AN INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

OLIVER LEAMAN

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

How did God create the world?

Religious texts which are designed to serve as the very basis of faith rarely incorporate philosophically or scientifically exact statements concerning the creation of the world, and Islam is no exception here. The Qur'ān makes several quite definite claims about the nature of the creator of the world and of the manner of its creation, yet these statements do not point unambiguously in just one direction. In the Qur'ānic description of God there is no doubt according to the Ash'arites that he is represented as superior to all his creatures, that he is the only God and that there is nothing in the universe upon which he is dependent. He is self-sufficient and has no need of human beings; he could do away with us and replace the world with something else without as a result ceasing to be himself. He need not have created the world, and now that it is created he could ignore it if he wanted to. We are told that God did create the world, that he is the origin of the heavens and the earth, that he created night and day, the sun, the moon and all the planets. He brings about the spring which reawakens nature and gives to gardens their beauty. Fortunately, for human beings, God designed nature and all his creation for our benefit, although he need not have done so, and all he 'requires' in return is prayer and adoration. Many theologians would want to add to these claims the clear assertion which they find in Islam that there was a time when God was and the world was not, and a later time when God was and the world was too. This rather unexciting view was the cause of great controversy between philosophers and theologians, and also within those groups themselves.

Let us first look briefly at how some of the problems concerning the nature of creation arose. We are told, for instance, that creation took six days. We might want to know whether anything existed before the world was created and out of which it was created. We might wonder whether time started with the first of those six days or whether it already existed before God created the world. If one looks carefully at the Qur'ānic text

itself there seems to be no definite answer to these sorts of problems. The language which is used there is not precise enough to come down on one side or another with any certainty when discussing creation. There are interpretations which suggest that God created the world in a free manner out of nothing. One of the Arabic terms frequently used for creation, *khāliq*, means 'to bring about' or 'to produce', and there are examples of its being used in a specifically divine sense to describe how God creates both the form *and* the matter of existence. In the orthodox Ash'arite commentary of al-Rāzī, for instance, for us even to talk about determining (*taqdīr*) or creating and producing (*takhlīq*) something is to speak loosely or metaphorically. God is regarded as having a qualitatively distinct intelligence from ours, and he does not even have to go through a process of reasoning to work out what he is going to bring about, nor have something already in existence for him to use as material for his construction. He can just do it. In a strict sense, then, only God can properly be said to bring into being. But even al-Rāzī has to admit that there is an interesting ambiguity in the meaning of *khāliq*, since in some Qur'ānic references it can mean either *muqaddir* (who determines) or *mūjid* (who brings into existence). If the creator merely determines the character of the universe then the suggestion could well be that he was working with previously existent matter which he at some point organized in a certain way. There are indeed some Qur'ānic passages which could be taken to point to the existence of something before the creation of the world. There is a suggestion, for example, that before the creation, heaven and earth were nothing but smoke. In the Arberry interpretation of the Qur'ān passage XLI,10–12 we are told: 'Then He lifted Himself to heaven when it was smoke, and said to it and to the earth, "Come willingly, or unwillingly!" They said, "We come willingly." So he determined them as seven heavens.'[1] One could take this text to imply that the smoke itself was created by God. But Averroes takes it in another sense:

if the apparent meaning of Scripture is searched, it will be evident from the verses which give us information about the bringing into existence of the world that its form really is originated, but that being itself and time extend continuously at both extremes, i.e. without interruption . . . Thus the theologians too in their statements about the world do not conform to the apparent meaning of Scripture but interpret it allegorically. For it is not stated in Scripture that God was existing with absolutely nothing else: a text to this effect is nowhere to be found. (*FM* 56–7)

---

[1] Quotations from the Qur'ān will, unless otherwise specified, be from A. J. Arberry, *The Qur'ān interpreted* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1964).

Even texts which might seem to point obviously in the direction of creation being *ex nihilo* can, with a little effort, be interpreted otherwise. For example, there is the interesting passage where Muhammad is attacking unbelievers who accuse him of authorship of the Qur'ān and so deny its divine provenance, where he says: 'Let them bring a discourse like it, if they speak truly. Or were they created out of nothing? Or are they creators? Or did they create the heavens and earth?' (LII,34–5). The Arabic expression *min ghayri shay'in* could indeed mean 'from nothing', and that reading would cohere quite well with the subsequent rhetorical question. It would then imply that the heavens and earth were created from nothing on the Qur'ānic view. Yet this is far from being the only interpretation of that passage. The Arabic could also mean 'from nothing' not in the sense of 'out of nothing' but in the sense of 'by nothing' or without purpose or aim, and such a reading would be neutral with respect to the nature of what if anything preceded creation. It is worth noting, too, that there are passages which could point to a different account of creation than the *ex nihilo* doctrine, in particular 'And it is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and his throne was upon the waters' (XI,9), a verse readily seized upon by Averroes to 'imply that there was a being before this present being, namely the throne and the water, and a time before this time, i.e. the one which is joined to the form of this being, namely the number of the movement of the celestial sphere' (*FM* 56–7).

