its paths, and who saw the false as false, choosing to avoid and shun it; to bring us to the felicity He promised His prophets and saints; to make us attain that rapture and gladness, favored bliss and joy (once we depart from this abode of delusion) from whose heights the greatest ascents of the understanding stand low and from whose dis-
10 tanced stretches the utmost reaches of the arrows of the imagination waste away; to grant us, after arriving at the bliss of paradise and emerging from the terror of the judgment day, "that which neither eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor occurred to the heart of men," and that He may bestow His prayers and His assured peace upon our prophet, the chosen,
15 Muḥammad, the best of men, and upon his virtuous family and his companions pure, keys of guidance and lanterns in the dark.

(2) I have seen a group who, believing themselves in possession of a distinctiveness from companion and peer by virtue of a superior quick
20 wit and intelligence, have rejected the Islamic duties regarding acts of worship, disdained religious rites pertaining to the offices of prayer and the avoidance of prohibited things, belittled the devotions and ordinances prescribed by the divine law, not halting in the face of its

prohibitions and restrictions. On the contrary, they have entirely cast off the reins of religion through multifarious beliefs, following therein a troop “who repel away from God’s way, intending to make it crooked, who are indeed disbelievers in the hereafter” [Qur’ān 11:19].

5 (3) There is no basis for their unbelief other than traditional, conventional imitation, like the imitation of Jews and Christians, since their upbringing and that of their offspring has followed a course other than the religion of Islam, their fathers and forefathers having [also] followed [conventional imitation], and no [basis] other than speculative investigation, an outcome of their stumbling over the tails of sophistical doubts that divert from the direction of truth, and their being deceived by
10 embellished imaginings akin to the glitter of the mirage, as has happened to groups of speculative thinkers, followers of heretical innovation and whim, in [their] investigation of beliefs and opinions.

15 (4) The source of their unbelief is in their hearing high-sounding names such as “Socrates,” “Hippocrates,” “Plato,” “Aristotle,” and their likes and the exaggeration and misguidedness of groups of their followers in describing their minds; the excellence of their principles; the exactitude of their geometrical, logical, natural, and metaphysical sciences—and
20 in [describing these as] being alone (by reason of excessive intelligence and acumen) [capable] of extracting these hidden things. [It is also in hearing] what [these followers] say about [their masters—namely,] that concurrent with the sobriety of their intellect and the abundance of their merit is their denial of revealed laws and religious confessions and their
25 rejection of the details of religious and sectarian [teaching], believing them to be man-made laws and embellished tricks.

(5) When this struck their hearing, that which was reported of [the philosophers’] beliefs finding agreement with their nature, they adorned themselves with the embracing of unbelief—siding with the throng of
30 the virtuous, as they claim; affiliating with them; exalting themselves above aiding the masses and the commonality; and disdaining to be content with the religious beliefs of their forebears. [They have done this,] thinking that the show of cleverness in abandoning the [traditional] imitation of what is true by embarking on the imitation of the false is a
35 beauteous thing, being unaware that moving from one [mode of] imitation to another is folly and confusedness.

(6) What rank in God’s world is there that is lower than the rank of one who adorns himself with the abandonment of the truth that is
40 traditionally believed by the hasty embracing of the false as true, accepting it without [reliable] report and verification? The imbeciles among the

masses stand detached from the infamy of this abyss; for there is no craving in their nature to become clever by emulating those who follow the ways of error. Imbecility is thus nearer salvation than acumen severed [from religious belief]; blindness is closer to wholeness than cross-eyed sight.

