

Al-Ghazālī

**The Incoherence
of the Philosophers**

تهافت الفلاسفة

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

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On refuting their statement that the souls of the heavens know all the particulars that occur in this world; that what is meant by “the preserved tablet” [Qur’ān 85:22] is the souls of the heavens; that the impression of the world’s particulars in them is similar to the impressions of the retained [images] in the retentive faculty entrusted in the human brain, not that the [preserved tablet] is a solid wide body on which things are inscribed in the way boys write on a slate, since the abundance of this writing requires a widening of the thing written on and, if the thing written is infinite, the thing written on would have to be infinite—but an infinite body is inconceivable, and it is impossible to have infinite lines on a body, and it is impossible to make known infinite things with limited lines

(1) They claim that the heavenly angels are the celestial souls and that the cherubim that are drawn close [to God] are the pure intelligences that are self-subsisting substances that do not occupy space and do not administer bodies; that these particular forms emanate from [the celestial intelligences] onto the celestial souls; that [pure intelligences] are nobler than heavenly angels because they are bestowers, whereas [the latter] are bestowed upon, the bestower being nobler than the bestowed upon. For

this reason the nobler has been expressed [by the term] “the pen,” so that God has said, “He taught by the pen” [Qur’ân 96:44], because it is like the one who etches, who bestows [knowledge] as the teacher [bestows it], and He likened the bestowed upon to the tablet. This is their doctrine.

5 (2) The dispute in this question differs from the one which preceded it. For what they had stated earlier is not impossible, since at most [it says] that heaven is an animal that moves for a purpose—and this is possible. But this [question, in the final analysis,] ends up in affirming a creature’s
10 impossibility one may well believe. We thus ask them for proof of it. [As it stands,] it is in itself sheer arbitrary [assertion].

(3) For proof of this they say:

(4) It has been established that the circular motion is voluntary, the will following the thing willed.¹ To the thing willed that is a universal,
15 only a universal will is directed. Nothing, however, proceeds from the universal will. For every existent that is actual is [something] determinate, a particular. The relation of the universal will to [each] one of the particulars is of one [uniform] pattern. Hence, nothing particular proceeds from it. Rather, there must be for the designated motion a particular will. For
20 in the heavenly sphere, for every designated particular movement from one point to another, there is a particular will for that motion. It thus necessarily has a representation² of particular motions by a bodily faculty, since particulars are apprehended only by bodily faculties. For it is a necessity [inherent] in every will that it [undergo] a representational
25 apprehension³ of that thing which is willed; that is, [it has] knowledge of it, regardless of whether [the thing willed] is particular or universal. And as long as the celestial sphere has a representation of the particular motions and knowledge of them, it must comprehend what necessarily follows from them by way of differing relations to the earth, in having
30 some parts [of the heavens] rising, some waning, some being at the center of the sky of some folk and [conversely] beneath the feet of [another] folk. Likewise, it knows what necessarily follows by way of the different relations that are renewed through motion, such as being threefold and

sixfold, [or being] in opposition, conjunction, and so on to the rest of the celestial events. All of the terrestrial events depend on the celestial events, either without an intermediary, through one intermediary, or through many intermediaries.

5 (5) In brief, every event has a temporal cause, until the chain of causes terminates with the eternal celestial motion, where each part is a cause for another. Hence, the causes and effects in their chain terminate with the particular celestial motions. Thus, that which has a representation of the movements has a representation of their consequences and
 10 the consequences of their consequences, to the end of the chain. In this way, what will happen is known. For [in the case of] everything that will happen, its occurrence is a necessary consequence of its cause, once the cause is realized. We do not know what will happen in the future only because we do not know all the causes [of the future effects]. If we were
 15 to know all the causes, we would know all the effects. For once we know, for example, that fire will contact cotton at a specific time, we would know the burning of the cotton. And once we know that an individual will eat, we would know that he will be satiated. And if we know that a person will step across such and such a place in which is a treasure covered by some
 20 light thing such that if a pedestrian walks over it his foot would stumble over the treasure and would recognize it, we would then know that he will become rich by finding the treasure. But we do not know these causes. Sometimes we may know some of them, whereby we would have an intuition of the occurrence of the effect. If we know the more frequent and the greater number of [the causes], we would acquire a clear, [well-
 25 founded] opinion [regarding the effects'] occurrence.⁴ If knowledge of all the causes were to occur to us, knowledge of all the effects would occur to us. But the celestial [events] are numerous. Moreover, they have an admixture with terrestrial events. It is not within human power to know
 30 them, whereas the celestial souls know them because they know the First Cause, the consequences [of their own occurrences], and the consequences of their consequences, to the end of the chain.

