



THE ETERNITY OF NATURE ACCORDING TO THE PHILOSOPHER IN IMAM AL-GHAZALI'S TAHAFUT AL-FALASIFAH

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Article Info

Article history:

Received :

Revised :

Accepted :

Available online

<http://jurnal.uinsu.ac.id/index.php/analytica>

E-ISSN: 2541-5263

P-ISSN: 1411-4380



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept of the eternity of the world (qidam al-'alam) in the perspective of Muslim philosophers and its critique in Tahafut al-Falasifah by Imam al-Ghazali. The research aims to analyze the differences between al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, who argue that the universe is temporally eternal through the theory of emanation (al-fayḍ), and the Islamic theological view which affirms that the world was created out of nothing (ḥudūs al-'alam). This study employs a qualitative method with a library research approach, using descriptive-analytical and comparative-critical analysis. The primary source is Tahafut al-Falasifah, supported by relevant secondary literature. The findings indicate that the philosophers conceive the relationship between God and the world as a necessary and eternal causal relation, implying that the universe has no temporal beginning, although it remains ontologically dependent upon God. In contrast, al-Ghazali rejects this necessity and asserts that God is a voluntary agent (fā'il mukhtār) who creates the world through His free will. This debate has had a significant impact on the development of Islamic theology and philosophy, particularly in defining the respective roles of reason and revelation in addressing metaphysical questions.

Keywords: *Eternity of the World, al-Ghazali, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Islamic Theology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tahafut al-Falasifah is a work by Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali ath-Tusi Al-Syafi'i in the 11th century CE. This book emerged from a major debate between philosophers and theological scholars in the Islamic world. At that time, Greek philosophical thought was highly developed and influenced Muslim scholars. The teachings of Aristotle were widely studied and developed by Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi. Tahafut al-Falasifah was written during a period of mental doubt in Baghdad. Al-Ghazali harshly criticized philosophy and philosophers (Asep Sulaiman, 2016).

One of the philosophical teachings that became the subject of debate was the eternity of nature (qidam al-'alam). Philosophers argued that the universe had no beginning. It has existed since time immemorial and has never ceased to exist. Philosophers explained that nature exists because of God, but its existence continues continuously without beginning of time. Thus, according to them, nature and God both have no beginning, although nature remains dependent on God (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2024).

This view differs from Islamic teachings. In Islam, it is believed that Allah SWT created nature from nothing. This means that nature once did not exist, then Allah created it. Nature has a beginning. Only Allah is eternal without beginning. This belief is crucial in the teachings of monotheism, as it demonstrates that Allah SWT is Almighty and free to create anything according to His will. As is evident in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 117.

بَدِيعُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ وَإِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

It means "Allah is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. When He wants to decree something, He only says to it, 'Be!' Then it becomes something."

Al-Ghazali saw that the philosophers' views on the eternity of nature could endanger faith. If nature is considered to have no beginning, then creation is no longer understood as an act of God's will. It is as if nature has always existed with God and emerged automatically. This could diminish the significance of God's power and free will (Ahmad Atabik, 2015). The issue of the eternity of nature is not simply a matter of when nature began to exist. Rather, it concerns beliefs about who God is and what His nature is. If nature is considered eternal, then there is something other than God that also has no beginning. This contradicts Islamic teachings, which state that only God is truly eternal and without beginning (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2024).

Through this book, al-Ghazali seeks to emphasize that reason is important, but it has limits. In matters relating to the supernatural and the divine, revelation remains the primary guideline. He does not reject philosophy in its entirety, but rather rejects those parts that he considers contrary to basic Islamic teachings. Thus, the main thrust of Al-Ghazali's Tahafut al-Falasifah is his desire to uphold Islamic teachings on creation. He emphasized that the universe had a beginning and was created by Allah SWT by His will. He argued that the idea that the universe is eternal could undermine the understanding of Allah SWT's power and oneness (Imam Al-Ghazali, 2024).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a Qualitative method with the type of Library Research, because the object of study is classical texts and the thoughts of philosophers in the work of Tahafut al-Falasifah Imam Al-Ghazali, so it cannot be explained through statistical measurements. Qualitative Research is a research method that emphasizes natural and in-depth observation and understanding, presented descriptively and interpreted comprehensively (Lexy J. Moleong, 2019). This research is philosophical and theological. The method used is a descriptive-analytical method with a comparative-critical approach,

