

## THE CONFLICT BETWEEN REASON AND REVELATION IN AL-GHAZALI'S *TAHĀFUT AL-FALĀSIFAH*: A CRITICAL STUDY OF INTELLECTUAL SOURCES

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### Abstract

This study offers a critical reappraisal of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, challenging the common view that he rejected philosophy entirely. By closely reading the text using both the approved English translation and the original Arabic and situating it within Ash'arite theology and Avicennan metaphysics, the study highlights al-Ghazali's nuanced and strategic engagement with philosophy. Rather than a blanket rejection of reason, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* presents a selective critique of metaphysical claims that, in al-Ghazali's view, exceed the limits of reason and conflict with revelation. The analysis explores key themes such as al-Ghazali's affirmation of divine will over necessity, his use of logic in defending theology, and his integration of Sufi concepts such as *kashf* and *dhawq* to expose the limits of discursive reasoning. It shows how he classifies philosophical doctrines as acceptable, irrelevant, or heretical, positioning revelation as the ultimate guide to truth. The study also reflects on the contemporary relevance of al-Ghazali's thought for debates on

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metaphysics, and the harmony of intellectual and spiritual knowledge. Moreover, this work reframes *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* as a constructive synthesis of philosophy and theology, affirming its place as a landmark in Islamic intellectual history and as a model of bounded rationality that continues to resonate today.

**Keywords:** Al-Ghazali; *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*; Islamic philosophy; reason and revelation; epistemology.

### **Khulasah**

Kajian ini menawarkan penilaian kritis terhadap kitab *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* karya Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, sekaligus mencabar naratif arus perdana yang mendakwa beliau menolak falsafah secara mutlak. Melalui analisis tekstual yang mendalam terhadap teks asal bahasa Arab dan terjemahan bahasa Inggeris yang autoritatif, serta menelitinya dalam kerangka teologi Asha'irah dan metafizik Ibn Sina, kajian ini mendedahkan pendekatan al-Ghazali yang dinamik, berlapis dan strategik terhadap falsafah. Bukannya menolak peranan akal secara keseluruhan, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* sebaliknya mengemukakan kritikan terpilih terhadap doktrin metafizik yang dinilai telah melampaui batas keupayaan akal dan bercanggah dengan wahyu. Wacana ini turut meneroka tema utama seperti penegasan al-Ghazali tentang kehendak mutlak Tuhan (*divine will*) berlawanan dengan keperluan kausaliti, pemanfaatan logik (*mantiq*) dalam mempertahankan teologi, serta integrasi konsep tasawuf seperti *kashf* dan *dhawq* bagi menyingkap keterhadan pemikiran diskursif. Kajian ini membuktikan bagaimana beliau mengklasifikasikan doktrin falsafah kepada kategori yang boleh diterima, tidak relevan, atau sesat, dengan meletakkan wahyu sebagai parameter tertinggi kebenaran. Akhir sekali, kajian ini bukan sahaja membincangkan relevansi pemikiran al-Ghazali dalam perdebatan kontemporari mengenai akal, metafizik dan penyelarasan antara ilmu intelek dan spiritual, malah merumuskan semula

*Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* sebagai sebuah sintesis konstruktif antara falsafah dan teologi bagi memperkukuh kedudukannya sebagai mercu tanda sejarah intelektual Islam serta model rasionaliti kritis yang kekal berwibawa sehingga kini.

**Kata kunci:** Al-Ghazali; *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*; falsafah Islam; akal dan wahyu; epistemologi.

## Introduction

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE) remains one of the most influential and multidimensional scholars in Islamic intellectual history, having significantly contributed to the fields of theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), philosophy, and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). His intellectual corpus, particularly *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifah*, and *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, reflects a profound engagement with both the Islamic religious tradition and philosophical reasoning.

Among these, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) stands out as a landmark text that critiques the philosophical methodologies of prominent thinkers such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and al-Farabi. Rather than offering a simplistic rejection of philosophy, al-Ghazali's critique is an attempt to delineate the boundaries between metaphysical speculation and divinely revealed knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This boundary-setting approach has been widely recognized in recent scholarship as a nuanced integration of reason and revelation rather than an outright dismissal of rationality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 1-5; Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12-15.