35 (6) For this reason they claimed that the sleeper sees in his sleep what will happen in the future—this [taking place] through his contact with “the preserved tablet” and viewing it. Whenever he sees something, that very thing may remain in his memory. Sometimes, however, the

imaginative faculty may hasten to imitate it. For by its innate nature, [its function is the] imitating of things through examples that have some correspondence to them or else the transferring of them to their opposite, whereby the truly apprehended thing is erased from the memory, the imaged example [alone] remaining in the memory. Hence, there is a need for interpreting what the imagination symbolizes; for example, a man may be exemplified by trees, a wife by a shoe, a servant by some of the household utensils, the trustee of pious property and alms by the oil of seeds—for the seeds constitute a cause for the lamp, which is the cause of illumination. The science of [dream] interpretation branches out from this principle. They [also] claimed that the contact with these [celestial] souls is openly given, since [at the time of sleep] there is no veil, but that in our waking hours we are preoccupied with what the senses and the appetites bring to us. Thus, our preoccupation with these sensory matters diverts us from [this contact]. When, during sleep, some of the preoccupation with the senses falls off, then there comes about with it some disposition toward the contact.⁵

(7) [In addition,] they claimed that the prophet has knowledge of the unknown also in this way, except that the prophetic psychological faculty can attain such strength that the external senses do not submerge it. No wonder, then, that he perceives while awake what others see in sleep. The imaginative faculty, moreover, makes for him representations of what he sees. Sometimes the very thing remains in his memory, sometimes [only] its symbol, whereby this inspiration requires [metaphorical] interpretation, just as that which resembles it in sleep requires [dream] interpretation. If it were not the case that all beings firmly exist in “the preserved tablet,” the prophets would not know the unseen, either in wakefulness or in sleep. But the pen runs dry in recording all of what would be until the date of the resurrection. The meaning of this is what we have stated.

(8) This, then, is what we wanted to convey in explaining [the philosophers’] doctrine.

(9) The answer is to say:

(10) With what [argument] would you deny someone who says that the prophet knows the hidden through God’s apprising him of it by way of [direct] initiation? The same applies to someone who has a vision in his

sleep who only knows [the hidden] through his being apprised [of it] by God or one of the angels. There is no need for any of the things you [philosophers] have mentioned, for there is no proof in this. Nor do you have a proof [for your interpretation] of what the religious law conveyed regarding “the tablet” and “the pen.” For the people versed in the law do not understand by “the tablet” and “the pen” the meaning [you have given to these terms] at all. Consequently, there is nothing for you to cling to [for your interpretation] in the religious law. [The only thing that] remains [for you] to cling to is the ways of reason. But the existence of what you have mentioned—even if one acknowledges its possibility (as long as this [acknowledgment] is not conditional on the denial of the finitude of these objects of knowledge)—is not known and its being is not ascertained. The only way [for this] to be known would be from the religious law, not through reason.

(11) Regarding what you have first mentioned by way of rational proof, this is built on many premises, for which [reason] we will not prolong matters [by] refuting [all of them]. We will confine ourselves to disputing three premises of these.

(12) The first premise is your statement that the heavenly movement is voluntary. But we have [already] finished with this question and [with] refuting the claim you made for it.

(13) The second is that even if, for the sake of being tolerant, one concedes this [view of the voluntary movement of the heavens], your statement that [the heavens] need a particular representation of the particular motions is [a premise that is] not conceded. Rather, according to you, [the spherical] body does not have a part, since it is one thing and is only rendered divisible within the faculty of estimation—nor does [the circular] motion, for it is one in being continuous. Hence, the desire [of the celestial soul]⁶ suffices to [make the celestial body] complete, [traversing all] the places that are possible for it, as [the philosophers] have mentioned. Universal representation and a universal will are sufficient for [the continuous circular motion of the heavens].

(14) Let us, then, represent the universal and the particular will by an example to explain [the philosophers’] intention. If a human, for example, has a universal purpose to make a pilgrimage to the house of God, from this universal will no motion will proceed. This is because motion occurs as [something] particular in a determined direction, having a determined quantity. Indeed, there continues to be renewed for man in his traveling to the house [of God] one [mental] representation after another for the place he will pass and the direction he will take, each

particular representation being followed by a particular will to move from the place [already] reached through [a previous] motion. This is what they meant by the particular will that follows the particular representation.

