

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2025, Term II.6

Al Ghazali (1058-1111), *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Discussion 20

*On refuting their denial of bodily resurrection and the return of spirits to bodies;
of the existence of corporeal fire;
of the existence of paradise, the wide-eyed houris,
and the rest of the things people have been promised;
of their statement that all these things are parables made for the commonality to explain spiritual
reward and punishment that are of a higher rank than the corporeal*

This is contrary to the belief of Muslims in their entirety. Let us, then, first present an explanation of their belief in matters pertaining to the other world, then object to that portion of it that is contrary to Islam.

The position of the philosophers: only the soul is “resurrected”

(2) They said: (3) The soul endures everlastingly after death either in a pleasure so great that it is beyond description or in a pain so great that it [also] is beyond description. Moreover, [either] this pain may be eternal [or] it may cease with the long passage of time. The classes of people vary in the degrees of pain and pleasure in innumerable ways, just as they vary in worldly degrees and their pleasures in innumerable ways. Everlasting pleasure belongs to perfect, pure souls, [and] everlasting pain to imperfect, tarnished souls. Pain [in the hereafter] that ceases belongs to perfect souls that have been tarnished. Thus, ultimate bliss is only attained through perfection, purity, and cleanliness. Perfection [is attained] through knowledge, [and] purity through action.

(4) The reason for the need of knowledge [lies in the fact] that the nourishment and enjoyment of the rational faculty consists in apprehending the intelligibles, just as the pleasure of the appetitive faculty consists in attaining the object of appetite, the pleasure of sight in looking at beautiful forms, and so on to the rest of the faculties. What prevents [the soul] from becoming cognizant of the intelligibles is the body and its preoccupations, its senses, and its desires. The ignorant soul in the mundane world should by right undergo pain by missing the pleasure of the soul. But preoccupation with the body makes [such a person] forget himself, distracting him from his pain in the way that one in [the grip of] fear will not feel pain and one benumbed will not feel fire. Thus, if [his soul] remains imperfect until he is unburdened of the body's preoccupation, he would be in the same state as the benumbed who, when subjected to fire, will [at first] feel no pain; but once the numbness ceases, he would then feel the great affliction that comes all at once, as an onslaught.

(7) The proof that the intellectual pleasures are nobler than bodily pleasures consists of two things:

(8) One is that the state of angels is nobler than the state of such beasts as ferocious animals and pigs, since [these angels] have no sensual pleasures by way of copulation and eating. They only have the pleasure of being aware of their own perfection and beauty that specifically belong to them through knowing the true nature of things and of being close to the Lord of the Worlds in [terms of] attributes, not space, and in rank of existence. For existents have come to be from God in an order and through intermediaries. Thus, the intermediary closer [to God] is necessarily higher [in rank].

(9) The second is that man also prefers intellectual pleasures to the sensuous. For whoever is able to defeat the enemy and gloat over him will, in achieving [this goal], abandon the pleasures of mating and food. Indeed, one may abandon food all day for the pleasure of winning in chess or backgammon, insignificant as this is, without feeling the pain of hunger. Similarly, one desirous of dignity and leadership would hesitate [when confronted with the choice] between the loss of dignity and, for example, attaining his goal with the woman he loves when another [person] would know this and [the affair] would become widely known. He would then protect his dignity, abandoning attainment of his [amorous] goal, belittling this for the sake of preserving his honor. This would thus be unquestionably more pleasurable for him. [Again,] the brave warrior may sometimes attack a host of brave warriors, belittling the danger of death, in the intense desire of what he imagines to be the pleasure of praise and honor bestowed on him after death.

(10) Hence, the intellectual otherworldly pleasures are better than the sensuous mundane pleasures. If it were not so, then God's apostle, God's prayers and peace be on him, would not have said [in conveying God's message]: "I have prepared for my righteous servants that which no eye has seen and no ear has heard and which has never occurred to the heart of mankind." And God, exalted be He, has said: "No soul knows the eye's consolation secretly kept for them" [Qur'an 32:17].

