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Ghazali on Immaterial Substances

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1. Preamble

I will in this paper attempt to extract a positive doctrine on the substantiality of the human soul from Ghazali's critique of the Aristotelian philosophical tradition. Rather than reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of intercultural dialogue, my aim is to directly engage in such dialogue. Accordingly, I will not suppose that we need to develop and apply external standards according to which one of the two philosophical traditions addressed here, Western and Islamic, may turn out to be superior. Up to a certain point, Western and Islamic philosophy are virtually indistinguishable regarding their style, the main topics, and the arguments discussed, which both take over from Aristotle and the Neoplatonists. Further, at least up to Ghazali, no Islamic philosopher actually employs standards of rationality that would differ from the standards also accepted in the West. Ghazali himself would certainly be at least as disturbed by a valid philosophical objection to his claims as any other serious philosopher. He does not pursue another kind of project, but submits to the same standards of truth and validity, as far as philosophical argument reaches. His point is, of course, that these standards do not reach as far as some philosophers suppose. But this, again, is not a particularly "Islamic" insight.

So, although I will discuss Ghazali against the background of a roughly outlined Western discourse about the mind as a substance, stretching from Augustine to Locke, this is not meant to be a confrontation between different styles of thinking or points of view. Insofar as Ghazali defends and refutes philosophical arguments, his style and point of view are thoroughly universal, as much as the style and point of view of Augustine, Descartes, and Locke. He could have directly contributed to their very project, and the following can be read as an attempt to reconstruct what his contribution might have been. I will start with a rough and superficial sketch of the Western philosophical tradition in question. Then I will turn to Ghazali by first outlining the general framework within which his talk about substances must be understood. I will further discuss two of the arguments for the eternity of material and immaterial substances that he

rejects. It will turn out that in order to understand how substances can come into being and cease to exist, we need to distinguish between two kinds of possibility, and accordingly between two ways in which possibilities may be said to inhere in an underlying substance. This will lead to an important and very general comment on immaterial substances: such substances are not related to forms and possibilities by possessing them as their own forms and potentials. It is precisely for this reason that it is misleading to think of the mind as an entity that has certain properties.

2. Immaterial Substances

In book VII of his *Confessions*, Augustine tells us that at some point in his life, he had an important insight when reading Neoplatonic philosophers. He does not name any specific Neoplatonic thinker or theorem, but his insight is clear and simple enough. He reports that he realized that there are entities that are not material: neither material substances nor properties of them, nor relations between such substances. Significantly, this insight helped him to solve the problem of evil, and the most important such thing he mentions is truth. In Augustine, the immaterial is the *normative*. Whereas there may perhaps be a way of identifying the established, finite set of all actually known facts with a set of relations between material objects, pieces of paper, human bodily organs, brains, their properties, and so on, there can be no such identification for truth. The truth always goes beyond the set of true assertions that we actually endorse. Since “truth” is also a name that Christian philosophers like Augustine habitually apply to God, Augustine does not hesitate to conclude that God is immaterial, and further, that the human soul, being made in his image, is an immaterial thing.

Descartes provides a rigorous argument in support of the Augustinian insight. He shows, in his first two *Meditations*, that our understanding of what it means to be a thinking subject need not involve any understanding of what it is to have a material body. Before we accept anything else as a fact, we already know that we think. Thinking, Descartes explains, is conscious activity. This however means that consciousness itself cannot be another kind of thinking. First, since all thinking is conscious activity, this would lead to a regress. Second, it does not seem true that we explicitly think of everything of which we are conscious. Anyway, Descartes nowhere claims that consciousness is anything like introspection, self-observation, or reflective thought. Consciousness goes beyond our actual

thinking in the same sense in which the truth goes beyond our actual asserting. This is so because similar to truth, consciousness is concerned with our thoughts and actions from a normative perspective. Consciousness is primarily concerned with the value of our own activity, and with our relation to this activity. Just as we need not state that what we say is true in a separate statement, we need not think that we think in a separate thought. Consciousness amounts to an implicit evaluation of a thought as our own. More specifically, it amounts to taking the stance that Descartes explicitly takes towards his own thoughts in his first two Meditations. He sets out to endorse only such thoughts that are most reliable that are immediately evident to his mind. He thus rejects all knowledge claims based on testimony, and all opinions that depend on possibly unreliable means, leaving only the thoughts that he can defend all by himself. The core subject of this and only this kind of activity is then called “*res cogitans*” – thinking subject. To be conscious of a thought or action is accordingly to regard oneself as immediately and fully responsible for defending this thought or action.

