

Ghazali on Miracles and Necessary Connection

GEORGE GIACAMAN AND RAJA BAHLUL

Birzeit University

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since Muslim thinkers came into contact with Greek Philosophy and science in the seventh century, the relation between Islamic philosophy and theology has been an uneasy one. Muslim philosophers often felt compelled to defend their philosophical activities against the suspicions and attacks of the theologians, and some developed considerable energy and effort to the harmonization of philosophy and religion on some fundamental points.

Ghazali (d. 1111) was perhaps the most important Muslim theologian to attack the activities of Muslim philosophers. His *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (“Incoherence of the Philosophers”) constitutes the most systematic and thorough attack on Neo-Platonism by a Muslim thinker, and has had a considerable influence on the course of philosophical activity in Islam.

So considerable its impact was that Averroes (d. 1198), the most prominent medieval Muslim Aristotelian, felt compelled to write a paragraph-by-paragraph rebuttal of Ghazali’s book. As cogent and persuasive as Averroes’ *Tahafut al-Tahafut* was, however, still it failed to counter the influence which Ghazali’s work was to have on the subsequent course of Islamic philosophy.¹

Ghazali’s *Tahafut* is also of clear philosophical interest since in it he was not merely content to adduce religious considerations for rejecting the views of Muslim Neo-Platonists, as represented primarily by Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037) and al-Farabi (d. 950). He sought to meet the philosophers on their own ground. As he himself observes in *al-Munqith mina’l Dhalal* (“Deliverance from Error”):

1. For a brief critical assessment of the basic line of defense used by Averroes against Ghazali, see George Giacaman, “Tradition and Innovation: Two Muslim Views of Causal Relations,” in *Philosophie et Culture: Proceedings of the Seventeenth World Congress of Philosophy* (Montréal: Éditions Montmorency, 1986), pp. 247–49.

I was convinced that a man cannot grasp what is defective in any of the sciences unless he has so complete a grasp of the science in question that he equals its most learned exponents in the appreciation of its fundamental principles, and even goes beyond and surpasses them, probing into some of the tangles and profundities which the very professors of the science have neglected. Then and only then is it possible that what he has to assert about its defects is true.²

The *Tahafut* itself consists of twenty questions or problems that have relevance to religion and for which Ghazali takes the philosophers to task. These can be divided into two broad categories: (1) questions that conflict with some of the fundamental principles of religion and for which the philosophers are to be charged with irreligion (*kufi*), and (2) questions that do not come into conflict with a basic religious tenet, yet on account of which, the philosophers are nevertheless to be considered to have committed heretical innovation (*bid'ah*). The problem of causation belongs to the second category and is dealt with as "problem number seventeen" of the *Tahafut*.

Ghazali's examination of causality occurs in the context of his discussion of the "physical sciences" (*al-tabi'iyya*). His overall concern is to affirm the omnipotence of God and to safeguard the possibility of miracles.³ Specifically, Ghazali argues against the conclusion that "[the] connection observed between causes and effects is of logical necessity."⁴ This he regards as relevant in view of the fact that the possibility of miracles, which constitute a "departure from the usual course of events" (*khariqah li'l'adah*, literally "violates habit"), appeared to him to conflict with the attribution of necessary causal efficacy to inanimate particulars. As he states:

As to the first point, it is necessary to contest it, for on its negation depends the possibility of affirming the existence of miracles which interrupt the usual course of nature like the changing of the rod into a serpent or the resurrection of the dead or the cleavage of the moon, and those who consider the ordinary course of nature a logical necessity regard all this as impossible . . .⁵

In what follows, we present a brief critical examination of Ghazali's main arguments against the views of the philosophers on causation. We

2. Ghazali, *al-Munqith mina'l Dhalal*, in *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1963), p. 29.

3. For the Arabic text of Ghazali's *Tahafut* we have used *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut: The Catholic Press, 1962) Henceforth: *TAF* Ghazali's text is quoted by Averroes in his *Tahafut al-Tahafut*. Henceforth: *TAT*. We have used Simon van den Bergh's translation of Averroes' *Tahafut* (London: Luzac & Co., 1954) as the English translation of Ghazali's text. *TAF*, p. 194; *TAT*, p. 1:313

4. *TAF*, p. 191; *TAT*, p. 1:312.

