

ARTICLE

Ghazali and Aquinas for a Posthumous Dialogue on the Possibility of an Eternally Created World

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Abstract

This article is a comparative study between arguably one of the greatest Christian theologians and philosophers, St. Thomas Aquinas, and one of the greatest Muslim theologians and philosophers, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. I engage in a textual, analytical, close reading of the classical texts written by Aquinas and Ghazali on the Aristotelian argument of an eternal world. I explore the possibility of posthumous interreligious dialogue that begins in the classical tradition of both Christianity and Islam and aim to create parallels between Ghazali and Aquinas even where perhaps they were silent, resulting in an exercise of comparative theology. Both Ghazali and Aquinas were dedicated to the integrity of human reason which is evidenced through their writings on the creation of an eternal world. They were not against philosophy, rather, their arguments were against the *falāsifa* who rendered God without a divine will. Through their commitment to reason and divine revelation, Quranic and Biblical respectively, the argument is made that perhaps Ghazali and Aquinas were closer to each other as theologians of differing religions than either of the two were to the Avicennian or Aristotelian philosophical tradition which they were immersed in.

Keywords

Ghazali, Aquinas, eternity of the world, medieval theology, *falsafa*, philosophy, Islam, Latin, Catholic Church, *creatio ex nihilo*

Those that defend and succeed have become giants within their respective religious institutions. They are heroes for defending the faith, for making their beliefs and practices plausible, maintainable, and alive. Every religious tradition has these heroes; their ideas and teachings are cited among the scholars while also being remembered by their learned congregation as wise and powerful historic leaders of the past. As a Muslim who is interested in making connections across religious traditions and creating various spaces for dialogue, I highlight two heroes, giants that is, one from Islam and the other from Christianity whose voices have remained alive in their respective traditions for close to or near a millennium, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the Muslim theologian, sufi, and philosopher and Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Christian theologian and philosopher. Through my research, I aim to advance the point that despite the often-cited differences between Ghazali and Aquinas, whether it be their religion, their theologies, or their seeming positions on philosophy, I find instead that both theologians have a shared affinity for the divine, and a shared dedication to philosophy. The integrity of rational argument is maintained throughout their philosophical discussions particularly as they engage the theologies of Avicenna. Thus, in this paper, I bring both Ghazali and Aquinas together as partners for posthumous interreligious dialogue on God's free will and power to create. Their affinities led them to make very similar arguments for the credibility of their religious beliefs specifically in defending a created, non-eternal world.

Both Ghazali and Aquinas defended the free will of God and his power to act upon his will in the face of a *falsafa* tradition that depicted God's greatness through ultimate simplicity. As Frank Griffel defends philosophy in Islam after Ghazali, he rightly clarifies *falsafa* as only a small segment of the greater philosophical tradition within Islamic philosophy. *Falsafa* occupied itself with Avicennian philosophy that promoted Aristotelian propositions on God's being and essence, mainly as a divine simplicity without the will to act, the ability to know particulars, and the ability to exist in any form or relation to change. Griffel writes, "This implies that, first, Avicenna's God cannot change and, second, He acts without exercising a free choice between alternative actions. The first point implies that God cannot change from being a noncreator to becoming a creator. This results in Avicenna's teaching of a pre-eternal world."¹ The proposition of a pre-eternal or uncreated world was rejected by both Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and St. Thomas Aquinas. Both were dedicated to theologies, Muslim and Christian respectively, that rejected such propositions and deemed them to be heretical.

1 Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 10.

Ghazali and Aquinas would engage deeply into both *falsafa* and philosophy to rebut through rational argumentation the proposition of a necessarily pre-eternal world while remaining committed to the usage of syllogisms and rational methods evidence to support their own philosophical arguments.

On the surface, Ghazali and Aquinas have seemed to many readers quite different from each other in their interaction with *falsafa*. Those familiar with the works of Ghazali and Aquinas would quickly understand David Burrell's first lines in his comparative work as he underscores the disparity of comparative analysis done on these two religious leaders, respective to their communities.² "Since the direct links between al-Ghazali and Thomas Aquinas are tenuous at best, one is not invited to compare these two thinkers as naturally as one would compare Aquinas with Averroes or Avicenna."³ The differences in their style and tone often overpower the text and the similarities are easily overlooked. Aquinas and Ghazali not only differed in terms of their respective religions and revelations but also in their individual writing styles. Where Ghazali was provocative, Aquinas was composed. Where Ghazali was writing a defensive text solely to refute the philosophers in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, Aquinas was writing a manual, the *Summa Theologia* or the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, on incorporating a philosophical voice into Christian theology. In mentioning the "romantic aura" style in which Ghazali wrote, Richard Frank asserts, "He (Ghazali) was no Aquinas!"⁴ Despite these differences, a comparative reader cannot ignore similarities found between the two theologians, from a shared devotion towards the power and will of God to a careful interactive balance between reason and revelation. I advance the idea that a posthumous interreligious exchange between the two theologians could begin from their defense of a created world and their commitment to using the philosophical tradition as a tool in that defense. Hence, this would make them excellent interlocuters for interreligious dialogue particularly in defending the omnipotence and will of God while maintaining a consistency with their philosophical world view.

In this paper, I highlight arguments that both Ghazali and Aquinas make in defending their respective faiths in a created world, not by necessity

- 2 More recent work is making room for comparison between Ghazali and Aquinas. Eward Omar Moad's work does make reference to Aquinas's arguments when discussing Ghazali. See, 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, no. 4. (2015): 429–441.
- 3 David Burrell, "Ghazali and Aquinas on the Names of God," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3, no. 2 (1989): 173–180.
- 4 Richard Frank, "Al-Ghazali's Use of Avicenna's Philosophy," *Revue des études Islamiques* 55–57 (1987–89): 271–284.

of God's essence or being, but by his free will and creative action. Despite coming from two separate religions and starting off from two separate scriptures, I demonstrate that the Muslim and Christian sides of the debate were not simply on opposite sides of one another; rather, many times they shared the same side of the argument, and for Ghazali that meant the side against other Muslims, particularly Muslim *falāsifa* or Aristotelian philosophers from the *falsafa* tradition within Islamic philosophy. When the two theologians believed that the power, will, and knowledge of God became challenged indirectly by the Muslim philosopher, Avicenna, through his cosmology of emanation and the active intellect, there is clear evidence that both Ghazali and Aquinas were provoked to counter what they thought was an affront on God. Although Avicenna was a Muslim, we will see that the distance between Ghazali and Avicenna was greater at certain points of theological thought, mainly God's divine will, power, and knowledge, than the distance between Ghazali and Aquinas on these issues. Robert Elias Abu Shanab highlights this point in his comparative writings on Ghazali and Aquinas when he states, "For all these objections that St. Thomas leveled at the Arabic Philosophers were to a large extent the same objections that Ghazali raised against his predecessors, especially Avicenna."⁵ Further, when we reflect upon the creative act of God, we can begin to imagine a kind of posthumous conversation between these two intellectual giants. Such a comparative vision allows us to see their shared commitment to rational argumentation, while also suggesting that both al-Ghazali and Aquinas might have been willing to defend the possibility of a pre-eternal world—so on as its existence depended entirely on God's will and creative agency.

