

The Incoherence of the Philosophers as a Defense of Philosophy against Theology

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Abstract : Al-Ghazali's Tahāfat al Falāsifa is widely construed as an attack on philosophy in favor of theological fideism. Consequently, he has been blamed for 'death of philosophy' in the Muslim world. 'Falsifa' however is not philosophy itself, but rather a range of philosophical doctrines mainly influenced by or inherited from Greek thought. In these terms, this work represents a defense of philosophy against what we could call 'falsifical' fideism. In the introduction, Ghazali describes his target audience as, not the falasifa, but a group of pretenders engaged in taqlid to a misconceived understanding of falasifa, including the belief that they were capable of demonstrative certainty in the field of metaphysics. He promises to use falsifa standards of logic (with which he independently agrees), to show that the falasifa failed to demonstratively prove many of their positions. Whether or not he succeeds in that, the exercise of subjecting alleged proofs to critical scrutiny is quintessentially philosophical, while uncritical adherence to a doctrine, in the name of its being 'philosophical', is decidedly unphilosophical. If we are to blame the intellectual decline of the Muslim world on someone's 'bad' way of thinking, rather than more material historical circumstances (which is already a mistake), then blame more appropriately rests with modernist Muslim thinkers who, under the influence of orientalism (and like Ghazali's philosophical pretenders) mistook taqlid to the falasifa as philosophy itself. The discussion of the Tahāfut takes place in the context of an epistemic (and related social) hierarchy envisioned by the falasifa, corresponding to the faculties of the sense, the 'estimative imagination' (wahm), and the pure intellect, along with the respective forms of discourse - rhetoric, dialectic, and demonstration - appropriate to each category of that order. Al-Farabi in his Book of Letters describes a relation between dialectic and demonstration on the one hand, and theology and philosophy on the other. The latter two are distinguished by method rather than subject matter. Theology is that which proceeds dialectically, while philosophy is (or aims to be?) demonstrative. Yet, Al-Farabi tells us, dialectic precedes philosophy like 'nourishment for the tree precedes its fruit.' That is, dialectic is part of the process, by which we interrogate common and imaginative notions in the pursuit of clearly understood first principles that we can then deploy in the demonstrative argument. Philosophy is, therefore, something we aspire to through, and from a discursive condition of, dialectic. This stands in apparent contrast to the understanding of Ibn Sina, for whom one arrives at the knowledge of first principles through contact with the Active Intellect. It also stands in contrast to that of Ibn Rushd, who seems to think our knowledge of first principles can only come through reading Aristotle. In conclusion, based on Al-Farabi's framework, Ghazali's Tahafut is a truly an exercise in philosophy, and an effort to keep the door open for true philosophy in the Muslim mind, against the threat of a kind of developing theology going by the name of falsifa.

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