5 (15) One concedes this because the directions in going to Mecca are many, the distance not determined. Thus, [each act of] determining one place after another and one direction after another requires another [renewed] particular will. But in the case of the heavenly movement, it has only one direction. For the sphere revolves around itself and in its space, not going beyond it, and the movement is willed. There is, more-
10 over, nothing but one movement, one body, and one direction. This is similar to the fall of the stone downward. For it seeks the earth in the shortest way, the shortest way being the straight line. The straight line is determined, and it has no inherent need for the renewal of a temporal cause other than the universal nature that seeks the center, together
15 with the renewal of proximity and remoteness, arriving at a limit and proceeding from it. Similarly, in this [heavenly] motion the universal will is sufficient for the motion and does not need anything more. Hence, this is a premise⁷ which [the philosophers] posited arbitrarily.

20 (16) The third premise—which is arbitrary in the extreme—is their statement that, if [the celestial sphere] forms representations of the particular motions, it also forms representations of their attendants and necessary consequences. This is pure insanity, as when one says, “If a human moves and knows his movement, he must know what follows necessarily from his movement in terms of being parallel and not parallel,
25 these being his relation to the bodies that are above him, below him, and to his sides; that if he walks in the sun he ought to know the places on which his shadow falls and those where it does not fall and what occurs as a result of his shadow by way of coolness through the obstructing of the sun’s rays in these places; [that he must know] what occurs by way
30 of pressure on the parts of the earth under his foot and what happens in terms of separation in them; [that he must know] what happens to his humors internally in terms of change toward heat due to [his] motion, and what of his parts changes into sweat, and so on to all the happenings in his body, and in other than it, for which [his] movement constitutes a
35 cause, a condition, a preparation, a disposition.” This is insanity which no rational being can imagine, [but] only the ignorant being deceived by it. It is to this that [their] arbitrary assertion reduces.

(17) But we further say, "Do these discrete particulars known to the soul of the heavenly sphere exist at the present, or does one add to them that which one expects to be in the future?" If you restrict them to the present, then [the heavens'] knowledge of the hidden ceases, and its mediated knowledge of the future [possessed by] the prophets while awake and by the rest of men while asleep [would also cease]. Moreover, what the proof leads to no longer holds. For it is arbitrary [to maintain] that, when one knows a thing, one knows its consequences and attendants, so that if we knew the causes of all things we would know all future events. [Now,] the causes of all events exist now. For they consist of the heavenly movement—which, however, requires [as its consequence] the effect through either an intermediary or many intermediaries. But if this goes beyond to the future, it would have no ending. How, then, are the infinite details of the particulars in the future known, and how would there combine in the soul of one created being at one time, without succession, detailed particular cognitions whose number is infinite and whose units have no end?⁸ Let anyone whose intellect does not testify to the impossibility of this despair of his intellect. Should they turn this against us as regards God's knowledge, [we would point out] that the attachment of God's knowledge to His objects of knowledge through correspondence is not in the same manner as the attachment of the cognitions belonging to creatures. But as long as the soul of the heavens plays the same role⁹ as the human soul, it is of the same kind as the human soul. For it shares with it apprehending particulars through a mediator. For if it does not affiliate with it in a definitive way, it is probable that it is of its kind. But even if it is not probable, it is possible. And [this] possibility refutes their claim of conclusiveness in what [they argued] as being conclusive.

(18) [It may be said]:

(19) It rightly belongs to the human soul in its [very] essence also to apprehend all things.¹⁰ But its preoccupation is with the consequences of appetite, anger, covetousness, rancor, envy, hunger, pain, and, in general, the things to which the body is prone and what the senses bring to it, so that when the soul attends to one thing, [this thing] diverts it from some

other. The celestial souls, on the other hand, are free from these attributes; no distraction afflicts them, and no worry, pain, or feeling preoccupies them. Hence, they know all things.

(20) We say:

- 5 (21) How do you know that they have nothing which preoccupies them? Are not their worship of the First and their longing [for Him things] that absorb them and distract them from apprehending discrete particulars? Or, what makes it impossible to suppose [the existence of] an impediment other than anger, appetite, and [such] sensory impediments?
- 10 How does one know that the impediments are restricted to the number we have witnessed in ourselves? [Now,] for rationally mature humans there are preoccupations such as high purpose and the quest for leadership which children cannot imagine and which [such adults] do not believe constitute preoccupation and impediment. How does one know
- 15 the impossibility of [the existence of] things that play a similar role among the celestial souls?

(22) This is what we have wanted to mention concerning the sciences to which [the philosophers] have given the name “metaphysical.”