That the conscious subject that Descartes isolates in the beginning of his Meditations is in its essence a locus for responsibility and liability for thoughts and actions explains, first, why Descartes can infer the existence of God from the existence of the conscious subject. To act responsibly is to suppose that there is a correct evaluation of one’s acting as good or bad, right or wrong, that need not coincide with any actual evaluation, not even one’s own. The notion of a responsible agent therefore implies the notion of an ideal evaluation. From this Descartes infers the existence of God, an ideal evaluator. Again, the truth transcends the merely factual.

Second and more importantly, that the *res cogitans* is in its essence a responsible subject of thought and action justifies the title of a thinking *substance*; at least to a certain extent. The important point to note here is that an agent can only be liable and accountable for thoughts and actions insofar as she persists over time and is clearly distinct from other instances of her kind. In this sense, the subject of conscious activity can only be a persisting individual. Since the terms in which we trace such subjects over time are not the same as the means by which we identify material bodies or parcels of matter, it is further legitimate to speak of *immaterial* substances. The point is not that they are entirely unrelated to matter, but that there is something about them that cannot be captured by a purely materialistic description. In order to say what it means to be responsible for an action or a thought, we need to transcend the material and the factual, since to be

responsible is not the same as to be actually held responsible. This insight is again emphasized by Locke: persons are identified and individuated not merely in terms of their bodily features, but in terms of their life histories; more precisely, in terms of the actions and thoughts for which they are accountable. And Locke also makes clear that it does not matter whether persons are actually held responsible for what they do by other humans, or consider themselves responsible for what they did. What matters is the evaluation by God, the ideal evaluator, in the final judgment (*Essay* II,xxvii,26).

This is, then, the motivation for calling the mind an immaterial substance — and for Cartesian Dualism in general. Humans subject their conscious thoughts and actions to an evaluation according to standards such as truth, correctness, goodness. But no finite, actual set of evaluations and meta-evaluations guarantees the satisfactions of such standards. What humans say may be false and what they do may be wrong even if no human on earth ever notices. In this sense, the standards themselves are immaterial. Insofar as we act and think, we are subject to a standard that transcends the material world, and we bear our responsibility regardless of what happens to our material bodies.¹ Let me now turn to the ontological framework within which immaterial substances are traditionally located.

3. Aristotelian Top-Level Ontology

According to a metaphysical framework that Ghazali largely accepts, there are two kinds of entities: those that are in something else, such as accidents and forms, and those that are not in anything else (3,41,66).² Entities that do not exist in any receptacle (*mahal*) or substratum (*maudu'*) are called substances (*jawhar*, 5,24,90). There are three kinds of substances. Some substances are receptacles for accidents and forms; others are self-subsistent (3,41,66). The self-subsistent substances divide into two kinds. Some of them are attached to substances that are receptacles; others are not essentially related to any other thing at all.

Instances of the first kind of substance, which are receptacles for accidents and forms, are mere extension (*madda*) and bodies (*jism*).

¹ This paragraph is a rough summary of results I develop more thoroughly in Hennig 2006.

² All references are to Ghazali 2000, ed. Marmura. The numbers refer to the discussion, paragraph and page respectively, such that the above “3,41,66” refers to the Third Discussion (which is found in part I), §41, p. 66. I have occasionally modified the translation.

According to a view that Ghazali attributes to Avicenna, the human soul is a substance of the second kind: it is not itself a receptacle but individuated only by being attached to a body that is a receptacle of forms and accidents (19,9,202-3). The third kind of substance is exemplified by the divine intelligences, which are immaterial, unique in their kind, and not attached to any particular, material body.