<sup>2</sup> Makrifat et al, "Reason and Revelation in Islamic Epistemology: A Hierarchical–Integrative Reconstruction," *Fitua: Jurnal Studi Islam* 7(1) (2026), 35-37; Bhat Ali Muhammad & Afroz Ahmad Bisati, "Rationality

Modern scholarship has increasingly recognized that al-Ghazali's work is not a polemic against rationality but a profound reassertion of revelation's epistemological authority. He adopted and mastered philosophical tools such as logic, dialectic, and metaphysics evident in his preparatory text *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifah* before deploying them critically in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*.

His methodological framework reflects a broader Islamic intellectual tradition in which reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*wahy*) are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist within a structured hierarchy, with divine knowledge constituting the ultimate source of epistemological certainty.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this study is to critically examine the intellectual sources, both direct and indirect, that inform al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*.

It explores the philosophical heritage of Greek and Islamic thought, particularly Avicennan metaphysics, alongside the theological commitments of Ash'arite and Qur'anic epistemology. Furthermore, the article seeks to clarify the distinction al-Ghazali establishes between demonstrative sciences (*burhān*), which are epistemologically reliable, and speculative metaphysics, which transgresses the limits of human reason.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding al-Ghazali's sources not only deepens our appreciation of his intellectual rigor but also enhances our comprehension of classical Islamic responses to Hellenistic philosophy. Moreover, this investigation contributes to ongoing debates about the reconciliation, or conflict between reason and revelation, a tension that

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in the Qur'an: Integrating Reason and Revelation for Contemporary Islamic Education," *Dirasah International Journal of Islamic Studies* 3(1) (2025), 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Shah R. Rania, *Al-Ghazālī on Reason and Revelation: A Revival in the Heart of the Islamic Scholarly Tradition* (California: Graduate Theological Union, 2016), 33-35.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 67-70.

continues to animate Muslim thought in the contemporary period.<sup>5</sup>

### Theoretical Framework

This study's framework combines Islamic theological epistemology and the historiography of Islamic philosophy, focusing on how thinkers like al-Ghazali balanced revelation (*wahy*) and reason (*'aql*). Central to this analysis is al-Ghazali's use of philosophical tools to critically examine metaphysical assumptions, forming the methodological foundation of *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*.<sup>6</sup>

Within the Ash'arite tradition, Islamic epistemology asserts that certain knowledge (*'ilm al-yaqin*) comes only through divine revelation, while rational inquiry supports faith but must align with religious truths. Al-Ghazali's framework prioritizes knowledge, accepting demonstrative reasoning (*burhān*) as long as it does not conflict with the Qur'an or Hadith, while rejecting speculative metaphysics that contradicts them. He classifies philosophical claims into three categories: (1) compatible with Islam, (2) irrelevant but tolerable, and (3) conflicting with Islamic doctrine, which are considered unbelief (*kuf'r*) or heresy (*bid'ah*).<sup>7</sup> This tripartite classification reflects a hierarchical-integrative model in which reason functions as an essential yet subordinate epistemic instrument under the normative authority of revelation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rasoul Namazi, "The Qur'an, Reason, and Revelation: Islamic Revelation and Its Relationship with Reason and Philosophy," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 43(3) (2017), 312–315; Mohamad Ghossein, "Reason and Revelation in Islamic Political Theology: The Epistemological Foundations of Al-Ghāzālī's Theocracy," (PhD Thesis, Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2021), 45-48.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 89-92; Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash 'arite School* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 55-57.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 15-18.

<sup>8</sup> Makrifat et al, "Reason and Revelation in Islamic Epistemology", 42-

Within this framework, al-Ghazali critiques key Avicennan metaphysical propositions, namely the eternity of the world, the denial of bodily resurrection, and the limitation of Allah's knowledge to universals. He robustly supports his critique by employing Aristotelian logic, which he conceptualizes as a neutral tool entirely compatible with Islam. Furthermore, al-Ghazali emphasizes that logic is indispensable for sound jurisprudence and theology, a perspective clearly demonstrated in his scholarly works, *Mi'yār al-'Ilm* and *al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm*.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Ghazali's critique targets not rationality itself but the excesses of philosophy and metaphysical overreach. Modern scholarship, such as the works of Shihadeh, Poya and Rizapoor, and Griffel<sup>10</sup> highlights this methodological nuance, showing that al-Ghazali aimed to reform, not abolish, Islamic engagement with philosophy. His goal was to reassert revelation as the ultimate source of truth while preserving the integrity of logical analysis and dialectical rigor.

