

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111 C. E.) and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) agree that happiness, or *sa'āda* is attained by means of perfecting the self through a process that leads to certain knowledge of God. Both philosophers develop an account of Koranic modes of knowing that ascend from knowledge of certainty to an apprehension of the truth of reality. Islamic philosophy's role in describing these modalities of certainty is summarized by Hossein Ziai in a discussion of Muslim philosophers in the Persian poetic tradition, such as al-Ghazali, where Ziai explains that "the role of philosophy is to refine and reconstruct the Aristotelian theory of intellectual knowledge into a unified epistemological theory capable of describing a comprehensive range of phenomena," including "the sensory, the intellectual, the intuitive, the imagined ... the inspirational, [and] the revealed."¹ Ziai describes the components which make up these states of certain knowing as:

- (1) subject, S--knowing and conscious of the self
- (2) object, O--the noumena *and* the phenomena
(an inclusive spectrum of all knowable things;
the 'unseen' and the 'seen' realms)
- (3) process--the functional correspondence, R
between S and O, such that SRO yields
knowledge Tj, that is not limited by the
predicative mode, X is Y.

The poet's [philosopher's] role in this scheme is central, commencing as knowing subject, S--or, the conscious self--and progressing to the knowing, creating self, at which time it becomes the main instrument for the recovery of the inclusive set of Tj.²

¹ Ziai, 433.

² Ziai, 433-434.

In this essay, I examine the different ways al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd conceive of the components of certain knowledge, SRO, by describing how the intellect, or *'aql*, moves through the modalities of certainty to reach *haqq al yaqin* or “the truth of certainty.” For al-Ghazali it is the particular lived experience of the individual that provides knowledge “not limited by the predicative mode, X is Y,” while for Ibn Rushd it is the act of abstracting universals from particular experiences which provides the least limited form of knowledge of reality. To delineate the differences in the philosophers’ conceptions, I consider the following: first, the states of certainty described in the Qur’ān and the means of experiencing these states, namely the fourfold Peripatetic model of the intellect; second, the different meanings that Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali assign to the subject, his or her object, and the relation, or means of correspondence that bestows certainty; and finally a specific example of the way in which the thinkers’ different conceptions of the components, SRO, necessitates their differing positions concerning the question of whether or not God knows particulars.

I. Modalities of Certainty in Islam and the Fourfold Intellect

Before comparing the views of Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali, it is necessary to further explain the importance of transforming belief into knowledge for the practice of Islam. Seeking knowledge is essential to the practice of Islam; as Vincent J. Cornell explains, a Muslim must not only believe that Islam is the true faith, but must also *know* that it is true:

Faith in Islam is never blind. Although belief in the unseen is just as important in Islam as it is in other religions, there comes a point at which the spiritually aware human being transcends the level of simple faith. At this point the person is more than just a believer, for his or her spiritual consciousness has penetrated the fog of the unseen, leading to knowledge

of the true nature of things. The Quran speaks of this progression from faith to knowledge as an inward metamorphosis in which belief (*iman*) is transformed into certainty (*yaqin*). This certainty is expressed in the Quran in terms of three types of knowledge of God, which were discussed by philosophers, mystics, theologians and jurists during the Islamic Middle Period (the ninth through the fifteenth centuries C. E.)³

These three types of knowledge, or modalities of certainty, are *ilm al-yaqin*, or “knowledge of certainty,” (Qur’ān 102:5) which is certainty obtained by means of human reason; *ayn al-yaqin*, or “the eye of certainty,” (Qur’ān 102:7) which is a higher level of certainty and refers to the direct apprehension of the existence of God, not merely by the rational mind, but also in the experience of the knower; and finally *haqq al-yaqin*, or the “truth of certainty,” (Qur’ān 69:51), also equated with *ilm ladunni*, or “knowledge by presence (Qur’ān 18:65), which refers to “a state of consciousness in which a person knows the ‘real’ through direct participation in it,” Cornell writes.⁴ The knowing subject, then, must participate in the reality of God directly; in other words, the practice of a Muslim should lead to a transformation of belief into knowledge. Ziai describes such experiences of reality as “a special knowledge or wisdom, that informs the individual of the totality of human experience without limitations imposed by matter, and without the ambiguities of excessive and purely subjective spirituality.”⁵

How does this imperative, incumbent upon Muslims, to acquire knowledge relate to al-Ghazali’s and Ibn Rushd’s differing conceptions of the components, SRO, of certain knowledge? As Cornell mentions, because of the Koranic emphasis on the necessity of certainty in the life of

³ Cornell, 63.

