The Decisive Treatise

AVERROES

1126–1198

The Decisive Treatise

فصل المقال فيما بين الحكمة والشريعة من الاتصال

Translated from the Arabic with AI (Claude) and edited



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The Decisive Treatise · Averroes (1126–1198)

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INTRODUCTION

Averroes—Abu l-Walid Muhammad Ibn Rushd (1126–1198)—was a judge in Seville and Cordoba, physician to the Almohad court, and the greatest commentator on Aristotle in any language; medieval Latin readers called him simply "the Commentator." He wrote the *Decisive Treatise* around 1179–1180, in the form of a legal opinion, a *fatwa*: does the revealed Law permit the study of philosophy, forbid it, or command it?

His answer is that the Law commands it, for anyone able to undertake it. The Quran calls on believers to reflect on the world, and the best kind of reflection is demonstration, so logic and the books of the ancient Greeks must be studied. Because "truth does not contradict truth," wherever a demonstrated conclusion conflicts with the apparent sense of Scripture, the text must be interpreted. But people differ: most are persuaded by rhetoric, some by dialectic, only a few by demonstration, and Scripture speaks to all three. Interpretations should therefore be kept for those who can understand them—and not broadcast, as the theologians and al-Ghazali had done, to the harm of both religion and philosophy, which are "companions by nature and friends in essence."

The treatise answers al-Ghazali's charge, in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, that philosophers like al-Farabi and Avicenna were unbelievers. It is followed here by a short appendix, a letter on how God can know particular things without His eternal knowledge changing.

The Law Commands the Study of Philosophy

The Law calls on us to reflect on existing things with the intellect; so demonstration, logic and the books of the ancients must be studied by those able to—and the Law's three ways of bringing people to assent.

1.1 In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God bless Muhammad and his family and grant them peace.

1.2 The jurist, the most eminent, the peerless and most learned, the great leader, the most just judge, Abu l-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd (may God Most High be pleased with him and have mercy on him), said:[1]

1.3 After praising God with all His praises, and invoking blessing on Muhammad, His purified and chosen servant and messenger: the purpose of this treatise is to examine, from the standpoint of study according to the Law, whether the study of philosophy (*falsafa*) and of the sciences of logic is permitted by the Law, forbidden, or commanded, and if commanded, whether as recommended or as obligatory. We say: the activity of philosophy is nothing more than the study of existing things and reflection on them insofar as they point to the Artisan, that is, insofar as they are artifacts. For existing things point to the Artisan only through knowledge of the art in them, and the more complete the knowledge of their art, the more complete

1 This is Averroes (Ibn Rushd, AD 1126–1198), jurist, judge, physician and philosopher of Cordoba.

the knowledge of the Artisan. And the Law has recommended reflection on existing things and urged it. If all this is so, then it is clear that what this name designates is either obligatory by the Law or recommended by it.[2] That the Law has summoned us to reflect on existing things by means of the intellect (*ʿaql*), and to seek knowledge of them through it, is clear from more than one verse of the Book of God, blessed and exalted is He. For example, God Most High says: "Reflect, you who have eyes!" This is an explicit text establishing the obligation to use intellectual syllogism, or intellectual syllogism and legal reasoning together. Again, God Most High says: "Have they not studied the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things God has created?" This is an explicit text urging the study of all existing things.[3]

1.4 Know that among those whom God Most High singled out and honored with this knowledge was Abraham (peace be upon him). God Most High says: "So We showed Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth…", and the rest of the verse. He also says: "Do they not look at the camels, how they were created, and at the sky, how it was raised up?" And He says: "…and they reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth"—and there are other verses too numerous to count.[4]

1.5 It is established, then, that the Law has made it obligatory to study existing things by means of the intellect and to reflect on them. Reflection is nothing more than inferring the unknown from the known and drawing it out of it, and this is syllogism, or is done by syllogism. So we are obliged to carry out our study of existing things by intellectual syllogism. It is clear, too, that the kind of study to which the Law has summoned us and which it has urged is the most perfect kind of study, using the most perfect kind of syllogism: the one called demonstration (*burhān*). Since the Law has urged knowledge of

2 *Falsafa*: philosophy in the Greek tradition of Aristotle and his Arabic followers. "The Law" renders al-sharʿ, the revealed Law (*sharīʿa*) of the Quran and Prophetic practice as a whole.

3 *ʿAql*: intellect, reason. Quran 59:2; 7:185.

4 Quran 6:75; 88:17–18; 3:191.

God Most High and of the things He has brought into existence by demonstration, it is best, or rather necessary, for anyone who wants to know God, blessed and exalted is He, and all other existing things by demonstration, first to learn the kinds of demonstration and their conditions, and how demonstrative syllogism differs from dialectical, rhetorical and sophistical syllogism.[5] That is impossible unless he has first learned what syllogism as such is, how many kinds it has, and which of them are valid syllogisms and which are not. And that too is impossible unless he has first learned the parts of which syllogism is composed, that is, the premises and their kinds. So the believer in the Law, who obeys its command to study existing things, is obliged, before he begins that study, to learn these things, which stand to study as tools stand to work. The jurist infers from the command to gain understanding of the legal rulings that he is obliged to know the kinds of legal reasoning by analogy, and which of them are valid analogies and which are not. In the same way, the knower is obliged to infer from the command to study existing things that he must know intellectual syllogism and its kinds. Indeed, he has the better claim to do so. For if the jurist infers from God's words "Reflect, you who have eyes!" the obligation to know legal reasoning by analogy, how much more fitting it is for the knower of God to infer from them the obligation to know intellectual syllogism. No one may say that this kind of study of intellectual syllogism is a heretical innovation because it did not exist in the first generation of Islam. For the study of legal reasoning by analogy and its kinds was also developed after the first generation, and it is not regarded as an innovation. We must hold the same view of the study of intellectual syllogism. There is a reason for this, but this is not the place to mention it. Indeed, most adherents of this religion affirm intellectual syllogism, apart from a small group of the Hashwiyya, and they are refuted by the texts. Since it is established that the Law makes it obligatory to study intellectual syllogism and its kinds, just as it makes it obligatory to study legal reason-

5 *Burhān*: demonstration, proof from certain premises (Aristotle's apodeixis).

ing by analogy, it is clear that if no one before us had examined intellectual syllogism and its kinds, we would be obliged to begin examining it ourselves, with each later scholar drawing on the earlier, until knowledge of it was complete. For it is difficult or impossible for any one person to discover, on his own and from the start, everything that is needed in this field, just as it is difficult for one person to infer everything needed for knowledge of the kinds of legal reasoning by analogy. Indeed, this is even truer of knowledge of intellectual syllogism. But if others have already examined it,[6] then it is clear that, in pursuing our aim, we must draw on what our predecessors have said on the subject, whether or not those others shared our religion. For when an instrument is used for ritual slaughter, the validity of the slaughter does not depend on whether the instrument belongs to someone who shares our religion or not, provided it meets the conditions of validity. By "those who do not share our religion" I mean the ancients who studied these things before the religion of Islam.