Why were the *falāsifa* so eager to snatch every hint in the Qur'ān that creation might not be *ex nihilo*? What does it matter whether time is finite and commenced with the creation of the universe? If creation *ex nihilo* is in many ways the most obvious reading that the relevant Qur'ānic texts can be given, why did apparently orthodox Muslims (or at least writers who tried to pass themselves off as orthodox Muslims) suggest that what seems to be the uncomplicated religious view is unsatisfactory? Certainly this point was taken up with alacrity by thinkers in other religions. In the first of the twelve errors which Giles of Rome found in Averroes, the Christian claims that the Muslim thinker must be condemned 'Because he reviled all law, as is clear from Book II of the *Metaphysics* and also from Book XI, where he reviles the laws of the Christians . . . and also the law of the Saracens, because they maintain the creation of the universe and that something can be produced out of nothing.'[2] As we shall see, Maimonides also explicitly claims that Judaism insists on creation

[2] Giles of Rome, *Errores philosophorum*, ed. J. Koch and trans. J. Riedl (Milwaukee, WI, Marchette University Press, 1944); in R. Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant* (Louvain, 1908), pp. 8–10.

ex nihilo.[3] But it is not clear that Islam requires creation *ex nihilo* as in these other religions. There is no doctrine of the precise age of the world in Islam and it might seem quite acceptable, although hardly common, to adhere to some other account of its creation such that perhaps it has always existed. And yet, as we have already seen al-Ghazālī felt that Islam was so strongly committed to the thesis of the world's creation out of nothing that philosophers who held different views were not just mistaken but had defined themselves as unbelievers and so were not Muslims at all.[4]

Given that so much religious opinion in all three religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity was in favour of creation *ex nihilo*, why did the *falāsifa* set out to present a different model of the world's generation? One possible explanation is that they just rather slavishly followed Aristotle on this topic. Aristotle came to the issue after a considerable period of controversy in Greek philosophy with radically different opinions being offered by different philosophers. Some of the arguments which the *falāsifa* give in opposition to the creation *ex nihilo* doctrine are indeed Aristotelian, while others are Neoplatonic or even theological. It is worth having a look at the model which the *falāsifa* constructed of the relationship between God and the world to see why they could not accept the *ex nihilo* doctrine and yet tried to encompass orthodox Islamic doctrines at the same time.

Al-Fārābī and Avicenna constructed the main framework of this philosophical analysis of God and the world which ran into so much theological opposition. They start off by claiming that God is the only uncaused thing in the universe. Everything other than God in the universe is brought about by some cause external to itself. One of the ways in which they distinguish between things that exist is to talk about entities which have existence as part of their essence and those which do not. Something which can only exist if it is brought into existence by something else is clearly contingent and dependent upon something else. As Avicenna put it: 'the existence of something which is dependent upon something else which actually brings it into existence is not impossible in itself, for if it was it would never come into existence. It is not necessary either, since if it was it would not be dependent upon something else, and we have to conclude that it is possible in itself.'[5] Avicenna adds: 'What is necessary is

---

[3] *GP* II,13, p. 281.

[4] Especially in his *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*.

[5] Al-Fārābī, *Philosophische Abhandlungen*, ed. F. Dieterici (Leiden, Brill, 1890), p. 67, but in fact by Avicenna.

what cannot be assumed not to exist without a contradiction. The possible, by contrast, can be assumed not to exist, or to exist, without any sort of contradiction at all.'[6] This distinction between necessity and contingency is designed to contrast God, the creator of everything in the world, and what he has created. If God had himself been created then there would exist something even more powerful than God. If we could think of God not existing then his existence might be regarded as some kind of accident, sharing the status of the objects which we see in the world and which we can quite easily imagine not to exist. In calling God necessary and his creation contingent the suggestion is that we are presented with a theological system which contrasts an independent and self-sufficient deity with his product, a contingent and dependent universe.

But we should be careful about accepting this suggestion. For Avicenna immediately complicates his initial distinction between contingency and necessity to talk about two types of necessity. The first type, which we have already examined, is where 'a contradiction is involved if it is assumed to be non-existent'. If we assume, for the sake of the argument, that God does not exist, then we are involved in a contradiction, since existence is so much a part of the definition or meaning of God that denying his existence is rather like questioning whether a rectangle has four sides. Nothing is a rectangle if it does not have four sides; similarly, nothing is God if it does not exist. Avicenna's other kind of necessity is more complicated. Something 'is necessary, provided a certain entity other than it is given . . . while considered in its essence it is possible, considered in actual relation to that other being, it is necessary, and without the relation to that other being, it is impossible'.[7] Avicenna is talking here about a type of being which relies upon something else to bring it into existence, but given that cause, it exists necessarily. This is an unusual distinction to make. The standard approach would be to distinguish possible beings which can, but do not, exist and possible beings which can, and do, exist, and a necessary being is that which cannot not exist by contrast with both types of possible beings. Avicenna is not interested in the standard approach at all. Indeed, he would claim that what has been called 'the standard approach' is rather misleading. He argues that a possible being is only possible if it *must* exist, while accepting of course its contingency upon the causal power of something else. He claims that those things which are necessary through the influence of

[6] Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt: Kitāb al-najāt*, ed. M. Kurdi (Cairo, Sa'adah Press, 1938), p. 224.
[7] *Ibid.*

something else are exactly what he means by the things which are possible in themselves.

