

The Secret Architect of Modernity: Al-Ghazali

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Journey to the Boundaries of Thought

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The Secret Architect of Modernity: Al-Ghazali

Abstract

In this study, we challenge Eurocentric narratives of modernity by revealing Ghazali's influence on Western thought. While traditional narratives present the transition from Aristotelianism to empiricism as entirely Western, our study shows how Ghazali's critiques of causality and rationalism reshaped Western epistemology. In his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Ghazali rejected necessary causality, arguing instead that observed patterns of cause and effect reflect divine will. Thus, Ghazali's "occasionalist view" foreshadowed Hume's skepticism. It also anticipated Pascal's "intellects of the heart" by emphasizing the limitations of reason and intuitive knowledge (the eye of the heart). Although direct translations are rare, his views reached Europe through figures such as Ibn Rushd and Ramon Martí and influenced Aquinas, Ockham, and Malebranche. Ghazali's challenge to cosmic determinism by divine voluntariness and randomness foreshadowed modern debates about scientific certainty. As a result, we position Ghazali as a vital bridge between Islamic and Western thought.

Keywords: *Al-Ghazali, Western thought, causality, Occidentalism, intuitive knowledge, Islamic-Western philosophical interaction.*

Introduction

The shift in Western thought from a strictly Aristotelian framework to a more dynamic, critical, and empirically oriented tradition is often portrayed as an internal European intellectual transformation. However, this traditional account ignores an important external influence. It was the profound, yet often underappreciated, influence of Islamic philosophy, particularly the contributions of al-Ghazali (الغزالي)¹. For al-Ghazali, philosophy was “*the acquisition of knowledge capable of being acquired by human reason, based on certain and authentic evidence.*”^[1] Yet throughout his works, he simultaneously revealed the limitations of such knowledge when separated from divine revelation and intuitive certainty. While Aristotle’s logic and metaphysics formed the backbone of medieval European scholasticism², it was Ghazali’s trenchant critiques of Aristotelianism that destabilized the unquestioned authority of Aristotle and set the stage for new epistemological and methodological developments. One of the most influential philosophers in Islamic history, Ghazali, launched a radical critique of metaphysical rationalism^[2,3] that resonated far beyond his immediate context^[4].

Ghazali's groundbreaking work, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*³ (Tahafut al-Falasifa - تهافت الفلاسفة), not only challenged the limits of rationalist philosophy but also introduced a critical skepticism to the West that would later resonate in European thought. Its emphasis on intuitive knowledge, the limitations of pure reason, and the necessity of experiential certainty anticipated major

¹**Imam Ghazali** (الإمام الغزالي) / Hujjat al-Islam Abu Hamid Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Ghazali al-Tusi (1058-1111) is one of the most important names in the Islamic scientific tradition. He taught at the Nizamiye Madrasa, approached philosophy critically, and left behind fundamental works such as *Ihya*. Ghazali's real importance lies in his ability to bring a new breath to Islamic thought by synthesizing rationality and spiritual experience. His criticisms of philosophers aim for a methodological reconstruction rather than a mere rejection.

²**European scholasticism** was founded by St. Augustine and Boethius, building on Greek philosophy (Aristotle and Plato). Later medieval thinkers expanded on this, combining faith and reason to support Christian theology. There were debates over their balance in the Early, High, and Late Scholastic periods. Still, figures such as Roger Bacon in Late Scholasticism prioritized reason, paving the way for the Renaissance.

³**Tahafut al-Falasifa** is the work of Imam Ghazali in the 11th century, in which he criticizes Ibn-i Sina's Islamic philosophy. First, the book summarizes Ibn-i Sina's philosophy with *Maksudul-Falasifa*. While Ghazali finds areas of philosophy such as logic and mathematics unproblematic, he criticizes approaches in metaphysics. The work consists of 20 sections: In 17 sections, he finds Ibn-i Sina wrong and accuses him of blasphemy; in the 3rd section, he argues that these ideas are un-Islamic. Ghazali criticizes philosophers for not being able to prove the existence and unity of Allah.

themes in early modern philosophy, from the methodological doubt of Descartes to the empiricism⁴ of Hume. Moreover, his integration of theology with philosophy provided a bridge between faith and reason that influenced later scholastic debates, especially in the works of *Thomas Aquinas*⁵ and *John Duns Scotus*⁶ [5,6].

