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NEITHER CREATED NOR DESTRUCTIBLE: IBN SĪNĀ ON THE ETERNITY OF THE UNIVERSE

Syamsuddin Arif

Abstract

This article discusses Ibn Sīnā's reasons for upholding the eternity of the world in his major philosophical writings and the ensuing heated debate between his detractors (al-Ghazālī, al-Shahrastānī and al-Rāzī) and supporters (al-Ṭūsī and al-Āmidī). I argue that notwithstanding the responses and surrejoinders it had elicited, Ibn Sīnā's position on the issue is indeed coherent and irrefutable, since he distinguishes three modes of eternity, corresponding to the hierarchy of beings which he introduced namely, (i) absolutely eternal (by virtue of itself); (ii) relatively eternal (by virtue of something else); and (iii) not eternal both considered per se as well per aliud. With this distinction he evades both horns of the dilemma: either the universe is eternal or it is not eternal. On Ibn Sīnā's account, therefore, the universe is both eternal and not eternal. It is eternal because the efficient cause that necessitates and sustains its existence is eternal, but also not eternal in view of its essential contingency.

Keywords: Ibn Sina, Avicenna, Falsafa, Islamic Philosophy, Cosmology, Eternity, Creation, Emanation

Introduction

Few thinkers exerted as much influence on the shape of medieval philosophy as Ibn Sīnā (also known in Latin as Avicenna, who died in Hamedan in 428 AH/ 1037 CE). Along with al-Fārābī, he rejected the traditional doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and adopted the Neoplatonic emanationist cosmology, arguing that the universe is not created, rather it is a necessary natural ‘overflow’ of the divine One.¹ This emanation theory of Ibn Sīnā, less a statement of fact than a convenient metaphor though it seems, had been misinterpreted and rebuffed as it involves several difficulties. First, it entails the eternity of the universe. Second, it seems to imply that God and the universe co-exist eternally and are of the same ontological status. Third, it is tantamount to saying that the universe is identical with God in that they both have the same nature, rendering them hardly distinguishable.

Ibn Sīnā does affirm the first implication, and also defends it, albeit with some qualification: not that the universe has no beginning at all; it did begin, but neither ‘in time’ nor ‘out of nothing’. As for the second and third implications, Ibn Sīnā rejects them categorically and even anticipates them by working out his coherently argued metaphysics of being and by drawing up his famous distinction between essence and existence. In what follows we will be largely preoccupied by various arguments for and against the eternity thesis offered by Ibn Sīnā and his critics.

Impossibility of Creation Out of Nothing

Ibn Sīnā’s belief that the universe is eternal follows from his rejection of temporal creation and coming into existence (*hudūth*) ‘out of nothing’ which, in his view, leads to a number of absurd

¹ Prior to the advent of Neo-platonic philosophy, the Greeks did not conceive of a universal cause of the totality of existence, but instead remained at the level of thought governed by the Pre-socratic dictum that “nothing can come from what is not.” The world was considered eternal because it is uncaused. The work of Plotinus (ca. 205-270) changed all of this. He introduced the idea of metaphysical causality for the first time in his doctrine of emanation, saying that the world is eternal because it necessarily emanates from the One in an eternal dependency relationship.

logical consequences. First of all, to say that God created the universe after it was not would be to contradict the assertion that God is changeless; for if He first allowed there to be no universe, and then made it exist, this means He would have had to change His mind or will; but how can God change His will if He is changeless and His will eternal? As Ibn Sīnā puts it:

The principle of the universe (*mabda' al-kull*) is a Being whose existence is necessary. Everything proceeds from the Necessary Being necessarily; for if not [necessarily], it would have been due to the emergence in Him of something that would change His state (*ḥāl*), and He would thus no longer become the Necessary Being in every aspect. Even if we assume that that new state, e.g. His will, originates (*ḥadatha*) not in His essence, but rather apart from it, we can still legitimately speak of change of state [i.e., from not having such a will to having one]; yet one may ask: 'Did it occur by volition or by nature or due to something else?' In any case—whether it originates in His essence or not, or rather apart from His essence²— the problem remains. For if it originated in His essence, then it would follow that His essence is changing (*kāna dhātuḥu mutaghayyiran*). However, [this is not the case] as we maintain that the Necessary Being is necessary in all aspects.³ Also, if it is clear that origination of something involves the occurrence [or change] of state in the Principle [namely, God], then it must have occurred either naturally or accidentally — be it by volition or

² Ibn Sīnā here seems to refer to the Karrāmiyyah of the Murji'ites (followers of Muḥammad b. al-Karrām, d. 868), who believed in a created will originated in the essence of God, and to the Mu'tazilite Abū al-Hudhayl (d. 841), who believed in a will created apart from God. See al-Baghdādī (d. 1037), *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, ed. M. M. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyyah, 1998), 217, line 11; and al-'Ash'arī (d. 935), *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1929-30; 3rd ed., Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1980), 52 and 189-190.