On God's Will: Creating the Eternal or the Temporal World and the Possibility of What is Not

One of the most central discussions and/or debates that raged throughout the Middle Ages among the religious and intellectual elites was the question of the eternity of the world. Is the earth co-eternal with God or is the earth a temporal creation of God; that is, did it have a beginning? Theologians among the Muslim and Christian establishments passionately argued this question within their religious circles revealing the greater complexity of the relationship between reason and revelation. The voices of Ghazali and Aquinas were critical within this debate in their respective circles. Their

5 Robert Elias Abu Shanab, "Points of Encounter between Al-Ghazali and St. Thomas Aquinas," *Tommaso d'Aquino Nella Storia Del Pensiero* 1 (1975): 261–267, 266.

arguments maintained a consistent commitment to the principles of reason, never utilizing the authority of revelation to respond to the philosophical propositions that they felt challenged that authority. In this way, each time they undermined the proposition of the philosophers through arguments based on logic, they raised the credibility level of their respective religious beliefs. For example, by arguing against the proposition that “From the eternal, only an eternal can proceed” through reason, Ghazali and Aquinas were able to maintain the possibility and credibility of their respective theologies which allowed for the assertion, “From the eternal a temporal can proceed.”⁶

We will examine key positions that Ghazali and Aquinas held on the controversial philosophical proposition *de eternitate mundi*, the eternity of the world. We will see how for both Ghazali and Aquinas it was important for them to maintain God’s temporal priority to the creation of the world and God’s limitless will. Further, we will examine some of the arguments that Ghazali and Aquinas were involved in for defense of the temporality of the world that was derived from Islamic and Christian doctrine respectively. This will reveal their technique of applying the tools of the philosophers to refute specific philosophical propositions that were thought to be “necessary,” and which negated religious truth claims. What was said to be a necessary conclusion by Avicennian philosophy or *falsafa* based upon so-called principles of reason were assessed and argued by both Ghazali and Aquinas to show that what was deemed philosophically necessary was not necessarily so. In this comparison and focus on the arguments against the eternity of the world, it will become evident that a posthumous dialogue between Ghazali and Aquinas could bear a fruitful exchange where the Proof of Islam and the Doctor of the Church may see eye to eye on the majesty of God and the role of philosophy in matters of revelation.

The concept of creation *ex nihilo* was historically introduced by the Jewish and Christian biblical tradition. The ancient Greeks that preceded Judaism did not possess the idea that creation could emerge from nothing; rather, they held to the idea that pre-existing matter was necessary, and that God is the witness of it, not its direct cause. “God moves or activates the universal machine but does not create it.”⁷ In contrast, Ghazali and Aquinas both inherited the view from their respective Muslim and Christian theologies that the only eternal being that existed was God; everything other

6 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 13.

7 Thomas Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi in St. Thomas Aquinas on the Eternity of the World and Selected Miscellaneous Texts*, trans. Cyril Vollert (Marquette University, 1964), 7.

than God came into existence and had a beginning. “This theological understanding was contrary to the view which Greek and Arabic (Avicenna) philosophers [or the *falāsifa*] taught, for whom any beginning of the world’s existence is unacceptable.”⁸ Ghazali and Aquinas each stood as authoritative voices within their respective theological traditions—Ghazali within the dominant Ash’arite school of Sunni Islam and Aquinas within the framework of Catholic teaching on Christian revelation. Both theological views rejected the idea of an eternally subsisting universe that existed by necessity through God’s very being. Instead, Ash’arite theology and the Catholic Church taught that the world passed from non-being into being through God’s will and creative act, not through any necessity of God’s essence. The proposition proposed by the *falāsifa* would ultimately render God without a will and creative agency.

The Ash’arite theological position on the creation of a temporal world stated that “All men of true religion hold that the world had an origin as the object of God’s creation. “God was and there was naught with Him.”⁹ The Catholic Church’s theological position on the temporal world rested on the Fourth Lateran council of 1215, Canon 1, which declared the temporal beginning of the world to be an article of faith. “We firmly believe and openly confess that there is only one true God, eternal ... who from the beginning of time and by His omnipotent power made from nothing creatures both spiritual and corporeal, angelic.”¹⁰

The debates within the religious circles of the Middle Ages would become more complicated when philosophers would shoulder Aristotelian ideas and couch them in religious terminology, yet the concepts would be quite distinct from their original religious intention. For Ghazali, the case of Avicennian philosophy would speak potently to this matter. In fact, the entire *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa, Incoherence of the Philosophers* was written precisely for the refutation of the Hellenistic ideas that Ghazali felt seeped into Islamic teachings mainly through the philosophy of Avicenna and al-Farabi, hence the *falsafa* tradition. Their metaphysics were derived from Aristotle and did not possess the authoritative backing of revelation or the convincing

8 Muammer Iskenderoglu, *Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Thomas Aquinas on the Question of the Eternity of the World*, (Brill, 2002), 2.

9 Al-Shahrastani, *Kitab Nihayatu’l-Iqdam Fi ‘l-Kalam in The Summa Philosophiae of Al-Shahrastani*, trans. Alfred Guillaume, (Oxford University Press; Humphrey Milford: 1934), 1.

10 “Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215: The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215,” Medieval Sourcebook, published by Fordham University, last modified July 12, 2024, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp>.

arguments of the principles of reason. According to Ghazali, those who denied the religious confessions and adapted the confessions of the philosophers were abandoning the righteous imitation of true belief to the destructive imitation of false belief. Ghazali asks, “What rank in God’s world is there that is lower than the rank of one who adorns himself with the abandonment of the truth that is traditionally believed by the hasty embracing of the false as true, accepting it without reliable report and verification?”¹¹ Since the *falāsifa*’s propositions, such as Avicenna’s proposition of an eternally uncreated world, were undermined by Ghazali’s rational arguments, then those *falāsifa* were simply believers in previous philosophical assertions of truth rather than believers in divine revelation.

Aquinas will take on a similar attitude. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas states, “Since, however, many have held that the world has been always and of necessity, and have endeavored to prove this, it remains for us to give their arguments, so as to show that they do not necessarily prove the eternity of the world.”¹² After investigating a large varying degree of arguments for and against the eternity of the world and refuting the arguments that claim the necessity of an eternal world, Aquinas closes his chapters on the eternity of the world in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* with a final statement giving us a picture of his view on this subject. “From what has been said,” writes Aquinas, “we are unable to avoid the various errors of the pagan philosophers. Some of whom asserted the eternity of the world; others asserted that the matter of the world is eternal, out of which at a certain time the world began to be formed; either by chance; or by some intellect; or else by attraction and repulsion. For all these suppose something eternal beside God: which is incompatible with the Catholic faith.”¹³ The “taking for granted” implies the baseless claim of eternity in something besides God. Hence, like Ghazali, he makes the claim that since there was no revelation to affirm eternity, it was left to be an idea that was shouldered only because it was there as an attractive notion and not because there was anything to substantiate it, whether by the authority of reason or by the authority of revelation. We can imagine Ghazali and Aquinas agreeing that those advancing Aristotelian or Avicennian arguments, and whose credibility failed under rational scrutiny, were essentially believing in an eternally uncreated world rather than upholding divine revelation.