(11) This, then, is the manner in which knowledge is needed. The beneficial parts of it are those purely intellectual sciences—namely, knowledge of God, His attributes, His angels, His books, and the way in which things come to exist through Him. Other than this, whatever is a means to [such knowledge] is beneficial. If, however, they are not a means to it—as, for example, grammar, philology, poetry, and the various kinds of sciences—these would-be arts and crafts like the rest of the arts.

(12) As regards the need for works and worship, [this] is for the purpose of the soul's purification. For the soul in this body is prevented from apprehending the true nature of things, not because it is imprinted in the body, but because of its preoccupation [with it], its desire toward its appetites, and its yearning toward [the body's] requirements. This appetite and desire constitutes a disposition of the soul which becomes embedded therein, taking hold of it through the constant endeavor to pursue appetites and persistence in befriending pleasurable sensible things.

(13) Nothing will deliver one from wallowing in these dispositions except restraining the soul from passion, forsaking the world, and applying oneself with all seriousness to knowledge and piety, so that the soul's connection with worldly things is severed while [still] in this world and one's relations with otherworldly things are made firm. Thus, when [the person] dies he would be as one escaping from prison, arriving at all that he seeks, this being his paradise.

(14) [Now,] it is not possible to completely remove and obliterate all these attributes from the soul. For bodily necessities draw it to themselves; but it is possible to weaken this connection. For this reason the Exalted has said: "None of you but will arrive at it, this being for your Lord a decreed, determined thing" [Qur'an 19:17]. When, however, the relation is weakened, the hurt of separation will not be severe; and the pleasure after death with knowing divine things becomes [so] great as to remove in a short time the effect of having left the mundane world.

(15) [Since] negating these [bodily] qualities is impossible, the revealed law has prescribed following the mean between every two extreme opposites. For lukewarm water is neither hot nor cold, as though remote from both qualities. Thus, [a person] must not go to extremes either in holding onto property, whereby holding fast to wealth becomes embedded in him, or in spending so as to become a spendthrift. [Again,] a person should not shrink from all things so as to be a coward, nor plunge into all things so as to be reckless. Instead, he should seek generosity, which is the mean between stinginess and overspending; courage, which is the mean between cowardice and recklessness; and so on with all moral dispositions.

Ethics is [a] lengthy [discipline], and the religious law has gone to great lengths in giving its details. There is no way for cultivating morals except through observing in works the canon of the religious law so that man would not follow his whim, such that "he makes his caprice his god" [Qur'an 25:45; 45:22]. Rather, he must imitate the law, advancing or holding back [action], not as he chooses, [but] according to what [the law] directs, his moral dispositions becoming educated thereby. Whoever is deprived of this virtue in both moral disposition and knowledge is the one who perishes, for this reason, God, exalted be He, said: "Whoever purifies it has achieved success, and whoever corrupts it fails" [Qur'an 91:9-10]. Whoever combines both virtues, the epistemological and the practical, is the worshipping "knower," the absolutely blissful one. Whoever has the epistemological virtue but not the practical is the knowledgeable, [believing] sinner who will be tormented for a period, which [torment] will not last because his soul had been perfected through knowledge but bodily occurrences had tarnished [it] in an accidental manner opposed to the substance of the soul. The causes renewing [these accidental occurrences are [themselves] not renewed; consequently, with lengthy time [the tarnishing accidents] are obliterated. He who has practical virtue but not the epistemological is saved and delivered but does not attain perfect bliss.

(16) [The philosophers further] claim that whoever dies is resurrected. Regarding what has appeared in the religious law in terms of [sensible] representation, the intention [here] is to give analogies because of the failure [of most people] to understand these [intellectual] pleasures. They have thus been given examples in terms of what they understand, being then told that these pleasures are above what has been described to them.

(17) This, then, is [the philosophers'] doctrine.