5. *TAF*, p. 192; *TAT*, p. 1:313.

suggest that the phrase “departure from the usual course of events” carries at least two meanings, only *one* of which is in conflict with the belief in the idea of a causal order where events follow one another in an intelligible manner. Furthermore, we argue that Ghazali’s desire to uphold the possibility of miracles need not constrain him to repudiate the idea of necessary connection, since he is able to explain miracles in ways that are compatible with belief in causality and necessary connection. We conclude by examining some arguments to the effect that Ghazali’s attempt to hold onto both miracles and necessary connection is inherently unstable; furthermore, we explore directions which Ghazalians may take in order to counter these arguments.

II. GHAZALI’S EMPIRICIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Ghazali begins by stating his view and then goes on to challenge the basis of the argument of his opponents. Simply stated, his view is that the connection between what is believed to be the cause and the effect is not necessary.⁶ It *is* possible to have a cause without what we normally view as its attendant effect, and it is possible to have an effect without what we regard as its cause. Ghazali offers several examples to clarify his meaning: eating and the satisfaction of hunger, contact with fire and burning, decapitation and death. That hitherto each of these “causes” was followed by what we understand to have been its effect is not due to any inherent powers or capacities in the “causes” themselves, but is solely due to the power of God through whose agency their concomitance has been maintained. The connection between them is itself neither necessary nor indissoluble. Moreover, God has the power to produce satiation without eating and decapitation without death.

Formulated in the foregoing manner, Ghazali’s initial position does not amount to an argument. It is a statement of a position and a point of view. And while the text itself does contain philosophical argumentation, Ghazali does not always separate clearly between that and a host of religious considerations that he marshals to buttress his position.

The main thrust of Ghazali’s attack on the belief in the existence of necessary causal connections in nature involves challenging the epistemological basis of such a belief. First of all, he argues, it can be said that the existence of one thing *with* the existence of another does not show that one exists *by* the other. When we ordinarily observe the constant conjunction of some objects with others, we begin to assume that they are inextricably connected. But what right have we to regard them as being causally connected and in a necessary manner, Ghazali asks, since all we observe is the

6. *TAE*, p. 195; *TAT*, p. 1:316.

presence of one object followed by the presence of another, and observe no connection between them? The only argument that philosophers can produce to show that fire, for instance, has the capacity to necessarily incinerate cotton is from observation. Observation, however, affords us no reason to believe in the existence of anything other than conjunction. It “proves a simultaneity, not a causation.”⁷ Fire, in any case, is an inanimate object and can have no action. God is the only agent of the creation of blackness in cotton and the disintegration of its parts, accomplished either directly or through the intermediary of angels.⁸

Ghazali’s argument presupposes an empiricist epistemology. But the foundation of the argument is not developed as it is, for instance, by Hume, whose views on causation bear a striking resemblance to those of Ghazali. Hume’s account of causation, it should be noted, was based, in part, on his epistemology—in particular, his general thesis that meaningful ideas are reducible to the sensory impressions from which they are derived. On the basis of this, Hume proceeds to isolate the three empirical relations of contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction as the essential elements in our idea of causation.⁹

According to Hume, the idea of necessary connection is a product of those three empirical relations. It is subjective in origin, in the sense that it is an idea that is impressed on our minds by the constant conjunction of certain objects and events. It has no foundation in reality, but is rather projected by the mind upon nature.

Unlike Hume, Ghazali’s intent is not primarily the analysis of the meaning of causation. Ghazali’s concern is to guard against compromising divine omnipotence. This becomes a distinct possibility when miracles are denied on the strength of a belief in a causal order which is not subject to divine power. To achieve his end, Ghazali finds it essential to deny that necessity and causality can be attributed to the ontological order.

Thus far, two main features of Ghazali’s position have been mentioned: (1) his denial of the existence of a necessary causal connection between matters of fact, which leaves him free to attribute causal agency solely to God; and (2) the argument that observation does not support the conclusion that necessary relations exist between causes and effects, but only their constant conjunction. The first point is clearly not a philosophical argument. Rather, it is a statement of a point of view to be argued for. But Ghazali’s argument in support of his position falls short of this mark for at least two reasons.

Firstly, if one grants the validity of the argument, all it demonstrates is that to the extent that our knowledge of the essential features of causal relations between particulars is based on observation, we cannot legiti-

7. *TAE* p. 196; *TAT*, p. 1:317.

8. *TAE* p. 196; *TAT*, p. 1:317.

9. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), bk I, pt. 3, sec. 2,6.

mately suppose that a necessary relation exists between what we regard as cause and effect, since we observe no such relation. It may well be that there are necessary connections between causes and effects, but if there are any, we are unaware of them. The evidence we possess does not afford us the information to warrant the assertion that necessary relations obtain between matters of fact. Ghazali's argument thus challenges the *empirical* grounds for believing that effects necessarily follow their causes. Of itself, however, the argument does not suffice to show that there are no necessary connections between causes and effects. As Madden puts it, one needs to be a "rigid positivist" in order to believe that failure to experience something is a good reason for believing that it does not exist.¹⁰

But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, what we have called Ghazali's "empiricist epistemology" can be challenged. In particular, one can question his claim that observation shows only that something happens *with* something rather than *by* it. The most straightforward line of questioning that comes to mind here is the one that G. E. M. Anscombe directs at Hume's claim that we are not able to perceive causality or necessary connection. Anscombe claims that our use of the concept "cause" presupposes our application of a host of causal concepts that we use in "reporting what is observed." As examples of causal concepts that we regularly use in reporting "what is observed," she offers the following examples: scrape, push, wet, carry, eat, burn, knock over, keep off, squash, make, and hurt. To Hume's challenge to produce an example of a (causal) "efficacy" that is obvious to our consciousness or sensation,¹¹ she replies: "Nothing easier: is cutting, is drinking, is purring not 'efficacy'?"¹²

Of course, die-hard Humeans or Ghazalians might reply that when we observe a floor being scrubbed, or a clump of cotton going up in flames, all our senses register is a series of appearances: first, the floor looks dirty, then it is shiny, and one might even see bits of dirt being "detached" from the floor, and so on. But scrubbing as such, one might say, is not really "observed." Perhaps one "infers" it from what one does see. But in so doing one goes beyond observable evidence (as is the case with all scientific inferences).

According to this line of reasoning no one really observes anything acting on anything, or, for that matter, being acted upon. But is this really a tenable position? Not only does it make one wonder what function all these verbs of "action" are doing in language, but it makes one also wonder what observation itself is, if not some kind of activity ("efficacy," in Anscombe's words). When one observes, is not one doing something, namely

10. E. H. Madden, "Averroes and the Case of the Fiery Furnace," in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. T. Beauchamp (Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1974), p. 139.

11. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, bk I, pt. 3, sec. 14.

12. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Causality and Determinism," in *Causation and Counterfactuals*, ed. E. Sosa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 69.

observing? And the mind that does the observing: is it not being affected in a certain way by the observed object? From both sides of the relation something is being done, and if we can be certain of this in some cases, there is no compelling reason to think that we cannot know it in others, such as when cotton is being consumed by fire.

III. DOES GHAZALI NEED TO DENY NECESSARY CONNECTION?

As Kogan notes, Ghazali's epistemological argument against belief in causality is not without irony. According to Ghazali, the only genuine example of causal efficacy is God, and God is certainly not something of which we have experience.¹³ But regardless of how successful Ghazali's epistemological attack on the notion of causality (a question which is important in itself, but one which we cannot discuss fully here), we must now turn to the question which we think we can answer in a reasonably short space: does Ghazali really need to deny necessary connection?

As we have already indicated, Ghazali is concerned with securing the possibility of miracles and the omnipotence of God. If we now want to construe Ghazali's belief that it is possible for events to depart from their "usual course" as something that conflicts with necessary connection, then a great deal hinges on the precise meaning of the phrase *khariq li'l adah* ("departure from the usual course of events"). Ghazali's assertion that miracles constitute a "departure from the usual course of events" can mean one of two things: (1) to have a cause without its normally expected effect; for instance, decapitation without death, or contact with fire without incineration. The crucial idea here is that fire does not burn cotton, even though the nature of the particulars involved has not changed, that is, fire remains what it is, and cotton retains its nature as we know it. What we have here is an unambiguous case of God violating (abolishing, or suspending) "the laws of nature." (2) To have a cause without its usual effect, not because God violates the laws of nature, but rather because He employs them in such a way as to produce the remarkable impression on the minds of the observers—those around the prophet—so that they are moved to say that a miracle has taken place.¹⁴

The first meaning of *khariq li'l adah* requires Ghazali to deny causal

13. Barry Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), p. 89.

14. This distinction can be found in E. Madden and R. Harré, *Causal Powers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), who point out the need for a similar distinction in Hume's case. Cf. Madden, "A Third View of Causality," in *Philosophical Problems of Causation*, pp. 178–89; Madden, "Hume and the Fiery Furnace," *Philosophy of Science* 38 (1971): 64–69; Harré and Madden, *Causal Powers*, pp. 44–69.

necessity, or to subscribe to Ash'arite occasionalism. The second meaning, as we shall see presently, requires nothing of the sort.