5 (7) When I perceived this vein of folly throbbing within these dim-wits, I took it upon myself to write this book in refutation of the ancient philosophers, to show the incoherence of their belief and the contradiction of their word in matters relating to metaphysics; to uncover the dangers of their doctrine and its shortcomings, which in truth ascertainable
10 are objects of laughter for the rational and a lesson for the intelligent—I mean the kinds of diverse beliefs and opinions they particularly hold that set them aside from the populace and the common run of men. [I will do this,] relating at the same time their doctrine as it actually is, so as to make it clear to those who embrace unbelief through imitation that all
15 significant thinkers, past and present, agree in believing in God and the last day; that their differences reduce to matters of detail extraneous to those two pivotal points (for the sake of which the prophets, supported by miracles, have been sent); that no one has denied these two [beliefs] other than a remnant of perverse minds who hold lopsided opinions, who
20 are neither noticed nor taken into account in the deliberations of the speculative thinkers, [but who are instead] counted only among the company of evil devils and in the throng of the dim-witted and inexperienced. [I will do this] so that whoever believes that adorning oneself with imitated unbelief shows good judgment and induces awareness of one's
25 quick wit and intelligence would desist from his extravagance, as it will become verified for him that those prominent and leading philosophers he emulates are innocent of the imputation that they deny the religious laws; that [on the contrary] they believe in God and His messengers; but that they have fallen into confusion in certain details beyond these principles, erring in this, straying from the correct path, and leading others
30 astray. We will reveal the kinds of imaginings and vanities in which they have been deceived, showing all this to be unproductive extravagance. God, may He be exalted, is the patron of success in the endeavor to show what we intend to verify.

(8) Let us now begin the book with **introductions that express the** pattern of discourse followed [therein].

[A first] introduction

5 (9) Let it be known that to plunge into narrating the differences among the philosophers would involve too long a tale. For their floundering about is lengthy, their disputes many, their views spread far apart, their ways divergent and convergent. Let us, then, restrict ourselves to showing the contradictions in the views of their leader, who is the philosopher par excellence and “the first teacher.” For he has, as they claim, organized and refined their sciences, removed the redundant in
10 their views, and selected what is closest to the principles of their capricious beliefs—namely, Aristotle. He has answered all his predecessors—even his teacher, known among them as “the divine Plato,” apologizing for disagreeing with his teacher by saying: “Plato is a friend and truth is a friend, but truth is a truer friend.”

15 (10) We have transmitted this story to let it be known that there is neither firm foundation nor perfection in the doctrine they hold; that they judge in terms of supposition and surmise, without verification or certainty; that they use the appearance of their mathematical and logical sciences as evidential proof for the truth of their metaphysical
20 sciences, using [this] as a gradual enticement for the weak in mind. Had their metaphysical sciences been as perfect in demonstration, free from conjecture, as their mathematical, they would not have disagreed among themselves regarding [the former], just as they have not disagreed in their mathematical sciences.

25 (11) Moreover, the words of the translators of the words of Aristotle are not free from corruption and change, requiring exegesis and interpretation, so that this also has aroused conflict among them. The most reliable transmitters and verifiers among the philosophers in Islam are al-Fārābī Abū Naṣr and Ibn Sinā. Let us, then, confine ourselves to
30 refuting what these two have selected and deemed true of the doctrines

of their leaders in error. For that which they have abandoned and scorned to pursue no one contests is error and needs no lengthy examination to refute. Let it, then, be known that we are confining ourselves to the [philosophers'] doctrines according to the transmission of these two men so that the discussion would not spread [far and wide] with the spread of doctrines.

[A second] introduction

(12) Let it be known, then, that the dispute between [the philosophers] and others of the sects has three parts.

(13) There is a part in which the dispute reduces to the purely verbal, as, for example, their naming the world's Creator—exalted be He above what they say—a substance, with their explanation of substance as that which does not exist in a subject—that is, [as] the self-subsisting that does not need that which substantiates it. They did not intend by substance, as their opponents intend, that which occupies space.

(14) We will not plunge into a refutation of this because, once the meaning of self-subsistence becomes agreed upon, then the discussion regarding the use of the term "substance" to express this meaning becomes a lexical investigation. If language sanctions its use, then the permissibility of its use in religion reverts to investigations within the religious law. For the prohibiting and permitting of terms derives from what the outer meaning of the religious texts indicates. Now, you may say that this [type of] naming has been mentioned by the theologians in relation to the [divine] attributes but was not introduced by the lawyers in the discipline of the religious law. You must not, however, allow the true nature of things to become confused for you because of customs and formalities. For you now know that it is an investigation about the permissibility of uttering an expression whose meaning is true of the thing named. It is thus similar to investigating the permissibility of a certain act[—hence, within the province of the religious law].