### Methodology

Alongside engaging with the rich body of secondary scholarship, this study takes a closer, more direct look at *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* itself. Based primarily on *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*,<sup>11</sup> together with its highly regarded English

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 22-24; Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 101-103.

<sup>10</sup> Ayman Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15(1) (2005), 145-148; Aminullah Poya & Habiburrahman Rizapoor, "Al-Ghazali's Theory of Real Knowledge: An Exploration of Knowledge Integration in Islamic Epistemology through Contemporary Perspectives," *International Journal of Humanities Education and Social Sciences* (IJHESS) 3(2) (2023), 610-612; Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 120-122.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, vii-x.

translation and, where necessary, reference to the original Arabic text, this analysis closely examines al-Ghazali's own language, mode of argumentation and use of philosophical terminology. This methodological approach moves beyond a sole reliance on subsequent scholarly interpretations of his critique, thereby placing al-Ghazali's own voice at the center of the discourse. In particular, it highlights how he methodically challenges the metaphysical doctrines of thinkers such as Ibn Sina and al-Farabi.

As pointed out by Griffel,<sup>12</sup> the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* is not merely a work of polemics; rather, it constitutes a profound philosophical engagement that systematically employs the tools of *falsafah* to interrogate its own conclusions. Consequently, this study focuses on the internal coherence of al-Ghazali's arguments, demonstrating how he draws upon reason to defend revelation and strategically deploys philosophical reasoning to counter claims he believed clashed with Islamic theology.<sup>13</sup> The study shows how al-Ghazali drew on and challenged philosophy to reassert revelation's primacy in the search for truth.

### **Literature Review**

The literature on al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* is vast and complex, reflecting the diverse interpretations of his project across Islamic theology, philosophy, and intellectual history. Over the past several decades, scholarly interest has moved beyond reductive portrayals of al-Ghazali as an opponent of reason toward a more nuanced understanding of his position as a reformist seeking to reconcile rational inquiry with revealed knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 135-138.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 30-33; Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 78-80.

This section surveys major contributions to the field, focusing on the identification of al-Ghazali's philosophical and theological sources and the evolution of academic perspectives on his methodological and epistemological strategies. Early orientalist interpretations, most notably those of Ernest Renan and Duncan B. Macdonald, cast al-Ghazali as the figure who brought Islamic philosophy to an end by stifling rationalism. This reading, however, has been robustly challenged by contemporary scholars such as Frank and Griffel,<sup>14</sup> who argue that al-Ghazali's critique of philosophy was not a blanket rejection but a selective rebuttal aimed at specific metaphysical propositions.<sup>15</sup> An annotated translation of *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* provides critical insights into al-Ghazali's argumentative structure, revealing the depth of his engagement with Avicennan philosophy.

Al-Ghazali demonstrates that he was deeply familiar with the logical and metaphysical frameworks of Ibn Sina and al-Farabi, and he used their own principles to refute them, a methodological strategy known as immanent critique, further contextualizing al-Ghazali's work within the broader tradition of Islamic theology, particularly the Ash'arite school. He argues that al-Ghazali developed a new form of kalam that was both critical of excessive rationalism and receptive to formal logic and dialectics. Similarly, Shihadeh<sup>16</sup> explores how al-Ghazali's theological commitments informed his philosophical interventions, especially his commitment to divine omniscience and the createdness of the world.

Other scholars, such as Mujahidin in his study<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 1-4; Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 1-5; Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 1-6.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 10-14.

<sup>16</sup> Ayman Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī," 141.

<sup>17</sup> Sultan Mujahidin, "The Supremacy of Revelation Over Reason: Al-

focuses on the pedagogical function of al-Ghazali's texts, demonstrating how his writings were intended not merely to refute but to educate readers in philosophical reasoning, thereby safeguarding the faith against intellectual misguidance. This pedagogical intent is also evident in *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifah*, where al-Ghazali outlines philosophical doctrines in a neutral tone before deconstructing them in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*. Beyond theology and philosophy, Poya and Rizapoor,<sup>18</sup> as well as Maghribi and Hidayah<sup>19</sup> have emphasized al-Ghazali's contributions to Islamic epistemology and ethical reasoning. They argued that his framework integrates rational inquiry with spiritual insight (*kashf*) and prophetic knowledge (*'ilm al-nubuwwah*), creating a layered model of cognition that distinguishes between empirical, rational, and revelatory sources. Recent scholarship further highlights how al-Ghazali's empirical-rational-spiritual epistemology provides a foundational framework for contemporary Islamic education, effectively integrating rational inquiry with spiritual insight and moral formation.<sup>20</sup>

Comparative studies also situate al-Ghazali alongside Western thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel

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Ghazali's Critique of Rationalist Philosophy in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*," *Islamic Thought Review* 2(2) (2024), 153-155.

