

## God's Omnipotence and Impossibility in al-Ghazālī and Thomas Aquinas\*

Özcan Akdağ \*\*

## ABSTRACT

During the Middle Ages, most theological and philosophical works were translated into Latin language, such as Avicenna's *al-Shifā: Ilāhiyāt* (*The Metaphysics of The Healing*), Al-Ghazālī's *Maqāşid al-falāsifa* (*The Aims of Philosophers*), and Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle's books. Thanks to these translations, Latin world have got acquainted with various controversial issues in the Islamic thought, such as whether "God knows particulars in their essence", "whether God acts necessarily because of His nature" and "whether reason and revelation can be reconciled or not" conveyed into Latin West. In addition to these issues, Latin thinkers have also got to know the problem of what scope of God's absolute power. In this paper, I tried to show the idea that God can do what is logically possible and this does not limit God's absolute power was conveyed in to Latin West because of translation of Avicenna's *al-Shifā* and Al-Ghazālī's *Maqāşid al-falāsifa*. As far as I can see, there is drastic textual similarity between idea of Al-Ghazālī and Thomas Aquinas about this matter. Based on the similarities between Al-Ghazālī and Aquinas, it is highly probable that Aquinas' idea about God's power goes back to Islamic tradition.

## KEYWORDS

Philosophy of Religion, Impossibility, Necessity, God's Omnipotence, Al-Ghazālī, Aquinas.

\* This article has been published previously in Turkish: Akdağ, Özcan. "Gazzâlî ve Thomas Aquinas'ta Tanrı'nın Kudreti ve İmkânsızlık". *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi-Cumhuriyet Theology Journal* 20/1 (June 2016): 147-166 . <http://dx.doi.org/10.18505/cuifd.78659>

\*\* Assistant Professor, Erciyes Univ, Faculty of Theology, Department of Philosophy of Religion, Kayseri, TURKEY  
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Erciyes Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi, Din Felsefesi Anabilim Dalı  
[ozcanakdag@erciyes.edu.tr](mailto:ozcanakdag@erciyes.edu.tr) orcid.org/0000-0002-7156-401X

**Article Types / Makale Türü:** Translated Article / Çeviri

**Received / Geliş Tarihi:** 26.04.2018

**Accepted / Kabul Tarihi:** 13.07.2018

**Published / Yayın Tarihi:** 31.07.2018

**Cite as / Atıf:**

Özcan, Akdağ. "God's Omnipotence and Impossibility in al-Ghazālī and Thomas Aquinas". *ULUM* 1/1 (July 2018): 23-34.  
<http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1488221>

## Gazzâlî ve Thomas Aquinas’ta Tanrı’nın Kudreti ve İmkânsızlık

### ÖZ

Orta Çağ’da, İslam düşüncesi içerisinde yazılmış olan İbn Sînâ’nın *eş-Şifâ: İlahiyat*’ı, Gazzâlî’nin *Makâsıdu’l-Felâsife*’si ve İbn Rüşd’ün, Aristoteles’in eserlerine yazmış olduğu şerhler gibi pek çok felsefî ve teolojik eser Latinceye çevrilmiştir. Söz konusu çeviri eserler vasıtasıyla, İslam düşüncesinde carî olan, Tanrı’nın tikelleri kendi zatlarında bilip bilmediği, Tanrı’nın zâtı gereği fiilde bulunup bulunmadığı, din ve felsefenin uzlaşıp uzlaşmayacağı gibi tartışmalı pek çok mesele Batı’ya intikal etmiştir. Bunlara ilaveten Tanrı’nın mutlak kudretinin alanının ne olduğu sorunu da Batı düşüncesinde bilinir hale gelmiştir. Bu çalışmada, “Tanrı mantıksal olarak mümkün olanı yapabilir ve bu durum Tanrı’nın mutlak kudretine hanel getirmez” anlayışının Latin Batı dünyasına İbn Sînâ’nın *eş-Şifâ*’sı ve Gazzâlî’nin *Makâsıdu’l-Felâsife*’sinin çevirileri vasıtasıyla intikal ettiği ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır. Tespit edebildiğimiz kadarıyla, Gazzâlî’nin *Makâsıdu’l-Felâsife*’de bu konuya ilişkin serdettiği fikirler ile Hristiyan teolog/düşünür Thomas Aquinas’ın fikirleri arasında önemli ölçüde benzerlik söz konusudur. Söz konusu benzerlik temele alınarak, Thomas Aquinas’ın bu hususta İslam düşüncesinden beslendiğini söylemek kuvvetle muhtemeldir.

