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A New Interpretation of the Conflict Between Ghazali and Avicenna on Creation and Eternity

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Abstract

The question of whether the universe is eternal and without beginning or created by God from nothing and thus temporally originated has long preoccupied philosophers and theologians. This debate has given rise to extensive discussions in philosophical and theological writings under the topic of "origination and eternity." Most philosophers have regarded the universe as eternal, while most theologians have considered it temporally originated. The conflicts and rebuttals between supporters of these two camps were to be expected. Imam Muhammad Ghazali's book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* is one of the well-known rebuttals written against Ibn Sina and his belief in the eternity of the world. This paper, after summarizing the historical debate on this issue, reexamines the conflict and aims to provide a new interpretation. Essentially, the debate over origination and eternity can be understood as appearing to address the nature of the universe, but in reality, each side had theological preconceptions, and the underlying issue was shaped by different theological perspectives.

Keywords: Origination, Eternity, Ibn Sina, Ghazali, Personal God.

Introduction

The emergence of human beings into the world and their ongoing relationship with various phenomena naturally raises questions: For instance, what does "being in the world" mean, especially since the inquirer is also part of it? How did this world come into existence? Did it emerge from nothing, and can we consider a point of origin for its existence? (the notion of creation) or has it always existed and is eternal? (the idea of eternity). Historical sources indicate that thinkers have grappled with this issue from ancient times to the present. Each has understood and interpreted the world based on their presuppositions, either through the lens of creation or eternity. These two divergent approaches led to the formation of two camps: those who advocate for creation and those who believe in eternity. It was not unexpected that these two groups would engage in conflict and debate, as few philosophical or theological texts fail to address this issue and establish a particular stance. These two approaches thus gave rise to two main currents or grand narratives. The concept of creation from nothing did not find a place in the beliefs of pre-Socratic philosophers, who viewed the world as eternal and without end. Plato's view seems to align with this notion. Aristotle inclined towards the eternity of the world. The idea of the world's eternity was conceptually refined by Plotinus. In his work "The Eighteen Arguments," Proclus provided eighteen arguments to prove the world's eternity. John Philoponus wrote a critique of Proclus' book in 529 CE, refuting each of Proclus' arguments. In the Islamic world, we witness a similar

conflict: between Ghazali, who supported the creation of the world, and Avicenna, who considered the world eternal.

Research Findings

The debates and critiques between the proponents of creation and the advocates of eternity can be evaluated as having both a superficial cosmological aspect and a fundamental theological aspect. The novelty of this paper lies in this fresh interpretation, which reveals that proponents of the world's eternity understood it through the concept of a non-personal deity, while the presupposition of creation-from-nothing advocates was that God is a personal being, with the most significant feature being His transcendence from the world. Additionally, an implicit finding of the paper is that Ghazali's dispute with Avicenna reflects a critique similar to John Philoponus's against Proclus.

Conclusion

The hermeneutic approach of the paper opens a path to reinterpret the conflict between Ghazali and Avicenna and, more broadly, to revisit all the refutations written by proponents of creation and eternity against each other. The paper demonstrated that both Avicenna, who viewed the world as eternal, and Ghazali, who considered it as created, had theological presuppositions that influenced their perspectives on the world. Belief in a non-personal deity aligned with the idea of eternity, whereas belief in a personal deity aligned with the concept of creation. Another outcome of this investigation was the reassessment of Ghazali's accusation of heresy and atheism against Avicenna, showing that this accusation was unfounded. The paper also implied that both Avicenna and Ghazali were influenced by the works of Proclus and John Philoponus in their arguments.

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Cite this article: Gozashte, N. (2024). A New Interpretation of the Conflict Between Ghazali and Avicenna on Creation and Eternity. *Philosophy and Kalam*, 57 (1), 265-280. (in Persian)

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

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DOI:<https://doi.org/10.22059/jftp.2024.372674.523486>

Article Type: Research Paper

Received: 17-Apr-2024

Received in revised form: 29-May-2024

Accepted: 14-Jul-2024

Published online: 22-Aug-2024

