

*Skepticism and Rationality: Ghazali, Hume, and Kant*

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*Abstract*

Considering three philosophers – Ghazali, Hume, and Kant – we perceive that they were at grips with skepticism and each had a different attitude towards it. While Hume remains in a skeptical sphere, Ghazali and Kant offer solutions for skepticism, although their solutions differ largely. Criticizing Aristotle's view on essential necessity, Ghazali expands Avicenna's emphasis on experimentation and, in effect, negates the necessary relation between cause and effect. Ghazali preceded Hume in this regard for some 6 centuries and put forward Hume's main idea. In order to overcome skepticism, Kant appealed to rationality and its *a priori* backgrounds, while Ghazali put forward God's will and put the emphasis on the inner direct experience. It will be argued that God's deeds, rationality and faith should be compatible in principle.

**Key Words:** 1. Ghazali, 2. Kant, 3. Hume, 4. skepticism, 5. reason and faith, 6. cause and effect.

**1. Introduction**

Philosophers such as David Hume (1632-1704) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and thinkers such as Mohammad Ghazali (1058-1111) dealt with skepticism and rationality in different manners. Even though skepticism is being held by some to be against rationality, it cannot be denied that skepticism

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presupposes rationality at a different level. In fact, skepticism is a rational endeavor as it should be an argumentative attempt in dealing with certitude. Thus, the relationship between rationality and skepticism is a kind of co-existence rather than an opposition even though the roles each one plays in this co-existence can be different in the work of any philosopher.

Even though Hume is sometimes held to be the first in putting forth skepticism against Cartesian certainty, some historical studies suggest that his skepticism originated elsewhere mentioning Malebranche (1638-1712) and Nicholas of Autrecourt (1300-d. after 1350) and the medieval Muslim thinker al-Ghazali (1058-1111) as the originators. Even though Hume had no direct access to Ghazali's works, he was, undoubtedly, familiar with those of Malebranche, while Malebranche had indirect access to Ghazali's thoughts through the works of Averroes and also through the indirect access to the works of Autrecourt who was familiar with Ghazali's argument against necessary connections between events.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to clarify the similarities and discrepancies between the two western philosophers – Hume and Kant – and the Iranian thinker – Ghazali – in dealing with skepticism and rationality. The philosophical viewpoints considered in this paper have a fairly long history and there are some comparative studies in this regard<sup>3</sup>. However, this paper aims at demonstrating that – contrary to what some may hold, skepticism is not uniquely western nor is it eastern. Doubt and skepticism are issues that have gained the attention of Muslim thinkers such as Ghazali and it can be said that western philosophy in its modern era may have been under Ghazali's influence. In addition, this paper is going to suggest different lines of similarities and differences among the three thinkers than what is known in the related literature.

This topic discussed in this paper has historical and analytical aspects. Thus, the method which is used is mainly analytic and comparative. Referring to the works of the thinkers concerned in this paper, we will analyze the thinkers' perspectives on rationality and skepticism.

Considering the three thinkers in question, choosing which one to begin with is itself a bit of a riddle. Ghazali lived centuries before the seventeenth century philosopher David Hume and the

eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant and confronted skepticism like Hume faced it later on and like Kant offered a solution to skepticism. Therefore, it might seem more appropriate to begin with Hume and go on with Kant who offered a solution to Hume's skepticism and finally consider Ghazali's position. Hume's skepticism in general, and his skepticism regarding cause and effect in particular, stems from his full-blooded empiricist heritage. However, Ghazali has theological reasons for denying the necessity of relationship between cause and effect even though he does not consider questioning causal relation as a background for skepticism. Kant, on the other hand, tries to overcome skepticism by means of finding an *a priori* solution to the existence of cause and effect. In what follows, skepticism as posed by Hume and Ghazali and different solutions for overcoming it by Kant and Ghazali will be considered respectively.

## 2. Hume and Kant

Hume encountered philosophy in the empiricist tradition. While other empiricists were trying to strengthen their reasons and arguments regarding the empirical knowledge, Hume argued that future cannot be foretold with the aid of past experiences since there is no necessary relation between the observed events.