### ANAHTAR KELİMELEER

Din Felsefesi, İmkânsızlık, Zorunluluk, Tanrı’nın Kudreti, Gazzâlî, Thomas Aquinas

### INTRODUCTION

In our daily lives, while we call various things as “possible”, we also call some others as “impossible”. As we do this, we base on our judgement of whether those things are within the extent of our power or not. As a matter of fact, we describe what is requested from us or what we plan to do as “possible” if it is in our limits, or we describe it as “impossible” if the request exceeds our power’s limits. It is obvious that there is a relation between the understanding of possibility, which is revealed by human actions, and the scope of power extension. In this context, it seems possible to describe possibility and impossibility as being a matter of power or not. Then, when it comes to God, is it possible to describe the concepts of possibility and impossibility as the things that are included in his scope of power? For instance, can we describe an action that is with the scope of God’s power extension as possible and an action that is not so as impossible? Or can we assume possibility and impossibility as realities that are independent of power? In other words, is the notion of possibility or impossibility not related to power and is it a mode that is related to things themselves. In this study, within the framework of the questions posed above, we will discuss the perspective of Al-Ghazālī’s (1058-1111), and Aquinas’ (1225-1274), who are one of the prominent figures in the mediaeval Islamic thought and mediaeval Christian thought respectively, and we will try to show that Aquinas was inspired by Muslim philosophers, such as Avicenna and Al-Ghazālī.

## 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Lexical meaning of possibility is doing something easily, the absence of obstacles to do something and that action is manageable.<sup>1</sup> According to Aristotle (367-347 BC), possibility is the thing that has probability to accept one of two opposites. For example, if Socrates is sitting, the statement that “Socrates is not sitting” will be wrong. However, inaccuracy of the that relevant statement is valid only for that moment because it is possible for Socrates to perform that action of not sitting in another time, and then the statement “Socrates is not sitting” might be correct.<sup>2</sup> And “necessity” is used to refer to something whose absence is impossible.<sup>3</sup> In other words, being obligatory is not to be either this or that way.<sup>4</sup> As for Muslim philosopher Al-Fārābī (874-950), possibility is the thing that is capable of accepting one of two opposites. If only one of these opposites was correct, it would not be possible for this thing to accept opposite cases. He also notes that existence of things depends on the possibility originated from their nature; if these things did not have a possibility in this way, they would not be mentioned in the God’s creation and destruction acts. Therefore, possibility is a condition that accepts the nature of creation and destruction. *If X necessarily accepted one of these capabilities/possibilities, X would be something necessary in this case.* For this reason, it would not be subject to God’s creation and destruction acts, and it would not be possible to accept one of these capabilities for the things that are possible due to their nature.<sup>5</sup> For Al-Fārābī, impossible cannot to exist and we need hardly mention that.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to this, from Al-Fārābī’s perspective, necessity is a mutual notion and has three meanings. The first is used for the being whose existence is eternal and everlasting and means that the absence of the thing is impossible. From this point of view, God is *wajib al-wujud* (necessary existence), which means God exists, and his existence depends on nothing. The second resembles the fact that the presence of color blue in the eye continues as the presence of eye itself continues to exist. Similarly, as long as the subject continuous to exist, the qualification of that subject also persists. The third meaning of necessity is the continuation of the state as long as the agent does the relevant action. For example, when John remains standing and the condition that he stands upright is necessary part of the action and continues as long as the action is done. From Al-Fārābī’s perspective, while the first meaning of the concept of necessity is primary, the others refer to a relative necessity.<sup>7</sup>

Avicenna (980-1037), on the other hand, defines “possible” as the probability of every existing things before they exist. If something was impossible in terms of its essence, that thing would not exist. Something

<sup>1</sup> Mahmut Kaya, “İmkân”, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Publications, 2000), 22 (2000): 224.

<sup>2</sup> Aristoteles, *Metafizik*, trans. Ahmet Arslan (Istanbul: Sosyal, 2010), 263.