4. The Extended Substance

Ghazali further endorses an Aristotelian principle according to which every change requires an underlying subject that remains, in some respect, the same (17,36,176). The “philosophers” (Farabi and Avicenna) argue that when a thing comes into being, it changes from non-existence to existence, and hence there must be a substratum that remains the same during the change from non-existence to existence. Before a thing comes into existence, it must have been possible for it to exist, and this possibility must have been present in a receptacle (*mahal*). Therefore it seems that if something A is possibly coming to be, something that is already actual must have the potential for becoming A. Hence, the universe in its entirety can have no beginning, since there would have to be a receptacle for its possibility of coming to be. This receptacle, however, will already have to be an extended thing (*madda*, 1,113,41).

In general, since a substance does not inhere in anything, there can be no substratum underlying the process by which a substance comes to be. It is easy to see how a property comes to be exemplified: something that may possibly have this property turns into something that actually has it. No such account, however, can be given for the way in which substances come into being. This appears to entail a Spinozistic ontology, according to which there is only one eternal substance, and everything that is subject to change inheres in this substance. Hence, the argument of the philosophers, as Ghazali states it, leads to undesirable conclusions.

5. The Thinking Substance

Ghazali picks up the same issue again in his discussion of the persistence of the soul (*nafs*). He begins by stating the following philosophical argument to the effect that the soul cannot cease to exist. A thing may cease to be for three reasons: by lack of support by an underlying substratum, by encountering its opposite, or by something else’s execution

of a power. But the soul does not cease to exist in the first way, since it needs no support from an underlying substratum. Rather than being imprinted in the body as its receptacle, the philosophers argue, the soul uses the body as a tool, and the destruction of a tool does not entail the destruction of its user. Second, there are no negative substances, such that a substance could be destroyed by encountering its negative counterpart. Third, the non-existence of a substance is not a positive fact and can therefore not be specified as a condition of success for the execution of a power. Since a power must be defined in terms of its successful execution, this means that there can be no power for destroying a substance (19,2-5,201-2).

These arguments are of doubtful validity. In order to establish the first, the philosophers would have to show that the soul does not in any sense depend on the body for its existence. But even if the soul is not imprinted in matter as its receptacle, it may still cease to exist in the absence of the body to which it is attached, just as humans will cease to exist in the absence of air without being imprinted in it. The specific way in which the soul depends on its body may be that it has its identity only insofar as it is attached to this body rather than to another (19,8-15,202-4). And as Ghazali argues elsewhere, we do in fact never refer to ourselves without in some way or other referring to our body (18,53,192-93). Therefore, it might well be that the soul depends on the body even if it uses it only as a tool. At any rate, Ghazali concludes, it is not logically impossible that God should be able to destroy the soul, and no one guarantees that the list of possible ways of ceasing to be that the philosophers offer is exhaustive (19,16-17,204-5).

In a second round, Ghazali has the philosophers elaborate on their first argument. Since a substance does not exist in a receptacle, they argue, it cannot cease to exist. For ceasing to exist is a change, and hence, there must be an underlying substratum that undergoes this change. This substratum, however, would have to underlie all stages of the change in question, such that first, the substance would be supported by this underlying substratum as long as it exists. But a substance needs no such support. Second, if the substratum underlies all the stages of the soul's ceasing to be, it would still have to be there in the absence of the soul—but there is nothing that belongs to a human being that would still be present when the soul has perished. This leads us back to the argument for the eternity of the extended substance. The substratum that remains when the soul has ceased to be would have to be a receptacle for a potential of a soul

to be, in the same way in which extension (*madda*) is the receptacle for a potential of a body (*jism*) to be. This however would turn the soul into a kind of form or accident, which would need something like extension as its receptacle (19,18-22,205-7).

6. Ghazali's Way Out

The main argument for the eternity of both extended and thinking substances is thus that the potential for a substance to exist would have to inhere in something else as long as this substance does not exist. But then, there would also be a receptacle on which the substance would depend for its existence when it exists.

