_____

The Relationship between God's Knowledge and Will in the al-Ghazālian Theology: A Critical Approach

HASAN AKKANAT
Hacı Bayram Veli University

Abstract: Three divine attributes (knowledge, will and power) discussed in the classical ages of Islamic theology were established as a doctrine in time, and the other doctrines of divine attributes were removed from the Sunnī theology. Divine knowledge is an attribute whose activity is generally to know all possible options about the universe, while the divine will is another attribute whose activity is to choose only one of the similar or dissimilar options. But they are seen incompatible when considered in the frame of God's relationship to the universe: (i) if it is obviously known which option will happen, it is not really chosen at the moment of choice, and (ii) if it is uncertain which option will be chosen, it cannot be known which option will happen until preference. What is problematic here is that you attempt to design the divine attributes and actions according to two-valued logic: His all activities must happen one after another. Then, which solution is proposed for the issue by al-Ghazālī, who claims that knowledge and the will are the mutually compatible and complementary attributes for God's relationship to the universe? I discuss whether al-Ghazālī supports his claim with adequate arguments or not.

Keywords: Al-Ghazālī, divine attributes, omniscience, divine will, two-valued logic.

_____

HASAN AKKANAT ✉
Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, Polatlı Faculty of Divinity, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Kemal Bıyıkoğlu Cad. No: 22, Polatlı, Ankara, 06900, TR [hasan_akkanat1971@hotmail.com]

Introduction

Some theistic theologians and philosophers such as al-Ash'arī (d. 936), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and Leibniz (d. 1716) claim that the life, will, omniscience, and omnipotence are the compatible attributes with each other, and that those are the best and the most perfect attributes to describe God: a notion of God in which even one of these attributes is overlooked is not perfect.[1] But I have some doubts whether there is a consistency among all divine attributes describing divine essence in general, and more specifically between divine will and omniscience, for the opinion that both are compatible attributes and equally function for divine essence cannot be consistently defended:

(i) A thing known undoubtedly to take place in a certain moment of the future can never be willed or preferred. For example, if God, whose knowledge about the universe is *always* complete and perfect, knows that Q (among the others such as P, X, Z) will take place in a certain time and place, Q will absolutely take place according to His knowledge.

(ii) If it is uncertain that which option (among the others) God will choose, nobody knows which option will take place by the choice. Suppose that God has various (or infinite) options about the universe to prefer one over the others, and that He is (now) in the decision phase: which one will He choose? It is seen that there must be a kind of epistemic uncertainty until (or immediately before) He prefers one of them to others. Namely, although He knows in detail what Q, P, and X are, it will (or must) be entirely uncertain that which option He will choose in decision instant.

Then, if you strongly emphasize divine will to describe God perfectly, you cannot defend the other attribute, omniscience, by the equal emphasis in a theological system rationalized with two-

---

1 For more information on free will, see İsmail Şimşek, *Düşünce Tarihinde Tanrı'nın Özgürlüğü Sorunu* (Ankara: Elis Yayınları, 2017), 191-270. Also see John Martin Fischer & Robert Kane, *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

valued logic. The essential principle of two-valued logic is stated by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* that *"it is, that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect,"*[2] and in *De Interpretatione* that *"the positive and negative propositions are said to be contradictory which have the same subject and predicate."*[3] This *"is the most certain of all principles"*[4] says Aristotle. Avicenna explains it in the way that *"one does not issue except for one,"* as one of the most general principles of his psychology and theology. Although some theologians such as al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī raises some critical objections to the Avicennian principle, this Aristotelian-logical principle became the main principle designing both philosophical and theological methodology under different appearances as the ultimate basis for the scientific paradigm from Aristotle until the 18th century. For example, the method of "classification and successive elimination" (*al-sabr wa al-taqsīm*), the primary one of the epistemological methods of Ghazālian theology, is a method for reducing a claim to one of two opposite propositional forms, positive or negative, because *"the positive and negative propositions are said to be contradictory which have the same subject and predicate."*[5] If one of these two opposite propositions is true, the other is certainly untrue, and there is no third possible way. What is problematic here is that you attempt to design the divine attributes and actions in the frame of two-valued logic: God *first* must know something and *then* wills it. His all activities must happen one after another, not in a "moment," according to two-valued logic. Also, He *first* must be *only* at the choosing step, not both before and after choice at the same time. The fact that God *first* knows something, and *later* prefers it among the others in His knowledge, *then* begins to create it,

---

2   Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, trans. W. David Ross, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. VIII, ed. W. David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 1005b19-20.