1.6 This being so, and since everything needed for the study of intellectual syllogisms has been examined by the ancients in the most thorough way, we should take their books in hand and look at what they have said on the subject. If all of it is correct, we will accept it from them; if any of it is incorrect, we will draw attention to that. Once we have finished with this kind of study, we will have the tools by which we can reflect on existing things and on the evidence of the art in them. For whoever does not know the art does not know the artifact, and whoever does not know the artifact does not know the Artisan. Then we must begin examining existing things in the order and manner we have learned from the art of knowing demonstrative syllogisms.

1.7 It is also clear that we can achieve this aim regarding existing things only if they are examined by one person after another in succession, the later drawing on the earlier, as has happened in the mathematical sciences. Suppose that the art of geometry

6 Hashwiyya: a hostile name for crude literalists who rejected rational argument in religion.

did not exist in our time, nor the art of astronomy, and a single person wanted to determine on his own the sizes of the heavenly bodies, their shapes and their distances from one another. He could not do it. He could not, for example, learn the size of the sun relative to the earth, or the sizes of the other stars, even if he were by nature the most intelligent of men, unless by revelation or something resembling revelation. Indeed, if he were told that the sun is about a hundred and fifty or sixty times larger than the earth, he would think the speaker mad. Yet this has been demonstrated in astronomy so firmly that no one versed in that science doubts it. But why turn to the mathematical arts for an example? Here is the art of the principles of jurisprudence, and jurisprudence itself, whose study was completed only over a long period. If someone today wanted to discover on his own all the arguments devised by the thinkers of the legal schools on the disputed questions debated among them throughout most of the Islamic lands, except the Maghrib, he would deserve to be laughed at: it would be impossible for him, and the work already exists, complete. This is self-evident, not only in the theoretical arts but in the practical arts as well.[7] For there is no art among them that a single individual can create by himself—how much less the art of arts, which is philosophy (wisdom)! This being so, if we find that our predecessors among earlier nations studied existing things and reflected on them as the conditions of demonstration require, we must look at what they said on the subject and what they set down in their books. Whatever in them agrees with the truth, we will accept from them, rejoice in and thank them for. Whatever does not agree with the truth, we will point out and warn against, and excuse them for it.

7 The Maghrib: the western Islamic world, North Africa and al-Andalus, where Averroes lived.

WHO MAY BE BARRED FROM PHILOSOPHY

Forbidding the ancients' books to capable students is wrong; harm from them is accidental, like drowning in water.

1.8 It is clear from this that studying the books of the ancients is obligatory by the Law, since their aim and intention in their books is the very intention to which the Law has urged us. Anyone fit to study them combines two qualities: first, natural intelligence; second, probity as the Law defines it and moral virtue. Whoever forbids such a person to study them has barred people from the door through which the Law summons them to knowledge of God: the door of study that leads to true knowledge of Him. That is the height of ignorance and of distance from God Most High.

1.9 Someone may go astray or stumble through studying them, whether through a deficiency in his natural capacity, or poor ordering of his study, or the domination of his passions over him, or because he found no teacher to guide him to an understanding of what is in them, or through a combination of all these causes or of more than one of them. It does not follow that we should forbid them to someone fit to study them. For this kind of harm arising from them attaches to them accidentally, not essentially. And what is beneficial by its nature and in itself should not be abandoned on account of some harm present in it accidentally. That is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) spoke as he did to the man he had told to give his brother honey for diarrhea. When the diarrhea grew worse after he gave it, the man complained to him, and he said: "God has spoken the truth; it is your brother's belly that has lied." Indeed, we say that someone who forbids the study of the books of philosophy to one fit for them, because some of the lowest sort of people are thought to have gone astray through studying them, is like someone who forbids a thirsty man to drink cool, fresh water, so that he dies of thirst, because some people have drowned in it and died. For death by drowning in water is accidental, whereas

death from thirst is essential and necessary. What has happened to this art happens to all the other arts. How many jurists there have been for whom jurisprudence was the cause of little piety and of immersion in worldly affairs! Indeed, we find that most jurists are like this, though their art in itself calls for nothing but practical virtue.[8] So it is not unlikely that the same thing should happen in the art that calls for theoretical virtue as has happened in the art that calls for practical virtue.

THREE WAYS TO ASSENT

People assent by demonstration, dialectic or rhetoric, and the Law summons everyone by all three.

1.10 Now that all this is established, we Muslims believe that this divine Law of ours is true; that it is the Law that has pointed the way to this happiness and summoned us to it, the happiness that consists in knowledge of God, mighty and majestic is He, and of His creatures; and that this is established for every Muslim by the method of assent that his temperament and nature require. For people's natures differ in excellence where assent is concerned. Some assent through demonstration. Some assent through dialectical arguments as firmly as the person of demonstration assents through demonstration, since their nature can do no more than that. And some assent through rhetorical arguments, as firmly as the person of demonstration assents through demonstrative arguments.

1.11 For since this divine Law of ours has summoned people by these three methods, assent to it has extended to every human being, except someone who stubbornly denies it with his tongue, or someone for whom the methods by which it summons to God Most High have not been established because he himself has neglected them. That is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) was singled out by being sent to all humankind: that is, because his Law contains the methods of summoning to God Most High. This is explicit in God's words: "Summon to the way

8 The Quran (16:69) says that honey contains healing for people.

of your Lord with wisdom and good admonition, and dispute with them in the way that is best."[9]

TRUTH DOES NOT CONTRADICT TRUTH

Where demonstration conflicts with the apparent sense of Scripture, the text is to be interpreted.

1.12 Since this Law is true and summons to the study that leads to knowledge of the truth, we Muslims know for certain that demonstrative study does not lead to anything contrary to what the Law has brought. For truth does not contradict truth; it agrees with it and bears witness to it. This being so, if demonstrative study leads to some kind of knowledge about some existing thing, then either the Law is silent about that thing or it mentions it. If the Law is silent about it, there is no conflict; it is like the rulings about which the Law is silent, which the jurist infers by legal reasoning by analogy. If the Law does speak of it, then the apparent sense of what it says either agrees with what demonstration has led to or disagrees with it. If it agrees, there is nothing to be said. If it disagrees, its interpretation (*taʾwīl*) must be sought.[10] The meaning of interpretation is this: carrying the significance of an expression from its literal to its figurative significance, without violating the custom of the Arabic language in figurative usage, such as calling a thing by the name of something resembling it, or of its cause, or its consequence, or something that accompanies it, or other things enumerated in accounts of the kinds of figurative speech.

9 "All humankind": literally "the red and the black," an Arabic idiom for all people. Quran 16:125.

10 *Taʾwīl*: interpretation that takes a text away from its apparent (literal) sense.