<sup>18</sup> Aminullah Poya & Habiburrahman Rizapoor, "Al-Ghazali's Theory of Real Knowledge," 615-618.

<sup>19</sup> Hamdan Maghribi & Alfina Hidayah, "Reason, Revelation, and Sufism: The Epistemic Paradigm of al-Ghazali and Ibnu Taimiyyah," *Journal of Islamic and Occidental Studies* 3(2) (2025), 22-25.

<sup>20</sup> Syihabuddin Budi & Sumanta Hasyim, "Al-Ghazali's Empirical-Rational-Spiritual Epistemology and Its Implications for Contemporary Islamic Religious Education," *Afaqulilmi: Journal of Islamic Education* 1(1) (2026), 83-87; Rizal Fathurrohman et al, "The Epistemology of Riyāḍah in Pesantren: A Philosophical Foundation for Islamic Intellectual Formation", *Scaffolding Jurnal Pendidikan Islam dan Multikulturalisme* 7(3) (2025), 301-305.

Kant, highlighting convergences in the critique of metaphysical abstraction and the prioritization of divine command in ethical reasoning.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, extend this comparative tradition by examining the parallel epistemological strategies of Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Ghazali, both of whom insist that sound reason does not contradict authentic revelation but rather confirms and supports it.<sup>22</sup> These studies underscore al-Ghazali's relevance to contemporary debates on reason, revelation, and the limits of philosophical speculation. In sum, the literature indicates that al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* was a sophisticated intervention in the intellectual landscape of his time, informed by deep philosophical training and rooted in a robust theological worldview. His engagement with the legacy of Greek philosophy, mediated through Islamic peripatetic thinkers, was not reactionary but reformative, seeking to assert the boundaries of reason without undermining its legitimacy.

### Findings

The analysis of *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* shows that al-Ghazali's critique of philosophers like Ibn Sina and al-Farabi distinguishes between acceptable philosophical methods and impermissible metaphysical claims. The study confirms that al-Ghazali was well-versed in the philosophical tradition he critiqued, using its tools, particularly logic and epistemology, to develop his arguments. His engagement with philosophy is strategic and selective, grounded in a broader theological framework that prioritizes revelation as the ultimate source of truth.

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<sup>21</sup> Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 89-92; Mona Siddiqui, *The Struggle of Human Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 30-31.

<sup>22</sup> Alshuhaymi Adeeb Obaid & Fouad Ahmed Atallah, "Reason and Revelation in Ibn Taymiyyah's Critique of Philosophical Theology: A Contribution to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy of Religion," *Religions* 16(7) (2025), 809.

### a. Categorization of Philosophical Claims

A significant portion of al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* is devoted to exposing flaws in key metaphysical claims, particularly in his critique of the doctrine of the world's eternity. In the opening discussion (*mas'alah* 1), al-Ghazali challenges Ibn Sina's argument regarding the pre-eternity of the world. With rhetorical precision, he contends, "You philosophers claim the world is eternal, co-existing with Allah, without a temporal priority. But where, then, is the divine will, if not prior to creation?"<sup>23</sup> Al-Ghazali challenges the philosophical claim that a necessary cause must produce its effect eternally. Instead, he argues that Allah's will is entirely free and unbound by necessity or temporal constraints, a perspective deeply rooted in the Asha'rite doctrine of occasionalism.<sup>24</sup> Contemporary analyses have demonstrated that al-Ghazali's occasionalism, which posits God as the sole efficient cause sustaining reality through consistent divine habits (*'ādah*), serves not only as a theological defense but also as a powerful metaphysical antidote to both absolute determinism and postmodern relativism.<sup>25</sup> Throughout his argument, al-Ghazali draws on both reason and revelation. He cites Qur'anic verses affirming the temporal creation of the cosmos: "Indeed, your Lord is Allah who created the heavens and the earth in six days..." insisting that philosophical claims must ultimately submit to the higher authority of divine speech.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, in his final critique (*mas'alah* 20), al-

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<sup>23</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Surah Al-A'raf 7:54; Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 26, 28-31.