His reasoning takes this form. A thing which is contingent and which is regarded separately from its cause either can or cannot exist. If one says that it cannot exist, then one is claiming that it is impossible, that it involves some sort of contradiction. If one claims that it can exist, then it must either exist or not exist. If it does not exist, it would be impossible. Avicenna returns to this point time and time again. In a chapter entitled 'What is not necessary does not exist' he argues:

Thus it is now clear that everything necessary of existence by another thing is possible of existence by itself. And this is reversible, so that everything possible of existence by itself, if its existence has happened, is necessary of existence by another thing; because inevitably it must either truly have an actual existence or not truly have an actual existence – but it cannot not truly have an actual existence, for in that case it would be impossible of existence.[8]

When Avicenna talks about the status of a thing which is not necessary in itself he comments: 'The thing, when looked at in terms of its essence, is possible but when examined in terms of its links with its cause, is necessary. Without that nexus it is then impossible. But if we think of the essence of the thing without linking it with anything else, the thing itself becomes seen as possible in itself.'[9]

It might seem that Avicenna is contradicting himself here when he considers the results of thinking of the relationship between an entity and its causes no longer holding. His argument is quite plausible, though. He is suggesting that it is possible to think of something like one's coat without thinking of how it was made and where the materials etc. came from. But it is not possible to think of that coat as having no relation whatsoever to what preceded it in existence. Every contingent thing is related to something else which brings it about; the only thing which is not thus related and which can be thought of as completely independent is God who is necessary in himself. Insofar as it goes, then, Avicenna's distinction does not involve a contradiction.

It is clear that for Avicenna a contingent thing can only exist if it is brought into existence by something else, and we would get an infinite regress of such causes were there not in existence a thing which is necessary in itself and which therefore does not require a causal push into

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 226; trans. G. Hourani, 'Ibn Sīnā on necessary and possible existence', *Philosophical Forum*, 6 (1974), pp. 74–86.
[9] Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt*, ed. Kurdi, p. 226.

existence. Now, many views of God and his creation would interpret this relation as one of God considering which of the possible states of affairs he could bring into existence if he is to fulfil his aims in constructing the world. God can select any possible state of affairs as desirable and then bring it into existence in the world. But this is not Avicenna's view at all. Contingent things are obliged to wait before they exist in a kind of metaphysical limbo which is entirely independent of God's will. All God can do is determine whether contingent things will exist or not; he cannot affect their possibility. This has interesting consequences. Avicenna distinguishes between possible material and possible immaterial substances. The former are essentially as they are before God's causal powers get to work on them; were they to be otherwise, on Avicenna's familiar argument, they would not be possible because 'whatever enters existence can be either possible or impossible before it exists. Whatever cannot exist will never exist, and whatever can exist has a possibility which exists before it is actualized . . . And so matter exists before everything what comes into existence.'[10] God's control over even existence is severely circumscribed with regard to the possible immaterial substances which are dependent upon him for their existence and not necessary in themselves, but for whom there was no time when they were not in existence. They are necessary but only necessary through another thing, God, and they exist in tandem with him. In so far as the contents of the material world go, though, God is confined to willing the possible to exist. He cannot will the possible to be existent *and* possible. He is rather in the position of the customer in a restaurant who has no choice as to what he can order. He can and indeed must order the fixed menu, and he has no control over the selection which is set before him.

So far we have been talking about three types of being. These are: (i) that which is necessarily existent in itself; (ii) that which is necessarily existent by reason of another but possibly existent by reason of itself; and (iii) that which is possibly existent by reason of itself without being necessarily existent by reason of another. As we have seen, members of the third class become rather difficult to distinguish from members of the second class. There is a class of things that are necessary without having a cause of their being necessary and another class of things which are necessary through a cause, this cause being a member of a former class. Examples of beings which are necessarily existent by reason of

---

[10] *Ibid.*

something else are 'combustion', which is 'necessarily existent . . . once contact is taken to exist between fire and matter which can be burned', and 'four' which is 'necessarily existent . . . when we assume two plus two'.[11] These examples suggest that the distinction between the kinds of being which we have called (ii) and (iii) above is rather artificial. One of the ways in which Avicenna characterizes necessity is in terms of 'indicating something which has to exist'.[12] The necessarily existent in itself is that which has certainty of existence by reason of itself, while the necessarily existent through another would be that which has certainty of existence through another. So in the end there is no real difference between necessary existence through another and actual existence for anything other than God. We might put Avicenna's argument in this way. So long as something is only possible, there is nothing in existence which can move it from non-existence to existence. The possibly existent can only become actually existent if something decides to shift it from the substitutes' bench to the playing area, as it were. Whenever that something is present and sets a series of events in train, the consequent existence of the possible being is inevitable. It will certainly exist and thus is necessary. So when the possibly existent actually exists, its existence is necessary, and when it does not exist, its existence is impossible. All that Avicenna can mean by talking about a class of things which are possibly existent without being necessarily existent is that, if we abstract from all external conditions, the class of possibly existent things can be *conceived* since they are always possibly existent.[13] If we are to divide up the actual existents we need only two categories, that of the necessarily existent by reason of itself, where an impossibility results if we assume it not to exist by reason of itself, and the necessarily existent by reason of another, where an impossibility or contradiction also results if we assume it not to exist, but this time only because it is assumed that something else exists.