Demonstration and the Law Do Not Conflict

Truth does not contradict truth: where demonstration conflicts with the apparent sense of Scripture, the text is to be interpreted. Consensus, al-Ghazali's charge of unbelief, and the three disputed questions.

2.1 If the jurist does this with many legal rulings, how much more fitting it is for the one who possesses demonstrative knowledge to do so! For the jurist has only a syllogism that yields opinion, whereas the knower has a syllogism that yields certainty. We affirm categorically that wherever demonstration leads to something that the apparent sense of the Law contradicts, that apparent sense admits of interpretation according to the rules of interpretation in Arabic. No Muslim doubts this proposition, and no believer has misgivings about it. And how greatly certainty in it grows for anyone who has pursued and tested this idea, and has set himself this aim of reconciling what is known by reason with what is handed down by tradition! Indeed, we say that whenever a statement in the Law contradicts in its apparent sense what demonstration has led to, if the Law is considered and all its other parts are examined, there will be found among its expressions something that in its apparent sense bears witness to that interpretation, or comes close to doing so. For this reason Muslims have agreed by consensus that not all the expressions of the Law are to be taken in their apparent sense, nor are all of them to be taken away from their apparent sense by interpretation. They have disagreed over which are to be interpreted and which not. The Ashʿarites, for example, inter-

pret the verse of God's sitting upright on the throne and the hadith of His descent, whereas the Hanbalites take them in their apparent sense. The reason the Law contains both an apparent and an inner meaning is the difference in people's innate dispositions and the variety of their natural capacities for assent. The reason it contains apparent meanings that conflict with one another is to alert those firmly grounded in knowledge to the interpretation that reconciles them. This is what is alluded to in God's words: "It is He who has sent down to you the Book, in which are verses that are precise in meaning…" down to His words: "…and those firmly grounded in knowledge."[1]

2.2 Someone may say: "There are things in the Law that Muslims have agreed by consensus to take in their apparent sense, things they have agreed to interpret, and things over which they have disagreed. Is it permissible for demonstration to lead to interpreting what they agreed to take in its apparent sense, or to taking in its apparent sense what they agreed to interpret?" We reply: if the consensus were established by a method yielding certainty, it would not be permissible; but if the consensus on such matters is only probable, it may be permissible. That is why Abu Hamid, Abu l-Maʿali and other leading authorities in theoretical study said that one who breaks consensus by interpretation in matters like these is not to be declared an unbeliever categorically.[2] What shows you that consensus cannot be established with certainty in theoretical matters, as it can be in practical ones, is this. Consensus on a question in a given age can be established only if that age is clearly delimited for us; if all the scholars living in that age are known to us, that is, known as individuals and in their total number; and if the view of each of them on the question has been transmitted to us by reports so numerous that they cannot be

1 A hadith is a report of the Prophet's words or deeds. The Ashʿarites were the dominant school of Sunni theology; the Hanbalites, a legal school known for literalism. The verse says God "sat upright on the throne" (e.g. Quran 20:5); the hadith says God descends to the lowest heaven each night. Quran 3:7.

2 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. AD 1111) and his teacher Abu l-Maʿali al-Juwayni (d. AD 1085), leading Ashʿarite theologians.

doubted. On top of all this, it must have been established for us that the scholars living at that time agreed that the Law does not have both an apparent and an inner meaning, that knowledge of every question must be withheld from no one, and that people have only one way to knowledge of the Law. Yet it is reported of many in the first generation that they held that the Law has an apparent and an inner meaning, and that the inner meaning should not be taught to anyone who is not fit to know it and cannot understand it. For example, al-Bukhari reports that ʿAli (may God be pleased with him) said: "Speak to people of what they know. Do you want God and His Messenger to be called liars?" Similar sayings are reported from a number of the early Muslims. So how can one conceive of a consensus on any theoretical question being transmitted to us, when we know for certain that no age has been without scholars who hold that there are things in the Law whose true meaning should not be known by all people? It is otherwise with practical matters. Everyone holds that these should be disclosed to all people equally, and for consensus on them we consider it enough that a question has become widely known and no disagreement about it has been reported to us.[3] This is enough to establish consensus in practical matters, but it is otherwise with theoretical ones.

AL-GHAZALI'S CHARGE OF UNBELIEF

Averroes answers al-Ghazali's condemnation of al-Farabi and Avicenna, beginning with God's knowledge of particulars.

2.3 You may say: "If one is not to be charged with unbelief for breaking consensus in interpretation, since no consensus is conceivable there, what do you say about the philosophers among the Muslims, such as Abu Nasr and Avicenna? For Abu Hamid categorically charged them both with unbelief in his well-known book *The Incoherence* on three questions: the doctrine of the eternity of the world; the doctrine that God Most

3 Al-Bukhari (d. AD 870) compiled the most authoritative collection of hadith. ʿAli ibn Abi Talib was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law and the fourth caliph.

High does not know particulars—exalted is He above that!—and their interpretation of what has come down about the resurrection of bodies and the states of the hereafter."[4]

2.4 We reply: what his words on this show is that his charging them with unbelief was not categorical, for in *The Decisive Criterion* he states explicitly that charging someone with unbelief for breaking consensus is open to doubt. And it is clear from what we have said that consensus cannot be established on questions like these, since it is reported of many in the first generation, to say nothing of others, that there are interpretations that must be disclosed only to those fit for interpretation, namely "those firmly grounded in knowledge." For the reading we prefer is to pause after God's words "and those firmly grounded in knowledge." If the people of knowledge did not know the interpretation, they would have no superior assent that would give them a belief in it not found among those who are not people of knowledge.[5] God has described them as the ones who believe in it, and this can only refer to belief that comes from demonstration, which occurs only together with knowledge of interpretation.

2.5 For believers who are not people of knowledge believe in it, but not through demonstration. So if this belief with which God has described the scholars is peculiar to them, it must come through demonstration; and if it comes through demonstration, it occurs only together with knowledge of interpretation. For God Most High has told us that these verses have an interpretation, which is the truth, and demonstration can only be of the truth. This being so, no widespread consensus can be established about the interpretations that God has reserved for the scholars. This is self-evident to anyone who is fair.