<sup>3</sup> Aristoteles, *Metafizik*, 207.

<sup>4</sup> Aristoteles, *Metafizik*, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Abū Naşr al-Fārābī, *Peri Hermenias Muhtasarı*, trans. Mübahat Türker-Küyel (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 1990), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Mahmut Kaya, “Al-Fārābī”, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Publications, 1995), 12 (1995): 149.

<sup>7</sup> Abū Naşr al-Fārābī, *Peri Hermenias Muhtasarı*, 94.

eventuality appears into existence not only because the owner of the power makes it so, but also because of the possibility of this entity’s essence. If something was impossible, it would not be within scope of power extension. Power extends to possible, not to impossible.<sup>8</sup> Just as the notions ‘being’ and ‘thing’ are first principles (avvalī), the notions ‘necessity’, ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ are also first principles.<sup>9</sup> But in *Dānišnāma-i Alāī* (*The Highest Knowledge*), Avicenna offers different definitions of *necessity* and *impossible* other than those mentioned above. Everything that exists is either *per se* necessary or not. Something that is not *per se* necessary is either possible or impossible. Something that is possible in itself is necessary providing that there is a cause and it is impossible providing that there is no cause. Without cause, something is neither necessary nor impossible. For example, if number 4 is impossible, it cannot exist. But if we consider that it exists due to the addition of 2 and 2, then it will be necessary in terms of its condition.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, according to Avicenna, possibility is not something ordained or something affected by eternal being’s power extension because we cannot know whether something is ordained or not, but we can know that it is possible or not. Therefore, the state of something’s being ordained is in consequence of possibility owned by that thing.

Now that we have mentioned what prominent philosopher’s, such as Aristotle, Al-Fārābī and Avicenna understand from notions like necessary, possible and impossible with broad strokes we can move on to what kind of an attitude Al-Ghazālī and Aquinas adopt in this matter.

## 2. AL-GHAZĀLĪ AND THOMAS AQUINAS

In the theistic tradition, God is almighty and able to do anything He wants. Therefore, there is nothing that limits His power. Being a theist thinker, Al-Ghazālī thinks that God is a perfect being not only in terms of His omnipotence but also in terms of His other characteristics. For this reason, it is not possible that there is a being equal to Him. If there were two beings with absolute power that are equal in power, then whoever created the earth would have been able to create the sky. If one of these beings is capable of creating the sky and the other one would not, then one of them would be incapable. If there were a cooperation between them, this would annihilate the quality of absolute power. As a result, if one of these beings has the absolute power, it is not possible for the other to have absolute power, which is the evidence known as the *argument of tamanu’* (*argument from hindrance*).<sup>11</sup> With this argument, although Al-Ghazālī tries to prove that God is one, he also aims to prove that God is a being that is omnipotent. Moreover, Al-Ghazālī also tries to prove that universe is a neat and arranged act by omnipotent God. The universe is firm and organized. Every act that is arranged emanates from an omnipotent agent. In that case, the universe emanated from a powerful agent.

<sup>8</sup> Abū ‘Alī Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik*, trans. Ekrem Demirli ve Ömer Türker (Istanbul: Litera, 2004), 162; Cüneyt Kaya, *Aristoteles’ten İbn Sīnā’da Varlık ve İmkân* (Istanbul: Klasik, 2012), 186.

<sup>9</sup> Kaya, *Aristoteles’ten İbn Sīnā’da Varlık ve İmkân*, 282.

<sup>10</sup> Abū ‘Alī Ibn Sīnā, *Dānišnāma-i Alāī: Alāī Hikmet Kitabı*, trans. Murat Demirkol (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu, 2013), 213-214.

<sup>11</sup> al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad, *al-Iqtisād fī al-’itiqād*, ed. İbrahim Agah Çubukçu-Hüseyin Atay (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi, 1962), 77-78.