In "Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding", Hume introduced a criterion for what counts as knowledge which became famous for "Hume's fork" later on. This principle states that except for abstract reasoning (mathematics for example) and experience, nothing else can be source of knowledge and should be committed to flames. In the path to attaining his fork, Hume introduces the dichotomy of knowledge in section 4 under the rubrics of "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact" from which follows that mathematical and logical subjects are composed of relations of ideas and they are certain regardless of the existence of the world. Regarding matters of fact, which constitute experiences and experimental knowledge, Hume argues that there is no certainty and that is why negating any propositions related to matters of fact would not cause contradiction. The example he uses is that 'whether the sun rises tomorrow' is impossible to affirm as by its negation we do not commit a contradiction.

Hume continues by saying that "All reasoning concerning matters of fact seem to be founded on the relation of cause and effect"<sup>4</sup>. Putting this claim side by side with the claim that refuting or assuming any proposition related to matters of fact will not cause a contradiction, will result in one's maintaining that if the relation of cause and effect is not based on relations of ideas, then it is based on matters of fact. Therefore, causal relation is not certain and holding it or negating it would not create a contradiction.

When there is smoke there is fire; this famous example for cause and effect holds a necessary relation between the cause and the effect. The nature of this relation is what Hume tries to jettison by stating that "knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasoning *a priori*; but arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other."<sup>5</sup>

The relation between the cause and effect is neither internal to objects nor established *a priori* according to Hume. Dealing with 'why do we hold that the relation of cause and effect exists and think based on it?' Hume claims that he has an answer, which is not ultimate but describes human nature, "For whenever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of understanding, we always say, that this propensity is the effect of custom."<sup>6</sup> This is Hume's explanation of the relation of cause and effect and states that it is a skeptical solution for a skeptical doubt.

We find that Hume's main reasons for this doubt in the relation of cause and effect are two. First, he speaks of secret powers of nature that if they exist we are unaware of them. Thus, he concludes, the only things we deal with are matters of fact and nothing beyond them. He then claims that there is no "known" connection between the events that we conjugate and the nature of the events. Therefore, you can only claim that so far such and such has been the case but not that it will be the case based on such and such been the case so far, and since these necessary connections are absent in events we have no choice but to state that "this idea [is] derived from reflection on the operations of our own minds, and [is] copied from...internal impression[s]".<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, he claims that in order to be able to infer a cause and effect relation in the nature you have to be exposed to experience and without experience, one cannot infer a connection: "But no man, having seen only one body move after being impelled by another, could infer that every other body will move after a like impulse."<sup>8</sup>

One could say, Hume had doubts in whether reason could guarantee any knowledge to the relation between cause and effect. Therefore, he resorted to the idea of a life that the future of it is completely undecided. Claiming that matters of fact are governed by cause and effect which are not *a priori* and cannot be justified by reason, and that there is no knowledge to the outside world but through matters of fact leaves knowledge of the external world in doubt.

However, Kant offered solutions for Hume's argument which results in claiming that reason cannot guarantee the relation between cause and effect and that the external world is inferred from our experience. While Hume came to the conclusion that cause and effect is not a necessary connection and that the only necessity involved in thinking about events is a psychological necessity based on habit, Kant tried to show that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect in order to save metaphysics from skepticism. Hume's fork stated that there are two kinds of knowledge; analytic and synthetic.

Kant (1966) already agreed with Hume that there is a synthetic (matters of fact) element in causality but in order to safeguard metaphysics in general and cause and effect in particular, he introduced the concept of "synthetic a priori". In "Critique of Pure Reason" Kant states that the causality that we hold for events is universal, but experience is incapable of showing this universality; therefore this universality must have an *a priori* source. That *a priori* source is, according to Kant, in our epistemic faculty.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, synthetic *a priori* is the concept that Kant introduces in order to save the experience from chaos. His famous example in Prolegomena in discussing  $7+5=12$  with the conclusion that "the concept of twelve is by no means thought by merely thinking of the combination of seven and five"<sup>10</sup> shows that arithmetic which was held to be analytic, is synthetic *a priori* for

Kant. Kant argues that Hume's skepticism stems from his fork, since analytic knowledge depends on avoiding contradiction whereas matters of fact do not. Kant tries to overcome Hume by rejecting this dichotomy and gives the main role to "synthetic *a priori*" in this rejection. While synthetic *a priori* is "*a priori*" yet its validity does not depend on the law of non-contradiction but refers to objects of experience.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that Kant's view on causality and arithmetic may be disputed widely today, we want to emphasize on the role of his reasoning against skepticism. Kant observed the strengths and limitations of reason and tried to open room for faith, the former was for avoiding skepticism and the latter for embracing God, Free will, and Morality.