Despite this, al-Ghazali's role in shaping Western intellectual history has remained marginal in mainstream historiography. By revisiting al-Ghazali's contributions, this article aims to show how Islamic thought—far from being merely the preserve of Greek philosophy—actively restructured it, thereby enabling the epistemological transitions that heralded modernity. In doing so, we challenge the Eurocentric assumption that the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were purely internal phenomena and instead emphasize the interconnected nature of philosophical progress.

Ghazali's Criticisms of Aristotelian Thought

For centuries, Aristotle's metaphysical and logical structures focused on the syllogism, or "*the law of non-contradiction and necessary causation*" [7,8]. This formed the backbone of European intellectual life. However, this system had important limitations. Among them, it privileged abstract inference over empirical observation, it assumed a static universe governed by an unchanging order, and it left little room for divine omnipotence or randomness. As theological and philosophical debates intensified, Western thinkers became increasingly inadequate within this framework [9]. So what was the solution? What triggered this critical paradigm shift?

Al-Ghazali's Radical Challenge to Causality and Rationalism

In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he launched a groundbreaking critique of Aristotelian causality, adopted by Islamic philosophers such as Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and Farabi. He argued that what we perceive as cause and effect, such as fire

⁴**Empiricism** is the view that knowledge can be acquired through sensations and experience.

⁵**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–1274) was an Italian Dominican priest, philosopher, theologian, and leading Scholastic thinker of the Middle Ages. He was a major figure in Western thought, having founded Thomism by combining Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine.

⁶**John Duns Scotus** (c. 1265–1308) was a Scottish Franciscan priest, philosopher, and theologian. One of the most influential thinkers of the High Middle Ages, he is famous for his doctrines of the univocity of being and formal distinction. He also formulated a complex proof for the existence of God.

burning cotton, is not a metaphysical necessity but merely Adatullah⁷ (the laws of Allah) ^[10]. That is, causality is not inherent but is constantly revived by the will of Allah. He proposed three basic hypotheses for this “*occasional view*” ^[11,12].

1. **There is no necessary connection between cause and effect:** Causality is not a logical necessity but observed regularity.
2. **Philosophical arrogance:** By confusing habit with necessity, philosophers deny the absolute power of God.
3. **Theological danger:** Attributing autonomy to nature risks heresy by limiting divine freedom.

Although al-Ghazali's critique emerged within an Islamic context, its implications extended further. The destabilization of Aristotelian necessitarianism brought a new epistemic humility⁸ that emphasized the limitations of human reason and the primacy of the divine will; these concepts found fertile ground in late medieval and early modern Europe^[13].

Intercultural Transfer: From Ghazali to the West

Al-Ghazali's works were not widely translated into Latin, but his ideas reached the West through indirect but important channels. One such path is the debate between Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd⁹, which is found in Ibn Rushd's *Incoherence of the Incoherence*¹⁰ (Tahafutü Tahafuti'l-Falasifi – تهافت تهافت الفلاسفة), a direct response to Al-Ghazali. Although Ibn Rushd sought to defend Aristotelian rationalism, his refutation forced Latin thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas to grapple with the underlying tensions that Al-Ghazali raised^[14].

⁷In the discussions on causality, Ghazali criticized the necessary cause-and-effect relationship and opened up the field of flexibility and miracle with the concept of **adatullah**. The main difference between Islamic philosophers and non-Islamic philosophers is the way causality is interpreted.

⁸**Epistemic humility** is the acceptance of the limits of one's knowledge; the acceptance that we may be wrong, unaware of basic truths, or lacking the consideration of others. It means remaining open to new evidence, reconsidering beliefs, and avoiding intellectual arrogance. This mindset encourages learning, reduces overconfidence, and enriches discussions in philosophy, science, and everyday life.