in order to examine the concept of qadim, and hadith, causality, and the relationship between God and nature, as well as seeing the debate between philosophy and kalam in the context of the eternity of nature. The data sources in this study are divided into primary data and secondary data. The primary data source of this research is Tahafut al-Falasifah, which is supported by the works of philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Secondary data sources include books, journals, dissertations, and scientific articles that discuss the concept of the eternity of nature in Tahafut al-Falasifah by Imam Al-Ghazali. The data collection technique is carried out through the documentation method, namely by tracing, reading, recording, and reviewing various written sources related to the research object. The documents reviewed include books, scientific journals, and other academic works relevant to the eternity of nature according to the philosophers in Tahafut al-Falasifah Imam Al-Ghazali. This technique was chosen because library research places text as the main source of research data (M. Nazir, 2014). The data analysis technique for this research uses content analysis (content analysis) of the collected data in the form of concepts of the eternity of nature according to philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, in order to gain a deeper understanding of Al-Ghazali's views (Sumadi Suryabrata, 2015).

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Short Biography of Al-Ghazali, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina

Al-Ghazali has a popular name, namely Algazel (M. Kamalul Fikri, 2022). Imam Al-Ghazali was born in 450 H / 1058 AD in Ghazaleh, in a village near Tus, in the Khurasan region, Persia (Krismuntaha et al., 2025). The name Al-Ghazali is derived from Ghazzal, which means a weaver, because his father's job was weaving wool. Meanwhile, Ghazali is also taken from the word Ghazalah, which is the name of Al-Ghazali's birthplace and this is what is widely used, so that his name is attributed by people to his father's job or to his birthplace (Hasyimiyah Nasution, 2007). Imam Al-Ghazali's written works cover various scientific disciplines. Below, the author will outline some of the most influential scholarly works on Muslim thought:

1. Maqfishid Al Falasifah (The Goals of the Philosophers), the first work addressing philosophical issues.
2. Tahafut al-Falasifah (The Confusion of the Philosophers), written while he was plagued by doubts in Baghdad, and al-Ghazali harshly criticized the philosophy of the philosophers.
3. Ibya' Ulum Ad Din (Reviving the Religious Sciences), his greatest work, written during his years of traveling between Damascus, Jerusalem, Hijfiz, and Tus, contains a guide to jurisprudence, Sufism, and philosophy (Hermawan et al., 2011).

Al-Farabi's full name is Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Tarkhan ibn al-Uzalagh al-Farabi. Al-Farabi was born in Wasij, Farab District (also popularly known as Utrar), an area in Transoxiana, around 870 AD, and died in Damascus in 950 AD. Al-Farabi came from a family of Persian soldiers (M. Subhi-Ibrahim, 2012). One of al-Farabi's works is a work whose contents try to bring together Plato (424-348 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC), between idealism and empiricism, and between religion and philosophy, such as Kitab fi Ittifaq Ara Aristhuthdhalis wa Aflatun (Meeting Point of Aristotle and Plato's Thoughts), and Kitab Falsafah Aflatun wa Aristhuthalis (Plato and Aristotle's Philosophy).

The basis of his reference is (1) to improve the philosophy of Aristotle's followers and wrap it with Platonic ideas to suit Islamic teachings. (2) Providing a rational interpretation of religious truth and explaining philosophy in a religious way so as to lead both in the same direction and in harmony. According to Madkur, Al-Farabi was the first person to build a philosophy based on this harmony, followed later by Ibn Sina (980-1037 AD), Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 AD), and so on (A. Khudori Soleh, 2018).

Ibn Sina was a Muslim philosopher who brought classical Islamic philosophy to its peak. His full name was Abu Ali al-Husayn Ibn 'Abdillah Ibn Sina (lived from 370 AH/980 AD to 428 AH/1036 AD). He was born in the village of Afsyanah near Bukhara, died and was buried in Hamadan (Hadi Suprpto, 2017). In addition to memorizing the entire Quran at the age of 10, at around 17 he also mastered the science and philosophy that were developing at that time. By reading medical books on his own for a year, he was able to perform as a doctor at the age of 17 and healed the Sultan of Bukhara, Nuh Ibn Mansyur, of the Samania Dynasty. Thanks to his talents, he was able to carry out many tasks such as practicing medicine, teaching, being a political advisor and even serving as prime minister. He practiced medicine since the age of 17, wrote songs since the age of 21, worked as a vizier (minister) in Hamadan for approximately 9 years and a political advisor in Isfahan for approximately 14 years. In recognition of his scientific and philosophical maturity as well as his political leadership, he was known by the title Al-Syekh al-Ra'is (Abdullah Nur, 2009). Ibn Sina, as one of the most influential figures in the history of philosophy and medicine, has made major contributions that transcend his time. In philosophy, Ibn Sina succeeded in integrating Aristotelian thought with the Islamic metaphysical tradition, establishing important concepts such as the distinction between being and essence, as well as the theory of the human soul. His thoughts had a significant impact on both Islamic and Western philosophical traditions, making him one of the leading philosophers of his time (Mujahid Mallombasi Arsyad et al., 2024).