### 3. Ghazali

Ghazali observed that philosophers' argument for causality was flawed. In his Magnum Opus "The Incoherence of the Philosophers", Ghazali argues that there is no necessary or internal connection between cause and effect. What we call cause and effect is a result of habit and there is no real cause and effect, the events following each other are concomitant events that we believe one following the other necessarily while there is no such necessary connection. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Ghazali preceded Hume for some six centuries in attacking causality which results in considering the relation of cause and effect as a custom without necessity. Ghazali held an occasionalist theory of causality that needs to be explained a bit further.

In order to give a more detailed account of Ghazali's view on causality the differences between Ghazali, on the one hand, and Avicenna and Aristotle on the other should be explained. Following Aristotle, Avicenna held that causality should be explained in terms of essential power. According to Aristotle, there are two sorts of powers in things; an active power in the cause and a passive power in the effect. A causal connection occurs when these two kinds of powers match. Fire, for instance, has an essence with an active power for inflammation while cotton has a passive power which makes it flammable. This match of essential powers provides a necessary connection between the cause and effect.

Avicenna makes a distinction between essential powers and inseparable accidents. In the case of essential powers and their

resultant causal relation there is a necessary relation and that is why an effect follows a cause constantly and without exception. However, as for inseparable accidents there is no necessary relation and an event follows the other in most cases rather than in all cases without exception. Avicenna gives the example of scammony that causes purgation in the bile. This characteristic of scammony, according to Avicenna, cannot be considered as an essential power of this material since the purgation can be an accidental characteristic of scammony. That is why Avicenna adds the phrase "in our lands" when he writes that scammony causes purgation.<sup>12</sup> This indicates that in some other lands it might be the case that scammony does not cause purgation in the bile.

The differentiation between essential and accidental causation, leads Avicenna to take part with Aristotle in his theory of knowledge. While Aristotle gave the main role to induction in gaining knowledge about causal relations, Avicenna put experimentation in a more privileged position. According to Avicenna, induction without experimentation would merely lead to an "overwhelming assumption" (*Zann Ghalib*) which cannot be considered as knowledge. Experimentation can provide us with more reliable generalizations than mere induction. Referring to McGinnis's argument, Griffel states that Avicenna with his emphasis on experimentation came very close to the modern epistemology: "Jon McGinnis argues that in Avicenna's critique of induction, he moves from a pure Aristotelian position of how we have knowledge of causal connections toward the direction of a more modern epistemology where causal connections are not learned from the universal forms of the active intellect. Avicenna's follower al-Ghazali went much further on this path."<sup>13</sup>

As Griffel states, Ghazali goes much further in giving an account of causal relation in terms of experimentation rather than essential powers. Experimentation is much more related to the conditions of experiment than to inner essences. Even though Ghazali along with Avicenna holds that in experimentation a hidden syllogism is involved, but nevertheless he holds that this syllogism refers more to a mental judgment of the experimenter than to an inner essence. Thus, by putting more emphasis on experimentation, Ghazali paves the ground for denying the essential connection between the cause and the effect.

Ghazali (1963) argues in chapter 17 against causality and states that observation can only affirm one event following the other but not causality. He gives the example of a blind man who has just gained sight, and after that he would assume that the light of the sun is what gives objects colors since in its absence he cannot see any color.<sup>14</sup> This example shows that if one has not had any experience, he would not be able to draw causality from the succession of events.