⁹**Ibn Rushd** - Averroes - ابن رشد (1126–1198) was an Andalusian Muslim scholar who wrote on philosophy, theology, medicine, law, and science. As one of the important interpreters of Aristotle, he defended rationalism against the criticisms of Ghazali, arguing that philosophy was compatible with Islam.

¹⁰Ibn Rushd's **Incoherence of Incoherence** is a refutation of al-Ghazali's views in *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

One particularly overlooked conduit was the 13th-century Dominican friar Ramon Martí¹¹, who drew heavily on *Ghazali's Ihyā*¹² (The Revival of the Religious Sciences – Ihyā' ulūmi'd-Dīn – إحياء علوم الدين) in his polemical work *The Dagger of Faith*¹³ (Pugio Fidei), quoting it without attribution. He repurposed Ghazali's critiques of excessive rationalism and the limitations of human reason to challenge both Islamic and Jewish philosophies^[15,16]. These ideas resonated deeply with later Christian thinkers, including Aquinas and Pascal^[17].

Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Fluctuations in Europe

The philosophical and theological implications of Ghazali's thought began to emerge in the late Middle Ages. Thinkers such as John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham¹⁴ echoed Ghazali's emphasis on divine omnipotence and the world's contingent nature. Ockham's Razor¹⁵, in particular, reflects Ghazali's rejection of unnecessary metaphysical constructs, contributing to the rise of nominalism and empiricism^[18].

In the early modern period, al-Ghazali's ideas re-emerged in a secularized form. Pierre Gassendi¹⁶ and Robert Boyle¹⁷ challenged the metaphysical necessity of natural laws, treating them as descriptive rather than prescriptive^[19]. David Hume would later radicalize this view, arguing that causality was a psychological

¹¹**Raymond Martini**, also known as Ramon Martí - Catalan (?–1285), was a Dominican friar and theologian who lived in the 13th century. In 1250, he was chosen by the provincial council of Toledo to study Oriental languages at a Dominican school founded to combat Jewish and Islamic beliefs. He is known for his polemical work *Pugio Fidei* (c. 1270).

¹²**Ihya** is a fundamental work that aims to revive Islamic sciences and reform society. It has a significant place in the history of Islamic thought with its combination of jurisprudence and Sufism and its psychological and philosophical analyses.

¹³Ramon Martí's major work, **The Dagger of Faith** (*Pugio Fidei*), was published by Joseph de Voisin in Paris in 1651. Consisting of three books, the work defends Christian doctrines against Judaism and Islam using Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin sources.

¹⁴**William of Ockham** (1285–1347/49) was an English philosopher known for Ockham's Razor and nominalism.

¹⁵In **Ockham's Razor**, William of Ockham proposes the principle of simplicity. Among competing hypotheses, he argues that the one that makes the fewest assumptions without ignoring the evidence is usually the best. The term razor refers to the shaving off of unnecessary complexity. The principle emphasizes efficiency.

¹⁶**Pierre Gassendi** (1592–1655) was a French philosopher, priest, and scientist who pioneered experimental skepticism. He Christianized Epicurean atomism and shaped modern scientific thought in his debates with Descartes.

¹⁷**Robert Boyle** (1627–1691) was an Anglo-Irish natural philosopher, chemist, physicist, alchemist, and inventor. Boyle is today widely regarded as the first modern chemist and is also known for his work in theology and philosophy.

habit rather than an objective feature of reality ^[20]. Hume's constant conjunctions¹⁸ are almost identical with al-Ghazali's occasionalist¹⁹ view ^[21].

Even Blaise Pascal's²⁰ *Thoughts of Pascal* (*Les pensées de Pascal*) exhibits strong parallels with Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Happiness*²¹ (کیمیای سعادت) and *The Savior from Error* (al-Münkız mine'd-Dalâl – المنقذ من الضلال). Blaise Pascal distrusted unaided reason, emphasized the existential misery of man without God, and advocated faith as a higher epistemic mode ^[22]. As Abdul Jabar emphasizes, Pascal's existential statements, such as '*the heart has reasons that reason does not know,*' are a clear reflection of Ghazali's mystical and rational thoughts ^[23].