³ *Shifā' il-lāhiyyāt*, 376 (IX.1.10; these refer to *maqālah*, *faṣl*, and line respectively on the page cited in Anawati's ed.)

not, since it surely was neither by coercion nor by coincidence. Now, if it occurred naturally, then [God's] nature has changed; and if accidentally, [His] accident has.⁴

Moreover, if it is admitted that God's eternal will is already a sufficient condition or cause for the universe existing, then it must follow that the universe is not created but has existed without beginning; for to say that the universe was not created earlier because God did not will its existence earlier would imply that God's will, which serves as the condition for the universe's creation at a particular moment of time, is originated, that is, not eternal. But a sufficient condition like God's eternal will, on Ibn Sīnā's account, cannot delay its effect, so that the universe would come into existence once it is willed and, consequently, creation in time would represent the delay of effect. Arguably of course, a delay can occur if there is an intervening obstacle, but to imagine such an obstacle in God's case would be to deny His omnipotence. Thus, from the doctrine of creation which asserts that God created the world at a definite moment in the past at least three problems arise. First, if there was enough reason for the universe to be created or to begin at some given time, then surely there must be enough reason too for it to begin or be brought into existence sometime earlier. Therefore, the universe, Ibn Sīnā insists, could not have proceeded from God in time, on the grounds that there is no adequate explanation why it should proceed at a certain point of time and not sooner or later (*falima lam yūjad qablu?*). Secondly, the doctrine leads to the absurd assumption that God would have to have been idle (*kāna al-ta'aṭṭul 'an al-fi'l ḥālahu*) before He created the universe.⁵ Finally, it would amount to denial of God's omnipotence. In Ibn Sīnā's words:

If it [i.e. the change of state] occurs voluntarily—
regardless of the volition being intrinsic or not— then

⁴ Ibid., 378 (XI.1.10-13).

⁵ Ibid., 377 (IX.1.5). It is interesting to note, however, that the idleness argument might be used in either of two opposite directions: to argue against as well as in favor of creation. For God would be left with nothing to do if the universe is uncreated; just as He would be idle before the creation if he did create the world.

we shall argue thus: the object of volition (*al-murād*) could either be the act of creation itself or else represents a certain purpose and benefit. If the former is intended, why then did not He act earlier? Do you think He only deems it fitting [to create the universe] now? Or did it happen just at the right time? Or perhaps He can only make it now (*aw qadara 'alayhi al-āna*)? In any case, one cannot dismiss this kind of questions as being simply absurd; for they keep coming all the time and will always have to be asked. On the other hand, if [we assume that God's will is] after a certain end or benefit [this is not true either]; for obviously something whose existence as well as its non-existence does not make any difference to something else is devoid of any purpose whereas something whose existence for something else is better [than its non-existence] is beneficial. But as a matter of fact, the First is perfect in His essence (*kāmil al-dhāt*) such that He need not seek benefit from anything.⁶

Again, supposing that the universe is created and comes to be after it was not, one might ask what it is that has led God to do what He did. But to suggest that something could have motivated Him to create would mean to imply change in God's nature and thus amount to contradiction, since God, being most perfect and self-sufficient, is supposed to be eternal and changeless. In other words, the notion of creation necessarily presupposes and leads us to assume the existence of a trigger or preponderator (*murajjih*), unless we are willing to accept that a changeless God would never be able to bring the universe into existence. Ibn Sīnā's argument runs as follows:

For something contingent which is possible to be or not to be [such as the universe] would never be actualized nor receive existence had there been no cause. Since the essence which is its Cause [namely, God] is eternally changeless (*kamā kānat*), having no inclination (*lā tatarajjah*) at all, for nothing obliges Him to tip the

⁶ *Shifā': Ilāhiyyāt*, 378 (IX.1.14-15) - 379 (IX.1.1-4).

scales in favour of an action over the other [that is: to create or not to create], nor could there have been any interest, benefit, etc. [on God's part], there must be some trigger in [His] essence on the assumption that it is the Efficient Cause.⁷

Here Ibn Sīnā is speaking in terms of potentiality and actuality as well as in terms of contingency and necessity. As we shall see in the following section, Ibn Sīnā asserts that unlike God who cannot not exist—hence the term “Necessary Being”—and whose existence is always actual (*bi al-fi'l*), the universe, in sharp contrast, depends for its existence upon its cause—hence “contingent”—and is sheer potentiality prior to its coming into actual existence in that it may or may not exist. That is to say, had God not tipped the scales in favor of existence, the universe, indeed every thing, would never have had the chance to exist in reality. In other words, nothing could exist were God not to exist also, and without God the possible things, which only require some cause or agent to bring them to existence, would not be actualized and so in that sense could be thought of as impossible.

To the first intellect it is obvious that the tipping of balance (*tarajjuh*) of one of the two extremities of the possibility of anything that exists after it has not is due to a certain thing or a cause, even though the human mind might ignore this obvious fact and resort instead to other kinds of proof. This preponderation (*tarjīh*) and determination (*takhṣīṣ*) resulting from that thing [i.e. cause] occurs either after being already necessitated by the cause, or without yet being necessitated, but is just made possible by it in the realm of possibility, since this tipping of balance is in no way prevented from being produced by it [i.e. the cause]. Thus we return to the original state of seeking the cause of preponderation once again, and to this, there will be no end. Therefore

⁷ Ibid., 377 (IX.1.12-17).

the truth is that the tipping of the scales is necessitated by the cause.⁸

Argument from Causal Efficacy

Ibn Sīnā's eternity thesis also rests on his theory of necessitarian causality. According to him, the relation between cause and effect is one of necessary entailment, both logically and ontologically, which means (1) that cause cannot exist without effect nor effect without cause (*al-'ilal ma'a al-ma'lūlāt*)⁹ and (2) that the connection of cause-effect pairs in the empirical world is a result of its own necessity (*wājib ḍarūrah*).¹⁰ The first point holds true in the case of efficient cause, by which Ibn Sīnā means "not only the principle of motion (*mabda' al-taḥrīk*, i.e. prime mover), as the naturalists do, but also the principle of and bestower of existence (*mabda' al-wujūd wa muḥīdih*) as in the case of God with respect to the universe."¹¹ It seems that only in this context can Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of necessary causation be properly understood; hence God and the universe as His effect suggest the model for the necessary relation between cause and effect. In such a model God is the supreme efficient cause, but also the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of the universe, the effect. The effect necessarily follows precisely because in God's case the causal conditions are ideal in that there is and can be no deterrent factor or impediment to His efficacy. Thus God necessitates the universe's existence and since God, the necessitating cause, is eternal, the universe, the necessitated effect, is eternal too. It also follows that the efficient cause and its effect co-exist necessarily, the universe being posterior to God essentially but not temporally, and that the former will continue to exist so long as the latter does (*fā in dāmat [al-'illah] awjabat al-ma'lūl dā'iman*).¹²

Ibn Sīnā does not deny the fact that some causes indeed precede their effects in time, but these are accidental (*bi al-'arād*),

⁸ *Ishārāt: Ilāhiyyāt*, 525-6.