(15) The second part is one where their doctrine does not clash with any religious principle and where it is not a necessity of the belief in the prophets and [God's] messengers, God's prayers be upon them, to dispute with them about it. An example of this is their statement:

“The lunar eclipse consists in the obliteration of the moon’s light due to the interposition of the earth between it and the sun, the earth being a sphere surrounded by the sky on all sides. Thus, when the moon falls in the earth’s shadow, the sun’s light is severed from it.” Another example
 5 is their statement: “The solar eclipse means the presence of the lunar orb between the observer and the sun. This occurs when the sun and the moon are both at the two nodes at one degree.”

(16) This topic is also one into the refutation of which we shall not plunge, since this serves no purpose. Whoever thinks that to engage in a
 10 disputation for refuting such a theory is a religious duty harms religion and weakens it. For these matters rest on demonstrations—geometrical and arithmetical—that leave no room for doubt. Thus, when one who studies these demonstrations and ascertains their proofs, deriving
 15 thereby information about the time of the two eclipses [and] their extent and duration, is told that this is contrary to religion, [such an individual] will not suspect this [science, but] only religion. The harm inflicted on religion by those who defend it in a way not proper to it is greater than [the harm caused by] those who attack it in the way proper to it. As it has been said: “A rational foe is better than an ignorant friend.”

(17) If it is said that God’s messenger—God’s prayers and peace be upon him—said, “The sun and moon are two of God’s signs that are eclipsed neither for the death nor the life of anyone; should you witness
 20 such [events], then hasten to the remembrance of God and prayer,” how, then, does this agree with what [the philosophers] state? We say:

(18) There is nothing in this that contradicts what they have stated, since there is nothing in it except the denial of the occurrence of the eclipse for the death or life of anyone and the command to pray when it occurs. Why should it be so remote for the religious law that commands
 25 prayer at noon and sunset to command as recommendable prayer at the occurrence of an eclipse? If it is said that at the end of [this] tradition [the prophet] said, “But, if God reveals Himself to a thing, it submits itself to Him,” thereby proving that the eclipse is submission by reason of revelation, we answer:

(19) This addition is not soundly transmitted and, hence, the one who transmits it must be judged as conveying what is false. The [correctly] related [tradition] is the one we have mentioned. How is this not so? For if the transmission [of the addition] were sound, then it would be easier to interpret it metaphorically rather than to reject matters that are conclusively true. For how many an apparent [scriptural] meaning has been interpreted metaphorically [on the basis of] rational proofs [rejecting their literal sense] that do not attain the degree of clarity [of the astronomical demonstrations regarding the eclipse]! The greatest thing in which the atheists rejoice is for the defender of religion to declare that these [astronomical demonstrations] and their like are contrary to religion. Thus, the [atheist's] path for refuting religion becomes easy if the likes [of the above argument for defending religion] are rendered a condition [for its truth].

(20) This is because the inquiry [at issue] about the world is whether it originated in time or is eternal. Moreover, once its temporal origination is established, it makes no difference whether it is a sphere, a simple body, an octagon, or a hexagon; [it makes] no difference whether the [highest] heavens and what is beneath are thirteen layers, as they say, or lesser or greater. For the relation of the inquiry into [these matters] to the inquiry into divine [matters] is similar to the relation of looking at the number of layers of an onion [or] the number of seeds in a pomegranate. What is intended here is only [the world's] being God's act, whatever mode it has.

(21) The third part is one where the dispute pertains to one of the principles of religion, such as upholding the doctrine of the world's origination and of the [positive] attributes of the Creator, [or] demonstrating the resurrection of bodies, all of which [the philosophers] have denied. It is in this topic and its likes, not any other, that one must show the falsity of their doctrine.