How do miracles take place in accordance with meaning (2) of *khariq li'l adah*? The answer is to be found in Ghazali's own text. According to Ghazali's explanation:

But we still regard it as possible that a prophet should be thrown into the fire, and not burn, either through a change in the quality of the fire or through a change in the quality of the prophet, and that either through God or through the angels there should arise a quality in the fire which limited its heat to its own body, so that it did not go beyond it, but remained confined to it, keeping, however, to the form and reality of the fire . . . ; or that there should arise in the body of the person an attribute, which did not stop the body from being flesh and bone, but still deflected it against the action of the fire. For we can see a man rub himself in talc and sit down in a lighted oven and not suffer from it.¹⁵

This is a straightforward case of God manipulating (using to advantage) the laws of nature, the laws which govern the behavior of flesh as well as of tar and fire, to produce remarkable results.

There are other ways of producing miracles, ways which to our mind exhibit a stronger degree of divine intervention, but which, to Ghazali's mind, still fall short of being a violation of the laws of nature:

And also the bringing back to life of the dead and the changing of a stick into a serpent are possible in the following way: matter can receive any form, and therefore earth and the other elements can be changed into blood, then blood can be changed into sperm, and then sperm can be thrown into the womb of take the character of an animal. This, is the habitual course of nature, takes place over along space of time, but why does our opponent declare it impossible that matter should pass through these different phases in a shorter period than is usual, and, and when once a shorter period is allowed there is no limit to its being shorter and shorter, so that these potencies can always become quicker in their action and eventually arrive at the stage of being a miracle of a prophet.¹⁶

These examples illustrate a possible course that Ghazali can take in order to find room for the miraculous in his system of thought. What is significant about these examples from our point of view, is the clear admission that the fire that fails to harm the prophet is the same thing that (by nature) burns combustible objects—that the rapidly transforming matter described above is not a different kind of matter from the one we know. Ghazali shows no inclination to give it different names. There can be no question here of God's suspending the operation of, or overriding the laws

15. *TAE* p. 200; *TAT*, p. 1:326.

16. *TAE* pp. 200–201; *TAT*, p. 1:327.

of nature in the case of these miraculous occurrences. Rather, God uses or exploits the laws in order to produce extraordinary results, in much the same way a scientist or an engineer is able to produce extraordinary effects by appropriate use of the laws of nature.

Now the question is bound to arise: How did Ghazali find room for the miraculous in his system? Did he opt for a world of totally contingent processes that depend for their occurrence, succession, and order on God's will? This is a world where one cannot seriously speak of the existence of laws of nature or natural necessities as everything is so utterly dependent on God's will. Or does Ghazali believe in a "lawful Nature," where everything happens in accordance with natural laws, albeit ones that were laid down by God? In the latter case, God's role in miracles would resemble that of the Master Engineer, who does truly wonderful things, not by violating the laws of nature, but by using them in the proper manner.¹⁷

The issue raised here is the historical question of Ghazali's position on causality. This is one of the most difficult questions about Ghazali's philosophy, and opinions on this subject have been divided for some time. While Alon correctly notes, "[m]ost writers agree that Ghazali rejected causality," some, such as Van den Bergh, have argued that Ghazali in the end reverts to "the rationalistic supernaturalism of the Muslim Philosophers."¹⁸ Still others, sometimes on the basis of the text of the Seventeenth Discussion of *tahafut*, sometimes on the basis of Ghazali's other writings have argued that Ghazali sought to reconcile "orthodox Islam" and philosophy, with regard to causality.¹⁹ We will not engage these debates here as we are mainly interested in Ghazali's *logically possible options*, more than his (real or theorized) course of action on this matter.²⁰

17. It is possible to associate two concepts of "the miraculous" with these two methods of accommodating miracles. Bahlul argues that the occasionalist path leaves us with an inadequate concept of the miraculous, mainly because it makes the terms "miracle" and "event" coextensive in the range of their application (R. Bahlul, "Miracles and Ghazali's First Theory of Causation," *Philosophy and Theology* 2 [1990]: 145). The second concept of the miraculous which we examine in this paper closely resembles what Kogan refers to as "the philosophers' conception of miracles," where these are seen "not so much [as] interruptions of the course of nature as they are extraordinary extensions of it" (Barry Kogan, "The Philosophers, Al-Ghazali and Averroes on Necessary Connection and the Problem of the Miraculous," in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, p. 116).