In addition to this claim, Ghazali argues that the event that is held to be the cause is not necessarily the only cause. The best way to express his refutation of causality is to quote a part of chapter 17 where he explains briefly and adequately why causality does not follow: "Take any two things...the affirmation of one does not imply the affirmation of the other; nor does its denial imply the denial of the other. The existence of one is not necessitated by the existence of the other, nor its non-existence by the non-existence of the other."<sup>15</sup>

Ghazali continues that God wills to put the two concomitant events side by side and this is the only reason they follow each other and there is no necessary connection between them. Therefore, in the case of miracles where cause and effect are separated, God has willed otherwise. In reply to the question that without causality there will be no order in the world or, in Kant's terminology, metaphysics would not be possible, Ghazali states that God wills that every event should occur in a manner that seems habitual to us; however He has and would will otherwise if He wants to.

There is an interesting point in Ghazali's view concerning miracles. As mentioned above, miracles are important for Ghazali because they show that there is no necessary causal relation. However, when Ghazali compares miracle to sorcery, he provides a room for rationality: "That the miracle points towards the veracity [of him who performs it] cannot be accepted unless one also accepts [the existence of] sorcery (*sihr*) and knows how to distinguish it from a miracle, and unless one acknowledges that God doesn't lead humans astray. It is well known that the question of whether or not God leads us astray is quite difficult to answer."<sup>16</sup>



It is interesting to note that Ghazali, unlike Descartes (1960), does not accept that it is a simple question to answer that God does not lead us astray. This is because, according to Ghazali, miracle and sorcery can have the same function in believing the claim of a real prophet as well as a pretender. It is not reasonable to say that God will intervene in the case of the pretender. Thus, it is quite possible that sorcery deceives people without the intervention of God. That is why Ghazali introduces "direct experience" (*dhawq*) and puts it, compared to miracle, at a higher level for believing a prophet. Even though miracle is a sign for the prophecy but it might be misleading, however, experiencing the real effects of a prophet's invitation on one's own soul is what can be relied upon. This direct experience is like what a person feels when thinks about the content of Quran and in effect weeps or shivers or gets goose bumps. Referring to this method of direct experience, Ghazali says: "Seek certain knowledge about prophecy from this method and not from the turning of a stick into a serpent or from the splitting of the moon. For if you consider that event by itself, and do not include the many circumstances that accompany this event you may think that it is sorcery (*sihr*) and imagination (*tahyil*)."<sup>17</sup>

The lack of necessity in causality and the insufficiency of observed causes create a skeptical episteme and Ghazali finds its solution to be the God's constant will in every occasion. This does not, of course, mean that Ghazali holds that God has ad hoc decisions without any constant manner; rather as Quran refers to God's "constant manner" (*sonnat Allah*) in His deeds, it is reasonable to think that God wills similarly in similar situations. The point Ghazali makes is that this constant manner of God is not the same as a necessary connection between cause and effect, it neither indicates that God might not will otherwise.

#### **4. Comparison**

There can be two lines of comparison; one between Ghazali and Hume and the other between Ghazali and Kant.

Since Ghazali sometimes gives his arguments with a theological flavor, one might think that his arguments are theological rather than logical. Take this example: "We say that it is God who, through the intermediacy of angels or directly, is the

agent of the creation of blackness in cotton, or the disintegration of its parts, and of their transformation into a smouldering heap of ashes".<sup>18</sup>

However, as Nadler states Ghazali has a logical orientation in dealing with the necessary connections in nature and in this regard Ghazali is similar to Hume. Referring to Ghazali's argument as to the existential distinction and independence between "causes" and "effects" ("This is not That; nor can That be This"<sup>19</sup>), Nadler concludes that Ghazali deals with logical relations: "Clearly, this is a logical point; it requires no theological assumptions; nor does it, for Ghazali, rest upon any."<sup>20</sup>

Drawing on this logical orientation of Ghazali Nadler points out a tension in Ghazali's view. Referring to Ghazali's statement that "No one has power over the Impossible"<sup>21</sup>, Nadler states: "Thus, what is possible or impossible is so in itself. But, then, so must be what is necessary or not. If God can bring about some sequence of events (say, A followed by not-B) contrary to the usual course of nature, this is only because that sequence is, in itself and independently of God's power, logically possible and not impossible."<sup>22</sup>

Nadler is right in stating that if the impossible in relation to God's power is impossible in itself, then the same can be said about the possibility and necessity of things in terms of their inner requirements.