<sup>25</sup> Supandi Muhammad Diaz et al., "Al-Ghazali's Framework of Occasionalism in *Tahafut al-Falāsifah* as a Critique of Contemporary Relativism," *Al-Ikhsan: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Studies* 4(1) (2026), 67-72.

<sup>26</sup> Surah al-A'raf 7:54.

Ghazali takes issue with the philosophers' view that Allah knows only universals, not particulars. He calls this claim not just mistaken but impious: "Their position entails that Allah is ignorant of the details of the world. This is an intolerable view that contradicts both reason and revelation".<sup>27</sup> Using both syllogistic reasoning and scriptural proof, he argues that divine knowledge must encompass all particulars, as it is neither acquired nor constrained by contingency.<sup>28</sup>

### **b. Use of Philosophical Tools for Theological Ends**

Al-Ghazali's application of logic and dialectics throughout the *Tahāfut* is both extensive and precise. His arguments against Avicennan metaphysics rely heavily on syllogistic reasoning and demonstrative critique. For instance, he challenges the Avicennan proposition that Allah knows only universals, not particulars, by synthesizing Qur'anic exegesis and Aristotelian logic to demonstrate that divine knowledge must encompass all modes of being.<sup>29</sup>

This strategic use of philosophical tools confirms that al-Ghazali did not reject rational inquiry per se, but sought to neutralize its claims to autonomy. His underlying concern is that when philosophy ventures into metaphysics without the anchoring of revelation, it risks leading believers astray.<sup>30</sup>

### **c. Integration of Theological and Mystical Epistemologies**

Another critical finding is the implicit integration of Sufi epistemology into al-Ghazali's critique. Although the *Tahāfut* is primarily a rational-theological text, it is

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<sup>27</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 180-183.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 210-213.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 185; Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School*, 113.

<sup>30</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 147; Shah R. Rania, "Al-Ghazālī on Reason and Revelation", 68.

inherently informed by al-Ghazali's broader spiritual epistemology, a framework developed more comprehensively in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. He often hints at the limitations of discursive reasoning and the need for higher, intuitive forms of knowledge, such as unveiling (*kashf*) and taste (*dhawq*).<sup>31</sup> As demonstrated through a comparative analysis, while Ibn Sina understood divine revelation as a metaphysical process transmitted through the active intellect, al-Ghazali defined it as a mystical encounter wholly beyond the limits of human reason, accessible only through spiritual purification of the heart.<sup>32</sup> This layered epistemology suggests that for al-Ghazali, intellectual certainty is not sufficient on its own. True knowledge must be grounded in revelation and actualized through spiritual purification, making ethical conduct and inner transformation prerequisites for epistemic reliability.

#### **d. Affirmation of Divine Sovereignty**

The culmination of al-Ghazali's critique centers on affirming divine sovereignty in all matters of knowledge, causality, and existence. His rejection of the philosophers' views on causality, particularly the doctrine of necessary connection, is rooted in the Ash'arite belief that Allah is the sole agent of all events in the cosmos. This rejection is not a denial of causality per se, but of causality as an independent principle detached from divine will.<sup>33</sup>

In this way, al-Ghazali restores the balance between empirical observation and theological truth by reframing

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<sup>31</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 201; Jules Janssens, "Al-Ghazālī Between Philosophy (Falsafa) and Sufism (Taṣawwuf): His Complex Attitude in the Marvels of the Heart ('Ajā'ib al-Qalb) of the *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*," *Muslim World* 101(4) (2011), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Erdoğan İbrahim Halil & Sema Eryücel, "The Concept of Divine Revelation According to Ibn Sīnā and Al-Ghazālī: A Comparative Analysis," *Religions* 15(11) (2024), 6-7.

<sup>33</sup> Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, "Epistemological Implication of al-Ghazzālī's Account of Causality," *Intellectual Discourse* 26(1) (2018), 55-58.

causality as a divine habit (*'ādah*), not a metaphysical necessity. This insight has had a lasting impact on Islamic thought and remains a cornerstone of Sunni theological epistemology.

**e. Close Readings of Key *Masā'il* in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah***

To bring this study closer to al-Ghazali's own thought, we look directly at several of his key arguments in the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*. These close readings reveal not just what al-Ghazali argued, but how original and strategic his method was, turning the philosophers' own tools back on them.