Therefore, the mind necessarily accepts the statement “Every arranged act emanates from an omnipotent agent.”<sup>12</sup>

To show that God is almighty, Aquinas also starts with experience in other words with the universe. According to him, the secondary reasons act in the universe that we experienced, they act with the power of the First Principle’s power. If the divine activity were to stop, all activities of secondary reasons would also disappear. So, every act can ultimately be returned to God.<sup>13</sup> We should also consider that from Thomas’ perspective, even though the power of the things that we experience and of the things that naturally act is determined to be actualized as a singular act, God’s power is not in this way. Yet God acts with His own will, not because of a natural obligation.<sup>14</sup>

As we have seen, both philosophers base God’s possession of absolute power on the basis of universe. Then, when we say that “God is capable of everything”, in which context should this statement be understood? What is implied with the notion *everything* that is cited in the statement? In that case, can God create a circle-square or make  $2+1=17$  equality real? According to the claims of writers like Peterson and Hasker, it has been traditionally accepted since Thomas Aquinas that God’s power should be limited to at least logically possible. Limiting God’s power to logically possible does not remove God’s absolute power. In addition to this, God cannot perform an action like climbing Mount Everest because he does not have a body to do this action. For this reason, God can perform every act that is logically possible and consistent with His nature.<sup>15</sup> To our knowledge, God’s power to do what is possible in terms of His own nature is an acceptable claim. However, this idea had appeared formerly in Islamic tradition before Aquinas introduced it. We claim that Aquinas also internalized the idea that God’s power extends to possible things in terms of His own power and introduced it to mediaeval western world due to being partially being influenced by Avicenna and Al-Ghazālī. In this context, to ground our claim, it would be right to elaborate what Al-Ghazālī and Aquinas have understood from the notions *possible* and *impossible*.

For Al-Ghazālī, possibility is a rational (*aqlī*) state. The judgements ordained by reason are possible, whereas those not ordained and not to be conceived by reason are impossible. If reason cannot ordain a judgement’s/thing’s absence, then it is also necessary.<sup>16</sup> Just like Avicenna, Aquinas also argues that the possibility of something is not in relation with power, but on the contrary, in relation with that thing’s necessity or impossibility. For example, the necessity for an addition of a triangle’s interior angles equals to

<sup>12</sup> Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī al-‘itiqād*, 80-81.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University, 2001), 3: 219-222.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. James F. Anderson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University, 2012), 2: 68.

<sup>15</sup> William Hasker Michael Peterson, *Akil ve İnanç: Din Felsefesine Giriş*, trans. Rahim Acar (Istanbul: Küre, 2009), 88; Özcan Akdağ, *Tanrı ve Özgürlük: Gazālī ve Thomas Aquinas Ekseninde Bir İnceleme* (Ankara: Elis Yayınları, 2016), 138; Mehmet Ata Az, “Descartes’ta Tanrı, Kudret ve Ezeli Doğrular”, *Şırnak Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 2/2 (2011): 69-90; Mehmet Ata Az, “Ghazālī ve Thomas Aquinas’ın Nedensellik Görüşlerinin Karşılaştırılması” 2/7 (2016): 85-100.

<sup>16</sup> al-Ghazālī, Abū Hāmid Muḥammad, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, ed. Salah al-Din al-Hawārī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Asriyya, 2010), 74-75.

addition of two right angles cannot be a matter of power, and this necessity do not remove God’s absolute power.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Al-Ghazālī mentions “possible” as a rational concept in *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), in *al-Iqtisād* (*Median in Belief*) he says that possible is an ordained thing. Based on the contention that power does extend to possible things only, he comes to the conclusion that possible is an ordained thing. Although reason has the quality of cognition, everything cannot be cognized at the same level. Among the first principles are the impossibility for something to be both created and eternal at the same time, and for it to be both existing and absent, the fact that the existence of the particular entails the existence of the general, and the fact that number two is bigger than number one, two times three makes six. These are necessary statements that mind possesses related to necessity, possible and impossible. Reasoning -in other words information gathered by research-, is not the information that the mind accepts immediately, but it is the information that is accepted and obtained after certain research processes.<sup>18</sup> In another work of his, Al-Ghazālī draws attention to the impossibility of existence of a thing that is possessed as impossible in mind. For instance, if a person, who is perceived as a saint, says that “The person ‘X’ will die tomorrow” the mind is limited with regard to this piece of information because this can only be known by God. If someone, who pretends to be a saint, argues that information like “God will create a being similar to Himself” is revealed to him, reason immediately refuses it. This is not because of mind’s failure in understanding that but it is due to the impossibility in the essence of the thing. A more impossible statement than the previous one is someone’s claim that “God will convert me into something similar to Him, and I will be God.” According to a statement like this, the created being will be an eternal being, which is impossible.<sup>19</sup> In his discussion of aspects, Al-Ghazālī points out that attribution of the notion *living* to human is necessary, and the statement “Human is a stone” is impossible in itself because the notion *stone* is contradictory with essential properties of human being.<sup>20</sup>