To try to become clearer concerning the philosophical motives for this conflation of necessity and possibility we need to look at some aspects of the work of Aristotle. He pointed out that in ascribing a certain power or ability to a thing it is necessary to determine the limits of this power. We do not say that a thing can lift weight as such, but that it can lift a certain weight or range of weights. If we say, then, that something is capable of existing and of not existing, we are bound to add the length

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 225.
[12] Ibn Sīnā, *Shifā': Ilāhiyyāt* (Healing: Metaphysics), ed. G. Anawati and S. Zayed (Cairo, Uthmānīyya Press, 1960). p. 36.
[13] See *ibid.*, p. 38; and *Najāt*, ed. Kurdi, pp. 226, 238.

of time in each case. If the time in question is infinite (and Aristotle does indeed argue that time is at least potentially infinite), then we are committed to saying that something can exist for an infinite time and also not exist for another infinite time, and this, he claims, is impossible. In a slightly different approach, Aristotle sometimes views potentiality as a sort of natural tendency. There is certainly something rather odd about saying that something has a natural tendency which is never fulfilled, even during an infinite period of time. Aristotle does indeed present an argument to suggest that what never happens is impossible.

This Aristotelian approach has been taken up by a commentator on his philosophy, Jaako Hintikka, and called rather appropriately the 'principle of plenitude'.[14] Hintikka argues that for Aristotle something is called necessary if it always was and always will be so and he interprets the sense of possibility relevant here as equivalent to saying that what is possible has happened or will happen at some time. A familiar logical notion is that of worlds which represent alternative arrangements to our existing world and which philosophers call logically possible. Clearly, Aristotle's apparent view that every possibility will in due course be realized runs counter to such an approach.

Aristotle's arguments for his thesis are not convincing. For example, he claims: 'It is not allowable that it is true to say "this is possible, but it will not be"' (*Met.* 1047b 3f.), and he reasons in this way. What is possible can conceivably occur. Imagine it occurring then but assume it will not occur; so imagining it to happen contradicts our assuming it will not happen. He gives the rather misleading example of saying we can do an impossible task but never will. He produces a more plausible argument when distinguishing between something like a cloak and things which like the stars exist for ever and are for ever active (*De Int.* 19a 9–18). Since the stars exist for ever, for the whole of time, possibilities cannot remain for ever unactualized. The sun and stars, if they could stop, would, given the whole of time, indeed stop. So the dual possibility of being and not being does not apply to what is for ever active. Aristotle gives another example when he suggests that if something were at all times sitting, it would be incapable of standing, and that which always exists is incapable of perishing (*De Caelo* 281b 3–25). His argument is not applied to the transient things of this world like cloaks but only to everlasting things and their eternal qualities. Yet it is not obvious why his analysis should not be extended to transient things. For although

[14] J. Hintikka, *Time and necessity: studies in Aristotle's theory of modality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973), ch. 5.

a cloak which has been eaten by a goat does not continue to possess the capacity to be burnt, it does for ever possess the negative property of not being burnt. Aristotle does accept that things can continue to possess negative properties after they have ceased to exist (*Cat.* 13b 26–35: *De Int.* 16b 11–15). If in the whole of time it will not be burnt, there should, on Aristotle's reasoning, be no time left at which a capacity to be burnt could be actualized, and so the cloak should be incapable of being burnt. It must be admitted that Aristotle carefully limits his principle of plenitude to eternal things – 'In everlasting things, there is no difference between being possible and being the case' (*Phys.* 293b 30) – and yet it is very interesting for our discussion of the notions of possibility and necessity that it is feasible to think of his arguments being extended to things which are not everlasting. Maimonides is quite clear on the distinction which Aristotle wants to make:

When a species is said to be possible, it is necessary that it exists in reality in certain individuals of this species, for if it never existed in any individual, it would be impossible for the species, and what right would one have for saying that it is possible? If, for example, we say that writing is a thing possible for the human race, it is necessary then that there be people who write at a certain time, for if one believed that there is never any man who writes, that would be saying that writing is impossible for the human race. It is not the same when possibility is applied to individuals, for if we say that it is possible that this child writes or does not write, it does not follow from this possibility that the child must necessarily write at one particular moment. Therefore, the claim that a species is possible is not, strictly speaking, to place the species in the category of possibility but rather to claim that it is in some ways necessary.[15]

We shall see later the significance of this approach when we come to look at Maimonides' analysis of the topic of the creation of the world.