The Secret Architect of Modernity

Although al-Ghazali did not directly initiate the changes that led to the Enlightenment or the Scientific Revolution, he created an intellectual opening that made such developments possible. His critique of necessary causality, his defense of divine freedom, and his insistence on the epistemic limits of human reason precipitated a broader philosophical reassessment across cultures ^[24]. Far from being a purely Western phenomenon, the move beyond Aristotle and the emergence of modernity were shaped by a global intellectual exchange. Al-Ghazali's legacy reminds us that philosophical revolutions are rarely inward-looking.

Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Legacy: From Islamic Occasionalism to Modern Thought

One of the most influential theologians and philosophers in Islamic history, Ghazali initiated a radical critique of metaphysical rationalism that resonated far beyond his immediate context. His works, especially *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and *The Savior from Error*, challenged Aristotelian eternity, necessary causality, and the adequacy of reason in metaphysical investigation

¹⁸ Hume used the term **continuous conjunction** to describe the relationship between two events in which one inevitably accompanies the other.

¹⁹ According to **occasionalism**, the real cause is God; all other causes are manifestations of His will.

²⁰ **Blaise Pascal** (1623–1662) was a French scholar, mathematician, and philosopher, best known for his *Pensées*, which combine the pessimism of St. Augustine with the skepticism of Montaigne to offer a profound, often tragic, perspective on human existence.

²¹ **Kimīyā-yi Sa'adat** is a Sufi work on self-knowledge and ethics. Ghazali described it as a simplified summary of *Ihya* for a wider audience.

[25,26]. These critiques eventually formed the basis for fundamental developments in Western philosophy, theology, and even modern science.

Al-Ghazali and the Deconstruction of Natural Necessity

In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Al-Ghazali shattered the Aristotelian worldview, especially its reliance on natural or necessary causality. Drawing on Islamic theology, he put forward two revolutionary ideas:

1. **Nature has no autonomy:** What philosophers describe as “*laws of nature*” are merely observed patterns. What happens is the manifestation of the laws of God, the Adatullah. These habits do not bind the divine will and can be suspended at any time (as in miracles).
2. **Causes are not real factors:** Fire does not, by its nature, cause combustion; it is merely the opportunity through which God brings about the effect. This opportunistic position confirms that God alone is the true cause and that all material causation is dependent on divine will.

Ghazali’s theological and philosophical implications were profound and multi-layered. Ghazali’s God has absolute power²² (al-Qudrat—القدرة) and moves freely, unlike Aristotle’s unmoved mover or Ibn Sina’s imperative cosmos. As a result, human knowledge is limited to observing regularities. It, therefore, cannot penetrate metaphysical necessity. In this way, Ghazali effectively separated empirical science from metaphysical certainty centuries before such distinctions emerged in the West [27].

From Islamic Occasionalism to Christian Thought

Ghazali's occasionalism later found expression in the Christian West, particularly in the work of Nicolas Malebranche²³. The French Cartesian philosopher and theologian Malebranche reformulated Ghazali's theology within a Christian framework. A comparison of the views of Ghazali and Malebranche is given in Table 1.

²²The word “*al-Qudrat*,” when attributed to Allah, means “*to do whatever He wills, completely and without excess, with wisdom.*”

²³**Nicolas Malebranche** (1638–1715) was a French Catholic priest and rationalist philosopher. He synthesized the ideas of Augustine and Descartes, emphasizing God's active role in all things in the world. He is best known for his doctrines of “*vision in God*,” “*occasionalism*,” and “*ontologism*.”

Table 1. Comparison of causality and divine will in Ghazali and Malebranche.

al-Ghazali	Malebranche
Causes are the only means. (أسباب- <i>asbāb</i>)	All natural causes are occasional causes. Work: Dialogues on Metaphysics ^[28]
The real cause is only Allah.	God is the only true cause. Work: Treatise on Nature and Grace ^[29]
Miracles reveal the randomness of nature.	God is not obliged to follow his own law. Title: Christian and Metaphysical Meditations ^[30]

While Ghazali based his views on Quranic theology, Malebranche used Cartesian dualism and argued that since the mind and body cannot interact directly, God must mediate every act of causation ^[31]. In this context, the transmission of Ghazali's ideas likely occurred through Latin translations, Syriac Christian scholars such as Gregory Bar Hebraeus²⁴, and the works of Ramon Martí, who anonymously quoted Ghazali in his *Pugio Fidei*.