3   Aristotle, *De İnterpretatione*, trans. E. M. Edghill, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. I, 17a34-5.

4   Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 1005b21.

5   Aristotle, *De İnterpretatione*, 17a34-5.

shows that divine activities occur in a fictional sequence designed by two-valued logic which enables Him not to be in two different states in one moment, or to do three actions in a moment, or to engage in four different jobs at the same time. Then, it requires a hierarchy in which God would successively put His activities into practice, and we encounter a priority and posteriority issue. This is the point in where divine knowledge conflicts with the divine will.

It is well known that al-Ghazālī is one of the Muslim theologians who argue that all attributes of God can be defended by equal emphasis without posing any problem for God's essence and His relationship with the universe. In what follows I present al-Ghazālī's statements regarding two attributes in some passages from *al-Iqtisād fī al-Iʿtiqād* and *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, and discuss them in terms of whether there is a consistency between these two attributes.

1. Al-Ghazālī's Arguments for God's Knowledge and Will

Al-Ghazālī makes a clear distinction between two divine attributes, the will and knowledge, in terms of their functions, in some passages of *al-Iqtisād* and *Tahāfut*:

> We mentioned both in our book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, and they have no escape from them at all.

> One of them is that some of the celestial movement are ... from the east to the west, and some are ... from the west to east. The opposite of that is equivalent to it in possibility, since the directions are equivalent for motions. How then is it necessitated by the eternal essence ... that a certain direction is determined instead of an opposite direction that is equivalent to it in all respects? ...

> The second is that (...) a pole (*qutb*) is (...) one of two points that are opposite to each other on the surface of the sphere (...), and the equator (*al-mintiqah*) is a great circle at the middle of the sphere that is equidistant from the two poles. We say that the body of the outermost sphere (*al-falak al-aqsā*) is symmetric and uniform, and every point on it could be imagined to serve as a pole. So, what is

that which necessitates the specification of two points among, according to them, infinitely many points? There must be an attribute that is additional to the essence and whose function is to specify a thing among its counterparts. This attribute is nothing but the will.[6]

As opposed to the philosopher's views on divine attributes, Al-Ghazālī's all attempts in both cases are to show that the will *"whose functions is to specify a thing among its counterparts"* is different from the omniscience whose function is to know all possible options available about a fact or event. Existing separately, these two attributes are different in terms of their functions, and both are added to God's essence.

At the very beginning of the "Eleventh Discussion" of *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, al-Ghazālī presents a series of propositions to find a rational basis for omniscience:

> Inasmuch as existence for the Muslims is confined to the temporally originated and the eternal, there being for them no eternal other than God and His attributes, [all things] other than Him being originated from His direction through His will, a necessary premise regarding His knowledge became realized for them. For that which is willed must necessarily be known to the willer. On this, they built that everything is known to Him because all [things] are willed by Him and originated by His will. Hence, there is no generated being that is not originated by His will, nothing remaining [uncreated] except Himself.[7]

Although the passage attempts to develop an argument for omniscience, it also gives further details about the will: 'if there is something except God's essence and attributes, it is temporarily originated through His will,' the argument continues, 'if something is temporarily originated through His will, then it is known to Him,' then 'if there is something except God's essence and attributes, it is definitely known to Him.' It is also possible to draw

---

[6] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief*, trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 108.

[7] Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, A parallel English-Arabic text, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 125.

another conclusion or a principle containing the will, as mentioned above, from this syllogism which is specifically created to make an argument for omniscience: *what is willed must necessarily be known to its willer*.[8]

This short sentence seems obvious, but we need to analyze it properly in order to reach a quite clear understanding of the relationship between knowledge and will. Then, we can start by reversing some parts of the sentence: *A willer necessarily knows what he wills*. For example, Ali wills water to drink, then he knows necessarily what water is before he wills it. It is true that human beings necessarily know *what* they will, but not *which one* they will –more precisely they cannot necessarily know which one they choose before their choices. We all know that there is a clear distinction 'what' and 'which one.' For instance, Ali knows that *what* water means both before and after he wills, and that what he chooses is water, but it is impossible for him to know *which one* (among the beverages) he will choose until he chooses drinking water or makes a decision for it. Before he chooses water, he has no knowledge about whether he drinks water or fruit juice. It is hardly possible for al-Ghazālī to accept such an idea of God, who has no knowledge about whether He will create the universe until He chooses it.