Avicenna's account of the nature of beings results in a good deal of necessity seeping into the world of transient things, with the principle of plenitude being extended to cover everything other than God. Now, the connection between the doctrine of necessity and the model of the creation of the world takes a particular form in Avicenna, one which originally stems from Plotinus. The notion of creation as emanation is not always described in the same way by Avicenna, but it is possible on the whole to give an account of its essential features. God is identified as the necessary existent and is one and simple. This necessary existent or being does not produce other things as though intending them to come into

---

[15] Letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon, cited in S. Munk 'Commentary' *Le guide des Egares* (Paris, A. Franck, 1861), p. 39.

existence, however, for then he would be acting for something lower than himself and would thereby introduce multiplicity into the divine essence. Rather, the first effect, a pure intelligence, necessarily proceeds from his self-reflection. This first intelligence which results from God's coming to know himself is an example of a being which is necessary through another, the necessary existent, but which unlike its originator is only possible in itself. It is the introduction of this intelligence that introduces multiplicity into the system which is extended once it considers three facts of existence. Firstly, it considers God's existence as necessary in itself. Then, it considers its own existence as a necessitated being. Lastly, it recognizes that its own existence is only possible and very different from the existence of its creator and originator. These three acts of knowing bring about the existence of just three things, maintaining the principle that from one only one proceeds and can proceed. The existence of another intellect, a soul and a sphere (the sphere of the heavens) are necessitated. Then we get a series of triads which explain the creation of yet more beings. The second intelligence replicates a similar process of thought as the first and so leads to the production of a third intellect, another soul and a sphere, this time the sphere of the fixed stars. The process continues via the thoughts of the successive intellects and results in the spheres of the planets, the sun and the moon, each with its intellect, soul and body, only coming to an end with the sublunary world, the world of generation and corruption in which we live. The tenth or last intelligence is the agent intellect, which does not have a soul and the body of a sphere, but rather produces human souls and the four elements of our world. We shall see later the significance of the agent intellect in Islamic philosophy.

Avicenna had the problem of reconciling an eternally existing world and an eternally existing God without having the perfect simplicity and unity of God destroyed by contact with the multiplicity of material things. His strategy was to interpose many levels of spiritual substances, the intelligences, between God and the world of generation and corruption to insulate the divine unity from multiplicity. This model of the development of the universe is hardly close to the traditional religious view. There is a big difference between producing something out of nothing and producing something by emanation from one's thinking. In the latter case there is a resemblance between the agent and the product, which is not to be found at all in the former case. Avicenna asserts that the necessary existent emanates the world via its emanation of the first intelligence, and that choice or deliberation has no part to play in its decision. After

all, God's will is identical to the knowledge of the best universal world order. Once the process of emanation has been set in train there is no place for God's intervention in the course of nature. Indeed, while the One of Neoplatonic thought and the necessary being in Avicenna's model can exist without the products of its thought, all that this means is that it can be conceived to exist by itself, i.e. that it is transcendent. Yet how can this be reconciled with the existence of the immaterial beings as necessary and eternal, with the fact that the intelligible world which has emanated from the One cannot not exist nor can it exist in a different form – it is necessarily produced by the One and produced in such a way that it must have a certain form? As al-Fārābī puts it:

> The first exists in and by itself, and it is part of its essence that it can lead to the existence of what is outside it. So that essence from which existence emanates onto other things is part of its definition . . . from which the existence of something else is produced. This cannot be separated into two separate things, one of them being something it brings about in itself, the other being that which brings about the existence of something else.[16]

So there are things which God brings into existence which cannot possibly not exist and which cannot be other than they are. The gap between God and his creation starts to look as artificial as the gap between beings which are necessarily existent by reason of another and beings which are possible in themselves and not necessitated by anything else.

   This is a very different picture of creation and of God's relation to the universe than that implicit in the Qur'ān. To take an example which comes this time not from a verse relating to the creation of the world but rather dealing with the world's possible destruction, we are told that: 'All things perish, except His face' (XXVIII,88). The idea that God can, if he wants, bring his creation to an end is an important expression of the power that God has over the world, something of a theme of the Qur'ān. At one point it says: 'On the day when We shall roll up heaven as a scroll is rolled for the writings; as We originated the first creation, so We shall bring it back again – a promise binding on Us; so We shall do' (XXI,104). Yet the heavens and the world are regarded as eternal by the *falāsifa*. They proceed necessarily from the divine essence and eternally persist in their continuous motion. Avicenna is aware of this problem and provides an orthodox interpretation of XXVIII,88 when he says: 'He dominates, i.e. he has the power to bring about non-being and to deprive of existence those

---

[16] Al-Fārābī, *Al-siyāsā al-madaniya* (The political régime), (Hyderabad, Dā'irah al-Ma'ārif, 1927), p. 18.

essences which in themselves deserve annihilation. Everything vanishes except he.'[17] It might be possible to argue that in this verse 'all things' refer to the contents of the universe rather than the universe itself, so that it is taken to mean that only what is found in the realm of generation and corruption goes to destruction. However, this would not cover the verse which refers to the rolling up of the heavens. It might then be argued that it is part of the essence of the necessary and eternal things that they go to destruction, and that eternal things can be destroyed if motion is brought to an end, since on an Aristotelian view of time it is only motion which makes time possible. If there is no longer any sense in talking about time then there would no longer be any point in talking about eternity. On such a view 'eternal' would mean something like 'existing until the end of time'. But this would be a difficult view for an Aristotelian to put forward, given the Aristotelian arguments for the infinity of time.