18. Ilai Alon, "Al-Ghazali on Causality," *American Oriental Society Journal* (100): 379; *TAT*, 2:182, 1:326 n.7.

19. W. J. Courntenay, "The Critique of Natural Causality in the Mutakallimun and Nominalism," *The Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973): 77-94; B. Abrahamov, "Al-Ghazali's Theory of Causality," *Studia Islamica* 67 (1988): 75-98.

20. Special mention should be made of L. E. Goodman, "Did Ghazali Deny Causality?" (*Studia Islamica* 47 [1978]: 83-120) and M. E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazali's Second Causal Theory in the Seventeenth Discussion of his *Tahafut*," (in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*) because they both examine the text of the Seventeenth Discussion in relation to Ghazali's other writings. Nevertheless, they are still able to reach opposing conclusions.

Still, it may be thought that Ghazali's expressed need to criticize the philosophers for saying that "the existence of the cause without the effect or the effect without the cause is not within the realm of the contingent or possible" shows that Ghazali is not neutral between the two ways of accommodating miracles. This, however, is by no means obvious. One who denies that it is necessary that the removal of a person's kidneys (cause) is followed by his death (effect) need not be denying any natural necessities. He or she may be just thinking of kidney machines or some scientifically possible method of doing what the kidneys do.

Of more interest to us is the viability of the "non-occasionalist" path, which we claim is open to Ghazali. Can one really believe in the existence of a law-governed nature and still think that miracles can take place? We shall discuss this option below.

IV. MIRACLES AND CONCEPTS OF IMPOSSIBILITY

The miracles Ghazali discusses in his chapter on causality are not all of one type. But what is more important for determining the viability of his options is that the suggested explanations of "how miracles can still take place" are not identical. There is at least one type of miracle (together with its explanation) that does not seem to comport well with belief in causality and the existence of a natural order.

For clarity's sake, let us begin with one type of miracle that does not seem to trouble Ghazali when it comes to explaining concepts that the philosopher and believers in causality are willing to accept. This is the miracle of Abraham surviving immolation by the unbelievers. Ghazali notes that a person who covers himself with talc and sits in a lighted oven suffers no harm, and hints that it is conceivable that God may have intervened in Abraham's case in some such fashion, much as a knowledgeable, inventive human engineer (or scientist) might bring about truly impressive effects by suitable use of the laws of nature.

Now all of this may be acceptable. But consider Moses' miracle: the rod turning into a serpent. Ghazali sees this as happening in terms of matter "passing through phases in shorter periods." And

when once a shorter period is allowed there is no limit to its being shorter and shorter, so that these potencies can always become quicker in their action and eventually arrive at the stage of being a miracle of a prophet.²¹

But is this plausible? Many philosophers are bound to object that Ghazali does not seem to realize that many laws of nature have a temporal

21. *TAF* pp. 200-201; *TAT*, p. 1:327.

dimension, which will become apparent when care is taken to formulate them exactly and explicitly. Consider, for example, the law Galileo arrived at from his study of the behavior of falling objects. According to this law, the distance covered by a falling object is proportional to the square of time. This means that if a body covers a certain distance by the end of the first second of its fall, then it is expected to cover a certain definitely known greater distance by the end of the second and third seconds of its fall. There can be no question of covering lesser or greater distances. Coverage of distance proceeds without question at a certain definite rate. Were a body to do otherwise in the same circumstances, the laws of nature would be completely violated.

The idea that natural processes take place at “certain rates” and not others is well attested. Many kinds of processes have “periods”—pregnancies have terms, different kind of plants grow at definite rates, and so on. And while some processes can be accelerated in certain circumstances, all activities occur within parameters set by laws that are more ultimate than those we can take advantage of in order to produce accelerated natural processes. For example, we can increase an object’s velocity by subjecting that object to greater and greater forces (all in accordance with the laws of physics). However, if the theory of relativity is to be believed, no object can exceed the speed of light. This is a law of nature, not something that merely happens to be the case.