Even though Al-Ghazālī states in *Mi’yār al-ilm al-Mantiq* (*The Criterion of Knowledge in the Art of Logic*), in which he discusses possibility, necessity and impossibility<sup>21</sup> that his aim is to explain the concepts used by philosophers, he adds that there are two types of impossibility: *impossible in itself* and *impossible by virtue of other*. For example, attributing whiteness and blackness to the same subject at the same time is *impossible in*

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University, 2009), I: 262.

<sup>18</sup> al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad, “*Mishkat al-anwār*”, *Majmuat al-Rasāil al-Imam al-Ghazālī*, ed. İbrahim Emin Muhammed (Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Tawfiqiyya, nd), 290-291; Id, *al-Iqtisād fī al-ı’tiqād*, 84; Id, *Mihāk al-Nazar*, ed. Muhammed Bedreddin Na’sanî (Beirut: Dār al-Nahdati al-Hadīse, 1966), 35; Id, *Düşünmede Doğru Yöntem*, trans. Ahmet Kayacık (Istanbul: Ahsen, 2012), 79; Id, *Mi’yār al-ilm fi al-Mantık*, ed. Ahmed Şemseddin (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-İlmiyah, 1990), 178; Id, *Mi’yār al-ilm: İlmin Ölçütü*, trans. Ali Durusoy-Hasan Hacak (Istanbul: TYEKB, 2013), 252-254.

<sup>19</sup> al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad, *al-Maqṣād al-asna fi sharah Asma’ Allahu al-Husna* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-İlmiyah, nd.), 125; Id, *İlahi Ahlak*, trans. Yaman Arıkan (Istanbul: Elif Ofset, 1983), 339.

<sup>20</sup> al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad, *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*, ed. Ahmad Farid Mezidi (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-İlmiyah, 2008), 30.

<sup>21</sup> Ghazālī, *Mi’yār al-ilm fi al-Mantık*, 283-284; Id, *Mi’yāru’l-İlm: İlmin Ölçütü*, 416-418.

itself. While it is possible for the world to come to an end at this very moment, it is *impossible by virtue of other* because there is a certain date designated for it in God's eternal knowledge, and it is impossible for His knowledge to turn into ignorance.<sup>22</sup> Based on this point of view, we can say that Al-Ghazālī does not just explain philosophers' notions, but he also accepts a differentiation as impossible in itself and impossible by virtue of other.

Al-Ghazālī, who makes a similar assessment in *al-Iqtisād*, with respect to whether universe is necessary, possible and impossible according to God's eternal will. If God's eternal will ordain the absence of that thing, the existence of the thing will be impossible. If His will ordains that the universe will be necessary, the universe would be necessary. If eternal will did not ordain to create the universe, then the universe would be impossible because there must be a reason for the existence of created thing (*hadith*). If there is no reason, the existence of a thing that is created is impossible. It is seen that the universe is possible when the essence of universe is considered without considering the eternal will. Therefore, a state that is possible can be impossible due to an external cause. Similarly, if there is knowledge in God's eternal knowledge that Zayd will die on Saturday morning, with respect to the case of whether there will be a creation of life for Zayd or not, Al-Ghazālī states that the creation of *life* is possible because of its essence, but it is impossible because of immutability and impossibility of God's wisdom for returning to ignorance.<sup>23</sup> Also in the case of Abu Jahl's conversion to Islam, Al-Ghazālī indicates that his believing is not per se impossible, but on the contrary, it is impossible because of an external cause, that is God's wisdom.<sup>24</sup> After all, if something exists in the eternal wisdom and if the eternal wisdom ordains that it will exist so, then that thing will exist in that way.<sup>25</sup>