11 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 2.

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles in On the Eternity of the World* [hereafter *SCG*], trans. Cyril Vollert (Marquette University Press, 1964), II.32.

13 Aquinas, *SCG* II.38.

To remain within the main scope of this article, I will not be thoroughly communicating the theory and arguments for the eternity of the world; but rather, I will use the theory and arguments for the eternity of the world only to demonstrate the distinctions and points of intersection between Ghazali and Aquinas. This will allow us a clear view of the interaction of reason and revelation in their respective work and allow us to make the case for their posthumous partnership as interlocutors in defending and promoting both their theological positions on the will of God, his majesty, and his eternity, and their position on maintaining the usage of credible Aristotelian philosophical propositions of their day. This, in turn, allows us to see Ghazali's position on these key arguments as closer to Aquinas than to the Muslim *falāsifa*, whose assertions conflicted with both Islamic and Christian theology—especially in their defense of an eternally uncreated world.

Although, one can find Ghazali underscoring his arguments safeguarding God free from any necessities in various places like his writings on God's 99 attributes, *Al-Maqsid*, for the most part, Ghazali explicates and argues against the doctrine of the eternity of the world mainly in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*.¹⁴ He refutes the top three proofs of the philosophers while beginning with the philosophical proposition of the eternity of the world:

That it has never ceased to exist with God, exalted be He, to be an effect of His, to exist along with Him, not being posterior to Him in time, in the way the effect coexists along with the cause and light along with the sun; that the Creator's priority to the world is like the priority of the cause to the effect, which is a priority in essence and rank, not in time... The doctrine of all of them is that the world is pre-eternal and that altogether it is basically inconceivable for a temporal being to proceed from the eternal without mediation.¹⁵

His goal is to demonstrate the blunder of the philosophers and the incoherence of the said proposition.

In the case of Aquinas, we find three main works with which he deals specifically with the concept of the eternity of the world: *De Aeternitate Mundi*, *On the Eternity of the World*, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and *Summa Theologiae*. Each of these major works deals with this issue in a distinctive fashion. The *Summa*

14 For example, although not directly arguing against the proposition of a coeternal world to God's being, Richard M. Frank points out Ghazali's writings in his *Maqsid* affirming God's freedom from any necessity of his being. Richard M. Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazali and Avicenna* (Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992), 68.

15 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 12.

Contra Gentiles is more like the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* because Aquinas, like Ghazali, engages in the proofs to demonstrate their incoherence, and to make the point that the proofs set forth to us by the philosophers do not demonstrate the necessity of an eternal world, thus giving the believer stronger credence for the truth of revelation. In the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas designates two articles: “Whether the Created Universe Has Existed Forever?” and “Whether it is an article of Faith that the World had a Beginning.”¹⁶ The simple position that Aquinas deals with throughout his writings is twofold: first, the possibility of an eternal world and second, whether the world is or isn’t eternal.¹⁷

The Actual and the Possible

One point of emphasis that should be made explicit in the beginning of our analysis and to help us see the remainder of their arguments is the difference between the positions that Ghazali and Aquinas are directly dealing with in their main arguments on the eternity of the world. While they are dealing with essentially the same topic, there is a major difference that will affect the type of response accorded. For the most part, Ghazali is dealing specifically with the proposition “that the world is pre-eternal,” and that altogether “it is basically inconceivable for a temporal being to proceed from the eternal without mediation”; whereas Aquinas is dealing with a dual proposition “the possibility” of an eternally created world and the “actuality” of an eternally created world, two totally different propositions. Whether something “is” will demand an answer that is more restricted than the question of whether something is possible. When Aquinas does state his position on whether the world is or is not eternally created, his type of argumentation will begin to parallel Ghazali in the way of dismantling the proofs of the philosophers and demonstrating their incoherence. Aquinas writes on this matter:

We must investigate, therefore, whether these two concepts are logically incompatible namely, that a thing has been created by God and yet has existed forever. Whatever may be the truth of the matter, no heresy is involved in the contention that God is able to bring it about that something created by Him should always have

16 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Christian Classics, 1948), 1, q. 46, arts. 1–2.

17 For a deeper analysis of the “possibility” of an eternal world and Aquinas’s defense of this proposition see John F. Wippel’s “Did Thomas Aquinas Defend the Possibility of an Eternally Created World?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (1981): 21–37.

existed. Nevertheless, I believe that, if the concepts were to be found incompatible, this position would be false. However, if there is no contradiction in the concepts, not only is it not false, but it is even possible; to maintain anything else would be erroneous. Since God's omnipotence surpasses all understanding and power, anyone who asserts that something which is intelligible among creatures cannot be made by God, openly disparages God's omnipotence.¹⁸

In this passage, Aquinas is admitting the "possibility" of an eternal world only out of reverence for divine omnipotence, the rules of logic, and the understanding that possibilities should be understood as non-existence with a potential for existence given God's freewill and creative powers to endow existence upon that which is possible.

Interestingly, although Ghazali in his *Tahāfut* does not engage in the possibility of an eternally created world in any of his arguments as Aquinas does, in his other writings we can find reference to the same line of argumentation on possibilities and God's creative action. This makes an intriguing point of posthumous discussion between Aquinas and Ghazali; where perhaps if Aquinas discusses with Ghazali the "possibility of a created world" perhaps we may find that Ghazali would agree to the truth of Aquinas's argument in the possible. Richard Frank discusses Ghazali's *Maqṣad* on God's attribute of *al-Haqq*, the Truth or the Real. Frank highlights Ghazali's statement about existence, possible existence, and impossible existence and links that to God's creative action. Frank writes:

It would seem that for al-Ghazali, their being as possibles is absolute; they are somehow eternally already and always there for God in their own givenness, not apart from Him, but in a sense, nonetheless, independently of Him. God's being is not absolutely prior to the possible as such, but only to the actual existence of the contingent entities He causes to come to be in the world. That is to say, the possibles as essences or quiddities instantiations of which can come to exist in the world, do not originate in God but are eternally there as givens for God's knowledge. For al-Ghazali, thus God may not, strictly speaking, be said to create *ex nihilo* but rather *ex possibili*. He causes the existence of particular instances of essences that are in themselves already there "in possibility."¹⁹

18 Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi*, 19.

19 Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazali and Avicenna*, 63.

Frank writes elsewhere:

In *Maqṣad*, al Ghazali says that the essential characteristic of God is that ‘He is the existent whose existence is necessary in itself and from which exists everything whose existence is in possibility ... He does not, that is, say anything here that would directly state or imply that God, of His very nature, must create either this world or anything at all. Elsewhere he strenuously rejects the proposition that creation takes place as a direct and inevitable consequence of God’s being.’²⁰

The passage which Frank is referring to is found in the *Maqṣad*, where Ghazali writes:

Al-Haqq—the Truth—is the one who is the antithesis of falsehood, as things may become evident by their opposites. Now everything of which one is aware may be absolutely false, absolutely true, or true in one respect and false in another. Whatever is impossible in itself is absolutely false, while that which is necessary in itself is absolutely true, and whatever is possible in itself and necessary by another is true in one respect and false in another. For this last has no existence in itself and so is false, yet acquires existence from the side of what is other than it, so it is an existence in this respect that acquired existence is bestowed upon it—so in that respect it is true while from the side of itself it is false.²¹

In terms of the possible in Ghazali’s writings on truth, although not directly related to the arguments of an eternally created world, looking closely at Ghazali’s writings that Frank highlights, one can see his line of reasoning on possibilities being true so long as they come into being through God’s creative action and will; otherwise, they are false. Although Frank’s discussion is on a far greater subject, we can still pick up on this point from his writings and draw a connection to Aquinas’s first proposition above on the possibility of an eternally created world.