⁹ *Shifā': Ilāhiyyāt*, 265 (VI.2.5)

¹⁰ *Shifā': Ilāhiyyāt*, 265 (VI.2.7-8).

¹¹ *Shifā': Ilāhiyyāt*, 257 (VI.1.13-14).

¹² *Shifā': Ilāhiyyāt*, 373 (IX.1.17).

not real or essential causes.¹³ For him, every essential, proximate cause in the realm of nature, provided all conditions including the absence of impediments are fulfilled, necessitates its effect and co-exists with it. To use his own example, the hand's movement that turns a key, necessitates the latter's movement and co-exists with it.¹⁴ Admittedly this does not always hold, especially in the terrestrial realm, where the relation between cause and effect is not always mutual, unless certain conditions peculiar to the sublunary world of generation and corruption have obtained. It should be clear, therefore, that if Ibn Sīnā insists on necessary entailment, he is referring not so much to the accidental cause as to the essential one (*al-'illah al-dhātīyyah*); and it is the latter that co-exists with its effect. But why is Ibn Sīnā so insistent on the co-existence of efficient cause and its effect? The answer, as one might expect, is rooted in his denial of creation *ex nihilo*. If the universe's existence is preceded by sheer nothingness or privation (*'adam*), then God's relation (*ta'alluq*) to this privation will have to be explained. For on the assumption of creation it would follow that God can neither act on that privation nor can He create it, which is absurd. Indeed to say that the universe came into existence after non-existence would imply that God was somehow related either to the prior privation, or to the existent or to both. Since He cannot be related to privation, for then He would have no efficacy, He cannot be related to both privation and existence. Thus, given the fact that He is eternal and can only be related to the existent, God must be related to an eternal existent, and the relation of God to the existent, therefore, is existence (*fabaqiya an yakūn ta'alluq min haythu huwa hādha al-wujūd*).¹⁵ Now if we suppose the existent permanent, then the relation, existence, is permanent (*kā'in dā'iman*). And if the relation between the agent and creation is permanent, then the agent is 'so much more the agent' (*af'al*) and the more efficacious. In other words, a God who sustains an eternal world is better or is more omnipotent than one who creates a world after privation. Furthermore, even if for the sake of argument we assume that here a special kind of existent is meant, namely, one that

¹³ *Shifā':Ilāhiyyāt*, 265 (VI.2.7-11).

¹⁴ *Shifā':Ilāhiyyāt*, 165 (IV.1.5-10).

¹⁵ *Ishārāt: Ilāhiyyāt*, 493.

is preceded by privation, the supposition that it is created leads to an absurd conclusion. For, if God creates this existent, He must create the prior privation, since these two are inseparable. But this is impossible; God does not create privation, as if privation is something existent.¹⁶

Another difficulty with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* has a great deal to do with the nature of time in terms of ‘before’ (priority) and ‘after’ (posteriority), for those who uphold the doctrine affirm the eternity of God as well as His priority to the universe. But these two theses, contrary to what one might expect, lead to inevitable consequences: if God is eternal, then the universe must be eternal. This corollary follows from the assertion that God’s priority to the universe is essential, not temporal, which entails that God and the universe co-exist and are simultaneous in time (*humā ma’an fī al-zamān aw al-dahr*).¹⁷ For it would be contradictory to affirm the eternity of the one and the temporal finitude of the other, while affirming that both are simultaneous, the cause being prior to its effect not in time, but in essence or ontologically. Just what is meant by ‘essential or ontological priority’? According to Ibn Sīnā, an event *C* is ‘temporally’ prior to event *E* if the former precedes, that is, occurs before and is followed by the latter, such that a temporal gap exists between the two, as in the case of the father’s priority to the son, in which the former is but accidental and preparatory cause. As for ontological priority Ibn Sīnā distinguishes two types. The first is the type where the prior (*mutaqaddim*) in a way represents a condition for the existence of the posterior (*muta’akhhir*) but does not necessitate it. He gives as an example the number “one”, which is a condition for the ensuing multitude (*kathrah*), and yet does not necessitate the latter’s existence.¹⁸ The second type represents the situation where the prior is both the necessary condition and necessitating cause for the existence of the posterior, its effect, such

¹⁶ See *Ishārāt: Ilāhiyyāt*, 485-92 = *Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*, ed. Jacob Forget (Leiden: E J. Brill, 1892), 148-50. Cf. *Shifā’: Ilāhiyyāt*, 260 (VI.1.12-17) - 261 (VI.1.1-4). See also Michael E. Marmura, “The Conflict over the World’s Pre-eternity in the *Tahāfuts* of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd,” (Phd dissertation, University of Michigan, 1959), 16-17.

¹⁷ *Shifā’: Ilāhiyyāt*, 167 (IV.1.1-3).