By following Aristoteles,<sup>26</sup> Aquinas separates possibility and impossibility into three: *The first* is possibility-impossibility in terms of actual and potential ability. For example, humans are capable of walking and while they are able to walk because of this ability, it is impossible for them to fly. *The second* is that possibility or impossibility of something is not dependent on any power. That thing is possible or impossible due to its essence. For instance, two opposite predicates cannot be concurrently attributed to the same matter. For this reason, the same predicate cannot be concurrently contradicted or confirmed, and this state cannot be discussed with reference to God's capability. This is not because of an absence in God's capability, but it is due to the lack of per se possibility of that thing. *The third* is mathematical possibility in the geometric calculations. If we know a square's area, we can calculate the measure of its one side using this information.<sup>27</sup> Based on the discrimination we mentioned, Aquinas comes to a conclusion that God's not doing something results from two reasons that are *will* and *power*. If God did not will something, He cannot do it. Human

<sup>22</sup> Ghazālī, *Mīyār al-ilm fi al-mantik*, 332-333; Id, *Mi'yāru'l-İlm: İlmin Ölçütü*, 524; Id, "İlcām al-avām an-İlmi al-Kalām", *Makāsıd al-falāsifa*, ed. Ahmed Ferid Mezidī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-İlmiyah, 2008), 236; Id, *al-Iqtisād fi al-i'tiqād*, 161-162.

<sup>23</sup> Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fi al-i'tiqād*, 84-85.

<sup>24</sup> Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fi al-i'tiqād*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fi al-i'tiqād*, 175.

<sup>26</sup> Aristoteles, *Metafizik*, 264-265.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Power of God*, trans. Richard Regan (New York: Oxford Universtiy, 2012), 9-10.

beings will happiness by nature. In the same way, divine will cannot will something opposite to divine goodness. Although God has the absolute power, He cannot perform some actions that are done with organs. The reason of God’s not being able to perform such actions is not about the power itself, but it is related to per se possibility. For instance, it is impossible for God to create another being that is equal to Him because the thing that is created will include potentiality and this is against the fact that God is pure act of being. Being actual pure is an attribution that is only peculiar to God and this attribute cannot be credited to other beings.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, from the perspective of Thomas, possibility of something is the possibility in terms of its very essence, and God cannot remove the possibility or impossibility arising from essence of things.<sup>29</sup>

Discussing the issue in detail in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas states that God does not act against the nature of being as a being and lists what God cannot do as eleven items. *First*, God is not capable of acting to remove the essence of something. For example, existence is the opposite of absence. God cannot make something existing and non-existing concurrently. Therefore, God cannot perform contradictory states. *Second*, God cannot gather two contrary predicates simultaneously in the same perspective and on the same subject. *Third*, removing something’s essential attributions of something means removing that thing. For instance, humans are a being composed of soul and body. God cannot create a human without these essential elements. *Fourth*, God cannot do anything against some initial principles of sciences, such as the fact that genus is a predicate for its subspecies, every line that is drawn from the center of a circle is equal and the addition of a triangle’s interior angles equals to two right angles. *Fifth*, God cannot make the past erased because it will lead to a contradictory state. *Sixth*, because God created everything as it is, He cannot do anything that does not comply with the nature of the thing in question. *Seventh*, a being that is created is a caused being, and a caused being cannot be the First Cause. Therefore, God, who is the First Cause, cannot create a being that is like Him. *Eighth*, everything needs God to exist and continue to exist. For that reason, God cannot create other beings that exist per se. *Ninth*, God cannot will the things that he is not capable of doing. Thus, God can will the things that He is capable of doing. *Tenth*, God wills His own essence necessarily, and for this reason, He cannot will His non-existence. *Finally*, God cannot will to do evil, and hence cannot commit a sin.<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen, Aquinas thinks that possible in itself and impossible in itself determine the scope of God’s power extension. In addition to things that are metaphysically impossible and forming logical contradictions, a state that existed in the past cannot be subjected to God’s ability. Even though Aquinas offers an argument that there is no past and future for God, and all times are eternal for Him, and because past and future do not arise an obligation in terms of His acts in *The Power of God*,<sup>31</sup> he highlights the fact that making what occurred not occurred leads to a logical contradiction in *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica*. Accordingly, if Socrates performed the sitting action, the statement “Socrates sat down” is necessarily correct and the statement “Socrates did not sit down” is necessarily wrong. It is impossible that both of these statements are correct at the same time, because making a state that occurred in the past not happened

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *The Power of God*, 17-18.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 1: 146-147.