The Concept of the Eternity of Nature in Al-Farabi's Philosophy

The concept of the eternity of nature in Al-Farabi's philosophy is rooted in the metaphysics of emanation, which he developed through a synthesis of Aristotelian thought and the Neoplatonic tradition associated with Plotinus. Within this framework, God is understood as the perfect First Being (al-Mawjūd al-Awwal) and the first cause of all reality. Nature was not created in a temporal sense, but rather emanates necessarily from Divine perfection. Therefore, discussions of the eternity of nature in Al-Farabi's thought must be placed in an ontological, not a chronological, context (Majid Fakhry, 2001).

According to Al-Farabi, God is Necessary, that is, a being whose existence is necessary and independent of anything else. From this First Being emanates the First Intellect (al-'Aql al-Awwal), then successive intellects emerge, gradually, until they reach the Active Intellect (al-'Aql al-Fa'āl), which is connected to the material world. This cosmological structure demonstrates that nature exists through a multi-stage process of emanation (al-fayḍ), not through creation from nothingness within a specific time. Thus, nature is qadīm (eternal), meaning it has no temporal beginning (Mulyadhi Kartanegara, 2006).

The eternity of nature in Al-Farabi's philosophy does not mean that it stands on the same level as God. Nature remains contingent, as its existence depends entirely on its first

cause. The eternity of nature is understood as a result of the eternal causal relationship between God and His creation. As long as God, as the first cause, exists—and His existence is necessary—then His effects are also necessary. This relationship is continuous and uninterrupted by the dimension of time (Ahmad Daudy, 1992).

Al-Farabi clearly distinguishes between the eternity (qidam) of God and the eternity of nature. God is eternal in substance (bi al-dzāt), while nature is eternal in cause (bi al-'illah). This means that God has no cause, while nature has an eternal cause. With this distinction, Al-Farabi strives to uphold the principle of monotheism while maintaining the consistency of his metaphysical logic. The eternity of nature is not an independent eternity, but rather a dependent eternity (Harun Nasution, 1995).

Within Al-Farabi's cosmological framework, time itself is part of the movement and change in the physical universe. Because time is a measure of movement, the question of "when" nature was created becomes problematic from his perspective. If time arises with the movement of celestial bodies, then there is no meaning of "before" nature existed. Therefore, nature is seen as having no temporal beginning, because the beginning of time itself coincides with the existence of nature (A. Khudori Soleh, 2013).

This thinking demonstrates that Al-Farabi understood creation as an ontological relationship of a rational-demonstrative nature (burhānī). He did not deny God as creator, but interpreted creation as a necessary emanation from Divine perfection. A frequently used analogy in this tradition is the emanation of light from the sun: light is inseparable from the sun and is always dependent on it, yet there is no temporal lag between the sun's existence and its emanation (Majid Fakhry, 2004).

Thus, the concept of the eternity of nature in Al-Farabi's philosophy is an integral part of his metaphysical system, which emphasizes the unity between the first cause and the cosmic order. Nature is eternal in the sense that it has no temporal beginning but remains completely dependent on God as the source of existence. Through this construction, Al-Farabi attempted to align philosophical rationality with the principle of divinity in Islam, although this view later became a long debate in the Islamic theological and philosophical tradition (Oliver Leaman, 2002).

The Concept of the Eternity of Nature in Ibn Sina's Philosophy

The concept of the eternity of nature in Ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) philosophy represents a systematic development of the metaphysics of emanation previously formulated by Al-Farabi. In his ontological system, Ibn Sina clearly distinguishes between necessary existence (Wajib al-Wujūd) and possible existence (mumkin al-wujūd). God is the only necessary existence whose existence is independent of any cause, while nature falls into the category of possible existence whose existence depends entirely on a first cause (M.M. Syarif (ed.), 1996).