¹⁸ *Shifā’: Ilāhiyyāt*, 164 (IV.1.12-17).

that the existence of the former entails that of the latter (*dhālik al-awwal mahmā wujīda lazima wujūduhu an yakūna ‘illah liwujūbi wujūd al-thānī*).¹⁹ Consider for instance, he says, the phenomenal simultaneity of movement of both the hand and the key, despite the obvious fact that the latter’s movement is but an effect which is posterior to and depends upon its cause, the hand’s movement.²⁰ Such is, on Ibn Sīnā’s account, the priority of God to the universe and hence the corollary that, being simultaneous, both are eternal.

Admittedly, the notion of simultaneity and mutual or reciprocal relation of efficient cause and its effect is not immune to criticism. As we have seen earlier, one possible objection to this notion, as Ibn Sīnā puts it, runs as follows: if two things or events are said to be mutually implied and reciprocally related—such that if one exists, the other exists, and that if one ceases to exist, the other also ceases to exist—then we cannot claim that one is the cause, the other the effect, or vice versa; that is to say, neither can be the cause or the effect, since neither has the better claim to be the cause in existence than the other.²¹ In his reply Ibn Sīnā, after elaborating the semantic nuances of the word “*idhā*” (if; whenever), contends that it is not simultaneity (*ma‘iyyah*) that rendered one of the two necessarily the cause, and this would mean that neither has the better claim to be the cause than the other since with respect to simultaneity they are equal. Rather, what rendered one the cause and the other the effect and thus made them differ is this: since it is assumed that the existence of either is not necessitated by the other (*lam yajib wujūduhu bi al-ākhar*), therefore it is a being necessarily existent by virtue of itself, albeit *with* the other; whereas in the case of the second, we have posited that its existence is not only concomitant with the other, but also by virtue of the other, not *per se*.²² No doubt Ibn Sīnā is referring here to God, the efficient cause, and the universe, His concomitant effect.

¹⁹ *Shifā’*: *Ilāhiyyāt*, 165 (IV.1.2-4).

²⁰ *Shifā’*: *Ilāhiyyāt*, 165 (IV.1.4-10).

²¹ *Shifā’*: *Ilāhiyyāt*, 167 (IV.1.6-8).

²² *Shifā’*: *Ilāhiyyāt*, 169 (IV.1.9-13).

Argument from Time

Having established that God's priority to the universe can only be essential and not temporal—which implies co-existence of the two, so that if one is eternal, the other must also be eternal, Ibn Sīnā works out another argument to strengthen his thesis, this time from the nature of time and yet on the basis of the same premise conceded by the advocates and opponents of creationism alike, that God is eternal. A kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, it runs as follows: if we suppose that God's priority is temporal, then God, who is eternal, would precede the universe by an infinite time, but an infinite time (*zamān mumtadd fī al-māqāt bilā nihāyah*)²³ implies eternity of the universe—a conclusion the creationists would never allow. Therefore, the opposite is true, namely, God's priority is essential. But why does an infinite time imply eternity of the universe? The answer to this lies in Ibn Sīnā's conviction that time follows motion (*al-zamān tābi' li al-ḥarakah*)²⁴ and that time is but a measure of motion. Now since motion—in the broadest of the word—is eternal, according to him, it follows that time is eternal. In his own words:

What is the nature of the First's [namely God's] priority (*yasbiqū*) to His originated acts? Is it essential or temporal? If merely essential [that is, by definition alone] then the relation would be like that of the number 1 being prior to 2. On the other hand, if [God and His effect were said to be] simultaneous such as the movement of two different things [one being concomitant with the other], both the Eternal [i.e. God] and the acts or His products are originated (*muḥdathayn*). Now, if God's priority is not only essential but also temporal, then we must concede that He existed alone while nothing else was—neither the universe nor motion, taking the word “there existed (*kāna*)” here to refer to something which once existed and is no longer now, so that there was a being (*kawn*) in the past before creation began and such a being had

²³ *Mabda'*, 46.

²⁴ *Shifā' ilāhiyyāt*, 375 (IX.1.6)

[at a certain point] come to an end (*mutanāhin*). However, this would mean that there had existed a time before motion and time existed, since the past [that is, a period of time that has elapsed] is either by itself (essential) or by the time (temporal); if essential, then it is time; and if temporal, then it is motion together with what is in it and with it. But this is absurd.²⁵

The conclusion drawn is that God's priority to the universe can only be essential or ontological, not temporal. Also it follows that the universe, being the effect of God's eternal causal efficacy, is therefore eternal. It should be borne in mind, however, that the term 'motion' is used in this context to refer to God's eternal state of activity (*fā'iliyyah*) which obviously knows no beginning and no end. As the measure of the universe's eternal existence, accompanying it in nature and encompassing it, time is, therefore, eternal in that, like the universe, it has always existed and had no beginning, despite being essentially or ontologically posterior to and dependent upon God. For anyone assuming an absolute beginning of time cannot avoid recognizing a prior time. One could always, as Ibn Sīnā remarks, speak of the period before time and when there was not yet time (*yalzamuhum an yaḍa'ū waqtan qabla waqtin bilā nihāyah*).²⁶ Indeed, even the terms 'before' and 'when' already imply time, so that time would, on creationists' account, have already existed before the assumed beginning.

Argument from Motion

The above argument from time given to support the eternity thesis actually rests on the eternity of motion to which Ibn Sīnā adduces another argument. It is to be noted that when he argues for the eternity of motion (*dawām al-ḥarakah*)²⁷ Ibn Sīnā is referring not so much to the terrestrial world of generation and corruption as to the celestial realm, where motion appears to be regular and circular, and therefore eternal. For according to him, each celestial sphere is

²⁵ *Mabda'*, 44; cf. *Shifā':Ilāhiyyāt*, 379 (IX.1.4-12).

²⁶ *Mabda'*, 44.

