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Al-Ghazali on Causation, Omnipotence, and Human Freedom

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Introduction

Al-Ghazali, in his work entitled “On Power,” argues that all of the events that occur in this world, whether sensed or not, are caused by one being: Allah (hereafter referred to as “god”). He even goes so far as to suggest that there is no true connection between what people would traditionally call causes and effects – an argument most famously championed by David Hume, though this seems to be as far as the similarities go between these two philosophers.¹ Instead, there is only what god causes to happen. The acts that seemingly cause purported effects to happen are, in reality, merely coincidental correlations of otherwise unrelated phenomenon, and it is really god who is producing these effects. Since god is all-powerful, he is the one who causes all things to occur and, according to al-Ghazali, if that were not the case, then god could not be considered omnipotent.² In this paper, we will explore al-Ghazali’s line of thought regarding causation and analyze its implications regarding human freedom and moral responsibility.³

Defining Omnipotence

Before delving too deeply into al-Ghazali’s thought regarding causation, it is first prudent to understand how he views god, particularly with respect to the omnipotence of god as this will have a strong bearing on his account of causation. Traditionally, omnipotence has been understood

¹ Edward Omar Moad, “A Significant Difference Between al-Ghazali and Hume on Causation,” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 3 (2008): 22-39. In this article, Moad argues that al-Ghazali and David Hume are more different than they are alike and explicitly states that Hume himself argued against the very position al-Ghazali holds, namely occasionalism.

² Al-Ghazali, “On Power,” in *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources*, trans. Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 258. “[T]here is no creator save God nor originator except Him.” Al-Ghazali makes it clear that god is not only the source of every event, but also the immediate reason behind it.

³ Al-Ghazali’s notion of causation, of course, extends beyond simply the acts of man – he gives an example of fire burning cotton in his argument; however, we will be focusing exclusively on how his notion of causation pertains to the acts of man.

to mean the capacity or the ability to do all that is logically possible.⁴ So, to cite a classic example, an omnipotent being could not make a triangle that has five sides or a triangle such that the sum of its angles does not equal 180 degrees.

The question now, of course, is whether this definition of omnipotence is acceptable for al-Ghazali. He states that every possible is an object of power, every possible occurs by power, and god's power is related to every possible.⁵ In other words, all possible circumstances or events have the potential to be actualized and god is able to actualize every one of the possible circumstances or events – no possible is outside of god's power and everything that is outside of god's power is considered impossible. In the First Subsidiary Topic of "On Power," al-Ghazali then raises the question of whether something that is contrary to fact can also be considered an object of power. Through a line of argumentation which includes an example he calls Zayd's death,⁶ al-Ghazali concludes that contraries to fact are logical impossibilities, which are not considered objects of power. So, to al-Ghazali, the traditional definition of omnipotence is acceptable, at least in a certain sense. In another sense, however, the definition seems to be lacking.

Omnipotence and Causality

God understood as an omnipotent being, according to the definition just described, means that he can do all that is logically possible, which suggests that god can choose to act and certain

⁴ Andrew Loke, "Divine Omnipotence and Moral Perfection," *Religious Studies* 46, no. 4 (2010): 525. With respect to the heritage of this definition, Loke mentions that "the overwhelming majority of philosophers and theologians, at least since Aquinas, have not thought that omnipotence includes the ability to do the logically impossible."

⁵ Al-Ghazali, 256.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 257-258. In this example, al-Ghazali is determining whether god has control over the life of a dead man named Zayd. He concludes that god had control over Zayd's life while he was living and he also has the power to restore life back to Zayd, but while Zayd is dead god does not have control over his life because there is no life for him to have control over.

events are thereby produced by his actions. For al-Ghazali, though, god may not be considered omnipotent by merely having the potential to do all that is logically possible and cause events. Instead, god can only be considered omnipotent if he, in fact, is the real and immediate cause for all occurring events. To ascribe causality to anything other than god is to rob god of his omnipotence. According to al-Ghazali, an object of power's occurring "from the [temporal] power would nullify the extensiveness of the [divine] power, which is absurd...everything is occasioned by [divine] power."⁷ Causal power, in this sense, is exclusive to god.