Let's concentrate on Ghazali's point in this case. In dealing with the impossible in relation to God's power, Ghazali states that there is only one limitation for God's power which is the law of non-contradiction.<sup>23</sup>

Now the question is this: What Ghazali means by limitation? Is it a limitation for God from the outside or from the inside? It seems that there is a dilemma here with the following two horns: If, on the one hand, Ghazali holds that the limitation is from the outside of God, then God is limited by something else which cannot be acceptable given God's definition. On the other hand, if the limitation is from the inside, it means that there is no distinction between the realm of God and the realm of rational laws such as the law of non-contradiction. Hence, Ghazali's attempt to deny necessity in order to provide room for God's power fails.

To get out of this dilemma we should abandon the alleged conflict between God's power and the necessary connection in nature. Sheikh states that according to Ghazali God is not limited by any external power or law except for non-contradiction which he has made himself to abide it.<sup>24</sup> This can be taken to indicate that the limitation to God's power is from the inside. As it was mentioned above, if this reading is closer to what Ghazali means, then he should admit that God's omnipotence does not mean that God's power is indifferent to rationality be it in terms of impossibility or necessity. The only thing that can be said about Ghazali's denial of necessary connections in nature is to take it to indicate that we do not know whether the current natural relations are really necessary or not. That is to say, Ghazali cannot hold that necessary relations are by no means reasonable.

The difference that Nadler mentions between Ghazali and Hume is instructive in this regard. Nadler (1996) points out that while Ghazali had an ontological concern in the denial of necessary connection Hume limited himself to an epistemological orientation: "In the most well-known use of this argument, Hume concludes only to an epistemological claim: whether or not there are any necessary connections in nature, we can never rationally justify our belief in them... The occasionalists Malebranche and Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, go further and argue that where there are no demonstrable causal relations, there are no causal relations tout court."<sup>25</sup>

According to Nadler, while Hume concludes only that we cannot rationally justify necessary connections in nature and taking it as an open question whether there are such connections, Ghazali goes further and concludes that there can be no such connections in the nature since we cannot justify them. Nadler holds that there is a conflation here between nomological and logical necessity. The former refers to a sort of necessity between the events that might be expressed in natural laws, whereas the latter concerns necessity in an absolute way: "What is necessary on account of the natural order (that is, what is necessary *ex hypothesi* or *secundum quid*) is not absolutely (i.e., logically) necessary, since God, in his absolute power, could have established a different natural order."<sup>26</sup>

What is needed in order to provide a reasonable understanding of Ghazali's view is to limit the claim to the

epistemological level rather than extending it to the ontological level. That is to say, if we take Ghazali to hold merely that we cannot realize whether necessary connections are involved in the current order of nature, instead of negating its possibility altogether, then his position would be defensible.

According to such a reading of Ghazali, Riker's statement that the denial of necessary causality is a two-edged sword seems not to be acceptable. Riker (1996) holds that the denial of necessary causality can lead to further skepticism as Hume, drawing on his argument against necessary connections in *An Enquiry*, concluded that there could not be any miracles, or even questioned the existence of God in his *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion*. On the other hand, the same argument might lead to limiting reason in order to provide room for faith, as Riker's interpretation of Ghazali concludes: "In the end, one must state that the denial of necessary causality, while a powerful philosophical argument, *is a two-edged sword*, that can be used against religion by leading to further skepticism or against philosophy in leaving room for faith in the omnipotence of God."<sup>27</sup>

However, if what is said above in interpreting Ghazali's view is sound, then one should not be so much concerned about the Riker's alarm. This is because the denial of necessary connection, being epistemological, will amount merely to the denial of justifying the currently understood order of nature rather than extending it to the ontological level and negating it altogether.

Now we turn to the comparison between Ghazali and Kant. Their similarity has been notified in the literature. For instance, Saeed Sheikh<sup>28</sup> mentions the following similarities. Both Ghazali and Kant destroyed rational philosophy by appealing to the limits of human reason; both of them held that human reason cannot prove the existence of God and the spirit and the eternity of the soul; both of them provided an amalgamation of rationalism and experience; both of them looked for a particular place for volition and supporting "volo ergo sum" instead of Cartesian "cogito ergo sum"; and finally that both of them tried to provide room for faith by limiting reason.