²⁷ *Mabda'*, 38-40.

moved by its soul (*nafs*), which is the proximate principle of its motion. This celestial soul, he tells us, is constantly undergoing renewal of form and volition (*mutajaddidat al-taṣawwur wa al-irādah*), possessing the power of estimation (*mutawahhimah*) and perception as well as desire for particulars.²⁸ It is to the celestial sphere like the animal soul is to ourselves, and its mode of intellection resembles that of our practical reason. Nevertheless, the motion of all spheres is ultimately caused by the first mover (*al-muḥarrīk al-awwal*) or the mover of all movers (*muḥarrīk al-muḥarrīk*) which, being immovable and immutable, acts through intermediaries. Its act is changeless, necessary, and devoid of any benefit. As a matter of fact, it is the very aim and ultimate purpose to which all that is in motion seeks to attain.²⁹ The principle of the first motion (*mabda' al-ḥarakah al-awwaliyyah*),³⁰ this immaterial and infinite power sustains the circular motion (*al-ḥarakah al-mustadīrah*) of the spheres, the motion being eternal in that it is not originated in time (*laysat mutakawwinah takawwunan zamāniyyan*),³¹ since it is by definition prior to time. Several reasons are offered by Ibn Sīnā to account for the eternal motion of celestial spheres. First of all, unlike terrestrial things that are originated, changing and passing away, the celestial spheres are not corruptible since they are not composed of matter and form. Secondly, their motion, unlike that of terrestrial things, is not inherent in them, but rather it is incidental due to their love of God and their desire to attain perfection and become like Him as much as possible (*al-tashabbuh bih bi miqdār al-imbān*), a state of affair which implies perfect actuality with no potentiality. They are not even aware of their motion for they are simply lost in the love of their Beloved (*ma'shūq*). Finally, thanks to their love-driven motion, God continually bestows upon them renewed life³² and will by virtue of

²⁸ *Shifā' Ilāhiyyāt*, 386 (IX.2.14-16).

²⁹ *Shifā' Ilāhiyyāt*, 387 (IX.2.4-13).

³⁰ *Shifā' Ilāhiyyāt*, 373 (IX.1.13-14).

³¹ *Shifā' Ilāhiyyāt*, 373 (IX.1.14).

³² Literally “form” (*ṣūrah*), which in this context seems to refer to *nafs*, that is, *ṣūrah* in its sixth sense. See *Fī al-Hudūd* in *Tis' Rasā'il* (Cairo: Maṭba'ah Hindiyyah, 1908), 83 = *Kitāb al-Hudūd*, ed. A.-M. Goichon (Cairo, 1963), repr. in *Rasā'il Ibn Sīnā*, 93.

which they are rendered eternal (*ḥayyījib al-baqā' al-abadiyy*), made permanent and their motion sustained (*tamma tashabbuhuhu bi al-thabāt wa bi al-ḥarakah*).³³

On closer examination, however, the argument for eternity from divine eternal motion turns out to be grounded on the axiomatic assumption that an infinite regress of causes is impossible. In more general terms it is argued that everything in motion is moved by something, the term 'motion' being taken as equivalent to change whereby something potential is actualized or brought into existence.³⁴ Now unless we allow an infinite regress in the chain of movers, the existence of a first unmoved mover and a first cause must be admitted. No doubt, in this context it is crucial to make a clear distinction between an imaginably linear series of events stretching back to the past and a vertical hierarchy of causes, agents or movers in which a subordinate member is here and now ontologically dependent on the causal activity of a higher member. In the former case the series can be infinite, for one member may after some time cease to be dependent upon its proximate precedent and so forth, whereas in the latter case an infinite regress is impossible. Surely the word "first" does not and is never intended to mean first in the temporal or chronological order, but first in essence and supreme in ontological order. The corollary drawn from these considerations is that since God, the first mover and mover of all movers, as well as His motive act is eternal, the universe must be eternal. Motion, like time, is considered eternal because it cannot have an absolute beginning. For if it did have, and the universe is assumed to be originated, then its origination would have constituted a motion prior to the supposed absolutely first motion, which is absurd. Similarly, if motion would have had a beginning, and the universe is assumed to be eternal in that it has existed in eternal state of rest before starting to move, then both the process whereby the universe was set in its state of rest as well as the change—initiated by the first motion—in the relationship between the universe and the cause of its motion

³³ *Shifā' il-Ilāhiyyāt*, 389 (IX.2.4-9).

³⁴ See *Fī al-Hudūd in Tis' Rasā'il*, 91 = *Kitāb al-Hudūd in Rasā'il Ibn Sīnā*, 105, where *al-ḥarakah* is defined as *kamāl awwal limā bi al-quwwah and khurūj min al-quwwah ilā al-fi'l*.

would also have constituted a motion prior to the supposed absolutely first motion, which is equally absurd.³⁵ Thus if motion ever had a beginning, it began when the first mover began, but the latter never began and so did the former. In other words, unless God is not eternal, the universe must be eternal. As we can see, this argument is but a variant of cosmological argument from efficient first cause, taking the term “immovable prime mover” as synonymous with the “First Uncaused Cause.”

Criticism and Response

It is hardly surprising that many found Ibn Sīnā’s theses unorthodox if altogether irreligious, and so subjected them to severe criticisms. In what follows, however, we shall confine ourselves to considering the objections against Ibn Sīnā’s position raised by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), and al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d. 1210). Al-Ghazālī devotes two chapters of his celebrated *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* to the question of eternity, in which he attempts to demonstrate how the philosophers (notably al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā) arguably fail to prove their theses that the universe is eternal *a parte ante* (*qadīm azalī*) and *a parte post* (*abadī*). He begins by countering the standard charge that the theory of creation *ex nihilo* entails untenable absurdities, namely, all such corollaries as the need for a trigger or determinant (*murajjih*), specifier (*mumayyiz*) or particularizer (*mukhaṣṣiṣ*), the ‘Why not earlier?’ question, the implied change and defect in God’s eternal will and nature, and the implied existence of a time before time prior to creation.³⁶ It would be superfluous to restate and examine al-Ghazālī’s arguments in close detail, since it has been a subject of numerous studies,³⁷ but suffice it here to underscore and

³⁵ For an elaborate analysis, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 17-24 and 237-80.

³⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 48-73 (Bouyges-Fakhry) = 89-117 (S. Dunyā) = 12-37 (Marmura).

³⁷ To cite but a few: Michael E. Marmura, “The Conflict over the World’s Pre-eternity in the *Tahāfuts* of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd,” Ph.D. diss. University of Michigan, 1959; Husam M. Alousi, *The Problem of Creation in Islamic Thought* (Baghdad: National Printing and Publishing Co., 1968) = idem., *‘iwār bayn al-Falāsifah wa al-Mutakallimīn* (Baghdād: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa al-‘Ilm, 1986);

evaluate his major points. First, one should keep in mind al-Ghazālī's summary of his own views on the issue: "Upon verification, [our] reply is that all hypothetical situations which they [i.e. the philosophers] have assumed (*taqdīr al-imbānāt*) and brought up [in this debate] are non-sense. One has but to accept that God, exalted be He, is eternal and omnipotent. Nothing can prevent Him from acting whenever He wishes. This consideration does not necessarily entail affirmation of infinite time, as the case may be when [our] confused imagination attributes to Him something [impossible]." ³⁸ As this statement makes clear, al-Ghazālī's refutation of the eternity thesis derives from his uncompromising religious belief in the *absolute* omnipotence of God, who acts by will and choice, rather than by necessity, and whose every aspect is by no means and in no way comparable to that of human beings. For al-Ghazālī, what our mind might rule out as impossible in our case are not necessarily impossible for God, and it is therefore a grave error and invalid analogy to compare God's will and determination with ours (*al-istib'ād wa al-tamthīl bi 'azminā wa irādatinā fahuwa fāsīd*). ³⁹

Indeed, the dispute between al-Ghazālī and the philosophers, as Marmura aptly observes, is not so much a conflict of methods as that of irreconcilable theological and metaphysical premises. While they both appeal to rational proofs, each party in the dispute in fact argues from a set of assumptions different and contrary to the other. ⁴⁰ For al-Ghazālī it is a blasphemy to say that God acts by necessity of His own nature, since it would not only imply a limitation on God that deprives Him of will, freedom and choice, but it also makes of God an inanimate being. For only the inanimate is said to act by the necessities in their nature and not through volition, in contrast to living beings whose act presupposes will and knowledge, by virtue of which they are called agent (*fā'il*). ⁴¹ The philosophers, on the other

Lenn Evans Goodman, "Ghazālī's Argument from Creation," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 2 (1971): 67-85 (Part I) and 168-88 (Part II); Richard C. Dales, *Medieval Discussions of the Eternity of the World* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990).

³⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 73 (Bouyges-Fakhry) = 117 (S. Dunyā) = 39 (Marmura). Translation is my own, unless indicated otherwise.

³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 53 (Bouyges-Fakhry) = 98 (S. Dunyā) = 17 (Marmura).

⁴⁰ Marmura, *The Conflict*, viii.

⁴¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 91 (Bouyges-Fakhry) = 136 (S. Dunyā) = 58 (Marmura).

hand, argue from purely rational conception of God, insisting on His being necessarily and eternally unique, changeless and active. They seek to avoid both materialist atheism and anthropomorphic deism. For them it is inconceivable that God should ever stop ‘acting’ or cease to be the ‘agent’, the efficient cause and necessary condition for the existence of the universe. God is always *in actu*—not in the temporal sense of ‘always’ but ontologically, which means that He cannot fail ever ‘to act’, to bestow existence or to cause to exist and sustain the existence, since nothing could prevent His ‘act’, not then, not now, never.⁴² It is to understand Ibn Sīnā’s notion of divine necessity in these terms that critics seem to fail.

Apart from purely theological considerations, there are two points in al-Ghazālī’s refutation that deserve close examination: first, his rejection of necessary causation, and second, his conception of time. While accepting the Aristotelian definition of time as a measure of motion, al-Ghazālī rejects the assumption that time, like motion, is eternal. For him time is originated and created (*al-zamān ḥādith wa makhlūq*)⁴³ which means that there was no time before time and creation, that is, when God was alone and nothing else existed. Time started when creation began; time, like the universe, is created and finite. But then, as Ibn Sīnā insists, even the term ‘when’ (in the proposition “when God was alone and nothing else existed”) implies time—at least a time when creation had yet to begin, and hence a time prior to time, which is absurd. Al-Ghazālī is well aware of the absurdities involved and is quick to admit that the problem cannot be settled through the testimony of human language. His proposal is that we can recast the statement that God preceded or existed before creation in the form: “God was, without a universe and without time, then was, with a universe and time” (*kāna wa lā ‘ālam, thumma kāna wa ma’ahu ‘ālam*), thereby avoiding the nasty implication of a time before time and creation. Thus al-Ghazālī does not deny that God is prior to the universe essentially rather than temporally; what he does deny is the corollary that time is both eternal and infinite. By ‘priority’, he says, we simply mean His being in existence alone

⁴² See *Mabda’*, 76-7.

⁴³ Al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 66 (Bouyges-Fakhry) = 110 (S. Dunyā) = 31 (Marmura).