What this suggests is that god must be the real intermediary link between events – when the cue ball strikes the eight ball in billiards and the eight ball moves, it is not because the cue ball strikes it, but rather because god moves it. There are no such things as causes and effects for al-Ghazali.⁸ There are only events, or, rather, there is one true cause that produces all events, both observable and non-observable: God. The purported "effects" that man habitually sees immediately following an event or "cause," such as a wet ground following rainfall or death following decapitation, are really merely results of divine power. It just so happens that god has ordained it such that certain events typically follow other events;⁹ however, being the true cause behind a wet ground or death means that god can make it so that these events do not follow rainfall

⁷ Ibid., 265. He also emphatically states, "Woe to those who stray from the path of God, those who are deluded by their limited power and weak ability, those who erroneously believe that they take part with God (exalted be He!) in creating, originating, and introducing the like of these marvels and signs" (259).

⁸ Edward Omar Moad, "Al-Ghazali's Occasionalism and the Natures of Creatures," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58, no. 2 (October 2005): 96. "[Ghazali insists] not only that inanimate things do not bring about anything with necessity, but that they do not bring anything about at all."

⁹ Michael E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazali," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 148-149.

or decapitation. Since there is no necessary connection between decapitation and death, god can interrupt the usual chain of events as he pleases.¹⁰

Causality and Man's Power

We have thus far discussed al-Ghazali's views on causality as it relates to natural phenomenon, but what about causality as it relates to sentient beings, specifically humans? Is a man able to cause an event, like simply lifting his arm or opening a door? Does he have control over an "object of power?" Al-Ghazali wrestles with this question in the Second Subsidiary Topic in "On Power." He recognizes that man has power,¹¹ in a certain sense, but knows that man cannot have exclusive causal power over something since that would rob god of his omnipotence and the extensiveness of his own divine power. Furthermore, man cannot have causal power over something which god does not have power since, as previously stated, anything that is outside of god's power is impossible. Yet at the same time, to suggest that two entities have causal power over a single event seems absurd.

What al-Ghazali does is argue against the absurdity of two entities having power over a singular object of power. He posits that both god and a man have power over a single object of power; however, the power that god possesses over a single object of power and the power that a man possesses over that same object of power are quite different from one another. God has power in that his is true causal power – he is the only one who can truly cause events to happen. A man has power in that he is related to the causal power that god possesses – he is the conduit, the

¹⁰ Stephen Riker, "Al-Ghazali on Necessary Causality in 'The Incoherence of the Philosophers,'" *Monist* 79, no. 3 (1996): 316. Riker, in this article, fully articulates how al-Ghazali demonstrates the lack of a necessary connection between causes and effects.

¹¹ Al-Ghazali, 258.

channel through which the causal power of god flows to produce effects. In this sense, then, man can be said to have power, although not causally effective power over something like god has. For al-Ghazali, god is the only true agent since he is “the creator of all the acts that humans perform.”¹²

Human Freedom According to Al-Ghazali

Given the idea that god is the only true agent, the question now arises as to whether or not the notion of human free will can possibly co-exist with the conception of causality that al-Ghazali has laid out. This question, of course, hinges upon the way in which human free will is defined.

There seems to be at least one sense in which al-Ghazali could defend the notion of human free will. Even though god is the creator and originator of all things on this conception, even the creator and originator of human acts, a man never acts against himself.¹³ In other words, god does not put a desire in a man to perform a certain act x, but then force him to do act y instead. When I raise my arm or open a door, my will is not fighting against what my body is doing – my desires and my actions line up, even though it is god who is ultimately the originator of that action or of that effect of raising my arm or opening a door. So, if free will is merely defined as acting in accordance with one’s desires, then human free will is compatible with al-Ghazali’s notion of causation. The problem with holding to this definition of free will, however, is that it would seem to conflate free will with free action – the act itself is free in that it lines up with one’s desired intention, but the desired intention is not up to the one performing the act.