As one might expect, then, Avicenna is hardly enthusiastic about this line of argument. He claims quite confidently that there is no great problem for his approach coming from XXVIII,88:

The existence of something which is contingent on a cause outside itself is not impossible, for if it were it could not possibly exist. Nor is it necessary, for then it could not be contingent on something else for its existence. The existence of such a thing is possible in itself. With respect to its cause, it is necessary, and with respect to the absence of the cause it is impossible. In itself it has no capacity except to be ultimately destroyed, but with respect to its cause it is necessary – 'All things perish, except his Face.'[18]

The Qur'ānic verse is then taken to distinguish between God and those things which are caused to exist by God. God will not be destroyed, but he could destroy everything else in the universe. Yet the sense which Avicenna gives to this claim is the rather weak explanation that nothing could exist were God not to exist also, that without God the possible things which only require some agent to bring them to existence would not be actualized and so in that sense could be thought of as impossible and destroyed. This seems a rather special sense of destruction. Since God is the 'principle of existence' of those things which are necessary through another, i.e. through him, he at first sight should have no difficulty in bringing their existence to an end. It might seem that all that God would need to do to make everything go to destruction is to will such an event. Yet for Avicenna it follows from the nature of God and

[17] Al-Fārābī, *Philosophische Abhandlungen*, ed. Dieterici, p. 83, but in fact by Avicenna.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 67, but in fact by Avicenna.

the nature of the possible things in the universe that they will be arranged in a certain optimum way; God could not just decide arbitrarily to change things around. It would be to go against his nature. On this sort of view the Qur'ānic passage which explains that everything goes to destruction except God could either be interpreted as a metaphorical way of expressing God's uniqueness and self-sufficiency and not be regarded as literally true at all. Or it could be taken as the claim that were it to be a desirable state of affairs for the world to cease to exist, then God would have pre-arranged such a state of affairs. As we shall see in the following section, for us to talk about something ceasing to exist is regarded by the *falāsifa* as rather more accurately described as its changing into something else: 'from this point of view the philosophers do not regard it as impossible that the world should become non-existent in the sense of its changing into another form . . . But what they regard as impossible is that a thing should disappear into absolute nothingness' (*TT* 86). Yet even if it is possible to accommodate Qur'ānic references to the destruction of the world within Islamic philosophy it remains true that in the philosophical account of creation God does not seem to have much work to do. God can only create what is possible, and there are beings which are possible and conceivable independently of the act of creation, and so of God. This is neatly put by al-Shahrastānī (d. 547/1153) thus:

The essential qualities of substances and accidents belong to them in themselves, not because of any connection with the creator. He only enters . . . in connection with existence because he tipped the scales in favour of existence. What a thing is essentially precedes its existence, i.e. the basic qualities which make it a particular thing. What a thing has through omnipotence is its existence and actual instantiation.[19]

Once God has tipped the scales in favour of existence, what has he left to do? If the possible things emanate from him necessarily, at however remote a stage, what control has he over them, what knowledge has he of them, what choice does he have in selecting one thing over another for existence? The difficulties involved in answering these questions in a manner acceptable to Islam suggests that a very different, albeit not necessarily irreconcilable, model of the connection between God and his creation is being presented.

---

[19] Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb nihāyat al iqdām fi 'ilm al kalām* (The 'Summa Philosophiae' of al-Shahrastāni), ed. and trans. A. Guillaume (London, Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 155.

AVERROES V. AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

By far the most brilliant of the opponents of *falsafa* was al-Ghazālī. Study-ing his writings is a pleasure because of both his clear and polished style and his skill and fervour in argument. He took considerable pains to master expertly the reasoning which had led the philosophers to what he saw as erroneous and theologically dubious conclusions. What gives his arguments their importance is that he attacked the philosophers on their own ground, arguing philosophically that their main theses were invalid on logical grounds. For example, in his book *The incoherence of the philosophers* he sets out twenty propositions which he attempts to disprove, seventeen of which constitute innovation or heterodoxy (in his opinion), and three of which actually reveal what he calls unbelief, an even stronger charge. These three propositions concern the denial of the resurrection of the body, the fact of God's knowledge of particulars, plus the doctrine of the eternity of the world. What is important, though, is not his charge that the *falāsifa* present un-Islamic views, but that they go awry in their arguments:

It is in the metaphysical sciences that most of the philosophers' errors are found. Owing to the fact that they could not carry out apodeictic demonstration ac-cording to the conditions they had postulated in logic, they differed a great deal about metaphysical questions. Aristotle's doctrine on these matters, as trans-mitted by al-Fārābī and ibn Sīnā, approximates the teachings of the Islamic philosophers.[20]

The philosophical doctrine which al-Ghazālī spends a great deal of time discussing in *The incoherence of the philosophers* is that of the eternity of the world. He argues both that the *falāsifa* are incapable of demonstrating that the world is eternal and that there is no way of reconciling belief in (the Muslim) God with adherence to the world's eternity. In charging those who adhere to the eternity doctrine with unbelief he was making a very strong claim, namely, that that doctrine is so inconsistent with Islam that no one can accept it and remain genuinely part of the community of Islam. Al-Ghazālī is especially careful in making this claim: he was very critical of the practice of some writers in his time as well as of his predecessors of making wild and unjustified accusations of unbelief against opinions and individuals that merely differed from their own on rather peripheral issues.[21] The line of argument which runs right through

[20] Al-Ghazālī, *Munqidh*, trans. R. McCarthy, p. 76.
[21] See al-Ghazālī, *Faysal al-tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa l-zandaqa* (The clear criterion for distinguishing between Islam and godlessness), trans. R. McCarthy, *Freedom and fulfillment*, pp. 145–74.