Response of Al Ghazali: resurrection pertains to both body and soul

(18) We say: (19) Most of these things are not contrary to the religious law. For we do not deny that there are, in the hereafter, kinds of pleasures superior to the sensory. Nor do we deny the survival of the soul after separation from the body. But we know this through the religious law, since it has conveyed

[that there is] resurrection. And the resurrection is only understood in terms of the soul's survival. We have previously denied only their claim that they know this by reason alone.

What is contrary to the religious law among [the things they hold] is the denial of the resurrection of bodies, the denial of bodily pleasures in paradise and bodily torments in the fire, and the denial of the existence of paradise and the fire as described in the Qur'an. What, then, is there to stand in the way of realizing the combination of both [kinds] of happiness, the spiritual and bodily, the same applying to misery, [in view] of His statement, "No soul knows what has been hidden from them" [Qur'an 32:17]—that is, it does not know all that—and [the prophet's] saying, [conveying God's utterance,] "I have prepared for my righteous servants that which no eye has seen . . ." As such, the existence of these noble things does not indicate the negation of others. Rather, combining the two represents what is more perfect, [rendering] the thing promised the most perfect of things. Moreover, this is possible; hence, belief in it (in accordance with the religious law) is obligatory.

Philosophers claim that verses in Qu'ran revealing resurrection are analogies and parables

(20) [It may be] said: (21) What has come down in [the revealed law] are parables struck to meet the level of the understanding of created [humanity], in the same sense that the anthropomorphic verses and reports [of the prophet] that have come down are analogies proportionate to the understanding of created [humanity]. The divine attributes are sanctified [high above] what the commonality imagines.

(22) [We] answer: (23) To make these two things equal is arbitrary. On the contrary, they differ in two respects.

(24) One is that the anthropomorphic utterances are amenable to interpretation in accordance with the customary practice of the Arabs in using metaphor. But what has come down [in the law] describing paradise and the fire and the detailing of these states has attained a degree [of explicit statement] that does not [render it] subject to metaphorical interpretation. Nothing, then, would remain but to take [such utterances] as obfuscation by making one imagine what is contrary to truth for the benefit of creatures. But this is what the position of prophethood is sanctified high above.

(25) The second is that rational proofs have shown the impossibility of [attributing] place, direction, visage, physical hand, physical eye, the possibility of transfer, and rest to God, praise be to Him. Metaphorical interpretation [here] is obligatory through rational proofs. What He has promised in the hereafter, however, is not impossible in terms of the power of God, exalted be He. Hence, one must follow the apparent [literal meaning of the revealed] speech—indeed, according to its signification, which is explicit.

(26) If it is said, "Rational proof has shown the impossibility of the resurrection of bodies, just as it has shown the impossibility of applying those [anthropomorphic] attributes to God, exalted be He," we would demand of them to bring forth [this proof]. In this they have different ways.

(27) The first is their statement that the supposition of the return [of souls] to bodies does not go beyond [involving] three alternatives.

(28) [The first alternative] is to say [that] the human consists of body and life, which is an accident subsisting therein, as some theologians have held; that a self-subsisting soul that manages the body has no existence; that the meaning of death is the severance of life—that is, the refraining of the Creator from creating it, whereby it ceases to exist, the body also ceasing to exist; [and] that the meaning of the resurrection is God's returning the annihilated body back to existence and the returning of the life which had been annihilated; or else, to say that the matter of the body survives as earth and that the meaning of the resurrection is that [this earth] is gathered and constructed in the form of a human, life then being created in it anew. This [then] is one alternative.

(29) [A second alternative] is to say that the soul exists and survives death but that the first body is changed back [into existence] with all its very parts. This is another alternative.

(30) [A third alternative] is to say that the soul would be returned to a body, regardless of whether [the body] is reconstituted from those [original bodily] parts or [formed] from other [parts]. The [person] resurrected would be that [identical] human inasmuch as the soul would be that [same] soul. As regards matter, no attention should be given it, since the human is not a human because of it, but by virtue of the soul.