***Mas'alah 1: The Eternity of the World***

Al-Ghazali challenges Ibn Sina's claim that the world is eternal, pointing out a theological consequence that philosophers often overlook: such a view leaves no room for divine choice. As he puts it, "If the world existed eternally alongside Allah, then divine will becomes superfluous. What kind of creator has no discretion?"<sup>34</sup> To ground his case, al-Ghazali cites the Qur'an (7:54), making it clear that creation, in Islamic belief, begins at a point in time and reflects intentional divine action.<sup>35</sup>

***Mas'alah 4: Denial of Bodily Resurrection***

Here, al-Ghazali tackles the philosophers' denial of bodily resurrection, a point where theology and epistemology meet. He insists: "It is not within the capacity of reason alone to deny that which revelation affirms, especially when the afterlife concerns unseen realities."<sup>36</sup> This reflects his view of the hierarchy of knowledge: revelation leads when it comes to eschatological matters, and reason must

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Surah al-A'raf 7:54; Edward Omar Moad, "Al-Ghazali's Position on the 'Second Proof' of the 'Philosophers' for the Eternity of the World, in the First Discussion of the Incoherence of the Philosophers," *Sophia* 54(4) (2015): 432-435.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 75-78.

respect those boundaries.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Mas'alah 17: Divine Will and Necessary Causality***

In his critique of necessary causality, al-Ghazali argues that this concept leaves no room for Allah's agency. "If Allah acts by necessity, He is no different from nature devoid of volition and wisdom."<sup>38</sup> He reframes causality around divine will (*irādah*), restoring the idea of choice and intention where the philosophers saw only inevitability.

### ***Mas'alah 20: Allah's Knowledge of Particulars***

Al-Ghazali strongly opposes the claim that Allah knows only universals, writing: "Their position entails that Allah is ignorant of the details of the world. This is an intolerable view..."<sup>39</sup> For al-Ghazali, divine knowledge is not like ours, it's neither acquired nor dependent. To compare the two, he argues, is to wrongly impose human limits on the divine.<sup>40</sup>

These readings show that Al-Ghazali did not just refute philosophical doctrines, he did so with remarkable creativity, using the philosophers' own methods while carving out a distinctly original response that reasserted the centrality of revelation.

## **Discussion**

In this section, we further explore the critical engagement al-Ghazali undertakes in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsīfah* with the philosophical doctrines of his time. His intellectual project remains significant for contemporary debates on the relationship between reason and revelation. By revisiting some of al-Ghazali's core arguments, we attempt to enrich

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<sup>37</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 175-178.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 152.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 154-157.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard G. Weiss, *The spirit of Islamic Law* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 32-35.

the discussion with additional insights, particularly reflecting on the contemporary relevance of his thought.

### **a. Reaffirming the Primacy of Revelation**

Al-Ghazali's distinction between rational inquiry and divine revelation is a hallmark of his critique. Contrary to readings that depict him as an outright adversary of reason, al-Ghazali's engagement with philosophy is selective, aimed at restraining the excesses of metaphysical speculation. As he demonstrates, reason must operate within clearly defined boundaries set by revelation. This view finds its fullest expression in al-Ghazali's rejection of the eternity of the world (*mas'alah* 1), where he asserts that divine will, not philosophical necessity, is the first cause of all things. Here, al-Ghazali's critique of Avicenna's notion of the eternal cosmos becomes an assertion of divine sovereignty and freedom, rooted in Ash'arite occasionalism. He writes, "If the world existed eternally alongside Allah, then divine will becomes superfluous."<sup>41</sup>

This theological stance underscores the necessity of aligning philosophical reasoning with revealed truth. In this context, al-Ghazali also critiques the philosophers' concept of causality. By rejecting the notion of necessary causality, al-Ghazali reasserts the divine agency behind every event, rather than allowing the laws of nature to function independently of Allah's will.

This reformation of causality remains relevant in contemporary discussions surrounding determinism and the autonomy of scientific laws. The notion that causality is not inherent but a habitual pattern set by Allah speaks to modern concerns with the limits of naturalistic explanations and the place of divine will in a scientifically determined universe.<sup>42</sup> This perspective finds resonance in modern

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<sup>41</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 160-163.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 250-253.

philosophy of science:<sup>43</sup> argues that al-Ghazali's critique of paradigms in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* anticipated contemporary epistemological shifts, particularly the recognition that causal relationships are not absolute certainties but contingent regularities subject to transcendental will, a view that aligns with developments in quantum physics and the philosophy of science.