2.6 Apart from all this, we think that Abu Hamid was mistaken about the Peripatetic philosophers when he attributed to them

4 Abu Nasr al-Farabi (d. AD 950) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina, d. AD 1037), the leading philosophers of Islam before Averroes. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) is al-Ghazali's attack on them.

the view that God, holy and exalted is He, does not know particulars at all. Rather, they hold that God Most High knows them by a knowledge not of the same kind as our knowledge of them. For our knowledge of them is an effect of the thing known: it is originated when that thing is originated and changes when it changes. God's knowledge of existence, glory be to Him, is the opposite of this, for it is the cause of the thing known, which is what exists. Whoever likens the two kinds of knowledge to each other has made the essences and properties of opposites one and the same, and that is the height of ignorance. So when the word "knowledge" is applied to originated and to eternal knowledge, it is applied in a purely equivocal sense, just as many words are applied to opposites, such as *jalal*, used of both great and small, and *ṣarīm*, used of both light and darkness. That is why there is no definition that embraces both kinds of knowledge, as the theologians of our time imagine.[6] We have devoted a separate treatise to this question, at the prompting of some of our friends.[7]

2.7 How can the Peripatetics be imagined to hold that God, glory be to Him, does not know particulars by His eternal knowledge, when they hold that true dreams contain warnings of particular events that will occur in the future, and that this warning knowledge reaches a person in sleep from the eternal knowledge that governs the universe and rules over it? Nor do they hold only that He does not know particulars in the way we know them; they hold that He does not know universals in that way either. For the universals known to us are also effects of the nature of what exists, whereas with that knowledge the relation is reversed. Since demonstration has therefore led to the conclusion that that knowledge transcends description as universal or

5 *The Decisive Criterion* (*Fayṣal al-tafriqa*) is al-Ghazali's treatise on when a charge of unbelief is justified. Pausing after this phrase in Quran 3:7 makes those firmly grounded in knowledge, together with God, the ones who know its interpretation.
6 The Peripatetics are Aristotle and his followers. The theologians (*mutakallimūn*) are the practitioners of *kalām*, dialectical theology.
7 This is the letter on God's knowledge given as the appendix to this edition.

particular, there is no point in disagreeing about this question, that is, about whether to charge them with unbelief or not.

IS THE WORLD ETERNAL OR ORIGINATED?

The dispute between theologians and ancient philosophers over the world's origin is largely one of naming.

2.8 As for the question whether the world is eternal or originated, the disagreement over it between the Ashʿarite theologians and the ancient philosophers seems to me almost to come down to a disagreement over naming, especially in the case of some of the ancients. For they agree that there are three kinds of beings: two extremes and one intermediate between them. They agree in naming the two extremes and disagree about the intermediate. One extreme is a being that has come into existence from something other than itself and by something, that is, by an efficient cause and from matter, and time precedes it, that is, precedes its existence. This is the condition of bodies whose coming to be is perceived by the senses, such as the coming to be of water, air, earth, animals, plants and so on. All of them, ancients and Ashʿarites alike, agree in calling this kind of being originated. The opposite extreme is a being that has not come into existence from anything or by anything, and is not preceded by time. Both parties likewise agree in calling this eternal. This being is apprehended by demonstration: it is God, blessed and exalted is He, who is the Agent of the whole, who brings it into existence and sustains it—glory be to Him, and exalted be His majesty!

2.9 The kind of being between these two extremes is a being that has not come into existence from anything and is not preceded by time, but that does exist by something, that is, by an agent. This is the world as a whole.

2.10 All of them agree that the world has these three characteristics. For the theologians concede that time does not precede it, or they are bound to concede it, since for them time is something that goes together with motions and bodies. They also agree with the ancients that future time is infinite, and likewise

future existence. They disagree only about past time and past existence. The theologians hold that it is finite, which is the doctrine of Plato and his school; Aristotle and his party hold that it is infinite, as is the case with the future. It is clear, then, that this last being resembles both the being that truly comes to be and the eternal being. Those more struck by its resemblance to the eternal than by its resemblance to the originated call it eternal, and those more struck by its resemblance to the originated call it originated. In truth it is neither truly originated nor truly eternal. For what is truly originated is necessarily subject to corruption, and what is truly eternal has no cause. Some have called it "originated and eternal": Plato and his school, since for them time is finite in the past. So the doctrines about the world are not so very far apart that some should be charged with unbelief and others not. For opinions of which that is true must be as far apart as possible, that is, they must be opposites, as the theologians supposed in this question: they took the names "eternity" and "origination," applied to the world as a whole, to be opposites. But it is clear from what we have said that this is not so.

2.11 All this holds even though these opinions about the world do not conform to the apparent sense of the Law. For if the apparent sense of the Law is examined, the verses that tell of how the world was brought into existence show that its form is truly originated, while existence itself and time continue at both ends, that is, without interruption. Thus the words of God Most High, "It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was upon the water," imply by their apparent sense that there was an existence before this existence, namely the throne and the water, and a time before this time. I mean the time joined to the form of this existence, which is the number of the motion of the celestial sphere. His words, "On the day when the earth is changed into another earth, and the heavens too," likewise imply by their apparent sense that there will be a second existence after this one. And His words, "Then He

turned to the heaven, and it was smoke," imply by their apparent sense that the heavens were created from something.[8]

2.12 So the theologians, too, do not follow the apparent sense of the Law in what they say about the world. Rather, they interpret. For nothing in the Law says that God existed alongside sheer nothingness, and no explicit text to this effect is ever found in it. How, then, can anyone imagine that consensus was reached on the theologians' interpretation of these verses? Moreover, the apparent sense of the Law that we have stated about the existence of the world has been held by a group of the philosophers.

EXCUSABLE AND INEXCUSABLE ERROR

Scholars who err in difficult interpretations are excused; errors about the fundamentals are unbelief.

2.13 It seems that those who disagree over the interpretation of these difficult questions are either right and rewarded, or mistaken and excused. For assenting to something on the strength of evidence present in the soul is compelled, not chosen. That is, it is not up to us to withhold assent or to give it, as it is up to us to stand up or not. And since free choice is a condition of legal obligation, one who assents to an error because of a doubt that occurred to him is excused, if he is one of the scholars. That is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "If the judge exercises his independent judgment and is right, he has two rewards; and if he errs, he has one reward." And what judge is greater than the one who judges of existence that it is so, or not so? These judges are the scholars whom God has singled out for interpretation. The error that the Law forgives is only the error that scholars fall into when they reflect on the difficult matters that the Law has charged them to reflect upon.

2.14 But error committed by anyone outside this class of people is pure sin, whether it concerns theoretical or practical matters. Just as a judge ignorant of the Sunna (the Prophet's practice) is not excused if he errs in a judgment, so one who judges about

8 Quran 11:7; 14:48; 41:11.

existing things is not excused if he lacks the qualifications of a judge; rather, he is either a sinner or an unbeliever. It is required of one who judges on what is permitted and what is forbidden that he possess the means of independent judgment, namely knowledge of the principles and knowledge of how to derive rulings from those principles by analogy. How much more fitting, then, is it to require this of one who judges about existing things: that he know the primary intelligibles and the way to derive conclusions from them.

2.15 In short, error concerning the Law is of two kinds. There is error for which one qualified to reflect on the matter in which it occurred is excused, just as a skilled physician is excused if he errs in the art of medicine, and a skilled judge if he errs in a judgment; but one who is not qualified in that field is not excused for it. And there is error for which no one at all is excused. If it occurs in the principles of the Law, it is unbelief; if it occurs in what comes after the principles, it is heretical innovation.