We must, then, consider the idea of God who knows in detail each part of the whole universe throughout His existence. A theist believes that God's existence has no starting point and endpoint since He continuously and always exists. It means that God always knows in detail each part of the universe both before and after He decides to create it, that is, He knows which option He will choose before He wills. But in this case, we encounter another significant problem: that He knows in detail everything which is existing now and will exist in future removes divine

---

8   The same conclusion can be re-established in a different syllogism: (i) the things willed by God must be known to Him, (ii) temporarily originated beings are the ones willed by God, (iii) then, temporarily originated beings are must be known to Him.

will, because if you certainly know which option you will choose in future, you do not really choose it, but only do it in accordance with your knowledge. For example, if Ali certainly knows now which option he will choose in the future, it will be meaningless for him to choose the option he already knows. Then, what is known to exist cannot be really willed.

It appears that the function of one of two attributes will be naturally secondary or inactive if you consider the other attribute as the principal or most appropriate for God's essence. We still do not know whether al-Ghazālī is aware of this conflict between the functions of these two attributes, and whether he offers a solution to it if he is aware of. It seems not possible to express any opinion so long as I cannot determine the Ghazālian content of the will. Therefore, we should analyze some passages that he attempts to define the will in *al-Iqtisād* and *Tahāfut*. It may be very useful to see them in their contexts:

> The will is nothing but an attribute whose function is only to distinguish a thing among its counterparts[9]

> The true nature of the will is to distinguish a thing among its counterparts.[10]

> Will [is] an attribute whose function is to differentiate a thing from its similar.[11]

Will is, according to al-Ghazālī, an attribute to distinguish a thing among its counterparts. We have already given its example in the opening sentences that we quoted from *al-Iqtisād* and *Tahāfut*: Will is an attribute whose function is to specify a thing among its counterparts/the similar alternatives standing separately in mind:

> God, the Exalted, knows that the existence of the world at the time when it was brought into existence is possible, and that its existence before or after that time is equivalent to it in possibility, for all

---

[9]   Al-Ghazālī, *al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief*, 106.
[10] Al-Ghazālī, *al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief*, 107.
[11] Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 22.

Hasan Akkanat

these possibilities are equivalent. Hence [divine] knowledge ought to attach to them as they are. If the attribute of will decrees that the world should come into existence at a specific time [among the others], knowledge would attach to this specification –namely, that it should exist at that time– because the will attaches to this specification.[12]

Al-Ghazālī states in the passage that there are different possible times in which the world will be created, and God knows each possible time for the creation, and that divine knowledge must attach to the will when it chooses one of those times. This statement is not adequately clear to understand what al-Ghazālī means regarding the relationship God and the universe, therefore we need to exemplify it: Suppose that there are some alternative times, Q, P, and X, in divine knowledge for the creation of the world. Al-Ghazālī argues that all these temporal points are equivalent to each other in possibility, and no one has a priority over the others in divine knowledge. When the will, whose function is *to choose* only one point among the other points, freely specifies one of them, knowledge attaches to this specification (or to the will). Namely, you cannot see any changing in God's knowledge before and after He wills because both knowledge and the will attach to the specification. On the other side, there is a close relationship between the will and action, since all choices are made by an agent who is free in his own actions. In his book *Tahāfut*, Al-Ghazālī claims,

Will necessarily entails knowledge. Similarly, action necessarily entails will.[13]

Agent is an expression [referring] to one from whom the act proceeds, together with the will to act by way of choice and the knowledge of what is willed."[14]

We cannot think of the will alone without considering knowledge, and of the action alone without considering the will.

---

[12] Al-Ghazālī, *al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief*, 105-6.
[13] Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 57.
[14] Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 56.

Will necessarily contains knowledge, because it acts according to knowledge, and similarly, action necessarily contains will, because every action depends on the will. And the term 'agent' contains knowledge, will and action since each action proceeds from the agent who acts according to his knowledge and will. Then, God, as an agent, has *knowledge* in which different or similar options about the universe are going to take place, and the *will* whose function is to choose one option among the others. He *knows* all possible options concerning each part of the universe and *chooses* freely someone among those possible options:

> If the attribute of will decrees that the world should come into existence at a specific time [among the others], knowledge would attach to this specification –namely, that it should exist at that time– because the will attaches to this specification. So the will is the cause of the specification; and knowledge attaches to this specification, is dependent on it, and does not affect it.[15]

According to the passage, whenever He wills the world to create at a specific time among infinite options of time (P, Q, X, Z, and so on) in His knowledge, He chooses freely, for instance, the option Q time, but not P, X or Z, and he starts the action of the creation of the world in Q time.[16] This result is actually not different than what I previously reached above. Therefore, if it is correct, the relationship al-Ghazālī establishes between divine will and knowledge deserves a strong criticism since he could not adequately rationalize it.