### **b. Integrating Philosophical Reasoning into Islamic Thought**

Al-Ghazali's selective use of philosophical tools from figures like Ibn Sina and al-Farabi is central to his project. His methodological approach, often described as "methodological inversion," demonstrates that he does not reject reason but repurposes it to serve theological ends. For instance, al-Ghazali employs Aristotelian logic to critique the metaphysical excesses of Avicenna's doctrines, particularly his denial of bodily resurrection. Al-Ghazali's use of logic is always subordinated to revelation, which he sees as the ultimate arbiter of truth. He asserts, "We do not oppose the philosophical sciences in their entirety. Rather, we reject those elements that contradict the truths established by the prophets."

This allows al-Ghazali to utilize Avicennan logic and Aristotelian categories while also using them to challenge metaphysical claims that, in his view, undermine core Islamic beliefs such as *tawhīd* (divine unity) and the sovereignty of divine will.<sup>44</sup> This idea can be extended to modern discussions of epistemology, where al-Ghazali's framework challenges the secular dichotomy between reason and faith.

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<sup>43</sup> Bhat Ali Muhammad & Afroz Ahmad Bisati, "Rationality in the Qur'an: Integrating Reason and Revelation for Contemporary Islamic Education," *Dirasah International Journal of Islamic Studies* 3(1) (2025), 2-6.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 252.

By reinterpreting philosophical reasoning through a theological lens, he offers a more nuanced view that encourages intellectual engagement without abandoning spiritual commitments. This integrative stance resonates with<sup>45</sup> analysis of Qur'anic rationality, which demonstrates that the Qur'an consistently harmonizes reason and revelation, inviting believers to engage in critical reflection while remaining anchored in divine guidance. Al-Ghazali's framework thus anticipates a model of bounded rationality that contemporary Islamic education continues to draw upon.<sup>46</sup> This position resonates in contemporary Islamic thought, especially within educational contexts, where rational inquiry and spiritual ethics must be integrated in the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

### c. Reframing Causality and Its Legacy

Al-Ghazali's critique of the metaphysical excesses of philosophy in *Tahāfut al-Falāsīfah* offers timeless lessons for contemporary intellectual discourse. One significant issue al-Ghazali addresses is the problem of determinism and divine will, particularly the rejection of necessary causality. This argument remains profoundly relevant in today's discussions on the autonomy of natural laws and the relationship between science and religion. Al-Ghazali's assertion that the universe is not governed by impersonal necessity but by divine will challenges deterministic readings of scientific laws and opens up space for understanding divine intervention and miracles within a

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<sup>45</sup> Bhat Ali Muhammad & Afroz Ahmad Bisati, "Rationality in the Qur'an," 4-8.

<sup>46</sup> Abid Nurhuda & Abdul Muid Nawawi, "*Tahāfut al-Falāsīfah* as a Critique of Paradigms: A Philosophical Analysis from the Perspective of Modern Science," *Anjasmoro: Islamic Interdisciplinary Journal* 3(1) (2025), 22-27.

<sup>47</sup> Aminullah Poya & Habiburrahman Rizapoor, "Al-Ghazali's Theory of Real Knowledge," 620-622.

naturalistic framework.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the philosophical discussion surrounding the creation and eternal nature of the cosmos is still of paramount importance. Al-Ghazali's insistence on a temporal beginning to the universe aligns with ongoing debates in cosmology about the origins of the universe, particularly recent discoveries about the Big Bang and the expanding universe.<sup>49</sup>

#### **d. Contemporary Relevance**

In line with these considerations, al-Ghazali offers further reflections on metaphysical issues such as causality, the vastness of the cosmos, and the nature of time. Specifically, he touches upon the following points:

- i. Causality: Al-Ghazali critiques the view of causality as a necessary link, proposing instead that it is a divine habit (*'ādah*) established by Allah's will, which is significant for contemporary debates on determinism and divine intervention.<sup>50</sup>
- ii. End of the Universe and Celestial Bodies: Al-Ghazali rejects eternalism, asserting the universe's temporal, created nature, which is relevant to modern cosmological discussions about the universe's fate.<sup>51</sup>
- iii. Expanding Universe: Al-Ghazali's idea of the universe having a beginning and end aligns with current scientific views, offering a philosophical framework that complements modern cosmology.<sup>52</sup>
- iv. Beginning and End of Time: His rejection of an eternal universe supports the view that both time

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<sup>48</sup> Shah R. Rania, "Al-Ghazālī on Reason and Revelation," 90.