According to Ibn Sina, from the necessary existence (Wajib al-Wujūd) emanates the First Intellect through a necessary process of emanation (al-fayḍ). This process continues in stages until the formation of cosmic intellects and ultimately gives birth to the material universe. Because God, as the first cause, is eternal and unchanging, His effects cannot be delayed in time. If the cause exists eternally, then the effect also exists eternally. This is the basis of Ibn Sina's argument about qidam al-'ālam (Majid Fakhry, 2001).

However, the eternity of nature in Ibn Sina's thought does not mean that nature stands on the same level as God. Nature remains mumkin al-wujūd, meaning that it is

essentially not necessary and could have ceased to exist. Its existence becomes actual only because of the overflow of existence from God. Thus, nature is *qadīm* in the sense that it has no temporal beginning, but remains ontologically dependent on God as its cause (Harun Nasution, 1995).

Ibn Sina also emphasized that creation should not be understood as an event in time. Time itself is a measure of the motion of celestial bodies. Because time is born with motion, there is no meaning of "before" the existence of nature. Therefore, nature is seen as having no temporal beginning, because the beginning of time itself coincides with its existence (Mulyadhi Kartanegara, 2005).

In his monumental work, *al-Shifa'* (The *Ilāhiyyāt*), Ibn Sina explains that the relationship between God and nature is one of necessary cause and effect, not a changing temporal will. God knows nature through His knowledge of Himself as the cause of all things. From this self-knowledge emanates the rational and orderly order of the cosmos (Ibn Sina, 2009).

This view later became a matter of debate in classical Islamic theology, primarily because it was seen as contradicting the doctrine of creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). Sharp criticism came from Al-Ghazali in *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, who argued that philosophers had established the eternity of nature alongside God (Al-Ghazali, 2003).

Thus, the concept of the eternity of nature in Ibn Sina's philosophy is an integral part of his metaphysical system of being. Nature has no temporal beginning, but remains completely dependent on God as the Necessary Being. The eternity of nature is derivative, not independent. Through this construction, Ibn Sina tried to maintain the consistency of rational metaphysics while maintaining the principle of divinity in Islam (Mulyadhi Kartanegara, 2006).

Imam Al-Ghazali's Critique of the Concept of the Eternity of Nature

Al-Ghazali's critique of the concept of the eternity of nature is systematically presented in his monumental work, *Tahafut al-Falasifah*. In this work, Al-Ghazali specifically addresses the doctrine of *qidam al-'ālam* (the eternity of nature) espoused by Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. According to him, the view that nature has no temporal beginning contradicts Islamic teachings, which affirm that God created nature from nothing (*al-ḥudūs*) (Al-Ghazali, 2003).

Al-Ghazali rejects the philosophers' argument that a permanent cause (God) necessarily produces a permanent effect (nature). He argues that God is a free agent (*fa'il mukhtār*), not a cause that operates necessarily as in the law of causality in Greek philosophy. Therefore, God can create nature at any time He wishes without having to assume a change in His essence (Al-Ghazali, 2003).

One of Al-Ghazali's important criticisms concerns the assumption of the inevitability of causality. In his analysis, causality is not something logical and necessary, but merely a custom (*'ādah*) established by God. Thus, there is no rational necessity that if God exists eternally, nature must also exist eternally. God has full power to create or not create (Harun Nasution, 1986).

Al-Ghazali also believes that the doctrine of the eternity of nature implies a reduction in the meaning of God's will and power. If nature emanates automatically from God through the process of emanation, then creation becomes a mechanical process and not

an act of divine free will. In Ash'arite theology, God creates by will and power, not by logical compulsion (Mulyadhi Kartanegara, 2006).

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali stated that the belief in the eternity of nature is one of three philosophical doctrines he considers to be *kufr* (disbelief). He views this doctrine as contradicting the text of the Qur'an and the consensus of the Ummah regarding the creation of nature within a specific timeframe. Therefore, he views this issue not merely as a methodological difference but also as a matter of faith (Al-Ghazali, 2003).

In refuting the argument that God's will is eternal, Al-Ghazali explains that God's will is eternal, but the realization of that will can occur at any time without any change in His essence. Thus, the creation of the world at a certain beginning does not necessitate any change in God (Majid Fakhry, 2001).