Frank Griffel’s work, *Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*, is another source where we can gain insight into Ghazali’s reasoning on the actual and the possible.²² Griffel analysis Ghazali’s writings in the Seventeenth Discussion of

20 Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazali and Avicenna*, 68–69.

21 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Ghazali: The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God, al-Maṣṣad al-asna fi sharh asma’ Allah al-husna*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (The Islamic Texts Society, 2007), 124.

22 Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* and highlights important aspects of how Ghazali understands possible propositions in relation to God and his creative activity. In his analysis of Ghazali's response to causality we can gain insight into how Ghazali might agree with Aquinas on the possibility of an eternally created world. However, in doing so, I will not address Ghazali's specific critiques of the *falāsifa* on this issue. Instead, the focus of this article is to clarify how Ghazali understands God's relation to actuality and possibility.

Griffel highlights one of the arguments that Ghazali makes when the *falāsifa* argue against occasionalism, that if causality was not necessary to the effect, then anything could be possible. Since effects in occasionalist thought do not necessarily rely on cause, then such possibilities can include examples like, "If someone leaves a book in the house, let him allow as possible its change on his returning home ... into an animal, changing into a dog"²³ Without getting into the argument on causality, let us look at what Ghazali says in relation to the possible and God's power. "What is not impossible is within [divine] power."²⁴ Hence for us it is important to see what Ghazali considers as impossible. He states:

The impossible is not within the power [of being enacted]. The impossible consists in affirming a thing conjointly with denying it, affirming the more specific while denying the more general, or affirming two things while negating one [of them]. What does not reduce to this is not impossible, and what is not impossible is within [divine] power.²⁵

In this statement we can see Ghazali upholding the rule of contradiction to render a thing impossible. Likewise, we saw that Aquinas in the statement above also upholds the rule of contradiction as that which renders a thing impossible. Aquinas wrote, "However, if there is no contradiction in the concepts, not only is it not false, but it is even possible; to maintain anything else would be erroneous. Since God's omnipotence surpasses all understanding and power, anyone who asserts that something which is intelligible among creatures cannot be made by God, openly disparages God's omnipotence."²⁶ Hence, both Ghazali and Aquinas are asserting the intelligible to be a marker of possibility. This again may be another place where we can build a posthumous dialogue between Ghazali and Aquinas on the possibility of an eternally created world and their reverence maintaining

23 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 170.

24 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 175.

25 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 175.

26 Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi*, 19.

the omnipotent power of God. Given all of this, it is important to recognize that, in upholding God's omnipotence, neither thinker would accept the actual existence of an eternally created world, as such a view would contradict their respective theological commitments.

For these theological thinkers, the possibility of an eternally created world would be upheld only in the mind. Griffel highlights this point from Ghazali,

Possibility does not exist in the outside world; rather, it is merely a judgement of the mind: The possibility which they mention reverts to a judgement of the mind. Anything whose existence the mind supposes, [nothing] preventing its supposing it possible, we call "possible," and if it is prevented, we call it "impossible." If [the mind] is unable to suppose its nonexistence, we name it "necessary." For these are rational propositions that do not require an existent so as to be rendered a description thereof.²⁷

In the forthcoming arguments against an eternally created world it becomes necessary for us to examine these arguments through the lens of the dual proposition and how in one respect it can be true but, in another respect, it can be false as Ghazali states in his description of *al-Haqq*, the Truth. For Ghazali and Aquinas, the possibilities will have some truth as long as they fall under the rules of logic; however, such possibilities themselves need God's creative action to become true in existence, otherwise they remain rational propositions. This realization may lead us to a rich posthumous dialogue between Ghazali and Aquinas where one can fathom that both would agree on the same proposition of the possibility of an eternally created world made by Aquinas despite the absence of this direct proposition in Ghazali's *Tahāfut*.

The Argument

Apart from directly contradicting Church authority and the Ash'arite theological position, the proposition of an eternal world would place upon God limits that were unacceptable to both Ghazali and Aquinas. The proposition assumes an eternal world by a necessary causality rather than the free will of God's creative action. This differs from the argument for a *possible* eternal world created by God's free will, which I explored in the posthumous dialogue concerning the relationship between what is actual and what is

27 Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 166.

possible. Rather, for Ghazali and Aquinas, the necessary causality becomes the ultimate problem in the proposition of an eternal world where God's omnipotence and divine will is challenged. When evaluating their respective arguments, we will be able to take note of this major undercurrent that runs through both of their writings.

Like Ghazali, Aquinas maintains that God does not act by necessity. There is nothing in his nature or in anything created to force God to will anything, whether to create the world in time or to create an eternal world, by the will of God either/or is possible. "Nothing that proceeds from the will is absolutely necessary, unless the will happens to be impelled by necessity to will something," writes Aquinas.²⁸ He continues, "But God brings creatures into existence, not by any necessity of His nature, but by His will, as we have proved; nor does He necessarily will creatures to be, as was shown in Book I. Hence, it is not absolutely necessary for any creature to be, and hence, it is not necessary that creatures should always have existed."²⁹

Ghazali takes on the proofs of the philosophers for an eternally created world in the very first discussion in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* and narrows them down. Due to the limitations of this present work, we will limit ourselves to the first proof.

Ghazali outlines the first proof of the philosophers: "It is absolutely impossible for a temporal to proceed from an eternal."³⁰ From this proposition, secondary arguments are formed. If creation was chosen at a specific time, this would constitute a change in the creator from being a willer of existence to not being a willer of existence. The next question arises, "If the world is originated through God's origination of it, why did the world come into existence now and not earlier particularly when all the states were similar?"³¹ This leads to the idea that if the world begins in time, then in God there was something absent which then became present, like the world. This for the philosophers constitutes change in the creator. Ghazali writes,

Thus, it is now ascertained through incontrovertible argument that the proceeding of the temporal from the Eternal without a change of state of affairs in the Eternal by way of power, instrument, time, purpose, [will] or nature is impossible [according to the philosophical claim]. To project a change of state in the Eternal is

28 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.31.

29 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.31.

30 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 13.

31 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 13.

impossible because the argument regarding that change that comes about is similar to the argument regarding any other change. All this is impossible. Hence, as long as the world exists and its origination in time is impossible, its past eternity stands necessarily established.³²

In his refutation, Ghazali's main goal will be to show that the above argument is not supported by reason. There is nothing for Ghazali that would force the faculty of judgment, human reason, to concede to the proposition of the philosophers. He will demonstrate this not by elevating revelation and believing in it, despite all logical contradictions, but through utilizing the principles of reason in showing how reason itself does not verify the claims that the philosophers make.