2.16 This second kind is error about things that every kind of method of proof leads one to know, so that knowledge of such a thing is, in this way, possible for everyone. Examples are acknowledging God, blessed and exalted is He, prophecy, and happiness and misery in the hereafter.

2.17 For these three fundamentals are reached by the three kinds of proof, rhetorical, dialectical and demonstrative, through which everyone without exception comes to assent to what he is obliged to know. So one who denies things like these, when they are among the fundamentals of the Law, is an unbeliever. He is obstinate with his tongue though not with his heart, or else he has neglected to attend to the knowledge of their proof. For if he belongs to the demonstrative class, a way has been provided for him to assent to them by demonstration; if he belongs to the dialectical class, by dialectic; and if he is one of those moved by exhortation, by exhortation. That is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “I have been commanded to fight people until they say, ‘There is no god but God,’ and believe

in me." He meant: by whichever of the three ways to faith suits them.

2.18 As for things that, being obscure, can be known only by demonstration, God has been gracious to those of His servants who have no access to demonstration, whether because of their natural constitution, their habits, or their lack of the means of learning. He has coined for them images and likenesses of these things and called them to assent to those images, since assent to those images can come about through the proofs common to everyone, namely the dialectical and the rhetorical. This is the reason why the Law is divided into an apparent and an inner meaning. The apparent meaning is the images coined for those ideas, and the inner meaning is those ideas themselves, which become clear only to the demonstrative class. These are the four or five kinds of existence that Abu Hamid mentioned in *The Decisive Criterion*.[9]

2.19 When, as we said, we happen to know a thing in itself by all three methods, we need not coin images for it; it is taken in its apparent sense and admits no interpretation. If this kind of apparent meaning concerns the fundamentals, whoever interprets it is an unbeliever. An example is someone who believes that there is no happiness or misery in the hereafter; that this teaching was intended only so that people might be safe from one another in their bodies and senses; that it is a ruse; and that man has no goal but his sensible existence alone. Once this is established, it will be clear to you from what we have said that there is an apparent meaning in the Law that may not be interpreted. If the interpretation concerns the principles, it is unbelief; if it concerns what comes after the principles, it is heretical innovation. There is also an apparent meaning that the demonstrative class are obliged to interpret; for them to take it in its apparent sense is unbelief. And for those who are not of the demonstrative class, interpreting it and removing it from its apparent sense is, in their case, unbelief or heretical innovation.

9 In that book al-Ghazali distinguishes five levels of existence: essential, sensible, imaginative, intellectual and analogical.

To this kind belong the verse of God's sitting upright on the throne and the hadith of His descent. That is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) said of a Black slave woman, when she told him that God was in heaven, "Free her, for she is a believer": she was not one of the demonstrative class. The reason for this is that people who come to assent only through the imagination, that is, who assent to a thing only insofar as they can imagine it, find it hard to assent to an existent that is not related to something imaginable. This applies also to those who understand this relation only as place. They are the ones who, by rejecting belief in God's corporeality, have advanced a little in reflection beyond the rank of the first class. So the answer to these people about such passages is that they are among the ambiguous verses, and that one should pause after the words of God Most High: "No one knows its interpretation except God."[10]

2.20 Although the demonstrative class agree that this kind is to be interpreted, they may differ in how they interpret it, according to each one's rank in the knowledge of demonstration. There is also a third kind of text in the Law, hovering between these two kinds, about which there is doubt. Some of those who engage in reflection assign it to the apparent meaning that may not be interpreted; others assign it to the inner meaning that scholars may not take in its apparent sense. This is because this kind is difficult and ambiguous. Whoever errs here is excused, I mean if he is one of the scholars.

2.21 Someone may ask: "Since it has become clear that the Law has three ranks in this respect, to which of the three do you assign what it says about the character and conditions of the afterlife?" We answer: This question clearly belongs to the kind on which there is disagreement. For we see some who count themselves among the demonstrative class saying that these texts must be taken in their apparent sense, since there is no demonstration showing that their apparent sense is impossible; this is the method of the Ashʿarites. Others, also among those who practice demonstration, interpret them, and they differ

10 Quran 3:7, read here with a pause after "God."

greatly among themselves in their interpretations. Abu Hamid and many of the Sufis are counted in this group. Some combine both interpretations, as Abu Hamid does in some of his books.[11]

2.22 It seems that a scholar who errs on this question is excused, and one who is right is thanked or rewarded. This holds provided that he acknowledges the afterlife's existence and interprets it in one way or another, that is, interprets its character, not its existence, and so long as the interpretation does not lead to denying its existence. Denying its existence is unbelief because it concerns one of the fundamentals of the Law, one assented to by the three methods common to all humankind. As for someone who is not a scholar, he must take these texts in their apparent sense; in his case, interpreting them is unbelief, because it leads to unbelief. That is why we hold that for anyone whose duty is to believe in the apparent sense, interpretation is unbelief, because it leads to unbelief. So whoever among those capable of interpretation discloses it to him has invited him to unbelief, and one who invites to unbelief is an unbeliever.

WHERE INTERPRETATIONS BELONG

Interpretations should be written only in demonstrative books, and al-Ghazali erred in publicizing them.

2.23 For this reason interpretations should be set down only in demonstrative books, because in demonstrative books they will reach only those of the demonstrative class. But when they are set down in books other than demonstrative ones, using poetic, rhetorical or dialectical methods, as Abu Hamid does, that is an offense against the Law and against philosophy, even if the man intended only good. He wanted to increase the number of the learned in this way, but what increased was the number of the corrupt, with no increase in the learned. Through this, some were led to disparage philosophy, others to disparage the Law, and others to combine the two. It seems that this was one of his

11 The Sufis: the mystics of Islam.

aims in his books. The evidence that he meant thereby to awaken minds of natural ability is that he held to no single doctrine in his books. With the Ashʿarites he is an Ashʿarite, with the Sufis a Sufi, and with the philosophers a philosopher, so that he is, as the saying goes: One day a Yemeni, when I meet a man of Yemen, / and if I meet a man of Maʿadd, then I'm of ʿAdnan.[12]

2.24 What the leaders of the Muslims ought to do is forbid his books that contain science to all but the learned, just as they ought to forbid demonstrative books to those unfit for them. The harm people suffer from demonstrative books is lighter, however, since for the most part only those of superior natural ability take them up, and this class is led astray only through lack of intellectual virtue, reading without order, and studying them without a teacher. But to forbid them altogether is to bar people from what the Law calls them to, for it wrongs the best class of people and the best kinds of existing things. Justice toward the best kinds of existing things is that they be known in their true nature by those prepared to know them so, and these are the best class of people. For the greater the existent, the greater the injustice done to it, which is ignorance of it. That is why God Most High said: "Associating others with God is a great wrong."[13]

2.25 This is what we saw fit to set down on this kind of inquiry, namely the discussion between the Law and philosophy and the rules for interpretation in the Law. Were it not that this matter, and the questions we have mentioned, are so widely known among people, we would not have allowed ourselves to write a single letter about it, nor to offer any excuse for the interpreters, since such questions belong by their nature in demonstrative books. God is the guide, who grants success in reaching what is right.