(*infirāduhu bi al-wujūd*).⁴⁴ Therefore, from al-Ghazālī's standpoint, one can always say that a certain moment was the first 'now' of time, namely the moment when the created universe began to move. To say that there was no time before the universe existed but God was even 'then', does not imply that God exists in time, so he argues. Nor is it impossible, he believes, to speak of 'before' without implying the existence of time before there was time. To the philosophers, however, this does not seem to be a legitimate way of speaking, for upon careful reflection it still involves equivocation and contradiction. In addition to the above argument, al-Ghazālī also invokes the analogy between temporal (*bu'd zamānī*) and spatial extension (*bu'd makānī*) to disprove the infinity and eternity of time, arguing that just as space is universally acknowledged to have a terminus beyond which there is no space, so too may time have a beginning before which there was no time. And just as an actual infinite space is impossible, that is, there is no empty space (*khalā*) beyond this universe, so is there no actual pre-existent, eternal time, even though our imagination (*wahm*) may insist on 'supposing' such infinite extensions.⁴⁵ To put it in other words, if it makes sense to talk about a finite space and deny the existence of void, it should not be meaningless to speak of a finite time either.

Like al-Ghazālī before him, al-Shahrastānī also composed a special treatise in order to 'combat' the philosophers. He focusses on two major issues that he assumed to lie at the basis of Ibn Sīnā's doctrine of eternity: namely, the notion of infinity; and secondly, the meaning of priority, posteriority and simultaneity. According to al-Shahrastānī, most disagreements and conflicting views among scholars arise from equivocality of terms (*ishtirāk al-alfā*) and ambiguity of expressions. Consider, he says, Ibn Sīnā's misleading statement that 'the universe exists by virtue of God's existence' (*al-'ālam mawjūd bi wujūdih*), which would be less objectionable had it been put in this way: 'the universe exists due to God's bringing it into existence' (*al-'ālam mawjūd bi t̄jādih*). Indeed, according to al-Shahrastānī, Ibn Sīnā has not made himself clear when he asserts

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See Al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 67-70 (Bouyges-Fakhry) = 111-14 (S. Dunyā) = 32-6 (Marmura).

that the universe ‘exists perpetually by virtue of God’s perpetuity’ (*dā’im al-wujūd bi dawāmih*). Because the term ‘perpetuity’ he used is equivocal, it gives the impression that God and the universe are co-eternal, which is not true; God’s perpetuity is far superior than that of the universe, the former is essential and necessary, whereas the latter is temporal and contingent.⁴⁶ This objection is answered by al-Ṭūsī, who argues that the term *dawām* as used by Ibn Sīnā is not equivocal; it can never be understood without implying the existence of time, real or conceptual, and hence it is not applicable to God and used only in reference to the universe. Moreover, al-Shahrastānī is off the mark when he says that the universe is said to exist perpetually ‘with the continuousness of time for it’ (*bi istimrār al-zamān ‘alayh*). For time is continuously concomitant with something else and in fact it is part of the universe. How then, al-Ṭūsī is prompted to ask, can time continue with [only] some part of its own *raison d’être*, the universe? How can time continue with itself or, even worse, with something whose very existence is *in* time and *with* time alike? For time presupposes and implies the existence of the universe, its cause, without which it would not exist.⁴⁷

Turning to the problem of infinity, al-Shahrastānī answers the eternity argument by explaining that any implication of time prior to the universe and its creation is no more than ‘an imaginary supposition’ (*taqdīr khayālī*), like the supposition of an empty space or void beyond the universe.⁴⁸ This is because whenever our imagination forms a concept, reason can always warrant the supposition of it (*al-wahm yuṣawwir wa al-‘aql yuqaddir*).⁴⁹ However, al-Shahrastānī would insist, merely imagining that there is a void beyond the universe does not establish that an empty space exists in actuality, and by the same token, merely imagining that time

⁴⁶ Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Muṣāra‘at al-Falāsifah*, ed. Suhayr M. Mukhtār (Cairo, 1976), 104-5; repr. in (together with) Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Muṣāri‘ al-Muṣāri‘*, ed. Asan al-Mu‘izzī (Qum: Maṭba‘at al-Khayyām, 1984); al-Shahrastānī, *Struggling with the Philosophers: A Refutation of Ibn Sīnā’s Metaphysics*, ed. and transl. Wilferd Madelung and Toby Mayer (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 100 (Ar.) and 79 (Engl.).

⁴⁷ Al-Ṭūsī, *Muṣāri‘*, 156.

⁴⁸ Al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, 52.

⁴⁹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Muṣāra‘at*, 104 (Madelung) and 82 (trans.) = 107 (Mukhtār).

existed prior to the universe does not establish that such a time truly existed. For such terms as ‘prior’ or ‘before’ in this context do not have a genuine reference or concrete extramental existence.

It proves to be a real ‘struggle’ for al-Shahrastānī when he deals with the notions of priority, posteriority and simultaneity. As we noted earlier, Ibn Sīnā has put the creationists in a dilemma; they will have to affirm either God precedes the universe ‘in time’ (*bi al-zamān*) or not; they will have to decide whether or not the words ‘precedes’, ‘before’ or ‘prior’ are used to denote temporality, time-boundness and being-in-time. As we know, the first alternative is ruled out as impossible, since it leads to the absurdities discussed above. The creationists are thus left with the other horn of the dilemma; God must be prior to the universe essentially, that is, in essence, in being, in existence, ontologically (*bi al-dhāt*). To accept this second alternative, however, would be to swallow the anathema offered by Ibn Sīnā: the universe is always existing. As one might expect, al-Shahrastānī refuses to admit the consequent, although he does not deny the antecedent. And in order to escape the dilemma he introduces another category of priority, namely ‘to be prior in existence’ (*taqaddum fī al-wujūd*), so-called the sixth type (*al-qism al-sādis*)⁵⁰ which he claims Ibn Sīnā has missed. According to al-Shahrastānī, this is the only conception of priority that allows us to eliminate altogether the idea of concomitance and contemporaneity (*ma‘iyyah*) in our assertion that God is prior to the universe. It bears close resemblance, he says, to the natural priority of the number 1 to 2, a priority which does not imply causal, let alone temporal relation.⁵¹ When subjected to scrutiny, however, this category is not as promising as it might appear, for it is in fact overlapped by the priority *bi al-dhāt*. As Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 1233 CE) aptly points out, al-Shahrastānī apparently fails to comprehend what Ibn Sīnā means by the phrase ‘in essence’, narrowing it down to signify the priority of cause to its effect (*taqaddum bi al-‘illiyah*), and accusing