al-Ghazālī's attack on the *falāsifa* is that belief in God is equivalent to belief that God's existence makes a real difference to the way things are in the world. He claims that there is a serious drawback in the theories of the philosophers in that they seem to want to allow God only a subsidiary role in the eternally organized and determined universe which they defend. He brings the same sort of charge against them for their apparent denial of resurrection and God's knowledge of particulars – these two denials also remove God and his power and knowledge from the world in a way that is obviously problematic for a Muslim. As we have seen so far, the *falāsifa* are not averse to appending their philosophical claims to passages from the Qur'ān, which one might think would be embarrassing given their adherence to theories which are, at least superficially, unsympathetic to the meaning of such religious passages. Al-Ghazālī is hinting that the *falāsifa* use these religious verses as a sort of camouflage for their real views, pretending that their doctrines are quite in accordance with religion when they know that they are quite otherwise. This approach to the *falāsifa* has been highly influential in interpreting their work even today, and al-Ghazālī has posed a methodological question to which we shall return throughout this book. It must be emphasized at the outset that al-Ghazālī is asking a vitally important question about the actual arguments of the *falāsifa*, namely, what difference does the introduction of God into a philosophical theory make? If it makes no difference at all, then surely it is just an attempt to mislead readers when religious vocabulary and Qur'ānic passages are used as though they fitted into philosophical arguments when quite plainly they do not.

The interchange between al-Ghazālī and Averroes is interesting for the subtle argument it often involves and the close relationship which the argument always bears to specific controversial issues. An intriguing feature of the discussion is that Averroes (in his *Incoherence of the incoherence*) is in effect fighting with one hand tied behind his back, since he is often critical of the approach to philosophy which al-Ghazālī criticizes, that of al-Fārābī and Avicenna. Averroes was especially critical of aspects of Avicenna's approach to modal concepts such as possibility and necessity. He argued against the combination of the 'possible in itself' and 'necessary through another', which he saw as a mistaken doctrine. He suggests that we should differentiate clearly between the possible and the necessary (*TT* 146), and argued that Avicenna's position is too heavily influenced by the theologians. Averroes also distanced himself to a degree from what he could perceive as non-Aristotelian (i.e. Neoplatonic) philosophical concepts in an attempt to return to the 'real' Aristotle for

his philosophical inspiration. It must be admitted, though, that he did use a good deal of both Avicennan and Neoplatonic theory in his defence of philosophy, and this was inevitable given the fact that the burden of al-Ghazālī's attack lies heavily on those aspects of philosophical thinking in Islam.

When it comes to considering the creation of the world, al-Ghazālī was repelled by the philosophical conception of the universe as eternal and brought about by emanation, with an eternal matter continually taking different forms. He accepts the view which he regards as traditional that the world was created by God out of completely nothing a finite time ago, and that both the matter and the form of the world were brought into being by God in this original act. It is worth pointing out perhaps that the Neoplatonic model of the relation between God and the world embodies all kinds of features which might well be *prima facie* attractive to mystics. For example, the large number of striking analogies to express the relationship between God and his creation, the stress on the generosity of the One and its self-reflection, the emergence of beings which in turn generate other beings and indeed eventually everything, and especially the power which is ascribed to *thought* as such, all these are principles dear to much mystical thinking. It is difficult to believe that al-Ghazālī, with his well-known fascination for mysticism, was not initially attracted to philosophy as a rational basis for his religious beliefs. When he came to the view that philosophy was a false god he rejected it with all the fervour of an apostate who still sees what is compelling in the old set of beliefs. His *The incoherence of the philosophers* is on the surface a cold and technical work, yet under the surface it is possible to detect the passion with which he abandons an immensely attractive way of looking at the world. Al-Ghazālī is driven to represent the arguments of the philosophers in close detail, replying himself to the criticisms which others might make of their main points before he presents the argument which he regards as the coup de grâce. His almost obsessive concern with accurately describing the arguments of his opponents is evidence of the love-hate relationship which he has with philosophy. It is often regarded as ironic that one of his books, *The intentions of the philosophers*, which sets out clearly the main doctrines of *falsafa*, should have given Christian Scholasticism the impression that he was a *failasūf* himself. It might well be argued that this 'mistake' is highly revealing.

The starting point of al-Ghazālī's approach to the *falāsifa* is to bring out how difficult it is to reconcile with Islam the central tenets of their view of God and the world. A view which emphasizes that from one can

only come one, that has at its apex an entity whose deliberations are limited to his own essence and who can only metaphorically be described as having a will or choice in his actions is not only dubiously compatible with Islam but also, al-Ghazālī argues, philosophically questionable. He insists that only an argument which stresses creation in the Islamic sense can allow for the existence of an effective Islamic God who actively determines what, where, how and when contingent states of affairs take place. He is not necessitated in his creating but considers choices; no general principles direct his choosing in one direction rather than another.