Much like Ghazali, Aquinas engages himself with the proofs of the philosophers in order to demonstrate that their proposition of a necessarily eternally created world is not a compulsory conclusion. "Since, however," writes Aquinas, "many have held that the world has been always and of necessity, and have endeavored to prove this, it remains for us to give their arguments, so as to show that they do not necessarily prove the eternity of the world."³³ Thus, Aquinas lists the many proofs that have been given by philosophers in order to prove an eternal world. Aquinas engages eighteen proofs altogether and writes his objection to each one of them to show their incoherence one by one, leading his readers to conclude that the proofs that the philosophers give for an eternally created world are not valid. Much like Ghazali, he casts doubt upon the philosophical proofs for an eternally created world while giving more credence to a temporally created world based upon divine revelation. Aquinas groups the philosophers' proofs into three main categories: arguments derived from God's standpoint, those that are derived from the point of view of creatures, and those that are derived from the manner in which things were made. He analyzes and objects to each of the eighteen proofs, each proof being short and direct.

Again, due to the limits of this paper, we will only interest ourselves with the particular arguments from Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* that overlap the arguments we find in Ghazali's argumentation in the first proof. This will allow us the ability to create the necessary space needed for dialogue between the two theologians giving us deeper insight into their shared positions on defending God's limitless powers using human reason. We will see in our comparison that although style and method of argumentation are quite different between the two; nevertheless, essentially through their

32 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 14.

33 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.32.

arguments against an eternally created world, Ghazali and Aquinas in their posthumous dialogue can be considered defenders of the faith, whether Muslim or Christian. There is essentially one main argument that both theologians aim to dismantle and that is: “From the eternal, only an eternal can proceed.” Our main concern with the proofs for an eternal world, and how Ghazali and Aquinas worked in refuting it, will revolve around the energy they put forth in refuting this particular supporting argument.

Ghazali’s Rebuttal of “From the Eternal, Only an Eternal Can Proceed”

Ghazali begins his rebuttal on the proposition of “from the eternal, only an eternal can proceed” by problematizing the proposition itself with a demand for proof. “Do you know the impossibility of an eternal will related to the temporal creation of something, whatever that thing is, through the necessity of reason or its theoretical reflection?”³⁴ What connection do the philosophers have between the eternal and the temporal? What makes the philosophers’ proposition valid, while invalidating the proposition of others who also do not defy reason, claiming that from the eternal, a temporal proceeds? Ghazali claims that their statements only express an unlikelihood, drawing an analogy with our resolve and will, which for him is false because the eternal will does not resemble temporal human intentions. In the same way that the philosophers impose the concept of rational necessity, a rational decision that is imposed upon oneself like the impositions of hunger and thirst, Ghazali turns the table and invokes upon the philosophers the argument of rational necessity using the propositions that the philosophers hold. In this way he is using the instrument of rational necessity that philosophers used for their own interests and points it right back at them. The following passage from the *Tahāfut* will illustrate Ghazali’s method in frustrating the arguments made by the philosophers:

With what argument would you deny your opponents inasmuch as they have said the following? ‘The world’s past eternity is impossible because it leads to affirming circular movements of the heavenly sphere whose number is infinite and whose individual units are innumerable, even though they divide into a sixth, a fourth, a half and so on ... Indeed, how are you to answer if one were to say, ‘Is the number of the rotations even or odd, both even and odd, or neither even nor odd?’ Should you answer either that the number is

34 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 17.

both even and odd or that it is neither even nor odd, then again this would be something whose falsity is known through rational necessity. If you were to say that the number is even, and the even becomes odd by the addition of one, then how can the infinite be in need of one? If, on the other hand, you answer that it is odd, then how would the infinite be in need of that one which would render it even? You are then necessarily forced to uphold the statement that it is neither even nor odd.³⁵

Ghazali continues along with answers that Avicenna and the philosophers would come up with in order to free themselves from the corner that he forced them into by his rebuttal questions, setting up the stage for a greater attack: “If it is said,” writes Ghazali, “It is only the finite that is described as either even or odd, but the infinite is not so described.”³⁶ Ghazali responds with another scenario, “the souls of humans, which the philosophers claim to be individuated and numerical infinities. Number divides into the even and the odd, and it is impossible for it to lie outside this division, regardless of whether or not what is enumerated exists and endures or ceases to exist.”³⁷ Ghazali writes:

According to your own principles, it is not impossible that there should be existents, present here and now, which are individual entities varying in descriptions and which are infinite. These are the souls of humans that are separated from bodies after death. These, then, are existents that are not characterized as even and odd (by the philosophers). With what arguments would you deny the statement of someone who says: “The falsity of this is known through the necessity of reason in the same way you claim that the falsity of the connectedness of the eternal will with the act of temporal creation is known through the necessity of reason?”³⁸

In order to transition to the supporting arguments, Ghazali sets up other scenario responses and again corners philosophers into demonstrating the incoherence of their proofs. “What is intended by all this,” writes Ghazali, “is to show that they have not rendered their opponents unable to uphold belief in the connectedness of the eternal will with the act of temporal creation except by invoking rational necessity and that they are unable to disengage from those who in turn invoke rational necessity against them in

35 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 18–19.

36 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 19.

37 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 19.

38 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 19.

those matters opposed to their own belief. From this they have no escape.”³⁹ Thus, by rendering the claim of “rational necessity” as an invalid tool since its usage can deliver results that are absurd, Ghazali can now claim that the philosophers do not have solid proof that warrants their claim that a temporal cannot proceed from an eternal. There is nothing demonstrated through the proofs of logic that would render belief in the temporal creation of the world impossible according to the principles of reason.

Moving along in his argument, Ghazali sets up the second argument that the philosophers use to support their proposition. They ask, “How can the will choose between two similars?” “If it is said that the will specifies it,” acknowledges Ghazali from the philosophers’ argument, “then the question arises concerning the will’s act of specifying and why it specified one possible rather than another.”⁴⁰ Does specifying one thing from another specify change in God? Was it that God changed from a non-willer to a willer? If God’s will is eternal, then shouldn’t it be the case that if God did not create at one point, then at all points God would will not to create? If God willed at a later temporal moment, did God change from one who first did not will to one who willed? Such are the problems that the philosophers are pointing out.

First, Ghazali replies to this argument by affirming the Islamic position of the existence of God’s will and to define the essence of what it means to will in comparison to the essence and function of knowledge. “The world came into existence by the will of God. It came into existence whence it did, having the description with which it came to exist, and in the place in which it came to exist, through will.”⁴¹ Ghazali emphasizes that the very function of will is to differentiate a thing from its similar. Just because God chose between two similars does not mean that a change took place; it is an attribute whose function is to act in such situations. To ask why is akin to the question “why does knowledge entail as a requirement the encompassing of the object of knowledge as it is?” The obvious answer would be, as Ghazali says, “This is because ‘knowledge’ stands as an expression for an attribute that has this as a function.”⁴² A direct analogy is drawn between knowledge and will, and similarly, Ghazali says, “Will stands as an expression for an attribute whose function—nay, its essence—is to differentiate a thing from its similar.”⁴³

39 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 20.

40 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 20.

41 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 22.

42 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 22.

43 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 22.