Against this, Ghazali argues that possibilities do not require a real substratum and that we rather “call that possible which the intellect (*‘aql*) may suppose to be there without encountering a contradiction” (1,116,42). That is, the possibility that a substance exists is not a possibility *for it* to exist. There need only be an intellect that grasps this possibility and that is able to realize it. But this intellect is not the thing for which it is possible to exist. The intellect already exists, and the thing that possibly exists does not. Ghazali claims that this may be seen by considering the following arguments.

First, there would have to be a substratum not only for the possibility of things to come into existence, but also for their refusal to do so (1,117,42).³ Although it might seem that a refusal to be must still be the refusal *of* some existing thing to be, this is not the case. There “are” things that may never actually be the case. Such things need no receptacle in order not to be, and hence their refusal to exist does not need any receptacle (1,122,43; 1,129,45).

Second, Ghazali argues, that which comes into being when an accident comes to be in a receptacle is not an abstract and universal form (*kulliya mujarrada*, 18,9,181), but only one of its particular instances. The universal itself does not come to be, but still, there is a sense in which a non-instantiated universal is only possible and not actual. That the universal is possible in the sense of being possibly instantiated does not mean that it may itself come to be; it rather means that something else may

³ Marmura translates *imtina‘* as “impossibility”, such that the claim would be that there must be a substrate for the impossible. This does not follow and “refusal” is a more natural translation; at any rate *imtina‘* is not literally the opposite of possibility (*imkān*).

come to be: one of its instances. By the same token, the soul may be said to be possible not because there actually is a receptacle in which it may come to be, but rather because something else may come to be: a bodily thing to which the soul may come to be attached (1,118,42).

Hence, although a universal form may only be *actual* by being realized in a particular instance, this does not mean that it needs this instance as a receptacle for its *existence*. The form does not come to *be* by being instantiated; it only comes to be *instantiated*. Likewise, the soul may be merely possible as opposed to actual as long as it is not attached to a body. But that does not mean that it comes to be in a body that would be its receptacle. It only means that it comes to be attached to a body.

7. Forms vs. Intentions: *Sura* vs. *Ma'nan*

The comparison between universals, souls, and possibilities is the most important step in the line that Ghazali takes against the philosophers. Both forms and possibilities may exist without inhering in a receptacle. They may be said to inhere in the intellect (*'aql*), but then the intellect will not be their receptacle—that they inhere in the intellect does not mean that the intellect exemplifies them.

We have already seen that the “philosophers” distinguish between two kinds of substance: substances that are receptacles of forms and accidents, and others that are self-subsistent. According to an account that a writer like Avicenna might put forward and with which Ghazali agrees, there are also two kinds of accidents or forms. There are, corresponding to the first kind of substance, forms and accidents that only exist in a receptacle (*sura* = Greek *morphe*). These are always forms *of* some particular thing: particular form-instances that come into existence when a thing actually has a property. Second, corresponding to the second and third kind of substance, there are forms that do not require a bodily receptacle in order to exist (*ma'nan* = Greek *ennoia*, translated into Latin as *intentio*). These are the universals that may be present in the mind without necessarily being instantiated by anything (18,3,179). In his 18th Discussion on the immateriality of the soul, Ghazali makes extensive use of the distinction between *sura* and *ma'nan*. Although universals are indivisible, he argues, they may still exist *in* a divisible substratum such as the brain, since they need not be *instantiated* by this substratum. The soul can accordingly be *in* a body without being its form; that is, it may depend on the body for its existence without being imprinted in it.

8. Potentials Require a Receptacle, Possibilities Require a Substratum

Although Ghazali himself presents his argument against the eternity of extended and thinking substance only in order to “throw dust in the face” of the alleged proofs (1,134,46), we may extract from his criticism two distinctions that are still of crucial importance.

First, it has emerged that one should distinguish between the *substratum* (*mawdu‘*) of a universal or possibility and its *receptacle* (*mahal*). The receptacle of a possibility or universal is that in which it is present when it is actual. The receptacle of a color must be an extended thing. The substratum of a universal or possibility is that in which it may exist without necessarily being actual. The substratum of a color need not be an extended thing. According to Ghazali, the intellect may function as a substratum for universals and possibilities.