<sup>49</sup> Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 112-115.

<sup>50</sup> Aminullah Poya & Habiburrahman Rizapoor, "Al-Ghazali's Theory of Real Knowledge", 607-610.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 273.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 40-42.

- and the cosmos are temporal, consistent with modern conceptions of time as changeable.<sup>53</sup>
- v. Time as Created: Al-Ghazali argues that time is created by Allah, challenging contemporary views of time as a self-sustaining entity and linking temporal reality to divine will.<sup>54</sup>
  - vi. These aspects of al-Ghazali's thought: Contribute to contemporary metaphysical, cosmological, and epistemological debates, presenting a balanced approach where reason and revelation complement each other in understanding reality.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

This study reexamines al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* through direct textual analysis, revealing a systematic critique of the metaphysical doctrines of Ibn Sina and al-Farabi. Contrary to the view of al-Ghazali as an anti-rationalist, this research demonstrates that his work is not a blanket rejection of philosophy or dogmatic theology. For instance, in critiquing the eternity of the world (*mas'alah* 1), al-Ghazali challenges Avicenna cosmology by emphasizing the theological necessity of divine volition, arguing that a creator must have discretion. His rejection of necessary causality in *mas'alah* 17 is rooted in the Ash'arite principle of *'adah*, reaffirming Allah's continuous agency over the cosmos. Additionally, in *mas'alah* 20, al-Ghazali defends the comprehensiveness of divine knowledge, asserting that Allah knows both universals and particulars. Al-Ghazali's originality lies in his "methodological inversion," using philosophical tools for theological

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<sup>53</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. William C. Chittick (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), 161–163.

<sup>54</sup> Achmad Khudori Soleh et al., "The Truth on Al-Ghazali Perspective," *International Journal of Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Education* 2(9) (2023), 431–439.

<sup>55</sup> Lenn E. Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120-123.

purposes and reconfiguring reason within a hierarchy of knowledge in which revelation takes primacy. Rather than ending philosophical inquiry, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* prompted a reorientation that influenced later scholars and remains relevant in addressing the limits of speculative reason in both classical and modern contexts.

### **Recommendations**

This study of al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* opens several avenues for future research. A promising direction is a comparative analysis of al-Ghazali's approach and that of Western philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant, particularly regarding their critiques of metaphysical speculation. Al-Ghazali's assertion that revelation must govern metaphysical inquiry provides a theological contrast to Kant's focus on the limits of human reason, offering fresh perspectives on the relationship between faith, reason, and metaphysical speculation. Additionally, exploring the pedagogical aspects of al-Ghazali's works could enrich curricula in Islamic philosophy, theology, and logic, particularly his integration of rational inquiry with spiritual and ethical formation. This approach offers a valuable pedagogical model for contemporary Islamic educational institutions. Revisiting al-Ghazali's views on public ethics and philosophical theology could also provide a framework for addressing contemporary ethical issues in pluralistic societies, such as bioethics, environmental ethics, and interfaith dialogue.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study provides a detailed examination of the intellectual sources and epistemology underlying al-Ghazali's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research focuses primarily on the *Tahāfut* and its critique of Ibn Sina and al-Farabi, thereby leaving ample room for future scholarship to explore other monumental works by al-Ghazali, such as *al-Iqtisād fī al*

*I'tiqād* and *al-Mustaṣfā*, to attain a more comprehensive understanding of his evolving thought. Furthermore, because this study predominantly reflects a Sunni Ash'arite framework, it does not engage deeply with Shi'ite, Mu'tazilite, or Ismā'īlī perspectives. Consequently, a comparative analysis incorporating these diverse theological traditions could significantly enhance contemporary understanding of al-Ghazali's historical and intellectual influence.

### **Contribution of the Study**

This study provides valuable insights into both al-Ghazali's intellectual legacy and contemporary ethical and theological debates, emphasizing the relevance of his thought in bridging Islamic moral tradition with modern ethical inquiry. By exploring the relationship between reason and revelation, it reaffirms the significance of faith-based knowledge in addressing tensions with secular rationalism. The study develops a moral framework grounded in both scripture and philosophy, highlighting key Islamic values such as justice, truthfulness, mercy, and Allah-consciousness, while drawing on modern virtue ethics and moral psychology. It also underscores the importance of *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, in addressing contemporary issues and illustrates how prophetic ethics can adapt to diverse contexts.

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