Ghazali's Cosmology: Creation, Time, and Will

Al-Ghazali also rejected Aristotle's concept of an eternal universe. He argued that the universe had a temporal beginning (*huduth al-‘ālam*—حدوث العالم)²⁵, as confirmed in the Qur'an (21:30)²⁶, and that the concept of a true infinite regression of events was logically inconsistent ^[32]. In fact, Al-Ghazali anticipated Kant's antinomies²⁷.

²⁴**Gregory Bar Hebraeus** (1225-1286) - Imprint Arabic: Abu'l-Faraj İbnü'l-İbrî (أبو الفريج ابن العبري) Latin: Abulpharagius—Syriac Orthodox Maphrian, scholar, and diplomat. He was born in Malatya to a Jewish mother and father. He studied Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, Arabic, philosophy, and medicine. He enriched Syriac literature by contributing to theology, philosophy, history, linguistics, and poetry.

²⁵The term **ḥudūth al-‘ālam** (حدوث العالم), meaning the beginning of the world, is derived from the Arabic root ḥ-d-th and conveys the idea of “*the coming into being of something that does not exist.*”

²⁶**Surah Anbiya, Verse 30:** Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, then We parted them, and We made every living thing of water? Will they not then believe?

²⁷**Kant's Antinomies:** Reason's inevitable contradictions while trying to know the absolute (for example, the beginning of the cosmos) reveal the limits of human understanding. In other words, reason falls into the totality of contradictions with the data of sense and perception.

At the center of Ghazali's cosmology is the absolute will of God. Unlike Aristotle's passive first cause, Ghazali's God chooses to create, act, and intervene. This will-centered cosmology is consistent with a broader critique of rationalism, supporting the claim that “*human reason alone cannot attain divine truths.*” Instead, Ghazali promotes the concept of *the eye of the heart*²⁸ (ayn al-qalb—عين القلب) as an intuitive faculty capable of perceiving spiritual realities^[33].

This mystical knowledge strongly coincides with the words of Blaise Pascal in his famous work, *Meditations*: “*The heart has its reasons that reason does not know.*”^[22] Pascal’s criticism of reason, his emphasis on fear and repentance, and his existential piety echo themes in works such as Ghazali’s *Ihya* and *The Chemistry of Happiness*.

Echoes in Modern Philosophy: Boutroux, Bergson and Beyond

In the 19th century, Ghazali's occasionalism resurfaced in a secular form in the philosophy of science. Boutroux²⁹ argued in *The Contingency of the Laws of Nature* (1874) that scientific laws were not metaphysically necessary but merely descriptive^[34]. This reflects Ghazali's insistence that “*tradition is not an argument*” (العادة ليست بحجة-*al-‘āde leyse bi-ḥucceṭin*)^[33].

Henri Bergson took these ideas further by rejecting mechanical time and affirming duration (*durée*)^[35]. A flowing, lived experience of time is closer to Ghazali's temporal creationism than to Aristotle's eternalism. His concept of *élan vital*³⁰, a life force behind evolutionary change, coincides with Ghazali's idea of the divine will as the source of transformation^[36].

²⁸**Eye of the Heart:** The ability to see the inner face of something, to discover the truth of intuition, to recognize the right path, to distinguish truth from falsehood, has been shown as the opposite of spiritual blindness or misguidance.

²⁹**Étienne Émile Marie Boutroux** (1845–1921) was a leading French philosopher of science and religion. He opposed scientific materialism and advocated the compatibility of science and religion. Although less well-known than Henri Bergson, he was elected to the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1898 and to the Académie Française in 1912.

³⁰**Élan vital** is Bergson's concept of a creative life force independent of matter. Although it evokes ideas such as emanation or Spinoza's substance, it remains a distinct and original element of his philosophy.