⁴ Cornell, 65-66.

⁵ Ziai, 433.

the believer, Muslim scholars from different disciplines sought to further articulate the precise meanings of the concepts of knowledge and certainty. Medieval Islamic philosophers working with Greek texts developed models of the intellect that describe how the individual by means of intellect participates in the divine reality. The contentious dialogue across time between al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd begins with al-Ghazali's nuanced criticism of philosophy found in such works as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-Falasifa)*, a book which uses rigorous demonstrative philosophy to refute certain arguments of Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī. Ibn Rushd responded to al-Ghazali's criticism one hundred years later with *The Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tahāfut al-Tahāfut)* in which Ibn Rushd masterfully defends the Aristotelian philosophy criticized by al-Ghazali.

Although Ibn Rushd defends *falsafa*, or Hellenistic Islamic philosophy, against al-Ghazali's attacks, in fact, both thinkers make use of earlier Aristotelian models of the intellect proposed by such philosophers as al-Kindī and al-Fārābī. According to Deborah L. Black, "the framework for all these theories of the intellect was provided by Aristotle's distinction in book III of the *De Anima* between the agent and potential intellect."⁶ Though different philosophers build on Aristotle's schema differently, the Peripatetic Islamic philosophers generally identify a fourfold intellect, according to Black.⁷ She summarizes the four meanings thusly:

(1) The **agent** intellect of *De Anima*, III.5. The Arabic philosophers all followed the prevailing view of the Greek commentators that the agent intellect, which Aristotle declares to be immortal and eternal, is a separate, immaterial substance, not a faculty in

⁶ Black, "Psychology," 317.

⁷ Black, "Psychology," 317.

each individual soul. Its function is to act as an efficient cause of human understanding, either by rendering objects intelligible or by actualizing the potential intellect, or some combination of the two.

(2) The *potential* intellect, which is often called the *material* intellect, following the practice of the Greek commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias. For most of the Arabic philosophers this is an innate capacity within the human soul for receiving intelligibles, as discussed by Aristotle in *De Anima*, III.4.

(3) The *habitual* or *speculative* intellect, sometimes called the *actual* intellect by al-Fārābī. This is the status of the human potential intellect once it has acquired some intelligibles and developed a habit or disposition for thinking at will. Avicenna subdivides it into two stages, using the label “habitual intellect” to describe the acquisition of primary intelligibles, such as the principle of non-contradiction, and the label “actual intellect” for the acquisition of secondary intelligibles deduced from them. To add to the terminological confusion, al-Kindī uses the label “acquired intellect” for this stage of development.

(4) The *acquired* intellect (*al-‘aql al-mustafād*, Latin *intellectus adeptus*). For most Arabic philosophers this is the habitual intellect when it has perfected itself by acquiring all possible intelligibles. At this stage it becomes a completely actual being akin to the separate intelligences, able to know itself as well as the closest separate intelligence to us, the agent intellect when it is exercising knowledge that it has previously learned, such as when the grammarian parses a sentence. For al-Kindī, such an actual exercise of stored knowledge is called the “appearing” or “second intellect.”⁸

Both Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali make use of this model in order to describe the states that the intellect moves through as it advances toward apprehending *haqq al-yaqin*, the reality of

⁸ Black, “Psychology,” 318.

certainty. However, Al-Ghazali takes these four stages of intellection and subtly reinterprets them by emphasizing the importance of the phenomenological experience of the believer. Al-Ghazali relies on the individual's intellect and his or her ability to experience the divine presence in order to reconstruct the knowing subject, its object, and the functional correspondence between the knower and his or her apprehension, by means of the intellect, of the presence of the divine. Ibn Rushd, on the other hand, relies on his doctrine of the Material Intellect and the individual's ability to cognize universals in order to recast the components of certain knowledge.