⁵⁰ Al-Shahrastānī enumerates six kinds of priority; things may be prior: (1) in time (*bi al-zamān*), (2) in place (*bi al-makān*) or in rank (*bi al-rutbah*), (3) in virtue (*bi al-fadīlah*), (4) in essence (*bi al-dhāt*) or in causality (*bi al-‘illiyah*), (5) in nature (*bi al-ṭab‘*), and finally (6) in existence (*fī al-wujūd*). See *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, 7-8.

⁵¹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, 8-9.

Ibn Sīnā of ignoring the fact that some effects do precede their cause ‘in existence’ though not ‘in mind’ (*fī al-dhihn*), such as the posteriority of the Final Cause.⁵² To be sure, says al-Āmidī, “the so-called sixth category, true though it is according to scholars, cannot solve the problem merely by introducing a new word and arguing at length (*lā naf’a fīhi bi-mujarrad al-maqāl wa maḥd al-istirsāl*)” since the opponent might contend that it is already subsumed under the five categories.⁵³

Equally noteworthy is Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s rebuttal of eternalism which, like that of al-Ghazālī, principally rests on Ash‘arite theological assumptions: that it is the nature of God’s will to choose a particular time for creation; that He can will something regardless of determinant factors; and that His knowledge determines the appropriate time for creation.⁵⁴ Specifically, al-Rāzī seeks to undermine the eternity thesis by refuting the two major postulates upon which, he believes, Ibn Sīnā’s arguments are built: (1) that God essentially precedes the universe, and (2) that time is eternal. Interestingly al-Rāzī not only avoids the two horns of the dilemma and rejects the other three alternatives altogether, arguing that God’s priority to the universe is neither causal, nor essential, nor hierarchical, nor positional, nor temporal, but he also affirms the sixth category of priority proposed by al-Shahrastānī and even vouches for it. God’s priority cannot be causal, he says, if causal priority means that non-existence precedes existence, since non-existence cannot be the cause for existence (*sic!*). Nor can it be in location and rank. It may be said to be essential, if ‘essentially’

⁵² See al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, 8-9, about which al-Āmidī harshly remarks: “Upon verification, however, [al-Shahrastānī’s argument] turns out to be a mirage, far from being correct (*wa huwa ‘ind al-tahqīq sarāb ghayr haqīq*).” See Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī, *Ghāyat al-Marām fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām*, ed. Hasan Mahmūd ‘Abd al-Laṭīf (Cairo: Lajnah Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1971), 260.

⁵³ For further detail, see al-Āmidī, *Ghāyat al-Marām*, 260-1.

⁵⁴ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Arba‘īn fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Hyderabad: Maṭba‘at Jam‘iyyat Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-Uthmāniyyah, 1934), 42, 44; id., *Muḥaṣṣal Afkār al-Mutaqaddimīn wa al-Muta‘akhhirīn min al-‘Ulamā’ wa al-Hukamā’ wa al-Mutakallimīn*, rev. Tāhā ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf Sa‘d (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyyāt al-Azhariyyah, n.d.), 106-7; cf. al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut*, 88 and 93 (Dunyā); id., *al-Iqtisād fī al-‘Iṭiqād* (Cairo, 1902), 47.

simply means ‘when it is considered in itself’ and provided it does not imply co-eternity of God and the universe. As for temporal priority al-Rāzī makes the following remark: if God’s priority to the universe is eternal in the sense of having no beginning, then time must be eternal, even more so if time is taken to be a corollary and concomitant of divine action and motion. That this is untenable follows from his bold claim that time is not a measure of motion. On this ground al-Rāzī asserts that God is prior to the universe in term of existence, neither in time nor with time.⁵⁵

Concluding Remarks

Eternity of the universe is arguably one of the most debated issues in the history of Islamic thought. The reason why it has attracted many best minds to participate is that the question of cosmic eternity impinges upon one’s faith as it is intertwined with the proofs of God’s existence, with discussions of the relationship of God to the created world, with the nature of the material universe and with the nature of infinity. Although he categorically rejected the idea of temporal creation, Ibn Sīnā had never succumbed to atheism or deism let alone pantheism. He found a way out of the false dilemma of temporality and timelessness through a distinction he made between three modes of being with respect to eternity, corresponding to his analysis and hierarchy of beings namely, (i) absolutely eternal (by virtue of itself); (ii) relatively eternal (by virtue of something else); and (iii) not eternal both considered *per se* as well *per aliud*. Only when this threefold distinction is taken into account, I submit, can we do justice to Ibn Sīnā and understand better his position *vis-à-vis* the Aristotelian doctrine of cosmic eternity and the Muslim theologians’ insistence on the logical necessity of the world’s beginning in time.

⁵⁵ See al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘Āliyah*, ed. Ahmad Hijāzī al-Saqā, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987), 4: 13-8.

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