12 Yemen (the southern Arabs) and Maʿadd, descendants of ʿAdnan (the northern Arabs), were rival tribal lineages.
13 Quran 31:13.

Interpretations Are Not for Everyone

The Law's purpose and its methods for the demonstrative, dialectical and rhetorical classes of people; the harm done by publicizing interpretations, and how the Law's original harmony can be restored.

3.1 You should know that the aim of the Law is simply to teach true knowledge and true practice. True knowledge is knowledge of God, blessed and exalted is He, and of all other existing things as they really are, especially the noblest of them; and knowledge of happiness and misery in the hereafter. True practice is performing the acts that bring happiness and avoiding the acts that bring misery. Knowledge of these acts is what is called practical science. It falls into two parts. One is outward, bodily acts, and knowledge of these is what is called jurisprudence. The other is acts of the soul, such as gratitude and patience and the other traits of character that the Law has called for or forbidden. Knowledge of these is what is called asceticism and the sciences of the hereafter. It was toward this that Abu Hamid turned in his book. Since people had turned away from this kind and plunged into the other, and since this kind is more closely bound up with piety, which is the cause of happiness, he called his book *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. But we have strayed from our path; let us return. We say, then: The aim of the Law is to teach true knowledge and true practice. Teaching is of two kinds, conception and assent, as the experts in *kalām* have explained. The methods of assent available to people are three, the demonstrative, the dialectical and the rhetorical; and the methods of conception are two, the thing itself or an image of it. Not all people

are so constituted by nature as to accept demonstrations, or even dialectical arguments, let alone demonstrative ones. Besides, learning demonstrative arguments is difficult and takes a long time even for one fit to learn them. And the aim of the Law is to teach everyone. It follows that the Law must contain every kind of method of assent and every kind of method of conception.[1]

FOUR KINDS OF SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENT

The Law's arguments differ in whether their premises are certain and their conclusions literal or images.

3.2 Now some methods of assent are common to most people, I mean that assent comes about through them: these are the rhetorical and the dialectical, the rhetorical being more common than the dialectical. Others are peculiar to a few people: these are the demonstrative. And the first aim of the Law is to care for the majority without neglecting to alert the elite. So most of the methods declared in the Law are those common to the majority for bringing about conception and assent. In the Law these methods are of four kinds. In the first, they are common and yet also special in both respects: they are certain in conception and in assent, although they are rhetorical or dialectical. These are the syllogisms whose premises, though commonly accepted or probable, happen to be certain, and whose conclusions happen to be taken in themselves, not through their images. Statements of the Law of this kind have no interpretation, and whoever denies or interprets them is an unbeliever. In the second kind, the premises, though commonly accepted or probable, are certain, and the conclusions are images of the things they were meant to yield. This kind admits interpretation, of its conclusions, that is. The third is the reverse: the conclusions are the very things they were meant to yield, while the premises are commonly accepted or probable without happening to be cer-

1 *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*): al-Ghazali's major work on religious and ethical life.

tain. This kind too admits no interpretation of its conclusions, though its premises may admit it. In the fourth, the premises are commonly accepted or probable without happening to be certain, and the conclusions are images of what they were meant to yield. Here the duty of the elite is to interpret, and the duty of the general public is to let such statements pass in their apparent sense.

3.3 In short, wherever any of these admits an interpretation that can be grasped only by demonstration, the duty of the elite is that interpretation, and the duty of the general public is to take the text in its apparent sense in both respects, conception and assent, since their natures allow no more than that. Those who reflect on the Law may also arrive at interpretations because some of the common methods are superior to others in producing assent, that is, when the argument for the interpretation is more persuasive than the argument for the apparent sense. Interpretations of this sort are popular ones. They may be the duty of those whose theoretical powers have reached the level of dialectic. Some interpretations of the Ashʿarites and the Muʿtazilites belong here, though the Muʿtazilites' statements are for the most part more reliable. But the general public, who are capable of no more than rhetorical arguments, must let such texts pass in their apparent sense, and must not be taught that interpretation at all.[2]

3.4 People, then, fall into three classes with respect to the Law. One class is not fit for interpretation at all. These are the rhetorical class, the overwhelming majority, for no one of sound mind lacks this kind of assent. Another class is fit for dialectical interpretation. These are dialectical by nature alone, or by nature and habit. Another class is fit for certain interpretation. These are the demonstrative class, by nature and by training in the art, I mean the art of philosophy. This interpretation should not be declared to the dialectical class, let alone to the general public. Whenever any of these interpretations is declared to someone unfit for it, especially the demonstrative ones, which are so

2 The Muʿtazilites: an earlier rationalist school of kalām, rival of the Ashʿarites.

remote from common knowledge, it leads both the one who hears it and the one who declares it to unbelief. The reason is that interpretation aims to cancel the apparent meaning and establish the interpreted one. So when the apparent meaning is cancelled for someone who belongs to the people of the apparent meaning, and the interpreted meaning is not established for him, this leads him to unbelief, if it concerns the fundamentals of the Law.

3.5 So interpretations should not be declared to the general public, nor set down in rhetorical or dialectical books, that is, in books whose arguments are of these two kinds, as Abu Hamid did. For this reason, when an apparent text is such that its difficulty is evident in itself to everyone, while knowing its interpretation is not possible for them, it must be openly declared that it is ambiguous and that no one knows it except God, and that here one must pause after the words of God Most High: "No one knows its interpretation except God." The same kind of answer should be given to questions about obscure matters that the general public have no means of understanding, as in the words of God Most High: "They ask you about the spirit. Say: 'The spirit is by my Lord's command, and you have been given only a little knowledge.'"[3]

3.6 Anyone who declares these interpretations to those unfit for them is an unbeliever, because he invites people to unbelief, the opposite of what the Lawgiver calls them to. This is especially so when the interpretations are false and concern the fundamentals of the Law, as has happened with some people of our time. For we have seen some of them who thought they had become philosophers and had grasped, with their marvelous wisdom, things contrary to the Law in every respect, that is, admitting no interpretation; and who thought that the right course was to declare these things to the general public. By declaring those false beliefs to the general public, they became the cause of the public's ruin, and of their own, in this world and the next.

3 Quran 3:7; 17:85.

THE PHYSICIAN AND THE LAW

Publicizing interpretations is like persuading patients to distrust a skilled physician's prescriptions.