II. Al-Ghazali's Description of the Intellect

In *The Book of Knowledge*, Section VII, al-Ghazali describes the difficulty of defining the intellect:

Let it be known that people have disagreed on the definition of the intellect and the truth concerning it. Many have forgotten that the term has been applied to several things, a fact which has led to the existing disagreement concerning the definition of the term. The truth, however, is that the word intellect (*'aql*) is a term used interchangeably for four distinct meanings in the same way as the term for eye has been used for several meanings. In the case of such words, therefore, no one single definition should be expected to cover the several meanings of the term. On the contrary each meaning should have its individual definition.⁹

The "four distinct meanings," can be traced to Aristotle who writes of four intellects in *De Anima*

III.4, as al-Kindī (c. 801-873 C. E.) explains in *On the Intellect*:

⁹ Al-Ghazali, *The Book of Knowledge*, 218

Aristotle's opinion is that there are four types of intellect. The first of them is the intellect that is always actual. The second intellect is the one that is potential and belongs to the soul. The third intellect is the one in the soul when it is brought from potentiality to actuality The fourth is the intellect that appears from the soul whenever it brings it into action, at which point it is something that exists for others as something coming from it actually.¹⁰

Al-Kindī explains that the difference between Aristotle's third and fourth intellects is the same as the difference between the *potential* writing of a writer and the *actual* writing flowing from the pen of a writer in the act of writing.¹¹ Al-Kindī states, the third intellect is "like writing in the writer; it belongs to the writer as a possible disposition that he has obtained and established in his soul," while the fourth intellect is like the activity of writing which a person "brings ... into action and uses ... whenever he wants."¹² The example of writing is also useful in distinguishing the first two intellects from the the third and fourth for it is an ability that must be learned. The first and second intellect refer to natural dispositions that the human person has potentially (first intellect) and can manifest by making the potential actual (second intellect).

Al-Ghazali takes these four intellects and subtly reinterprets them in order to emphasize that it is the experiential content of the believer who is aware of the presence of God that leads to *haqq al-yaqin*. The first intellect is "the foundation of the other three," and may be understood as the instinct (*gharizah*) which enables the human mind to reason and "understand and grasp the

¹⁰ McGinnis, 18.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

theoretical sciences and the abstract (*fikriyah*),” while the second intellect refers to the intelligence innate in a human being, even in infancy, which allows humans to discern “axiomatic knowledge,” for instance that which is possible or impossible.¹³ The first two intellects, according to al-Ghazali are native (*bi-al-tab’*), while the last two are acquired (*bi-al-iktisab*).¹⁴

For al-Ghazali, the third intellect refers to the repository of empirical knowledge, namely what we know based upon how we were “taught by experience and schooled by time,” while the fourth intellect “is used when the power of the instinct develops to such an extent that its owner will be able to tell what the end will be, and consequently he will conquer and subdue his appetite which hankers for immediate pleasure.”¹⁵ The third intellect, then, is instinct developed by means of experience, while the fourth intellect is instinct developed by an awareness of God and the resulting knowledge of the ultimate aim of the human person.

III. Ibn Rushd’s Description of the Intellect

Deborah L. Black writes that Ibn Rushd views the Medieval fourfold structure of the intellect as four internal senses that all aid in the formation of “intentions,” or *ma’anān* (singular: *ma’nān*).¹⁶ She lists these four senses as, “the common sense; imagination (combining both its retentive and compositive functions); the cogitative faculty; and the memorative faculty.”¹⁷ The Arabic word for “intention,” *ma’nān*, literally means, an “idea” or “meaning,” and as a technical

¹³ Al-Ghazali, *The Book of Knowledge*, 218-219.

¹⁴ Ibid., 220.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Black, *Imagination*, 6. Though Ibn Rushd follows Ibn Sīna’s definition of *ma’nan*, he does not agree with the Ibn Sīna’s metaphysical explanation of the production of intentions, Black notes.