Although Ghazali has defined the attribute of will as that which differentiates a thing from its similar, the argument does not end there. In the voice of the philosophers, Ghazali responds with the question of contradiction. To be similar means to be indiscernible, the philosophers would say, and to be discernible means that it is dissimilar. Such a function is a contradiction, for, if to be similar, it is to be indiscernible, then there is no discerning between anything and thus the function is not possible. Ghazali illustrates the philosophers' scenario:

It is inconceivable of us [according to the philosophers] that we would differentiate through will one thing from its similar. Indeed, if in front of a thirsty person there are two glasses of water that are similar in every respect in relation to his purpose of wanting to drink, it would be impossible for him to take either. Rather, he would take that which he would deem better, lighter, closer to his right side—if his habit was to move the right hand—or some such cause, whether hidden or manifest. Otherwise, differentiating something from its like is in no circumstance conceivable.⁴⁴

Ghazali initially responds with a theological argument that the philosophers cannot say that God's will is like the will of humans since there is no correlation between the divine and the human. This ultimately rests upon the belief in revelation that nothing is like unto him. "Your using our will as an example constitutes a false analogy that parallels the analogy between human and divine knowledge. God's knowledge differs from human knowledge in matters we have already established. Why then should the difference between the divine and the human in the case of the will be unlikely?"⁴⁵ He goes on to explain that the word "will" is conventionally used in language to designate that which has an objective fulfilling a need. Clearly, God has no need, and the word "will" is used in this sense only for creatures, not for the divine. In the case of the divine, the word "will" has also been used, but it is meant to designate the attribute of God whose function is to differentiate a thing from its similar. Hence, what is being said of God and said of humans are two different things. Ghazali opens up the option of choosing a different word in order to grasp the attribute whose function is to differentiate a thing from its similar. "If the term "will" does not correspond to this attribute, then let it be given another name; for there need be no dispute about names."⁴⁶

44 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 23.

45 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 23.

46 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 23.

After arguing for the distinctiveness of God's attributes, Ghazali goes back to refute the philosophers' argument on their own terms. He has made his statement that we cannot correlate human attributes with divine attributes and puts it aside. His response is to engage in the argument internally, using only the philosophical tools to cast doubt upon their proofs and folly the proposition of an eternal world in a fascinating argument that does not derive from an Islamic or theological perspective. "Even so, in our own human case," he writes, "we do not concede that the choice between similar things is inconceivable."⁴⁷ Ghazali establishes a scenario that will refute the philosophers' proposition: "[D]ifferentiating something from its like is in no circumstance conceivable."⁴⁸ In this scenario, Ghazali demonstrates that there are circumstances where it is proper for the will in the human experience to differentiate between one thing and its similar.

For we will suppose that there are two equal dates in front of someone gazing longingly at them, unable however, to take both together. He will inevitably take one of them through an attribute whose function is to render a thing specific, differentiating it from its like. All the specifying things you have mentioned by way of goodness, proximity, and ease of taking we can suppose to be absent, the possibility of taking one of the two yet remaining. You are, hence, left between two alternatives. You could either say that equality in relation to the individual's purpose is utterly inconceivable, which is sheer foolishness, the supposition of this equality being possible, or else, that if the equality is supposed, the man yearning for the dates would ever remain undecided, looking at them but taking neither through pure will and choice that according to you are dissociated from the objective of taking a specific one. This also is impossible, its falsity known by rational necessity. It is, hence, inescapable for anyone engaged in theoretical reflection on the true nature of the voluntary act, whether in the realm of the observable or the unseen, but to affirm the existence of an attribute whose function is to render one thing specifically distinct from its similar.⁴⁹

The dates present themselves in front of an individual as similar in all ways. From the human perspective this constitutes a choice between two similars. What is one to do? Intellect is not required to satisfy the want of the individual. At this point, it is that attribute which has an objective fulfilling a

47 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 23.

48 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 43.

49 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 23–24.

need. The need is to satisfy one's hunger or desire for the date, and it is the will that takes the date and satisfies the hunger, obviously taking one and not the other. There is a choice between two similar dates, and the person will eventually pick one. Hence, the claim that philosophers make about differentiating a thing from its similar as inconceivable is now unwarranted. Ghazali's example renders the conceivability of how one can differentiate a thing from its similar.

The second objection that comes from Ghazali concerning the impossibility of discernment between similars gets directly into the heart of the argument made by philosophers regarding the eternity of the world. "You in your own doctrine," accuses Ghazali, "have not been able to dispense with the rendering one of two similars specifically distinct, for you hold the world to have come into being through its necessitating cause, having specific configurations similar to their opposites."⁵⁰ The philosophers claim that by the necessitating causal relations the world came into existence with particular configurations, those configurations were selected among other similar configurations. Ghazali questions why the philosophers allow the specification between similars that follow naturally, yet don't allow the specification between similars through the voluntary act of the divine will. At this point, Ghazali strikes the philosophers with the aim of his rebuttal, "We will force on you, in terms of your own principles, the admission of rendering specific one similar as distinct from another in two instances where it is not possible to suppose a difference between their similar. One is the difference of direction of the world's motion; the other is the assignment of the position of the pole in the ecliptic movement."⁵¹ Both instances are admitted by the philosophers and admitting either of the two cases necessarily forces the philosophers to admit the possibility and necessity of specifying one thing from its similar. Again, in this second argument, Ghazali will work within the principles of the philosophers and on their own grounds to refute their particular proofs and to create doubt in their greater proposition of an eternally created world by switching to the concept of creation in space in order to justify the concept of creation in time.

For the sake of demonstrating the Ghazalian use of reason in refuting the arguments of the *falāsifa*, it will be sufficient to relay only one instance, "the assignment of the position of the pole in the ecliptic movement."⁵² This will give us a strong demonstration of Ghazali's style. Ghazali argues:

50 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 24.

51 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 25.

52 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 52.

Heaven is a sphere rotating around two poles as though both are stationary. Now the heavenly sphere is of similar parts. For it is simple—particularly the highest heaven, the ninth, for it has no stars at all. These two spheres, the ninth and the rest, rotate around two poles, northern and southern. Thus, we say, “There are no two opposite points among the points that, according to the philosophers, are infinite but could be conceived as being the pole. Why is it, then, that the northern and southern points have been assigned to be the poles and to be stationary? And why does not the ecliptic line shift, moving with it the two points so that the poles would revert to the two opposite points of the ecliptic? If, then, there is wisdom in the extent of the largeness of heaven and its shape, what differentiated the place of the pole from another place, singling it out to be the pole from the rest of the parts and points, when all the points are similar and all parts of the sphere are equal?” There is no way out of this for them.⁵³

If the heavens are to be spherical in shape, simple nature, similar in its parts, having no inequality, then how does one point get chosen above all else? How do the north and south positions become fixed and why do they not change? If the philosophers claim a natural inequality, then Ghazali dives right back at them with their very own doctrine of the heavens being similar and identical in all its parts, according to them there are no peculiarities. “Yet, despite the fact that they claim total equality, the question regarding that peculiarity remains. Are the rest of the parts receptive to this peculiarity or not? If they say, “Yes,” then why did this peculiarity attach specifically to one of the similars and not the rest?”⁵⁴ Ghazali intuitively the philosophers’ response as deeming one of the parts receptive of the pole. For him, this is not sufficient because if all the parts are similar then no one part can be receptive above another. They cannot escape from Ghazali’s interrogation. “It is thus the inescapable conclusion,” resolves Ghazali, “that assigning a particular place with a specific characteristic is either arbitrary or else realized through an attribute whose very function is to render one thing more specific than its exact similar.”⁵⁵ “If it is valid for the *ḥalāṣifa* to say that the temporal states are equal in their receptivity of the world’s occurrence, it is valid for their opponents to say that the parts of heaven are equal in terms of receptivity of the idea due to which precedence is given to the fixity of one position for the pole as against its replacement.”⁵⁶ Again, Ghazali closes

53 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 25.