(31) All these three alternatives [they argue] are false:

(32) In the case of the first, its falsity is clear. For once life and the body become annihilated, then the commencing of their creation would consist of bringing into existence a replica of what had been, not what is identical with what had been. For he is what he is by virtue of his spirit or soul. If, then, life or spirit ceases to exist, then the return of what ceases to exist is unintelligible.

(35) As regards the second alternative, which is the supposition of the survival of the soul and the returning of it to that very same body, [this,] if conceivable, would be a return—that is, a return [of the soul] to managing the body after having separated from it. But this is impossible, since the body of the dead person disintegrates into earth or is eaten by worms or birds and changes into blood, vapor, and air, mixing with the world's air, vapor, and water in a manner that renders its extraction and retrieval remote.

(37) As regards the third alternative—namely, returning the soul to a human body composed of any matter whatsoever and whatever soil— this would be impossible in two respects: one of them is that the materials receptive of generation and corruption are confined to the sphere of the moon, increment being impossible for them. They are finite, whereas the souls separating from bodies are infinite. Hence, the materials would not be sufficient for them. The second is that earth, as long as it remains earth, is not receptive to being managed by the soul. Rather, the elements need to be mixed in a manner similar to the composition of the sperm.

Al Ghazali responds

(38) [Our] objection [to all this] is to say: (39) With what [argument] would you deny one who chooses the last alternative and holds the view that the soul survives death, it being a self-subsisting substance? This is not contrary to the religious law. On the contrary, the religious law indicates this in His saying: "Do not think that those who have been killed in the way of God are dead, but [they] are living with

their Lord . . ." [Qur'an 3:163] and in the saying [of the Prophet], peace be upon him, "The spirits of the righteous are in the crops of green birds that hang beneath the throne," [as well as] by what has been conveyed to us by the reports of the spirits' awareness of charitable deeds.

Yes, in addition, [this] indicates the revival and resurrection thereafter—namely, the resurrection of the body. This is possible by returning [the soul] to the body, whatever body this might be, whether [composed] of the matter of the first body [or from that] of another or from matter whose creation commences anew. For [an individual] is what he is by virtue of his soul, not his body, since the parts of the body change over for him from childhood to old age through being emaciated, becoming fat, and [undergoing] change of nourishment. His temperament changes with [all] this, while yet remaining that very same human. This lies within God's power and would be a [true] return of that soul. For [with the separation of the soul from the body] it had become not feasible for him to undergo physical pain and pleasure due to the loss of the instrument. But now an instrument similar to the first has been returned to him. This, then, becomes true resurrection.

(41) As regards your second [claim of] rendering [the third alternative] impossible, in that this constitutes transmigration, there is no need to squabble about terms. What the religious law has conveyed [as true] must be believed. Let it be "transmigration." We only deny transmigration in this world. As regards the resurrection, we do not deny [it], whether or not it is called "transmigration."

Philosophers add another rational proof against resurrection

(46) If this is understood, then, if the body of the resurrected human were of stone, ruby, pearl, or pure earth, he would not be a human. Indeed, it is not conceivable that he would be a human unless he has a special shape formed from bones, veins, flesh, cartilages, and humors. The simple parts are prior to the complex. Hence, there would be no body if there were no organs, and there would be no compound organs if there were no bones, flesh, and veins; and these single things would not be if there were no humors; and there would not be the four humors if their matters did not consist of food, and there would be no food unless there were animal or plant—namely, flesh and seeds—and there would be no animals and plants if all the four elements were not mixed according to lengthy particular conditions, greater than the general treatment we have detailed. Hence, it is not possible for the body of a human to be reformed anew so that the soul would be returned to it except through these things, which have many causes. Does soil, then, turn into a human by [one] saying to it, "Be," or by preparing the causes of its transformation through these phases? The causes [of its transformation] consist in placing the sperm extracted from the core of the human body into a womb so that it would derive from the blood of the menses and from nourishment for a period until it is created into a lump, then a clot, then a fetus, then an infant, then a youth, then an old man. Hence, one's saying that it is said to it, "Be," is unintelligible, since earth is not addressed and its transformation into a human without undergoing these phases is impossible. And for it to undergo these stages without these causes running their course is impossible. Hence, [bodily] resurrection is impossible.