On the other hand, in terms of the differences between Ghazali and Kant, Griffel for instance holds that the latter looked for a priori knowledge whereas the former, under the influence of

Avicenna, was concerned about the innate knowledge: "Unlike early modern Western thinkers such as René Descartes or Immanuel Kant, Avicenna is not interested in the question of what is *a priori* knowledge. He is rather interested to find out which kind of knowledge do all humans find true if they have only sense perception at their disposal, without being influenced by education, the opinions of other people, or any other factors that come with their individual life circumstances."<sup>29</sup>

Griffel's point can be challenged in the following way. Griffel is right in saying that Avicenna, and Ghazali were interested in knowing innate human knowledge "if they have only sense perception at their disposal". However, as Griffel himself mentions the following without paying enough attention to it, Avicenna did not limit himself to merely sense perception since he held that there are some principles for sense perception; principles such as "assumptions about unity or multiplicity, about the limitations of things, or about cause and effect".<sup>30</sup>

These principles of sense perception are quite similar to what Kant held as *a priori*. This is because not only are these principles necessary for sense perception but also that they are "outside of the things that are perceived by the senses".<sup>31</sup> It seems clear to hold that Kant's synthetic *a priori* is similar to Avicenna's sense perception along with their principles because synthetic *a priori* too refers to sense perception along with some frameworks of the mind.

Griffel has successfully shown that Ghazali was under the influence of Avicenna in terms of; 1) his treatment of innate elements including first principles and true estimation judgments (*wahmiat*); and 2) his treatment of normative statements as based on conventions (*mash'horat*). The first point provided Ghazali with a way for showing that people have innate knowledge about God and the second point paved the ground for Ghazali to hold that morality is not innate and thus moral norms should be taken from Quran. All these findings are instructive but what needs to be noted is that there is no big difference between Kant, on the one hand, and Avicenna and Ghazali on the other hand in terms of *a priori* knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarize the three philosophers' problem and solution, we can state that Ghazali first observes what leads to skepticism and by employing the concept of God as an assumption, he concludes that God's will is behind the regulation of nature and he can, in principle, will otherwise. Kant, on the other hand, employs synthetic *a priori* to overcome Hume's skepticism and to render metaphysics possible and open room for faith and consequently God. Ghazali uses God to approach a reasonable stance with regard to skepticism while Kant uses reason to reach faith. Hume, however, did not find any argument satisfactory for his skepticism and remained a skeptic because he did not accept anything else as knowledge except for his fork.

The most important result of this interpretation suggested for Ghazali's view is that it makes the conflict between rationality and faith untenable. If God's power and rationality belong to the same realm, then there is no need to limit reason in order to provide room for faith as Ghazali and Kant held. What in fact both of them were concerned about was to take the current scientific rationality as the criterion. Ghazali held that God's power should not be limited by what is understood as necessary relations and Kant was concerned about the mechanical scientific understanding in terms of which there will be no room for morality and religion. However, if one avoids considering the current rationality as the final feature of rationality, then there will be no fear from rationality as a threat to God's power or faith in God. What is needed is to go beyond the limits of the current rationality. Thus, God's power and deeds, such as miracles, can be rational even though it might not be understandable in terms of current rationality. The criterion is that these features of God's power and deeds should be rational in principle even though not in practice (in terms of the current status and understanding of rationality). This stance is different from the two following stances: one that holds a conflict between reason and faith and thus turns faith to a non-rational matter; and the other that reduces faith and God's power to the current rationality and thereby renders all the un-conceived secrets as null.

### Notes

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5. Ibid, p. 43.
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7. Ibid, p. 43.
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9. Ibid, p. 14.
10. Ibid, p. 56.
11. Ibn Sina, 1375/1956, al-Manteq, al-Burhan, 97.
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15. al-Munqidh, 32, 5-11, cited in Griffel, F. (2009). *Al-Ghazali's philosophical theology*. Oxford University Press, p. 196
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28. Griffel, F. (2012). Al-Ghazālī's Use of "Original Human Disposition" (*Fi ra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, *The Muslim World* (102):1, Pages 1–209, p. 19)
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