3.7 The relation between the aim of these people and the aim of the Lawgiver is like that of a man who goes to a skilled physician. The physician aims to preserve the health of all people and to rid them of diseases. He lays down for them precepts that all can assent to, on the need to use the things that preserve their health and remove their diseases and to avoid their opposites. For he cannot make them all physicians, since the one who knows by demonstrative methods the things that preserve health and remove disease is the physician. Then this man sets himself before the people and tells them, "These methods that this physician has laid down for you are not true," and sets about refuting them until they stand refuted in the people's eyes. Or he says, "They have interpretations," and the people neither understand these interpretations nor come through them to any assent in practice. Do you suppose that people in this situation will do any of the things that help to preserve health and remove disease? Or that the man who has declared to them that what they believed about those things is false will be able to use them with them, I mean to preserve health? No: he will not be able to use them with them, nor will they use them, and ruin will overtake them all. That is if he declares correct interpretations of those things to them, since they cannot understand such interpretation; still more if he declares false interpretations to them. For then they will end up believing neither that there is any health to be preserved nor any disease to be removed, let alone that there are things that preserve health and remove disease. This is the position, with respect to the Law, of anyone who declares interpretation to the general public and to those unfit for it. That is why he corrupts the Law and bars people from it. And one who bars people from the Law is an unbeliever.

3.8 This comparison is certain, not poetic, as someone might claim, because the proportion holds exactly. The physician stands to the health of bodies as the Lawgiver stands to the health of souls. That is, the physician is the one who seeks to preserve the health of bodies when it is present and to restore it when it is lost, and the Lawgiver is the one who seeks this for the health of souls. This health is what is called piety. The noble Book has declared in more than one verse that it is to be sought through the acts the Law prescribes. God Most High said: "Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be pious." He said: "Their flesh and their blood do not reach God, but your piety reaches Him." And He said: "Prayer restrains from indecency and wrongdoing." And there are other verses in the noble Book to the same effect.[4]

3.9 So what the Lawgiver seeks through the knowledge and the practice prescribed by the Law is this health. It is on this health that happiness in the hereafter follows, and on its opposite misery in the hereafter. It is clear to you from this that correct interpretations should not be set down in books meant for the general public, let alone false ones. Correct interpretation is the trust that man took upon himself and that all other existing things refused to bear and shrank from, I mean the trust mentioned in the words of God Most High: "We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains…" It was from interpretations, and from the belief that in matters of the Law they must be declared to everyone, especially the false ones, that the sects of Islam arose, until they charged one another with unbelief and with heretical innovation. The Muʿtazilites interpreted many verses and many hadiths and declared their interpretations to the general public; the Ashʿarites did the same, though they interpreted less. In this way they plunged people into hatred, mutual loathing and wars, tore the Law to pieces, and divided people utterly.[5]

4 Quran 2:183; 22:37; 29:45.

5 Quran 33:72; the verse goes on: "but they refused to bear it and shrank from it, and man bore it."

3.10 On top of all this, the methods they followed to establish their interpretations serve neither the general public nor the elite. They do not serve the public, because they are more obscure than the methods common to the majority. They do not serve the elite, because on examination they are found to fall short of the conditions of demonstration, as anyone who knows those conditions will see after the slightest examination. Indeed, many of the principles on which the Ashʿarites built their knowledge are sophistical, for they deny many necessary truths, such as the persistence of accidents, the action of things on one another, the existence of necessary causes for effects, substantial forms, and intermediaries. Their thinkers have gone so far in wronging the Muslims in this respect that one group of the Ashʿarites has charged with unbelief anyone who does not know the existence of the Creator, glory be to Him, by the methods they laid down in their books for knowing Him. But it is they who are truly unbelievers and astray. This is the source of their disagreement: some said that the first obligation is reflection, others that it is faith. That is because they did not know which methods are the ones common to everyone, the doors through which the Law has called all people in, and they thought there was only one method. So they missed the Lawgiver's aim, went astray, and led others astray.

3.11 Someone may ask: "If the methods followed by the Ashʿarites and by others who reflect are not the common methods by which the Lawgiver meant to teach the general public, the only methods by which they can be taught, then which methods are these in this Law of ours?" We reply: They are the methods set down in the noble Book, and those alone. For if the noble Book is examined, the three methods available to all people will be found in it, and these are the common methods for teaching most people and the elite. And if the matter is examined, it becomes clear that no common methods for teaching the general public can be found better than those mentioned in it. So whoever distorts them by an interpretation that is not apparent in itself, or is not more apparent to everyone than they are,

which is something that does not exist, has undone their wisdom and undone the effect they were meant to have in bringing about human happiness. This is very clear from the state of the first generation and of those who came after them. The first generation attained perfect virtue and piety only by using these statements without interpreting them, and any of them who came upon an interpretation did not think it right to declare it. But when those who came after them resorted to interpretation, their piety diminished, their disagreements multiplied, their love for one another vanished, and they split into sects.

RESTORING THE LAW

The Quran's own arguments suit everyone, and the rift between philosophy and the Law should be healed.

3.12 So anyone who wishes to remove this innovation from the Law must turn to the noble Book and gather from it the arguments it gives for each of the things we are required to believe. In reflecting on them, he must strive as far as he can to keep to their apparent sense, without interpreting any of it, unless the interpretation is itself apparent, that is, apparent to everyone alike. For if the statements set down in the Law to teach people are examined closely, it seems they can be defended so far that no one but a member of the demonstrative class can take out of its apparent sense whatever in them is not meant in its apparent sense. This property is not found in any other kind of statement.

3.13 For the statements of the Law set out explicitly for everyone in the noble Book have three properties that show its inimitability. First, nothing is more fully persuasive to everyone, or more able to win everyone's assent. Second, by their very nature they can be defended up to the point where no one but the demonstrative class can grasp the interpretation in them, if they are of the kind that has an interpretation. Third, they contain pointers for the people of truth to the true interpretation. None of this is found in the doctrines of the Ashʿarites or in those of the Muʿtazilites. That is, their interpretation cannot be defen-

ded, contains no pointer to the truth, and is not itself true. That is why heretical innovations have multiplied. We would dearly like to devote ourselves to this aim and be able to carry it out. If God grants us a longer life, we shall set down on it as much as we can manage. Perhaps that will be a starting point for those who come after.[6]

3.14 For the soul is in the utmost grief and pain at the corrupt passions and distorted beliefs that have crept into this Law, and especially at what has befallen it from people who count themselves followers of philosophy (wisdom). Injury from a friend is harder to bear than injury from an enemy. I mean that wisdom is the companion of the *sharīʿa* and her milk-sister. So injury from those who count themselves her followers is the gravest injury, quite apart from the enmity, hatred and quarreling it stirs up between the two, though they are companions by nature and friends in essence and in innate character. The Law has also been injured by many ignorant friends who count themselves its followers: these are the sects found within it. May God set all of them on the right path, grant them all success in loving Him, unite their hearts in piety toward Him, and remove hatred and ill will from them by His grace and mercy. God has already removed many of these evils, follies and misleading paths through this victorious authority.[7] Through it God has also opened the way to many good things, especially for the class of people who have taken the path of reflection and desire to know the truth. For it has called the general public to a middle way of knowing God, glory be to Him, a way that rises above the low level of those who follow authority and stops short of the contentiousness of the theologians. And it has alerted the elite to the obligation of full reflection on the foundation of the Law. God is the one who grants success and guides, by His grace.