Al Ghazali responds

(47) [Our] objection [to this is as follows]: (48) We admit that ascending through these stages is necessary for [the earth] to become a human body. But this is possible either in a moment or a [longer] period of time. It has not been made plain to us that the resurrection takes place in the shortest possible

time, since it is possible that recollecting the bones, reviving the flesh, and making them grow takes place in a long period of time. But this is not the point at issue. [The question] to be examined, however, is concerned with the progress of these stages—whether it occurs purely through [divine] power, without mediation, or through some cause or another. Both [explanations], according to us, are possible, as we have mentioned in the first question in the natural sciences when discussing [God's] making [all events] run according to a habitual course. [There we stated] that the connection of connected things in existence is not by way of necessity, but that habitual [patterns] can be disrupted, whereby these matters would come about through God's power without the existence of their causes.

The second [view] consists of our saying that this is due to causes, but it is not a condition that the cause [here] would be one which we have experienced. Rather, in the treasury of things [enactable by divine] power there are unknown wondrous and strange things denied by someone who thinks that nothing exists but what he experiences, in the same way that some people deny magic, sorcery, the talismanic arts, [prophetic] miracles, and the miracles [of saints], which are affirmed, as all agree, through strange unknowable causes. Indeed, if a human had never seen a magnet and its attraction of iron and this [fact] is related to him, he would deny it, saying, "No attraction of iron is conceivable except through a string attached to it and then pulled, for this is what is observed in [things] being pulled." However, when he sees [the magnet's attraction of iron], he would be astounded by it and would realize that his knowledge falls short of encompassing the wonders of [divine] power.

(49) And it is thus with the atheists who deny the resurrection and the hereafter. When they are resurrected from the graves and see the wonders of God in [resurrecting man], they will suffer regret that will not do them any good, feeling sorry for their ingratitude—a sorrow of no benefit to them. And it will be said to them, "This is the thing which you used to deem untrue" [Qur'an 83:17], being like the one who deemed false the [existence] of [hidden] properties and wondrous things. Indeed, if a human is created rational from the very beginning and it is said to him, "This dirty sperm, whose parts are similar, will have its similar parts divide in the womb of a woman [to form] different organs, by way of flesh, nerves, bones, veins, cartilages, and fat, from which there comes to be the eye (with seven layers differing in constitution), the tongue, the teeth (with the differences between them, despite their proximity, in being soft or hard), and so on to the wonders of creation," his denial will be [even] stronger than the denial of the atheists who said: "When we were moldy bones . . ." [Qur'an 29:11].

(50) The one who denies the resurrection does not give thought to [the question] of how he would know the confining of the causes of existence to what he has observed. For it is not improbable that in the resurrection of bodies there is a pattern other than what he observes. In some (of the traditional) reports it is said that at the time of the resurrection here would cover the earth rain whose drops are akin to sperm and will mix with the earth. What improbability is there for there being among the divine causes something similar to this, which we do not know, that results in the resurrection of bodies and their being rendered disposed to receive the resurrected souls? Is there any basis for this denial other than merely thinking it unlikely?

56) We have shown that it is not rationally improbable to posit three divisions—namely, that God exists without the world, that he then creates the world according to the order we experience, and [that he] then begins a new order which is the one promised in paradise. The whole, then, could be annihilated so that nothing would remain save God. This [latter] is possible, except that the religious law has conveyed [its opposite—namely,] that reward, punishment, paradise, and the fire have no end.