¹⁷ Deborah L. Black, *Imagination and Estimation: Arabic Paradigms and Western Transformations*, 5 - 6.

philosophical term it refers to a “form or essence insofar as it is apprehended by any cognitive faculties;” for example, Black adds, “color and sound are sensible intentions ... images are intentions in the faculty of the imagination, and universal concepts are intelligible or understood intentions.”¹⁸ Intentions are “sensible, imagined, or intelligible,” and they are the forms “of the objects we know,” writes Black.¹⁹ Therefore, Black explains, the content of our thoughts, the intentional objects, “can be said to exist in some way in our souls, so that all cognized forms” are therefore dual; one form is extra-mental, or “the object to which the cognitive act refers.”²⁰ This form can be either true or false depending on the state of affairs in the world, while the other form is the intentional object as it appears in the faculty in question.²¹

Black writes that Ibn Rushd, “identifies an intention as that which conveys awareness of an individual *as* an individual.”²² Understanding particular, individual occurrences of forms, then, is the result of the human being’s cogitative faculty which transforms perceptions into intentions. Although it follows from Ibn Rushd’s conception that individuals have the ability to cognize particular objects, how then does the limited human intellect cognize universals? In order to create a model of intellection that accounts for universals, Ibn Rushd’s develops his “famous doctrine of the Material Intellect,” Richard C. Taylor writes.²³ Alfred I. Ivry explains that, generally speaking, for Ibn Rushd, the intellect and the intelligibles it conceives by means of perceiving and thinking account for the generated knowledge of limited human (as opposed to

¹⁸ Black, “Psychology, 311.

¹⁹ Black, “Psychology,” 312.

²⁰ Black, “Psychology,” 312.

²¹ Black, “Psychology,” 312.

²² Black, 6.

²³ Taylor, 4.

divine, or eternal) wisdom.²⁴ In the *Long Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Ibn Rushd writes, “the intellect is the process of thinking (or ‘conceptualization,’ literally, ‘representation by means of the intellect’), and the process of thinking is (the same as) the intelligibles,” namely, the thoughts as they “appear” in the intellect of the limited human person.²⁵ This conception accounts for the capacity of limited human beings to produce philosophical and scientific knowledge that is universal and therefore able to be shared within an intellectual community by means of “the Material Intellect in which all human knowers share.”²⁶ The continuous stream of thought, the myriad of cognitions coursing through the consciousness of every human being, then, is made possible by our participation in the one Material Intellect. For if we did not all share in a single intellect, Ibn Rushd reasons, then we would not be able to access the universal truths of science, mathematics, and philosophy, but would rather each propose differing accounts of reality based on multiple “material intellects.”²⁷ We *are* able to produce such universals, though, so it must be the case that the Material intellect is one intellect shared by all.

In Ibn Rushd’s epistemology, our use of the intellect, is hampered by our human particularity, in other words, by our existence in a particular time and place; therefore, human cognition cannot produce definitive knowledge unless it does so by means of accessing the universal forms that transcend the particulars of our human existence.²⁸ For example, when we comprehend God as Being as opposed to understanding the existences of individuals as particular beings, we comprehend a universal concept (Being) over and above the multitude of particular instantiations

²⁴ A. L. Ivry, *The Ontological Entailments of Averroes' Understanding of Perception*, 78.

²⁵ Ivry, 79.

²⁶ Taylor, 4.

²⁷ Taylor, 4.

²⁸ Ivry, 78.

(beings). The subject, the “I” of “*I know*,” is able to participate in the real only to the extent that he or she can comprehend universals by making use of the Material Intellect. Therefore I know reality with ever increasing certainty depending upon my ability to transcend my particular experience by means of my understanding of universals. The human knower who can do Peripatetic natural philosophy, then, comes the closest to understanding reality, according to Ibn Rushd.

How does the Material Intellect make the understanding of universals possible? Taylor explains the process as follows:

On [Ibn Rushd’s] account of human knowing, it is necessary that the actuality of knowledge come to exist in a separate, immaterial Intellect as a consequence of contributions from the sensory and cogitative powers of individual human beings. The process is one which begins in sense perception, employs the activities of the powers of the imagination and cogitation, involves the Agent Intellect, and concludes with the realization of immaterial non-particular intentions in the separate Material Intellect. This is the activity of conceptualization by intellect, *taṣawwur bi-l-‘aql*, *imaginatio* or *formatio per intellectum*.²⁹

Use of the Material Intellect, then, involves the whole of the human person, as all human experiences are processed and made into abstract knowledge by means of the Material Intellect. Taylor writes that “the separately existing substance, the Material Intellect,” is unique in its special nature as knower and is so intimately involved with human beings that it is in a