Similar ideas surface in Kierkegaard's "*qualitative leap or leap of faith*"³¹ Heidegger's "*temporality of Being*,"³² and even Whitehead's *Process and Reality*³³, where nature consists of "*events*" driven by divine purposes^[37,38,39]. These modern thinkers reflect a common skepticism of rationalist metaphysics and a renewed interest in contingency, will, and divine freedom.

Al-Ghazali and the Philosophy of Science

Perhaps most strikingly, Ghazali's occasionalist approach anticipated some of the most fundamental critiques of modern science. The uncertainty introduced by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (1927)^[40] reopened discussions about causal gaps in nature. Postmodern critiques of scientism by philosophers such as Bruno Latour³⁴ also recall Ghazali's challenge to the metaphysical claims of science^[41]. Ghazali's distinction between observable regularities (Adatullah) and necessary causalities is an attitude that anticipated Karl Popper's principle of falsifiability. Ghazali argued that causal relations in nature are not metaphysical necessities but regularities dependent on the will of Allah. At the same time, Popper emphasized that scientific theories do not carry absolute certainty but are merely provisional hypotheses that can be tested and falsified^[42].

Conclusion

The intellectual journey from Aristotelian necessity to the dynamic, contingent worldview that underlies modern philosophy and science cannot be fully understood without acknowledging Ghazali's fundamental role. Although his direct influence on Western thought has often been overshadowed by the lack of

³¹A **leap of faith**, as an idiom, refers to the act of believing something that cannot be proven. The phrase is often attributed to Søren Kierkegaard, although he never used the term "*leap of faith*", instead referring to a "*qualitative leap*".

³²With the **temporality of being**, Heidegger redefined time as finite, unified future, past, and action (present). Unlike linear or theological models, temporality is existence itself, incomplete yet determined.

³³With **Process and Reality**, Whitehead argues that reality is not composed of static "*things*" but of dynamic "*processes*" and relationships.

³⁴**Bruno Latour** (1947–2022) was a French philosopher and sociologist known for his work in science and technology. He co-developed Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Latour's work interacts with a variety of traditions, from structuralism to postmodernism, from posthumanism to environmental philosophy, but he never fully adheres to any of them.

translations and the mediation of later thinkers, his critiques of causality, rationalism, and metaphysical certainty have shaped Western thought for centuries. Ghazali's critique of causality, time, and the adequacy of reason was not a medieval dead end but a bold restructuring of the relationship between God, nature, and knowledge. By subordinating reason to revelation and asserting the contingency of the cosmos, Ghazali created intellectual space for a world that was both spiritually meaningful and epistemologically modest. In this context, Ghazali challenged the concept of necessary causality by demarcating the limits of human reason and laid the foundation for later developments of empiricism, nominalism, and even early modern skepticism.

His ideas found their way into the works of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham and later into the empiricist tradition that culminated in Hume. Hume's radicalization of causality bears a striking resemblance to Ghazali's occasionalist view. Similarly, the existentialist and fideist strands in Pascal's thought reflect Ghazali's emphasis on the inadequacy of pure reason and the primacy of spiritual intuition (the eye of the heart). Even in contemporary discussions of the philosophy of science and Western thought, Ghazali's insistence on the randomness of natural laws anticipated modern critiques of scientism and deterministic metaphysics. Direct and indirect Ghazali's influence can be traced from Malebranche to Pascal, Boutroux to Bergson, and even to the probabilistic universe of quantum physics. In this respect, Ghazali can be considered one of the earliest philosophers of science who insisted, long before Hume or Popper, that what we observe does not reflect how reality should be.

In conclusion, al-Ghazali's legacy challenges the Eurocentric narrative of progress in Western thought, demonstrating that the evolution of Western thought was deeply intertwined with broader intellectual currents, including Islamic thought and metaphysics. His work is a testament to the cross-cultural interaction that has historically driven philosophical innovation and fostered a more inclusive understanding of the roots of modernity. Far from being a simple critic of Aristotelianism, al-Ghazali deserves the title of a hidden architect of ideas that would later develop in the West, reshaping epistemology, theology, and the foundations of scientific inquiry.

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