<sup>30</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2012, 2: 74-76; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1: 146.

<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *The Power of God*, 17.

cannot be subjected to God’s power. However, the impossibility mentioned here is not an impossibility as in the case of resurrecting a dead person. Resurrecting the dead does not include a contradiction and is not a state that is per se impossible. This act is regarded as impossible with reference to power. Therefore, because God has absolute power and the act being mentioned is not per se impossible, resurrecting the dead can be subjected to God’s power.<sup>32</sup>

Although it is accepted by many theists that God has absolute power, the discussions about absolute power focus on its extent. For example, according to Al-Ghazālī, the statement “God is omnipotent” is a customary belief/generally accepted thing (*mashurat/endoxa*). Everyone and the majority accepts such statements such as “Lies are bad, To excruciate an innocent person is bad, It is good to be grateful to the benefactor or To help someone at the point of death is good, Prophets should not be tormented” are accepted by everyone or by the majority. These well-known statements are not certain as the necessary truths that express certainty. Besides being sayings that are heard since childhood, they are also rules that are used to bring order to social life. If these statements are offered to a person, who has not lived in any society and has not received education, it is possible for that person to refuse them. However, if the statement “Two is bigger than one” or similar statements are offered to that person, it is unthinkable that this person refuses this statement, as these statements are necessary. Therefore, some of these customary belief statements might be correct and some might be wrong. The statement “God is omnipotent” is also one of the customary statements. This proposition is accepted as true even though God is not capable of creating His own essence and attributions.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, when we say that God is omniscient” it should be understood that God can know everything that is possible for Him to know. Because God cannot know of a being like Himself.<sup>34</sup>

Al-Ghazālī writes “...when we say that “God is omnipotent”, we cannot see immediately that there might be something over which He did not have power until we realized that He could not create another being like Himself. Then we aware of the error of our assertion. But the true assertion is that “He can do everything that it is possible for Him to do” and there is no conflict in it.”<sup>35</sup>

Customary statements can be considered in terms of proper or improper, not in terms of being truth or falsehood as contradictions. What contradicts with wrong is correct, but the contradiction of customary belief is what is improper. Therefore, there are many things that are improper (shani’) but correct for Al-Ghazālī, and there are many wrongs that are customary beliefs.<sup>36</sup> It may not appear that the proposition “God is omnipotent” includes a contradiction at the first sight, but when this proposition is analyzed, it will be deduced that the proposition “God is omnipotent” contains a contradictory state because it is impossible for God to create another being like Him. This is because a being that is created cannot be God. From this point of view, we can deduce that God’s power extends to things that are possible in itself. As a result, the

<sup>32</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I: 32,147; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 362.

<sup>33</sup> al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad, *Mustasfā: min Ilmi al-Usul*, ed. Hamza b. Zūheyr Hafız (Madinah, s.n., 1413), 150-152; Id, *Mustasfā: İslam Hukuk Metodolojisi*, trans. Yunus Apaydın (Istanbul: Klasik, 2006), 74-75.

<sup>34</sup> Ghazālī, *Maqāşid al-falāsife*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Ghazālī, *Maqāşid al-falāsife*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> Ghazālī, *Maqāşid al-falāsife*, 51.

statement “God can do all things that are possible in itself” does not contain a contradiction in contrast with the proposition “God is omnipotent.”<sup>37</sup> According to my research, Avicenna also mentions the proposition “God is omnipotent” as a customary statement, and without offering a more detailed explanation, he tells that proposition “God is omnipotent to do impossible, and He is omniscient and omnipotent in terms of His assistant.” The one who ignorant of letters is cannot be characterized by the power to perform the art of calligraphy.<sup>38</sup> In my opinion, when Al-Ghazālī says “God is omnipotent in everything that is possible in itself.” he is influenced by Avicenna’s explanations in *as-Shifa*<sup>39</sup> and *Dānišnāmah* and introduced it in a clearer way by improving it.