54 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 26.

55 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 26.

56 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 26.

his dramatic argument with the words, “From this there is no escape!”⁵⁷ As is characteristic of his work, Ghazali limits his rebuttal to the techniques of the *falāsifa* and does not assume the Quranic and theological voice as a legitimate tool for persuasion and argumentation. His arguments are based on principles derived from reason, not principles derived from the Quran.

Aquinas’s Rebuttal of “From the Eternal, Only an Eternal Can Proceed”

Aquinas’s position on whether the world is an eternal creation of God was made clear numerous throughout his writings. He stood firmly with the Catholic Church and affirmed the temporal creation of the world denouncing the Aristotelian proposition that the world must have been eternal because God’s act is eternal. “We must hold firmly that the world has not always existed, as the Catholic faith teaches. And this truth cannot be effectively attacked by any demonstration based on physics.”⁵⁸ Like Ghazali, Aquinas brought forth the philosophical proofs that dominated the intellectual sphere concerning the proposition of the eternity of the world. He listed each proof and then listed his objection to each one of them, planting doubt upon the philosophers’ proofs that contradicted the revelation of the Bible. Thus, like Ghazali in support of Islamic doctrine, Aquinas strengthened the biblical and Catholic faith by demonstrating that what the philosophers, those that copied the *falsafa* tradition of Avicenna or the Aristotelian propositions, deemed to be a necessary conclusion on the eternity of the world was not necessarily so. Yes, as discussed above, Aquinas certainly did take a step further than Ghazali in affirming the “possibility” of an eternal world. However, this possibility is based solely on the will and power of God and upon his findings that the proposition was not in itself inherently contradictory. For here, we imagine a posthumous dialogue between the two theologians, resulting in a comparative theological exercise. Aquinas, like Ghazali, would never deny God the power of doing anything he so chooses, so long as no logical contradiction is imposed like in the case of God creating a rock that He can’t carry or a thing that is both even and odd. “If we inquire whether something has always existed,” deliberates Aquinas, “understanding that it was caused by God with regard to all the reality found in it, we have to examine whether such a position can be

57 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 33.

58 Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei, On the Power of God in On the Eternity of the World*, trans. Cyril Vollert, (Marquette University Press, 1964), q. 3, a. 17.

maintained. If we should decide that this is impossible, the reason will be either that God could not make a thing that has always existed, or that the thing could not thus be made, even though God were able to make it. As to the first alternative, all parties agreed that God could make something that has always existed, because of the fact that His power is infinite.”⁵⁹ Based on the will and power of God, Aquinas will make room for the possibility of an eternal world; however, none of the arguments he lists will ever achieve the glory of proving necessarily that the world is eternal; this would be in great contradiction to divine revelation of a temporally created world and an assault on the religious affirmation of the sole eternal being, God.

Aquinas’s categorizations of the arguments are quite different than Ghazali. Where Ghazali positions all the arguments under four main umbrella arguments on the eternity of the world and pieces them together almost in a dialogical format, Aquinas on the other hand, as was said earlier, lists each argument under its type and objects to each one in a very direct and succinct manner. Further, many of his objections are based upon the premise that God is all willing and all powerful. Yet, like Ghazali, Aquinas does get into the philosophers’ proofs and dismantles them within the proof itself, not premising the argument on anything other than what the argument itself entails. For the sake of the comparative element and the limits of this project, we will only concern ourselves with a handful of Aquinas’s arguments that overlap Ghazali’s.

Addressing the proposition “from the Eternal only an eternal can proceed,” Aquinas lists two proofs from the philosophers which are worded differently. The first of the proofs relates to God’s act and it being necessarily an act that must act in the same way always in order to avoid attributing contingency in God. “Every agent that is not always in action, is moved either directly or indirectly ... but God is not moved directly or indirectly ... Therefore God always acts in the same way, and it is by His action that created things are brought into being. Accordingly, creatures have always existed.”⁶⁰ From this proof, we are led to believe that it is inconceivable for something to come from God that starts anew. This would entail God being directly or indirectly moved either by something external like an event or an agent or something internal that is newly formed within God. The prior would mean that God was contingent upon an event or agent, and the later would mean that a change took place in God, either of which entail contingency in God, who is not contingent, thus a contradiction. Hence, the

59 Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi*, 19.

60 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.32.

proof deduces that from the Eternal only an eternal can proceed through God's eternal act.

Aquinas responds to this proof by asserting the opposite of what the argument is saying. Even if the effects produced by God begin to exist anew, He Himself need not be moved either directly or indirectly. "Newness of effect can, indeed, indicate a change in the agent to the extent that it demonstrates newness of action," writes Aquinas.⁶¹ However, for Aquinas God's act is from His essence. "Newness of a divine effect does not demonstrate newness of action in God, since His action is His essence ... Newness of effort cannot demonstrate change when God is the agent."⁶² Like Ghazali's argument above, "Your using our will as an example constitutes a false analogy that parallels the analogy between human and divine knowledge," Aquinas, too, is calling out a false analogy.⁶³ God's will, according to Aquinas, is from his essence and his essence is a mystery. For St. Thomas, we cannot know anything about God's essence except what he reveals to us. Reason, whether by an analogy or by demonstrative argumentation, will never lead us to a conclusion about God's essence that we can know to be true.

The second proof is quite succinct and is listed as follows:

Again, an effect proceeds from its efficient cause by the action of that cause. But God's action is eternal; otherwise, He would become an actual agent after being a potential agent, and He would have to be actualized by some prior agent; which is impossible. Therefore, the things created by God have existed from eternity.⁶⁴

The argument is essentially declaring the same thing as the argument which Ghazali refutes that "from the Eternal, only an eternal can proceed." For if a temporal proceeds from the eternal, this would tell us that God was in a state of potentiality or contingency which is obviously contradictory to God's being. At one point, God thought of creating the world, but did not yet do so, and at another point he actually creates the world. All of this constitutes change and contingency within God; thus, the philosophers find it absurd to think God's creation as temporal. To refute this proposition, Aquinas strikes an analogical argument to give an alternative possibility, stating that it does not follow that if the action of the First agent is eternal, His effect must be

61 Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi*, 34.

62 Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi*, 34.

63 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 23.