¹² Matthew Levering, “Providence and Predestination in Al-Ghazali,” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1037 (2010): 60.

¹³ Al-Ghazali, 261. Al-Ghazali here references how a man’s action is still ultimately a result of god’s acting through him, but that those actions should not be misconstrued as involuntary “convulsions.” It is still a voluntary act on the part of the person taking the action.

There are other ways that free will can be defined, however, which may help to distinguish free will from free actions, but which may also make free will irreconcilable with al-Ghazali's views on causation. Robert Kane defines free will as "the power of agents to be the ultimate creators (or originators) and sustainers of their own ends or purposes."¹⁴ If free will is to be taken in this sense, then, regardless of whether or not a man acts in accordance with his desires, if he is not the originator of those desires (or "ends" as Kane puts it), then he cannot be considered free. On this conception, al-Ghazali may not be able to easily argue that a man has free will, but he may still be able to argue that a man has free actions.

Moral Responsibility

If we continue along the path of the implications of al-Ghazali's metaphysics of causation, another important consideration may be where the weight of moral responsibility lies in this framework. Accepting that humans may not have free will as defined in the latter part of the last section, but that it may be argued that humans still have free actions, then can they be held morally responsible for those free actions or does the brunt of responsibility ultimately fall upon god since he is the true cause of all events?

Based upon al-Ghazali's metaphysics, if we are to place the weight of moral responsibility with human beings, then perhaps the only argument that could be made in support of this would be that a man still has power, at least in a certain sense, over objects of power. His actions are still considered voluntary on al-Ghazali's conception and his actions line up with his desires. In his

¹⁴ Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

own mind, a man is not being coerced to perform a particular action. That, however, is where a significant objection can reside.

A man may be considered to have power over objects of power; however, casually effective power resides only with god. If man is merely a conduit or a channel through which the casually effective power of god flows, then ultimately the happenings of the world whether good or bad are all linked back to god. Even if man is not acting against his desires when he does either a morally praiseworthy or a morally abhorrent act, it is the case that both his desires were placed within him and that he carried out those desires because of god. God is the mover of man, both in his will and in his actions. Because of this, it would appear difficult for al-Ghazali to successfully argue that the brunt of moral responsibility for his actions lies with man and not with god.

Conclusion

With respect to causation, god is the mover of all things both animate and inanimate. For al-Ghazali, there are no real causes and effects that exist in the world, but rather just the habitual succession of certain events which exist solely because of god's actions.¹⁵ Even man is not considered the cause of any event, though he still has power in that he is related to the ultimate causal power that is god.

Considering how this position affects the human free will and moral responsibility, these two notions seem salvageable only if defined in strict terms. More likely, however, they appear to be more or less untenable ideas given the overall causal framework that al-Ghazali holds to; although, whether these two notions are even important to al-Ghazali is still a matter up for debate.

¹⁵ Riker, 322.

If we accept, however, that moral responsibility resides with god and not with man, then this would seem to entail that god is the author of evil. This in-and-of-itself is a significant result, and possibly even a significant issue, for al-Ghazali's position.

One of the lingering questions that al-Ghazali unfortunately did not get a chance to answer, though, is if man's power is distinguishable from the power of other things, even non-sentient entities, in the world. If man only has power by merely being related to the true causal power (namely, god) and is just the channel through which god acts and affects change, then what is the difference between man and fire? Fire is the channel through which god causes things to burn just as man is the channel through which god causes doors to open. This seems a significant question not just for the thought of al-Ghazali, but also for any who hold to the occasionalist metaphysic.

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