Al-Ghazālī clearly has a very different conception of God and the universe than the *falāsifa*. He defends his ideas carefully and slowly, developing a piecemeal critique of *falsafa* which I shall attempt to discuss and assess in some of its detail. The First Discussion of his *The incoherence of the philosophers* discusses four proofs which he considers to be the best of those presented by the philosophers in defence of the eternity of the world. The First Proof deals with some of the problems in making sense of the notion that the world came into existence suddenly. On the *falāsifa*'s understanding of Aristotle, every change which takes place must be determined to occur by some cause which is external to it. This is the case not just for physical objects but for states of mind as well. So presumably if God wills a change to take place, some external cause must have led him to that decision. If the world as a whole had come into existence rather than existed eternally this would present a difficulty. There would then have been nothing outside God's mind to influence him into making a decision about the existence of the world, since nothing but God yet existed. Now, we know from our experience that the world is already existing and so we can conclude that this sort of problem did not prevent it from existing. In that case the world must surely have been in existence all the time, an assertion which once it is accepted sidesteps neatly the problem of having to explain how the first change which created the world came about. Given the model of creation through emanation, the world continually emanates from the One and it is of the nature of the One to produce what it thus produces and how it thus produces. The main difficulty which the philosophers see is in explaining the first change, the creation of the world, on the creation *ex nihilo* doctrine. If God at one time existed without anything else, before he created the world, what could have persuaded him to create the world in the first place? There was nothing around in existence to affect him and he could have remained perfectly constant and unmoved. We know, though, that there is a world and we believe that God created

it, and we can only make sense of this fact if we admit that his creation is eternal.

Al-Ghazālī is aware that he has to defend the possibility of the world coming into existence at a certain time. He repeats the Ash'arite view that God could easily have willed eternally that the world should come into existence at a certain time in the future if he wanted to. After all, according to the Qur'ān, all that God has to say is 'Be, and it is' (III,42). Why could he not postdate, as it were, the existence of the universe? The world could then come into existence at a particular time in the future. The traditional objection to such a possibility by the philosophers is that there must be some reason why someone who wills something which he is capable of performing at a particular time desists from the performance. If he wants X and can get X, why should he wait a certain length of time after the performance *could* be carried out to satisfy his want? Surely there cannot be any obstacle which impedes an omnipotent God from carrying out his purpose? As al-Fārābī put it:

What delays his making it is the obstacle to his making it, and the non-success which he thinks and knows will occur, if he makes the thing at that time is the obstacle which prevents his making it . . . If there is no cause of non-success, its non-existence is not preferable to its existence, and why did it not happen? . . . if he were personally the sole cause of the success, the success of the action should not be retarded in time, but both should happen together, and therefore when the agent is sufficient in himself alone for something to come into existence from him, it follows that the existence of the thing is not later than the existence of the agent.[22]

The Ash'arite response to this sort of objection is to press the analogy between natural and conventional norms and to suggest that God could make the creation of the world contingent on certain conditions being satisfied in the future, in the same way that a man can divorce his wife in Islam as from a particular time in the future. Averroes' objection to this example is that it is invalid to relate natural and conventional causality closely in this way. It is no doubt true that we can determine the legal nature of the future given the legal validity of certain procedures, yet we cannot delay natural events until a future time in the same way. This objection to al-Ghazālī is hardly apposite since, as we shall see later, he adheres to a theory of causality which identifies it with God's commands, and he would probably agree that the analogy of natural and

---

[22] Al-Fārābī's *The fuṣūl al-madanī of al-Fārābī* (Aphorisms of the statesman). ed. and trans. D. Dunlop, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, 5 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 66.

conventional causality does not work when applied to human beings, but would be highly appropriate when applied to God, the aim of the analogy in the first place. Perhaps a stronger objection that Averroes might have used would be to ask what *motive* God could have for delaying the creation of the world. After all, there is nothing in existence with him to influence him and one might have thought that if he was interested in creating the world he would just create it and not spend a period of time at rest after having willed the world to be created. This is certainly the point of al-Fārābī's argument above. After all, the use of a legal device as a result of which a man can divorce his wife in the future has as its purpose some practical effect. For example, a wife may be warned that if she does something objectionable in the future then she will from that time immediately be divorced. What possible practical consequences could God's postdated creation of the world have? There is surely no context available in which he would need to threaten or warn anyone or anything, since there is before the creation, on al-Ghazālī's view, absolutely no one and nothing except God himself.

Al-Ghazālī challenges the claim that even the divine will cannot produce a delayed effect. Why *must* there be an obstacle to explain such a phenomenon? What justification have philosophers in ruling it out completely? He argues for the possibility of such a delayed effect by presenting an intriguing account of how the divine will might well work. If we return to the previous point, that the philosophers are dubious about the possibility of a delayed effect since there seems to be no conceivable motive for the delay, we can see that there is also a problem with the creation of the world at one particular time rather than at another particular time. If God did create the world at a certain time, then he decided to create it at that time and not at another time, assuming that he was not acting haphazardly. Yet before anything exists except God what reason could God have for creating the world at one particular time at all? There exists nothing to motivate him in this respect except his thoughts, and why should he select one time in preference to another time? Al-Ghazālī is impatient with this sort of objection to the creation of the world at one finite time:

as to your affirmation that you cannot imagine this [a will causing a delayed effect] do you know it by the necessity of thought or through deduction? You can claim neither the one nor the other. Your comparison with our will is a bad analogy, which resembles that employed on the question of God's knowledge. Now, God's knowledge is different from ours in several ways which we acknowledge. Therefore it is not absurd to admit a difference in the will...How will