

Al-Ghazālī on the Incoherence of “Substance”

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Abstract. One of the main targets of Al-Ghazālī’s *Incoherence of the Philosophers* is the Aristotelian doctrine that every change requires an underlying substratum, which seems to entail that the material universe and each human soul are either not substances or else eternal. Since a substance does not inhere in any further substratum, it seems that there can be no change by which a substance comes into existence. I will argue that despite his merely critical intent, Al-Ghazālī points out two distinctions that are still of crucial importance for contemporary metaphysics: the distinctions between potentialities vs. possibilities, and the distinction between receptacles vs. substrata. Whereas the *potential* for being *A* must inhere in a *receptacle* that may eventually become *A*, the *possibility* for being *A* need only inhere in a *substratum* that need not possibly become *A*. This will be shown to have important consequences for the notion of a substance.

1. Arabic top-level ontology

According to a metaphysical framework that Al-Ghazālī largely accepts, there are two kinds of entities: those that are in receptacles (مَحَالٌّ), such as accidents and forms, and those that are not in receptacles (3,41, 66).¹ Entities that do not exist in any receptacle or substratum (مَوْضُوعٌ) are called substances (5,24,90, جَوْهَرٌ). There are three kinds of substances. Some substances are receptacles for accidents and forms; others are self-subsistent (3,41,66).² 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 (مَادَّةٌ) and bodies (جِسْمٌ). According to a view that Al-Ghazālī attributes to Avicenna, the human soul is a substance of the second kind: it is not itself a

receptacle, but it is 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, who are immaterial, unique in their kind, and not attached to any material bodies.

2. The extended substance

The “philosophers” (Al-Farābī and Avicenna) argue that before a thing comes into existence, it must have been possible for it to exist. However, before it is actualized, this possibility must be present in a receptacle (مَحَالٌّ). 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 (1,113,41, مَادَّةٌ).

Further, 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: something that may possibly have this property turns into something that actually has this property. 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 Al-Ghazālī states it, leads to undesirable conclusions.

3. The thinking substance

Al-Ghazālī picks up the same issue again in his discussion of the persistence of the soul (نَفْسٌ). 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 its 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 in a 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 air as in their receptacle. 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 to another (19,8–15,202–4). And as Al-Ghazālī 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, Al-Ghazālī 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, Al-Ghazālī 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 process, and hence, there must be an underlying substratum that undergoes this process. This substratum, however, would have to underlie all stages of the process 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 (مَادَّة) is the receptacle for a possible body (جِسْم). 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). “But the soul”, they argue, “is simple, since it is a form denuded from matter” (صُورَةٌ مُجَرَّدَةٌ عَنِ الْمَدَّةِ = εἶδος ἄνευ ὑλης, 19,21,206).

4. Al-Ghazālī’s way out

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

Against this, Al-Ghazālī argues that possibilities do not require a real substratum and that we rather “call that possible which the intellect (عَقْلٌ) may suppose to be there without encountering a contradiction” (1,116,42). This, he claims, may be seen by considering the following three 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 exist (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 be actually 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, Al-Ghazālī argues, that which comes into being when an accident comes to be in a receptacle is not an abstract and universal form (18,9,181, كَلْبِيَّةٌ مُجَرَّدَةٌ), 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, 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 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).

A universal form may only be actual by being realized in a particular instance, but 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.

5. مَعْنَى vs. صُورَة

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

As far as universal forms are concerned, Al-Ghazālī thus remains firmly within the limits of traditional Arabic metaphysics. We have already seen that the “philosophers” distinguish between two kinds of substance: substances that are receptacles for forms and accidents, and others that are self-subsistent. According to an account that a writer like Avicenna would put forward and with which Al-Ghazālī 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 (صُورَة = μορφή). These are always forms *of* some particular thing: particular form-instances that come into existence when a thing actually has a property.⁴ Second, corresponding to the second and third kind of substance, there are forms that do not require a bodily receptacle in order to exist (مَعْنَى = έννοια, 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, concerning the immateriality of the soul, Al-Ghazālī makes extensive use of the distinction between صُور and مَعَانٍ. 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.

6. Possibilities require a substratum, potentials require a receptacle

Although Al-Ghazālī himself present 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 emerges that one should distinguish between the *substratum* (مَوْضُوعٌ) of a universal or possibility and its *receptacle* (مَحَالٌ). 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. According to Al-Ghazālī, 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 that may eventually catch a cold. In this case, my son is the receptacle of the possibility of his 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 as *de re* and *de dicto* modality: one may say that it is possible *for* my son to catch a cold, but not literally that it is possible *for* my daughter, since there is no daughter for it to be possible for.

The second distinction that we may extract from Al- Ghazālī’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 (مَعْنَى) and particular form-instances (صُورَةٌ). 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 the intellect in order to exist.

7. Substances

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 Al-Ghazālī raises is whether a substance is supposed not to inhere in another thing as its *receptacle* or 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 only—cases of substance.

The best thing to do will probably be 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.

Endnotes

1. All references are to Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. Michael E. Marmura, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press 2000. The numbers stand for 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.

2. self-subsistent = قَائِمٌ بِنَفْسِهِ. That the particle “self” (نَفْسٌ) in this expression (بِنَفْسِهِ) is also the word for “soul” is significant, since all known self-subsistent substances are souls or minds.

3. Marmura translates اِمْتِنَاعٌ 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 اِمْتِنَاعٌ is not literally the opposite of possibility (اِمْكَانٌ).

4. Such form-instances are what I herewith explicitly refuse to call “tropes”.