When Al-Ghazālī discusses the conditions of syllogism in *Mihāk al-nazar fi al-Mantiq*, which he wrote after *Maqāsid al-falāsifa*, he draws attention to the point that to make the syllogism, it should be concepts (tasawur) and propositions which are based on these concepts. Just as a person needs materials like wood and adobe to build a house, s/he needs propositions to create syllogism. The universe is a whole that consists of singular parts. Part’s precedence over the whole is necessary.<sup>40</sup> Al-Ghazālī, who discusses the same matter in *al-Mustasfā*, which is one of his latest works, states that at least two propositions are needed to form the demonstrative knowledge. Therefore, in Al-Ghazālī’s view, requesting evidence without concepts, propositions and assent (tasdiq) is requesting the impossible. This process resembles to the case of a person wanting to write although he is not able to write the letters, or to the case of a person wishing to be a clerk, who writes fine and properly, although he is not able to write a single word. Parts of a whole always precede the whole, which is a necessary state. According to Al-Ghazālī, this state is valid for everything that is united. In brief, just as a person cannot be qualified with fine and proper writing ability without knowing words, the Omnipotent Being cannot be qualified with creating the unified knowledge without singular concepts.<sup>41</sup> In other words, God cannot be qualified with a power to create the propositions and universe, which are composed of parts, as a whole without parts.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Al-Ghazālī says that divine omnipotence can extend to the things possible in itself. Even though Al-Ghazālī mentions philosopher’s ideas in *Maqāsid al-falāsifa*, he holds this opinion both in *Mīyār al-ilm*<sup>43</sup> and *al-Mustasfā*, despite partial discrepancies. Although Al-Ghazālī inherited the idea about God’s omnipotence that he propounded in *Maqāsid al-falāsifa* from Avicenna, it is possible to say that he internalized and even improved this idea.

<sup>37</sup> Ghazālī, *Maqāsid al-falāsife*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Sīnā, *Dānišnāme-i Alāi: Alāi Hikmet Kitabı*, 102-104.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Ghazālī, *Mihāk al-nazar*, 12-13; Ghazālī, *Düşünmede Doğru Yöntem*, 63-64.

<sup>41</sup> Ghazālī, *Mustasfā: Min Ilm al-Usul*, 91.

<sup>42</sup> Ghazālī, *Mihāk al-nazar*, 12-13.

<sup>43</sup> Ghazālī, *Mīyār al-ilm fi al-Mantık*, 187-188.

Aquinas also thinks that although God’s omnipotence is absolute, His power extends to everything that does not contain contradiction. Therefore, according to Aquinas, the expression “God is omnipotent” implies that His power extends to things that are *per se* possible and not contradictory.<sup>44</sup> In his work *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas draws attention to the point that although God’s possession of absolute power is accepted by everyone, the scope of omnipotence’ extension is disputed, and he states that meaning the word *everything* (*omni*) in the proposition “God is omnipotent” contains only the things that are within the bounds of possibility. For this reason, Aquinas clearly states that the statement “God is omnipotent” should be understood as “God is omnipotent in everything that is possible.”<sup>45</sup>

As is seen, Thomas’ explanations about God’s omnipotence share similarities with Al-Ghazālī’s approach, in fact the propositions that Aquinas used show similarities to a large extent with the statements that Al-Ghazālī used in his work *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*, which was translated into Latin in the mid 12th century and which Aquinas gave reference. Instead of continuing his predecessor’s, Anselm<sup>46</sup> who has a voluntarist perspective about God’s omnipotence, Aquinas adopted the idea that God’s not doing something, which is logically impossible, does not harm His absolute power. In my opinion, he obtained this understanding generally from Islamic thought and specifically from Avicenna and Al-Ghazālī and used in his own system. Therefore, as we mentioned earlier in our study, the claim that what is mentioned by like Peterson and Hasker, such as “God’s omnipotence does not extend to logically impossible” can be traced back to Aquinas is invalid because it is a thought accepted by philosophers, such as Avicenna and Al-Ghazālī and it is known by other thinkers in Islamic thought. Consequently, we can easily say that Aquinas thanks was intellectually fed by Avicenna and Al-Ghazālī in this matter introduced that perspective into the western thought.

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<sup>44</sup> Aquinas, *The Power of God*, 19-20.

<sup>45</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1: 145-146.

<sup>46</sup> Anselm, “Why God Became Man”, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, trans. Brian Davies - G.R. Evans (New York: Oxford Universtiy, 1998), 342.

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