6 The inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Quran is the doctrine that no human being can match its style and content, which is taken as proof of its divine origin.
7 "This victorious authority" is the Almohad dynasty, which ruled North Africa and al-Andalus and which Averroes served as judge and physician.

Appendix: On God's Knowledge

المسألة التي ذكرها الشيخ أبو الوليد في فصل المقال

A letter answering a question raised in the treatise: how God can know things that come into being without His eternal knowledge changing.

A.1 May God prolong your power, preserve your blessing, and shield you from the eyes of misfortune.[1]

A.2 By the excellence of your mind and the nobility of your nature you have surpassed many who engage in these sciences, and your sound reflection has led you to discover the difficulty that arises about the knowledge of the Eternal, glory be to Him, given that it is related to the things that originate from Him. It has therefore become our duty, for the sake of the truth and for the sake of removing this doubt from you, to resolve this difficulty after first stating it. For whoever does not know how the knot is tied cannot untie it.

A.3 The difficulty arises as follows. If all these things were in the knowledge of God, glory be to Him, before they came to be, then are they in His knowledge while they exist as they were in it before they existed? Or are they in His knowledge while they exist otherwise than they were in it before they existed? If we say that they are in God's knowledge while they exist otherwise than they were in it before they existed, it follows that eternal knowledge changes. It also follows that when they pass from nonexistence into existence, an additional knowledge comes into being. That is impossible for eternal knowledge. If we say

1 The appendix is a letter to an unnamed patron on the question of how God knows particular things.

that the knowledge of them is one and the same in both states, it will be asked: are they, the originated beings, the same in themselves before they exist as when they have come to exist? The answer will have to be that in themselves they are not the same before they exist as when they have come to exist. Otherwise the existent and the nonexistent would be one and the same.

A.4 When the opponent concedes this, he will be asked: is true knowledge not knowledge of what exists as it actually is? If he says yes, he will be told: then when a thing varies in itself, the knowledge of it must vary; otherwise it has been known otherwise than as it is. So one of two things must hold. Either eternal knowledge varies in itself, or originated things are unknown to Him. Both alternatives are impossible for Him, glory be to Him.

A.5 The difficulty is reinforced by what we see in the case of human beings. A person knows nonexistent things on the supposition that they will exist, and he knows them once they exist. It is self-evident that these two knowledges are different; otherwise he would be ignorant of their existence at the time when they came to exist.

A.6 Nor is one rescued from this by the answer the theologians usually give: that God Most High knows things before they come to be as they will be when they come to be, in time, place and the other attributes proper to each particular existent. For they will be asked: when the thing comes into existence, does a change occur or not? This change is the thing's passing from nonexistence into existence. If they say no change has occurred, they are being obstinate. If they say a change has occurred, they will be asked: is the occurrence of this change known to eternal knowledge or not? And the earlier difficulty follows. In short, it is hard to conceive that knowledge of a thing before it exists and knowledge of it after it has come to exist are one and the same knowledge. This, then, is the statement of the difficulty in the strongest form it can be given, as we discussed it with you.

A.7 Resolving this difficulty calls for a long discussion. Here, however, we shall aim only at the crucial point by which it is resolved.

A.8 Abu Hamid tried to resolve this difficulty in his book entitled *The Incoherence*, but with something that does not satisfy. What he said amounts to this. He claimed that knowledge and its object fall under the category of relation. Just as one of two related terms may change while the other does not change in itself, so the same, it seems, may happen to things in the knowledge of God, glory be to Him: they change in themselves while His knowledge of them, glory be to Him, does not change. An example of this in relation is that one and the same column may be on Zayd's right and then come to be on his left, while Zayd has not changed in himself. But this is not true. The relation itself has changed, for the relation that was "on the right" has become "on the left." What has not changed is only the subject of the relation, that is, its bearer, which is Zayd.[2] If that is so, and knowledge is the relation itself, then it must change when its object changes, just as the relation of the column to Zayd changes when the column changes, that is, when it comes to be on his left after being on his right.

THE SOLUTION

God's eternal knowledge causes things rather than being caused by them, so it does not change.

A.9 What in our view resolves this difficulty is to recognize that eternal knowledge stands to the existing thing differently from originated (temporal) knowledge. The existence of the existing thing is the cause and reason of our knowledge, whereas eternal knowledge is the cause and reason of the existing thing. Suppose that when the existing thing came into existence after not existing, an additional knowledge arose in eternal knowledge, as happens in originated knowledge. Then eternal knowledge would be an effect of the existing thing, not its cause. So no change can occur there as it does in originated knowledge. This error arose only from reasoning by analogy from originated knowledge to eternal knowledge, that is, by analogy from the

2 Zayd is the stock name used in Arabic examples.

seen to the unseen. The unsoundness of this analogy is well known.[3] Just as no change occurs in an agent when its effect comes into existence, meaning a change that was not there before, so no change occurs in eternal knowledge, glory be to Him, when its object originates from it.

A.10 So the difficulty is resolved. For if no change occurs in eternal knowledge, it does not follow for us that it fails to know the existing thing as it is at the time it originates. What follows is only that it knows it not by an originated knowledge but by an eternal knowledge. For a change in knowledge when the existing thing changes is a condition only of knowledge that is caused by the existing thing, namely originated knowledge.

A.11 So eternal knowledge is related to existing things in a different manner from originated knowledge. It is not that it is not related to them at all, as the philosophers are reported to hold when, because of this difficulty, they say that He, glory be to Him, does not know particulars. The matter is not as has been imagined about them. Rather, they hold that He does not know particulars with originated knowledge, whose condition is that it originates when they originate. For He is their cause, not caused by them, as is the case with originated knowledge. This is the utmost in declaring Him free of imperfection, and it must be acknowledged.

A.12 For demonstration has compelled the conclusion that He knows things, since they issue from Him only because He knows. It is not because He merely exists, or exists with some particular attribute, but because He knows. As God Most High has said: "Does He who created not know? He is the Subtle, the All-Aware." And demonstration has compelled the conclusion that He does not know them with a knowledge of the same character as originated knowledge. So there must be another knowledge of existing things, whose manner cannot be described: eternal knowledge, glory be to Him. How can one imagine that

3 Arguing "from the seen to the unseen" (*qiyās al-ghā'ib ʿalā l-shāhid*) was a standard method of the theologians: they inferred truths about God from what is observed in the world.

the Peripatetics among the philosophers hold that eternal knowledge does not encompass particulars, when they hold that it is the cause of warnings in dreams, of revelation, and of the other kinds of inspiration? This, then, is how we see the resolution of this difficulty, and it is beyond doubt or dispute. God grants success in reaching what is right and guides to the truth. Peace be upon you, and the mercy of God and His blessings.[4]

4 Quran 67:14.