2. Some Difficulties in Ghazālian Arguments

a) Since al-Ghazālī established his theory of divine attributes in the Aristotelian paradigm, all of the criticism to be directed to Aristotelian paradigm will be also directed to his theory constructed with two-valued logic.

---

[15] Al-Ghazālī, *al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief,* 105-6.
[16] For more details on Ghazalian divine will, see Fehrullah Terkan, "el-Ğazâlî'nin İlahi İradeye Dair Argümanları ve Müslüman Filozofların İtirazlarına Verdiği Cevaplar", *900. Vefât Yılında İmâm Gazâlî*, (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı Yayınları, 2012), 615-39.

b) In my opinion, the statements of al-Ghazālī concerning divine will and knowledge are almost wholly anthropomorphic. It seems that human being and his attributes were the basic models to establish his theory of divine attributes.

c) A theist surely believes that God's essence, existence, and knowledge never change by other divine attributes or external effects. And there is no beginning for His essence, existence and knowledge, thus, you cannot use the term 'in past-eternity', implying a kind of beginning, for God's will or choice. It is a merely formal and fictional 'point' that, not corresponding to any factual reality, human mind –thinking in temporal or situational categories– imagines in order to start some divine activities. We initially start activity of the will from this formal and fictional point, and then make it a reality when we establish an argument for God's choice: "God chose it in the past-eternity." The Ghazālian theory of the divine will with 'optional choice' does not function without the word "in the past-eternity." If you remove it, you must refer it only to God's eternal essence, for God still exists even long before each point that can be marked for "eternity."

d) If you examine the Ghazālian theory in detail, you will confront some other big problems: Suppose that you go back to the beginning of the universe. At that time, what you see is that the universe has not existed yet, and that God will choose one of two options: (i) the universe will come into existence, and (ii) the universe will not. I wonder whether there is a real choice: since the universe does not actually exist, there is no two options, but the first one that God can will. The second option is always there by itself apart from God's will and without any preference.

e) Also, suppose that you are with God immediately before He chooses one of the infinite options regarding with the universe included in His knowledge. If you ask Him 'Which option (among the others) will you choose?', He will never answer to this big question at that time since He is going to choose one of them a little later. Therefore, He will never know which one he will choose until he chooses it. But, if he knew which one He

would choose before the choice, there would be no real choice.

f) According to al-Ghazālī, all options concerning the universe exist in God's knowledge in its possibility, and He prefers one to others by His own free will. But what does it mean 'to prefer one (of the alternative options) to others', and what kind of process should He follow to prefer a thing to others?

To prefer Q to the other alternative options (P, X, and Z) necessarily entails to compare Q with the others. Let us take the sentence 'Ali is going to go to school tomorrow' as Q, and the sentence 'Ali is going to go for his vacation tomorrow' as P, and the sentence 'Ali is going to die tomorrow' as Z. Each option has one (or more) justification that caused it to be chosen or eliminated by His will, and He knows each justification in detail. Keeping in our mind that the goodness is one of the attributes of God and He wants goodness for human beings, let us suppose that it is good for Ali 'to go to school tomorrow', which is the better option to be chosen by God. In such cases, He must compare all justifications, and find the better justification, and finally choose/prefer it to other options. If He directly makes His decision on Q without making a comparison among all justifications, there will be no significance to know more than one option and to choose one of them. But if He makes His decision immediately after He compares all justifications and finds the better, He will know only by syllogism the better one for Ali, for a comparison is a kind of syllogism. But we use a syllogism to gain knowledge about what we do not know. If He compares an option to the others, then, God will also complete His knowledge in time by syllogisms and reasonings to cover up His theoretical deficiency.

g) According to Ghazālian theory, God has all possible knowledge regarding the universe in pre-eternity, and He chooses anyone among his possible knowledge, and then He puts it into action. It can be expressed the above order as follows: (i) divine knowledge (i.e. all possible options in God's knowledge), (ii) will (choosing one of the possible options), and (iii) action.