²⁹ Taylor, 4.

significant sense even included in the definition of human beings insofar as human beings are rational animals.”³⁰

First, intellectual understanding, that is knowledge of what we call universals, requires that it be received into something which is not a “this,” a particular, since reception into a particular would render knowledge particular, not universal. Second, the unity of science requires that there be a common referent for the universals of scientific discourse, something which precludes there existing a plurality of different material intellects, since in that case each intellect would have its own intelligibles in act.³¹

It is this ability to conceptualize by means of the accessing the Material Intellect that Ibn Rushd seeks to protect in his work *The Decisive Treatise*, or *Faṣl al-maqāl*, when he describes the varying degrees of possible sophistication in human conceptualization, all of which have the potential to lead to assent, or belief in Islam transformed into knowledge of the truth of Islam.³²

Ibn Rushd explains:

Some assent by means of demonstration; some assent by means of dialectical statements in the same way the one adhering to demonstration assents by means of demonstration, there being nothing greater in their natures; and some assent by means of rhetorical statements, just as the one adhering to demonstration assents by means of

³⁰ Taylor, 4-5.

³¹ Taylor, 4.

³² Ibn Rushd, 8.

demonstrative statements. (*Faṣl al-maqāl*, 11.10-16)³³

The philosophers with their demonstrative logic offer the least personal knowledge of that which they perceive, and therefore theirs is the highest form of conceiving an idea. Philosophers are best able to access universals by means of their reasoning, and therefore they produce the most abstract intentional objects when they make use of the Material Intellect. Next, is the dialectical reasoning of the theologians, and that is followed by all who think rhetorically, which for Ibn Rushd means in imagined images, such as pictures and stories. All can hold the meaning of the divine law in their minds, to some extent, but the more subjective the conceptualization, the less abstract the thoughts in the mind of the believer. The mind that relies on imagination, then, is less objective and has thoughts that are less abstract than the mind that relies on the demonstrative logic of the philosophers.³⁴ Consequently, Ibn Rushd necessarily puts the rhetorical, or the image-driven form of conceptualization at the bottom of the intellectual hierarchy because it is the most individual and the least abstract of the three ways of arriving at assent.

While demonstrative logic may be the pinnacle of human intellection, Ibn Rushd indicates in his commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima* that all thought brings human beings closer to truth, and thereby closer to God.³⁵ As Black explains, Ibn Rushd describes the content of human thought, even sensory perceptions, as mental abstractions that have a *rūḥāniyya* or spiritual

³³ Ibn Rushd, 8.

³⁴ A. L. Ivry, *The Ontological Entailments of Averroes' Understanding of Perception*, 78.

³⁵ Ivry, 84.

existence.³⁶ However, according to Ibn Rushd, if two minds simultaneously understand a universal truth, in a sense, they experience the same intellect, and this shared intellect is connected to the glory of God in a special way. Consequently, even though all may attain cognizance of God, it is this universal form of thought that brings persons closest to an understanding of the divine, according to Ibn Rushd. Dominique Urvoy summarizes Ibn Rushd's idea that conceptualizing universal forms brings human beings closer to God as follows:

Divine wisdom establishes an organized world by permitting the potential forms to affect the act, and in this way they gather together the concrete individuals in terms of genus and species. The human spirit can, through the act of abstraction, bring about the separate existence of these forms. It is at once the most characteristic human act and what links us with the divine. This is not Neoplatonism, but it arises from the core of the Rushdian problematic.³⁷

Thoughts, then, are creations in their own right, and in that way thoughts mirror the “artifacts” of the “Artisan,” or God, referred to at the beginning of the *Decisive Treatise*. However, throughout the *Decisive Treatise*, Ibn Rushd is careful to emphasize the fact that since human knowledge is generated by sensation, perception, and imagination, it is limited; as a result, all must behave with humility, for knowing in part means that one will always be missing some bit of the larger eternal truth that is the wisdom of God. This is as true for the captive woman Mohammed freed

³⁶ Black, “Psychology,” 316. Black notes that is a term borrowed from Ibn Bājja

³⁷ Dominique Urvoy, *Ibn Rushd*, 341.

after she “announced God was in heaven”³⁸ as it is for the philosopher who can conceptualize universal forms by means of demonstrative logic. All human beings are limited because the knowledge they create is based on their perceptions which are limited by their individual experiences. The mirror whose reflective surface offers the clearest image, is still just a mirror. All human beings imperfectly reflect the divine, according to Ibn Rushd.