This debate later received a response from Ibn Rushd in *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, which defended the philosophers' position. This polemic became an important milestone in Islamic intellectual history, particularly in the relationship between theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (Ibn Rushd, 2004).

The Relevance of the Debate on the Concept of the Eternity of Nature in Imam Al-Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifah* to the Development of Islamic Theology and Philosophy

Al-Ghazali's views on Greek philosophy were heavily influenced by the Ash'ariyah perspective on the limitations of reason in understanding divinity. In his famous work, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (The Confusion of the Philosophers), Al-Ghazali harshly criticized Muslim philosophers who were heavily influenced by Greek thought, such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Al-Ghazali argued that Greek philosophy, which emphasized logic and rationality in understanding everything, including God, tended to conflict with Islamic beliefs that prioritize revelation. Al-Ghazali criticized the idea of the eternity of the universe held by some Greek and Muslim philosophers, as it was considered contrary to the Islamic concept of creation. Ash'arism, in this context, rejected determinism, or the belief that the universe follows laws that can be fully explained by reason. For both Ash'arism and Al-Ghazali, God's will is above all, and the universe is constantly dependent on God's will, not on unchanging rational principles. In this line of thought, Greek philosophy was deemed to have failed to grasp the transcendent nature of God, which cannot be fully grasped by human reason. Through the Ash'arism perspective, Al-Ghazali laid the foundation for understanding divinity and faith as things beyond reason, which must be accepted by faith and subject to revelation (Nasrul Nurdin et al., 2024).

Al-Ghazali's view of the relationship between reason and revelation was shaped through his intellectual journey from Ash'arism to philosophy, and finally to the spiritual pinnacle of Sufism. He recognized the usefulness of reason in the exact sciences such as logic and mathematics, but he emphasized the absolute limitations of reason in attaining absolute metaphysical and spiritual truth. Al-Ghazali lived amidst the sectarian crisis in the East (the Ismaili threat) and was supported by the Seljuk Dynasty to strengthen Sunni orthodoxy. However, after his existential crisis, he realized that neither scholastic theology nor philosophy offered absolute certainty. He believed that human reason was incapable of understanding the essence of three central issues that he considered heretical by the philosophers (the eternity of the universe, God's knowledge of particulars, and bodily resurrection). Therefore, in matters of faith, reason must submit completely to

revelation. His goal in criticizing philosophy through *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* was to protect the faith of the common people from deviant ideas (Sulfiana et al., 2026).

Ibn Rushd, through his work *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, sharply criticized the arguments put forward by Al-Ghazali in *Tahafut al-Falasifah*. Ibn Rushd's main criticism lies in the epistemological and logical approaches Al-Ghazali used to reject philosophy. According to Ibn Rushd, Al-Ghazali often misunderstood the basic principles of philosophy, especially concepts adopted from the Aristotelian tradition. For example, in the debate about the eternity of the world, Al-Ghazali accused philosophers of stating that the world is eternal and uncreated, which is considered contrary to Islamic doctrine. However, Ibn Rushd refuted this accusation by explaining that philosophers such as Aristotle and Ibn Sina understood the eternity of the world not as the absence of creation, but as the continuation of God's creation in a certain form. Ibn Rushd emphasized that this concept, if understood correctly, does not contradict Islamic teachings (Ibn Rushd, 1954).

4. CONCLUSION

The debate on the eternity of nature (*qidam al-‘ālam*) in *Tahafut al-Falasifah* reveals the methodological tension between philosophy and theology in the classical Islamic tradition. Al-Ghazali firmly rejected the philosophers' view that nature is *qadīm* (without beginning). For him, only God is eternal in essence, while nature is a being created from nothing (*ḥudūs al-‘ālam*). This critique is not merely philosophical but also theological, as it concerns God's omnipotence and absolute will. The criticized view is primarily associated with Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, who explain the relationship between God and nature through the theory of emanation. In their system, nature was not created in a specific time, but rather emanated necessarily from the First Being. While still affirming nature's ontological dependence on God, Al-Ghazali understood this concept as a reduction of God's free will (*irādah*), as it makes creation a necessary rational consequence. Thus, the debate over the eternity of nature reflects a fundamental difference in understanding the relationship between reason and revelation. Al-Ghazali placed revelation as the supreme authority in metaphysical matters, while philosophers emphasized rational coherence. This dialectic was then continued by Ibn Rushd in his attempt to reconcile philosophy and religion, making the issue of the eternity of nature one of the most important discourses in the history of Islamic thought.

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