Unfortunately, al-Ghazālī overlooks a critical point in this

order: If God has no knowledge about which option He is going to choose until He wills, He will learn it after choosing it. Then there must be a second knowledge between His will and action: (i) Raw knowledge, (ii) will, (iii) complete knowledge, and (iv) action. Al-Ghazālī, moreover, makes an interesting claim that the sense perception, hearing and sight are the additional perfections for knowledge and that it is also true for God.

> Knowledge is perfection and hearing and sight are additional perfections for knowledge. We have shown that they are a form of completion to knowledge and imagination. Whoever knows something without seeing it and then sees it would benefit from increased revelation and knowledge. Thus, how could it be said that this [form of perfection] is true of that which is created but not of the Creator?[17]

Al-Ghazālī explicitly states that someone who knows something before seeing it would attain an increased revelation and knowledge when he sees it and that it surely is true for God. Considering his expression that sense apprehension complements knowledge to be perfect, I necessarily conclude that God is not completely perfect until He will hear and see the universe and all its components. Then, we reach the final state of his hierarchy: (i) raw knowledge, (ii) will, (iii) complete knowledge, (iv) action, and (v) the final/perfect knowledge.[18]

Conclusion

The scientific method grounding on two-valued logic of the Aristotelian paradigm has been a basic dynamic for all rational thoughts until the 18th century. To become an information science depends on its expression rationally by two-valued logic within this method. However, two-valued logic rationalizes every information according to the values of 'existence' and 'non-existence,' each of which corresponds to huge fields. Namely, everything must be necessarily located either in the fields of ex-

---

[17] Al-Ghazālī, *al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief*, 112.
[18] For additional criticisms, see Hasan Akkanat, *Klasik Dönem İslam Felsefesinde Tümeller* (Adana: Karahan Yayınevi, 2016), 442-57.

istence or nonexistence. Similarly, all judgments must be made in the frame of two-valued logic, either in the form of 'there is' or 'there is not'.

Although al- Ghazālī criticizes some opinions of the philosophers in various matters, he builds his opinions to the extent that two-valued logic allows him, and he considers this kind of logical dimension as the basic method which completely expresses the goals of the divine text. We can see a clear example of this in the issue of divine attributes in general, more specifically in the issues concerning God and the universe relation such as temporality, eternity, omniscience and the will. Treating divine essence and attributes on an anthropomorphic ground, al-Ghazālī argues that divine knowledge and the will are the attributes compatible with each other: God knows all alternative options that will exist or not in future about the universe, and He chooses one of them, and finally He takes it into action. Even though such an anthropomorphist process is quite appropriate for human beings, it causes major problems if you take it for God: (i) If God's essence, existence and knowledge never change, He knows in detail each part of the universe that will exist in future. (ii) But if God creates the universe by choosing it, He does not know which option he will choose and create until He wills it. (iii) And if God knows all alternative options about the universe and He chooses one of them, His knowledge will change after He chooses it. Because He knows what the universe is before He chooses it, but not that which universe (among the others) He himself will choose. He *will* know which universe he is going to choose while choosing it. Then, the status of His knowledge will not be the same in both cases: Knowledge before the will, I call it 'raw knowledge'; and knowledge after the will, I call it 'complete knowledge.'

It is obvious that the Ghazālian theory of divine attributes, which he attempts to show it as the sole purpose of the religion, have some problems arisen from the peripatetic methodology by two-valued logic, which need to be criticized in a philosophical point of view.

References

Akkanat, Hasan. *Klasik Dönem İslam Felsefesinde Tümeller*. Adana: Karahan Yayınevi, 2016.

Al-Ghazālī. *al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief.* Trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Al-Ghazālī. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. A Parallel English-Arabic Text. Trans. Michael E. Marmura. Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

Aristotle. *De Interpretatione*. Trans. E. M. Edghill. *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. I. Ed. W. David Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926.

Aristotle. *Metaphysica.* Trans. W. David Ross. *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. VIII. Ed. W. David Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926.

Fischer, John Martin & Kane, Robert. *Four Views on Free Will*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Şimşek, İsmail. *Düşünce Tarihinde Tanrı'nın Özgürlüğü Sorunu*. Ankara: Elis Yayınları, 2017.

Terkan, Fehrullah. "el-Ğazâlî'nin İlahi İradeye Dair Argümanları ve Müslüman Filozofların İtirazlarına Verdiği Cevaplar". *900. Vefât Yılında İmâm Gazâlî*. İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı Yayınları, 2012, 615-39.