64 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.32.

eternal. God's power is that which does not divide the act from the will and intellect like in the human act. "God's act of understanding and will is necessarily identical with His act of making. An effect issues from the intellect and will according to the direction of the intellect and the command of the will."⁶⁵ God's power in creating the temporal avoids potentiality because he sets a time for his creation. He not only determines the creation but also the time, he is not limited to human contingency upon successive moments. Aquinas gives a plausible example in the case of a physician: "A physician prescribes that a medicine should be given at this or that time; if his act of will were in itself powerful enough to produce the effect, the effect would follow in due time from the previous decision, without any new action on his part."⁶⁶ The statement "if his act of will were in itself powerful enough to produce the effect" forces upon the reader the existence or possibility of a power strong enough to create in future time, in a single act. If God is omnipotent, the denial of this possibility would be contradictory to the essence of omnipotence. Without resolving to revelation, Aquinas engages himself in the argument, relying only upon the principles of the argument. Aquinas invokes God's power and stresses that what creates a delay in act is the limitations set on human power; however, if these limitations were lifted away, a delay in act would not take place. Creatures are limited but no such limitations can be associated with God.

The final argument to be considered is the argument of choosing between two similars. "An intellectual agent does not choose one thing in preference to another unless the one is more excellent than the other. But where there is no difference, there cannot be any superiority in excellence. Hence, where no difference is discernible, no choice will be made of one thing rather than of another."⁶⁷ The agent will not proceed in act between two similars because there is nothing that is superior to the other that would allow the agent to differentiate and choose one over the other. This translates into the argument against a temporal creation by showing that likewise in the eternity of God, beyond the entire universe of creatures nothing in difference exists.

No difference in periods of time can be designated in nothingness. Such a difference in moments cannot be designated in eternity, the whole of which is uniform and simple ... The consequence is, therefore, that God's will is equally disposed to the production of creatures throughout all eternity. Accordingly, it is either His will

65 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.35.

66 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.35.

67 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.32.

that creatures should never be produced within His eternity, or that they should always have been produced.⁶⁸

Either God creates the world necessarily with his own being together from eternity, or God should never create. Since it is obvious that the world exists, then God created the world necessarily from eternity equal in eternality with his being. According to the philosophers, no choice for God is possible because in the eternity of God, there are no points of distinction, and it is not possible for God to differentiate between two similars. Like in the case of Ghazali, the question arises concerning the will's act of specifying, "for the proposition is that differentiating something from its like is in no circumstance conceivable."⁶⁹ Aquinas, like Ghazali, will demonstrate how this is not necessarily so. He will use the time and space to make his demonstration.

Solving this problem, Aquinas admits, like the philosophers have claimed, that there is no diversity of parts prior to the beginning of all creation. "God's duration, which is eternity, has no parts, but it is absolutely simple, without before and after, since God is immovable."⁷⁰ But for Aquinas, the admission of all parts being similar invalidates the question of why this and not that. "There is no question of comparing the beginning of all creation with diverse parts designated in some pre-existing measure, with which the beginning of creatures might be in agreement or disagreement, so that an agent would have to have a reason for bringing creatures into existence at this particular instant of that duration rather than at some preceding or subsequent instant."⁷¹ Answering the question of why this moment rather than that moment is valid only in the temporal realm where duration is divisible into parts. Aquinas now flips the argument; the question to be deliberated is not, why He produced them now rather than earlier, but only why He did not endow them with eternal existence. If God is eternal, why isn't creation eternal?

To clarify his position, Aquinas will refer to the concept of space/place as well as the concept of time. Referring to the concept of creation in space is also one of the means that Ghazali uses in his argumentation to justify creation in time. Particular bodies are created in place as well as in time. We know this because the world is situated in a definite place within eternal space. It has limitations or borders and a particular size and shape. This is

68 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.32.

69 Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 43.

70 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.35.

71 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.35.

something that we can measure and confirm through observation. Is there a reason why particular bodies, such as the earth, are produced in this place and at this time rather than another? Similar to how Ghazali engages in the argument of the two stationary poles in the heavenly sphere, Aquinas affirms that “there is no reason for inquiring why the whole of heaven was located here and not there, for beyond it there is no place, and the entire place for all things was produced along with it.”⁷² As Ghazali questions the choice of poles in a sphere of identical points, Aquinas questions the choice of the whole of heaven and its designation in particular time and space. Further, we know that it is produced in a particular place, but does that mean we have to know why it is produced in a particular place or how it was produced in a particular place, in order for us to know that it is produced in a particular place? Likewise, we know through revelation that the world was temporally created, but does that mean we have to know why and how it was temporally created? “Similarly,” writes Aquinas, “outside the totality of creation there is no time, since time was produced simultaneously with the universe; hence we need not go into the reason why it exists now and not earlier, and so we will not be led to concede the infinity of time.”⁷³ Although Ghazali and Aquinas are using somewhat different examples, their arguments remain the same. They are questioning why the philosophers who promote the inability for the creator to choose between two similars, actually does so in other aspects of the heavens, whether it is the poles of the spheres or the placing or timing of the earth and other heavenly bodies.

Conclusion

In their arguments against the proposition of an eternal world, both Ghazali and Aquinas can be seen as defending the power and will of God. For Aquinas, belief in a temporal world is based solely on faith in divine revelation. No arguments or demonstrations can be made to prove a temporal world and hence the possibility of an eternal world is always open as long as it is God’s will that chooses to create it. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, after dismantling the proofs for an eternal world, Aquinas further lists six arguments that are made in order to prove that the world is not eternal. Like in the case of the proofs for an eternal world, Aquinas dismantles these six proofs affirming that the proofs for a temporal world do not conclude with strict necessity, although they are not entirely devoid of probability.⁷⁴

72 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.35.

73 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.35.

74 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.38.

Aquinas's motive is made clear by his statement that "it is enough to touch on them briefly, so that the Catholic faith may not seem to rest on inept reasoning rather than on the unshakable basis of God's teaching."⁷⁵

In the case of Ghazali, we do not see him dismantling proofs for a temporal world and affirming that only through divine revelation can we know of a temporal world, like Aquinas. However, Ghazali dismantles the proofs of the philosophers for an eternal world and at the same time affirms his belief in the divine revelation made knowable to us through the prophets of God. His basis for a temporally created world, apart from revelation, rests largely upon his arguments against the proofs of a necessarily and eternally created world. Further, although Ghazali himself does not entertain the possibility of an eternally created world, a posthumous comparison allows us to see how, based on his description of God's divine attribute *al-Haqq* (the Truth) and his rejection of necessary causal connection, he might align with Aquinas in allowing for the *possibility* of an eternally created world based on God's will and creative action—even if he never states this explicitly in the *Tahāfut*. As stated earlier, Ghazali certainly did entertain the idea of the possible which may or may not become actual depending upon the will and creative action of God.

As a Muslim engaged in searching for areas of understanding across faith traditions, I recognize that these questions are seldom black and white. They require attentiveness to nuance. When we approach theological inquiry with this sensitivity, we may discover that traditions often stand closer to one another in their reverence for God than we initially assume—even closer than some who share the same confessional identity. This is, in many ways, the central lesson of comparative theology. And thus, we can imagine that Aquinas and Ghazali may agree on the *possibility* of an eternally created world—so long as it remains an idea entertained in the human mind—and would likewise agree in rejecting the *actuality* of such a world in order to uphold their respective religious doctrines. For both, nothing is impossible for God: If He wills a thing, it is. *Deo Volente—Insha'Allah—God willing*.

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75 Aquinas, *SCG*, II.38.

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