[A third] introduction

(22) Let it be known that [our] objective is to alert those who think well of the philosophers and believe that their ways are free from contradiction by showing the [various] aspects of their incoherence. For this reason, I do not enter into [argument] objecting to them, except as one who demands and denies, not as one who claims [and] affirms. I will render murky what they believe in [by showing] conclusively that they must hold to various consequences [of their theories]. Thus, I will force on them at one time necessary adherence to Mu^otazilite doctrine, at

another to that of the Karrāmiyya, at yet another to that of the Wāqifiyya.² I, however, will not rise to the defense of any one doctrine but will make all the sects as one group against them. For the rest of the sects may differ from us in matters of detail, whereas these [philosophers] challenge the [very] principles of religion. Let us [all], then, strive against them. For in the face of hardships rancors depart.

[A fourth] introduction

(23) One of the tricks these [philosophers] use in enticing [people] when confronted with a difficulty in the course of an argument is to say: "These metaphysical sciences are obscure and hidden, being the most difficult of the sciences for intelligent minds. One can only arrive at knowing the answer to these difficulties through the introduction of mathematics and logic." Thus, whoever imitates them in their unbelief when confronted with a difficulty in their doctrine would think well of them and say: "No doubt their sciences include a resolution of [this difficulty]; but it is difficult for me to apprehend it, since I have neither mastered logic nor attained mathematics."

(24) We say: "As regards [the branch of] mathematics which consists of the examination of discrete quantity—namely, arithmetic—metaphysics has no relation to it. The statement that the understanding of metaphysics is in need of it is nonsense." It is as if one were to say that medicine, grammar, and philology require it, or that arithmetic is in need of medicine. As regards the geometrical sciences that consist in the investigation of continuous quantity, [the investigation] in sum amounts to showing that the [highest] heavens and what is below them to the center are spherical in shape, to showing the number of their layers, to showing the number of the spheres that move in the heavens, and to showing the quantity of their [various] motions. Let us concede all this to them, either dialectically or out of conviction.³ They do not need to set up demonstrations for it. This has no bearing whatever on metaphysical investigation. For this is as if someone were to say that the knowledge that this house came to be through the work of a knowing, willing,

5 living builder, endowed with power, requires that one knows that the house is either a hexagon or an octagon and that one knows the number of its supporting frames and the number of its bricks, which is raving, its falsity obvious; or that one does not know that this onion is temporally originated unless he knows the number of its layers and does not know that this pomegranate is temporally originated unless one knows the number of its seeds—[all] of which is abandonment of [rational] discourse, discredited by every rational person.

10 (25) Yes, when they say that the logical sciences must be mastered, this is true. But logic is not confined to them. This is the principle which in the discipline of theology we name "The Book of Reflection." They changed its expression to "logic" to magnify it. We can [also] call it "The Book of Argumentation," and we may call it "The Cognitions of the Intellects." But when the one seeking to be clever, who is weak, hears the name "logic," he thinks it an unfamiliar art, unknown to the theologians, known only to the philosophers.

20 (26) In order to drive away this nonsense and uproot this ruse for leading astray, we see [it fit] to set aside discussing "The Cognitions of the Intellects" in this book, forsaking in it the terminology of the theologians and lawyers, but will express it in the idiom of the logicians, casting it in their molds, following their paths expression by expression, and will dispute with them in this book in their language—I mean, their expressions in logic. We will make it plain that what they set down as a condition for the truth of the matter of the syllogism in the part on demonstrating [their] logic, and what they set forth as a condition for its form in the book of the syllogism, and the various things they posited in the *Isagoge* and the *Categories* which are parts of logic and its preliminaries, [are things] none of which have they been able to fulfill in their metaphysical sciences.

30 (27) We judge it best, however, to introduce "The Cognitions of the Intellects" at the end of the book. For it is like an instrument for apprehending the intention of the book. But perhaps some who engage in theoretical reflection may not need it for comprehending [the book]. Hence, we will postpone it to the end so that those who do not need it can set it aside. Whoever is unable to understand our expressions in
35 the individual questions in refuting [the philosophers] should begin by

mastering the book, *The Standard for Knowledge*,⁴ which is designated "logic" by them.