The receptacle of a possibility can only be an existing thing that may eventually actualize this possibility. For instance, it is possible that my son catches a cold since I have a son who does that quite often. In this case, my son is the receptacle of a potential for getting a cold. But this is not the only way in which possibilities may be there. For in a different sense, it is possible that my daughter catches a cold, although I do not yet have a daughter and may never have one: it is possible that I may have a daughter who has a cold. These two senses in which a state of affairs is possible have also been distinguished in terms of *de re* and *de dicto* modality: one may say that it is (*de re*) possible *for* my son to catch a cold, but not literally that it is possible *for* my daughter, since there is no daughter of mine for it to be possible for.

The second distinction that we may extract from Ghazali’s discussion of the philosopher’s “substance” is closely connected to this distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* modality. We may distinguish between possibilities that require a receptacle in order to become real and possibilities that do not require such a receptacle, but may exist in a substratum such as the intellect. The former may be called *potentials* of the receptacle in question. This distinction mirrors the division of forms into universals (*ma‘nan*) and particular form-instances (*sura*). Potentials are particular possibility-instances, as it were, and they require a receptacle in order to exist. *De dicto* possibilities do not require a receptacle, but only a substratum such as an intellect in order to exist.

9. Substance Ontology Revised

Traditionally, a substance is said to be something that does not inhere in anything else, but in which other things such as forms and accidents inhere. This is, admittedly, a vague formulation, and much more would have to be said about what “inherence” means in this context. The question that Ghazali raises is whether a substance is supposed not to inhere in another thing (1) as its *receptacle* or (2) as its *substratum*. If a substance may not inhere in any substratum whatsoever, it will be difficult to explain how substances come and cease to be. On the other hand, if the relevant kind of inherence were restricted to inherence in a receptacle, it would seem that space and matter are the paradigm—if not the only—cases of substance.

If we admit that forms may also inhere in substrata without being forms *of* these substrata, we can explain how it can be possible that the universe exists before there is anything other than the divine mind. Hence, the best thing to do is to account for *both* kinds of inherence. It will then turn out that the mind or intellect is not a substance in the same sense in which a body is a substance, and that thoughts inhere in the mind not in the sense in which properties inhere in bodies. The mind is not a receptacle, but a substratum of thought and action, whereas bodies are only receptacles of their properties. Likewise, bodily substances can only host potentials, and *de dicto* possibilities can only inhere in the mind.

What matters here are not so much the possibly existing substances, but rather the further substances in which their possibilities subsist before they exist. These are the immaterial substances, mind and intellect, and according to Ghazali, they are related to that which subsists in them in a peculiar way. The distinction of substances and inherence relations into two types is not yet fully reflected in the top-level ontology presented earlier on in this paper. In addition to receptacles and things that inhere in them, we need to introduce entities that subsist in immaterial substances without inhering in them. This new class will include universals, *de dicto* possibilities, and probably also intentions and thoughts. All these “mental entities” do not inhere in the mind in the sense that they are forms of the mind or possibilities for the mind. Not even thoughts are forms of the mind, since we do not literally look inside our own minds when we contemplate them. Thoughts are possible facts. Likewise, intentions are not in the mind as in a receptacle, but are rather certain possibilities to act. These consequences are not elaborated by Ghazali, but they appear natural

and they are of utmost importance. The revision of the Aristotelian top-level ontology that Ghazali recommends leads to an insight into the nature of the mind. Although there are good reasons for calling the mind a “substance”, since it is an individual and persistent locus of responsibility, there are also good reasons not to apply the schema of form and matter to this substance. Immaterial substances thus differ radically from material substances.

Ghazali thus offers an alternative ontological framework for drawing the distinction between material and immaterial substances with which Augustine, Descartes and Locke were concerned. I have argued that the mind is a subject of thoughts and actions in that it is responsible for them rather than exemplifying them as its properties. The way in which this relation of the mind to its activities differs from spatial relations or the relation between an extended thing and its properties. This motivates the Cartesian distinction between extended and thinking substances and explains why the soul is thought to be an immaterial substance. In Ghazali’s terminology, the thinking substance differs in that it is not a receptacle of its thoughts and actions, but a substratum. He draws the same distinction, but not in terms of materiality.

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