III. Al-Ghazali

Since Ibn Rushd’s knowing subject reaches union with the divine by means of understanding universals, the importance of cognizing the particular, not as an instantiation of a universal but rather as an individual in all its specificity, is diminished. Al-Ghazali, on the other hand insists on the importance of the particular. He writes in the Thirteenth Discourse of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* that the philosophers believe God “does not know the particulars divisible in terms of temporal division into what is, what was, and what will be.”³⁹ This particular point of contention emphasizes the way in which alAl-Ghazali explains the philosophers’ doctrine by giving the following example: He asks the reader to consider the sun on the verge of an eclipse. The sun exists and is not eclipsed, then it is eclipsed, and then “it becomes bright again.”⁴⁰ He explains further:

Three things occur to it--I mean, to the eclipse:

- (1.) A state in which it is nonexistent, but its existence is expected-- that is, it will be;
- (2.) a state in which it exists--that is, it is;
- (3.) a third state in which it is nonexistent,

³⁸ Ibn Rushd, *Decisive Treatise*, 30.4, 20.

³⁹ Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, title to the Thirteenth Discussion, 134.

⁴⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, Thirteenth Discussion, 2.10 - 4.5, 134.

having however, been previously existent. Alongside these three states, we have three different cognitions. For we know, first of all, that the eclipse is nonexistent but will be; secondly, that it is; and, thirdly, that it was but is not presently existing.⁴¹

The notion that God does not know the particulars as successive cognitions leads to heretical ideas, namely, that God does not “know” anything individually. Al-Ghazali reports that the philosophers claim God cannot know the eclipse in its three states, for the states are the result of change.⁴² The philosophers reason that “if the object known changes, knowledge changes; and if knowledge changes, the knower inescapably changes. But change in God is impossible.”⁴³ Al-Ghazali then adds that Ibn Sina deduces from this argument that God does not know things by means of successive cognitions, but rather that the whole is “known to Him--that is unveiled to Him--in one homogeneous unveiling, unaffected by time.”⁴⁴

Al-Ghazali then points out that this argument leads to the conclusion that God does not know the sun before, during, or after the eclipse. Furthermore, by stating that God does not know the particular attributes of a particular solar eclipse, one is led to the conclusion that God does not have any knowledge of individual objects in the material world. Therefore, al-Ghazali continues, God only knows people as beings with certain characteristics held universally; according to the logic of the philosophers’ argument, God does not know the difference between individual people:

⁴¹ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, Thirteenth Discussion, 2.10 - 4.5, 134.

⁴² Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 13.5.10., 135.

⁴³ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence* 13.5.10., 135.

⁴⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, Ibid., 13.6.9 - 19, 136.

Their doctrine is similar regarding what is divisible in terms of matter and space--as, for example individual humans and animals. For they say that [God] does not know the accidents of Zayd, ‘Amr, and Khālīd, but only man [in the] absolute [sense] by a universal knowledge. He thus knows [absolute man’s] accidents and properties: that his body must be composed of organs, some for attacking, some for walking, some for apprehending; that some [of his organs] are pairs, some single; that his powers must be spread throughout his parts; and so on to the inclusion of every attribute external and internal to man, all that belongs to his appendages, attributes, and necessary concomitants, such that nothing escapes His knowledge, knowing [all that constitutes man] universally.⁴⁵

Therefore, God, according to this doctrine, cannot know individuals in their specific contexts, but rather knows of all the possible particulars of their species. Al-Ghazali explains,

As for the individual Zayd, he becomes distinguished from the individual ‘Amr to the senses, not the intellect. For the basis of the distinction is the pointing to him in a specific direction, whereas the intellect apprehends saying ‘this’ and ‘this,’ this is a reference to a relation obtaining between the sensible object and the perceiver by being close to him, far from him, or in a specific direction--[all of which] is impossible in the case of [God].⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 13.6.20 - 26, 136.

⁴⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 6.20-26, 136.