(28) Let us now, after [these] introductions, mention the table of contents of the problems wherein we show the inconsistency of their doctrine in this book. They are twenty problems.

[Author's table of contents]

- | | | |
|----|--------------------|--|
| | The first problem: | [On] refuting their doctrine of the world's pre-
eternity. |
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| 10 | The third: | [On] showing their equivocation in saying that
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| | The fourth: | On [showing] their inability to prove the exis-
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| 15 | The fifth: | On [showing] their inability to prove the impos-
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| | The sixth: | On refuting their doctrine denying [the divine]
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| 20 | The seventh: | On refuting their statement that the essence of
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| | The eighth: | On refuting their statement that the First is a
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| 30 | The eleventh: | On showing their inability to maintain that the
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| | The thirteenth: | On refuting their statement that the First does
not know particulars. |

- The fourteenth: On [refuting their doctrine] that heaven is an animal that moves through volition.
- The fifteenth: On refuting what they mention regarding the purpose that moves heaven.
- 5 The sixteenth: On refuting their doctrine that the souls of the heavens know all particulars.
- The seventeenth: On refuting their doctrine that the disruption of the habitual [course of nature] is impossible.
- The eighteenth: On [refuting] their statement that the human soul is a self-subsistent substance that is neither body nor accident.
- 10 The nineteenth: On [refuting] their assertion that annihilation is impossible for the human soul.
- The twentieth: On refuting their denial of bodily resurrection [and] the accompanying bodily pleasures and pains in paradise and hell.
- 15

(29) These, then, among their metaphysical and physical sciences, are the things in which we wish to mention their contradictions. Regarding mathematical sciences, there is no sense in denying them or disagreeing with them. For these reduce in the final analysis to arithmetic and geometry. As regards the logical [sciences], these are concerned with examining the instrument of thought in intelligible things. There is no significant disagreement encountered in these. We will bring about in the book *The Standard for Knowledge* of its kind⁵ what is needed for understanding the content of this book, God willing.

20

25

The Book's Conclusion

(1) If someone says: "You have explained the doctrines of these [philosophers]; do you then say conclusively that they are infidels and that the killing of those who uphold their beliefs is obligatory?" we say:

5 (2) Pronouncing them infidels is necessary in three questions. One of them is the question of the world's pre-eternity and their statement that all substances are pre-eternal. The second is their statement that God's knowledge does not encompass the temporal particulars among individual [existents]. The third is their denial of the resurrection of bodies and their assembly at the day of judgment.

10 (3) These three doctrines do not agree with Islam in any respect. The one who believes them believes that prophets utter falsehoods and that they said whatever they have said by way of [promoting common] utility, to give examples and explanation to the multitudes of created mankind. This is manifest infidelity which none of the Islamic sects have believed.

15 (4) As regards questions other than these three, such as their treatment of the divine attributes and their belief in divine unity entailed therein, their doctrine is close to that of the Mu^ʿtazila. Their doctrine of the necessary [connection] of natural causes [and their effects] is the one which the Mu^ʿtazila have explicitly expressed in [their doctrine of] generation.
20 Similarly, all of what we have reported [of their doctrines] has been held by one or another of the Islamic sects, with the exception of these three principles. Whoever perceives the heretical innovators among the Islamic

sects to be infidels will pronounce [the philosophers] also to be infidels [for the views they share]. And whoever hesitates in pronouncing [such Islamic sectarian innovators] as infidels will confine himself to pronouncing [the philosophers] infidels on these [three] questions [alone].

5 We, however, prefer not to plunge into [the questions] of pronouncing those who uphold heretical innovation to be infidels¹ and of which pronouncement is valid and which is not, lest the discourse should stray from the objective of this book. God, exalted be He, is the One who leads one successfully to what is correct.