Given this, what can Ghazali say in order to explain Moses’ miracle? He can certainly look for a more conservative explanation of the rod/serpent miracle, along the lines of his explanation of Abraham’s miracle, which does not necessarily fly in the face of natural laws. But there is a somewhat more radical approach that Ghazali can avail himself of, which does not seem to be subject to these difficulties. It has a general character that relieves one from the need to pay attention to the details of ever-changing scientific theories. It can be explained thus.

It is well known that, as his examples of impossibilities illustrate, Ghazali restricts the necessary to what is “logically or analytically necessary.” Toward the end of the Seventeenth Discussion he says:

the impossible cannot be done by God, and the impossible consists in the simultaneous affirmation and negation of a thing, or the affirmation of the more particular with the negation of the more general, or the affirmation of two things with the negation of one of them, and what does not refer to this is not impossible, and what is not impossible can be done.²²

Given this, it is open to Ghazali to question the necessity of the entire natural causal order, where fire causes combustion, and where decapitation

22. *TAF* p. 203; *TAT*, p. 1:329.

leads to death, and so on. He could question it, not from perspective of a Humean, who is willing to entertain the picture of “cotton-engulfed-in-fire-but-not-burning,” but from the perspective of someone who believes that our world, with all its natural-causal laws (where fire burns, and so on) is only one of many logically possible worlds (with different systems of causal-natural laws) that God could have created. After all, to our minds it is not impossible that falling objects should accelerate at a slightly different rate from the one which Galileo discovered, or that light should travel at a different speed than the one we know. Of course, a change here or there in the laws of nature as we know them might logically necessitate changes and adjustments elsewhere in the system of nature. But this does not prevent us from imagining systems, whole and entire, that differ from the one we know.

In this light, one might look at the rod/serpent miracle as taking place within the confines of a different system of laws, ones that do allow for matter to be manipulated in ways that are ruled out by our familiar causal/natural laws. If God were to do this, would this be a violation of “the laws of nature?” Not really. Imagine persons who invent games (chess, backgammon), and freely assign (consistent) rules for these game. If one took the game of chess (as we know it) and made the pawn move three squares at a time, that agent would be violating “the laws of chess.” But if the inventor were to abolish the whole game, replacing it with another, the “laws of the game” would not be violated. Changes *in* the game are one thing, changes *of* the game are a different matter entirely. The laws of the game are not “self-necessitating,” and there is nothing in them that guarantees their continued holding.

It could be the same with the laws of nature, according to Ghazali. Given the laws (as we know them), fire has to burn, and dead matter (rod) becomes “live” (if it ever does) only at a certain rate, and after going through phases that have to last this long (much longer than is required for a prophet’s miracle). But Ghazali need not accept the idea (nobody really does) that the laws of nature are logically necessary, that things could not happen differently. The world could be have been otherwise. Perhaps what happens during a prophet’s miracle is that the world (temporarily at least) is otherwise, as far as the laws it obeys are concerned. In this case, a miracle need not be a violation of causal laws, but merely something that happens in accordance with a different set of causal laws.

This, we think, is one direction that Ghazali can take. It comes with an “uncertainty price”; one is bound to wonder: How can we ever be sure that God will not choose to replace the laws of nature with another set at any minute? This is, of course, reminiscent of the epistemological difficulties that follow from Ghazali’s explorations of the “occasionalist” path, which is subject to the “absurdities” (*tashni’at*) that he tries very hard to rebut in the Seventeenth Discussion.²³

In the end, Ghazali is left in as comfortable a position as that of Hume,

23. *TAF* pp. 198–99; *TAT*, p. 1:323.

who could not be certain about the future either. But this is probably a result that we must endure, no matter what our views of miracles or the laws of nature are. The laws of physics (of nature as whole) do not have the necessity, certainty, or self-evidence of the laws of mathematics and logic. It makes no sense to wonder whether 1 and 1 will make 2 next week, simply because we do not really understand what it means for 1 and 1 not to make 2. But we can certainly understand what it would mean for falling objects to begin (next week) accelerating at a rate which is proportional, not to the square of time, but the cube of time, or something entirely different.

It is significant that some philosophers claim that the (skeptical) Humean predicament is the human predicament. But in the case of philosophers such as Ghazali, the predicament is alleviated by the belief in the existence of a God, who, although powerful and unpredictable, is nevertheless good, and thus can be trusted not to toy with us. Hence, it need not be thought that the “non-occasionalist” method of accommodating belief in the possibility of miracles that Ghazali can (or does) offer is hopeless.