Since God cannot “sense” individuals, but only the universal concepts to which they conform, the philosophers are able to use this doctrine in order to foment disbelief; if God cannot know Zayd “in his particularity,” then God cannot know the acts of Zayd.⁴⁷ God, then, cannot know of Zayd’s particular good or bad acts. Instead, God knows just that men, as a species of beings, are capable of committing good and bad acts.⁴⁸ Believing that God does not know particulars, al-Ghazali concludes, leads to disbelief and creates a situation where it does not matter whether one embraces virtue or vice. Thus, this doctrine vitiates revelation which calls for individuals to assent to the truth of Islam.

In the Decisive Treatise, Ibn Rushd does not defend the epistemology as it is presented by al-Ghazali; instead he draws from certain of its ideas in order to present a model of the acquisition of knowledge that is empowering because it is humbling and encourages tolerance. In his defense of philosophy, Ibn Rushd forgoes an investigation of what God knows, and focuses instead on how the human person perceives, reflects, and judges, and thereby generates knowledge. He begins by explaining that al-Ghazali’s mistake is one of semantics, for he has conflated an effect, generated knowledge, with its cause, eternal knowledge:

We are of the opinion that Abu Hamid [al-Ghazzali] was mistaken about the Peripatetic sages when he accused them of saying that He (Holy and Exalted) does not know particulars at all. Rather, they are of the opinion that He knows them (may He be exalted) by means of a knowledge that is not of the same kind as our knowledge of them. That is because our knowledge of them is an effect of what is known so that it is generated when the known

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 6.30-32, 136.

⁴⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence*, 6.32-33, 136

thing is generated and changes when it changes.
And the knowledge God (glorious is He) has of
existence is the opposite of this: it is the cause of
the thing known, which is the existing thing.⁴⁹

Therefore, what al-Ghazzali terms “successive cognitions,” namely, the acts of perceiving the sun before, during, and after an eclipse, are actually intentions generated in the mind of an individual human being, a humanly created intelligible that is a part of the eternal knowledge of God. Ibn Rushd writes, “God, (may He be blessed and exalted)...is the Agent of the whole, its Giver of Existence and its Sustainer (glorious is He, and may His might be exalted).”⁵⁰ God’s knowledge is not limited as is the knowledge of created beings; God knows the intelligibles created by the cogitative faculty of the intellect, but, Ibn Rushd argues, it is inaccurate to describe God’s knowledge as similar to such human cogitations. Since his argument relies upon the fact that human knowledge is limited by a person’s particular experience, it empowers individuals by announcing that all should be humble before God and the revelation of God, the Qu’ran. It humbles all human beings because it presents the idea that no one person has complete knowledge.

In the *Epistle Dedicatory*, Ibn Rushd takes al-Ghazali’s example of the eclipse, and what God could know, and corrects it by describing what Zayd, one of the men named in al-Ghazali’s example, is capable of knowing. He asks the reader to imagine what is related to Zayd’s intellect as he moves from one side of a pillar to the other:

An example ... with respect to what is related is for

⁴⁹ Ibn Rushd, *Decisive Treatise*, 17.12 - 21, 13.

⁵⁰ Ibn Rushd, *Decisive Treatise*, 17.12 - 21, 13.

there to be a single column on Zayd's right, then for it to come to be on his left while Zayd would not have changed in himself. And that is not sound, for the relation has changed in itself. That is, the relation that was right [-handed] has come to be left [-handed]. What alone has not changed is the subject of the relation, that is, the one bearing it--namely, Zayd. If that is so and if knowledge is itself the relation, then it must have changed when what is known changed, just as the relation of the column to Zayd changes when it [the column] changes--that is when it comes to be left [-handed] after having been right [-handed].⁵¹

Imagine further that the column was painted two different colors, say blue and red. While walking past the column, Zayd would have the image of the blue pillar as he approached it from the left. At that moment he would think the pillar was blue. Then as he moved past the pillar and looked back at the pillar, on the right side, he would see that it was also red. He would then adjust his knowledge to house the image of the pillar that is red and blue, the pillar he had formerly considered to be only blue (see figure one, page 24 below). Zayd's knowledge of the pillar, in other words, is determined and limited by his perception of the column, and his perception is determined by his relation to the column in space; in other words, Zayd's vantage point determines what he sees. By means of this example, Ibn Rushd shows that al-Ghazali's attempt to state that God knows "particulars" is tantamount to saying either 1.) A person's knowledge is not limited by their particular perspective; this is not acceptable because it would require humans to have knowledge of that which they have not perceived (as in the first description of Zayd and the column), or that 2.) God, like Zayd, once "knew" the blue pillar to be only blue, but through generated knowledge, came to know it as both red and blue. Therefore,

⁵¹ Ibn Rushd, *Epistle Dedicatory*, 6.16 - 25, 40.

humans know according to their individual perceptions, while God’s knowledge, eternal knowledge, is impossible for humans to adequately describe.

Ibn Rushd explains that since individuals are limited in their experiences and powers of perception, the knowledge they generate by means of their senses is necessarily limited. Ibn Rushd writes that al-Ghazali “claimed that knowledge and what is known are related; just as one of two related things may change and the other related thing not change in itself, so is it likely to occur with things in God’s knowledge.”⁵² Ibn Rushd points out that al-Ghazali is conflating what God “sees” with the limited sight of human beings. Human sight includes that which is seen, or that which is apprehended by the sense perceptions, but it does not include that which is not seen, that which is not perceived. Zayd sees the pillar, but he does not see the whole pillar. His limited knowledge may even lead to mistakes, as is evidenced when Ibn Rushd’s illustration is taken further by considering that the pillar might first appear to Zayd to be blue, and then to be red and blue.

While al-Ghazali attacks the view that God could not know particular individuals, Ibn Rushd takes the view that because human beings only know by means of particulars, they are limited. By changing the focus from how God knows to how human beings know, Ibn Rushd posits an epistemological model that is based on cause and effect:

CAUSE	Eternal Knowledge
	causes
EFFECT	Existence
CAUSE	Existence
	causes

⁵² Ibid., 6.11 - 13, 40.

EFFECT	Generated Knowledge
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Therefore, “eternal knowledge” and “generated knowledge” are related in that the effect of the former is the cause of the latter. This connection, Ibn Rushd contends, causes confusion that ultimately is “a disagreement about naming.”⁵³ He states that the ancient Greek philosophers and the Ash‘arite theologians are in agreement in that they all assert that there are three types of existing things, namely “two extremes and one intermediate between the extremes.” He adds that the ancients and the theologians “agree about naming the two extremes but disagree about the intermediate.”⁵⁴ The disagreement, then, concerns “existence,” as the effect of one kind of knowledge and the cause of another.

Ibn Rushd explains that both groups agree that matter is generated and that certain material elements in the world of existence came into being after the element of “time” entered the cosmos.⁵⁵ In addition, both agree that there is something that time does not precede, namely that which is eternal.⁵⁶ The eternal is God, the one “who is the Agent of the whole, its Giver of Existence, and its Sustainer.”⁵⁷ The intermediate step between the eternal knowledge of God and the generated knowledge of beings is what Ibn Rushd terms “the world as a whole,” or the cosmos. He states that the dialectical theologians agree with Plato in saying the world “is limited, while Aristotle and his faction are of the opinion that it is infinite.”⁵⁸ Each group is

⁵³ Ibn Rushd, *Decisive Treatise*, 17.5, 14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.15 - 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.22 - 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.1 - 2, 15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.5 - 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.17 - 18.

emphasizing a different aspect of the cosmos, and that difference of emphasis is what causes their disagreement, according to Ibn Rushd. As an existent, the cosmos are somewhat like the eternally existing thing because time, according to the theologians, is “joined to” the motions of the heavenly bodies.⁵⁹ Consequently, the heavenly bodies had to exist before time because they are the material cause of time. In addition, the cosmos are like “the existing thing that truly comes into being” because it is a creation of God, not a co-eternal entity.⁶⁰ Therefore, Ibn Rushd explains, the cosmos do not perfectly fit the description of an eternal existent, because God created the cosmos, and they do not conform perfectly to the description of a generated existent because the creation of the cosmos precedes time. Ibn Rushd concludes that those who say the world is not eternal are emphasizing the fact that it is a creation of God, while those who say it is infinite are emphasizing the fact that the creation of the cosmos preceded time.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., 18.14.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 19.21.

⁶¹ Ibid., 18.14 - 19.