

ONE ASPECT OF THE AVICENNIAN TURN IN SUNNĪ THEOLOGY*

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Most scholars of Islamic intellectual history now agree on the distortedness of the traditional Western portrayal of al-Ġazālī (d. 1111) as the defender of Muslim orthodoxy whose *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) was such a powerful critique that it caused the annihilation of philosophical activity in Islamic civilization. Some in fact are coming to the conclusion that al-Ġazālī's importance in the history of Islamic philosophy and theology derives as much from his assiduous incorporation of basic metaphysical ideas into central doctrines of Sunnī *kalām*, as from his far more celebrated bashing of the *falāsifa*. What is less well known is that al-Ġazālī's role in the “philosophizing” of Sunnī theology was not a lonely struggle by a single genius, but part of a broader trend that seems to have begun during Avicenna's lifetime and that picked up speed in the first and second generations after Avicenna's death in 1037, with the work of al-Ġazālī's teacher, the Aš'arite al-Ġuwaynī (d. 1085), as well as of the Māturīdite al-Bazdawī (d. 1099), work that was carried forward by dozens of subsequent members of those two major Sunnī theological schools. It is clear, in fact, that the dividing line between the Sunnī theologians commonly referred to in the later Islamic tradition as *mutaqaddimūn* (“early” or “ancient”), and those referred to as *muta'ahhirūn* (“late” or “modern”), lies not with al-Ġazālī but with Avicenna himself, and that the turn in Sunnī *kalām* was therefore Avicennian, not Ġazālīan.

* I am grateful to the anonymous referee for *ASP*, whose criticisms were acute and suggestions helpful. Thanks are also due to my students in a graduate seminar on Māturīdism – Recep Goktas, Josh Hemani, Wes Kelly, Yaron Klein, Christian Lange and Hikmet Yaman – for pointing me in the direction of new and interesting materials, and for forcing me to think more critically about my hypothesis.

We can gain a panoramic view of the Avicennian turn in Sunnī theology by training our eyes on al-Māturīdī's (d. 944) *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, a book whose sources, contents and influence we are much better able to assess since the publication of Ulrich Rudolph's recent monograph.¹ It turns out that while al-Māturīdī made a number of important conceptual contributions to *kalām* debates about specific problems – most notably his arguments for the eternality of God's attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*), to which I shall briefly return later in this article – just as significant was the way he structured his *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. This is because al-Māturīdī's ordering of topics in the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* provided a template which most subsequent Sunnī *mutakallimūn* followed in their own independent treatises and textbooks. In the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, al-Māturīdī begins with a general discussion of epistemology (pages 3–11 in F. Kholeif's Beirut, 1970 edition); turns to establishing the world's createdness and God's existence (11–37); discusses divine oneness and problems associated with God's attributes (38–85) and criticizes corresponding Muslim and non-Muslim doctrines (86–176); analyzes prophecy (176–215); and finally articulates a moderate position on God's determination of human actions (215–323), on sin and punishment (323–72) and on faith (373–401).

Al-Māturīdī's template was particularly significant because the newly standardized order of topics – particularly the first three topics: (1) epistemology > (2) God's existence > (3) God's oneness and attributes – provided a framework in which Avicennian metaphysics, and particularly Avicenna's distinctions between essence (*māhiyya*) and existence (*wuḡūd*) and between the necessary of existence in itself (*wāḡib al-wuḡūd bi-dātihi*) and the necessary of existence through another/possible of existence in itself (*wāḡib al-wuḡūd bi-ḡayrihi/mumkin al-wuḡūd bi-dātihi*), could be progressively integrated into subsequent *kalām* treatises. In the case of topic (1), epistemology, pre-Avicennian Sunnī-*kalām* distinctions between three means to knowledge – perception (*ḥiss*), report (*ḥabar*) and speculation (*naẓar*) – and between two types of knowledge – acquired (*muktasab*) and *a priori* (*ḡarūrī*) – were eclipsed by post-Avicennian Sunnī-*kalām* distinctions between

¹ U. Rudolph, *al-Māturīdī und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand* (Leiden, 1996).

the two most basic objects of knowledge – essence (*māhiyya*) and existence (*wuğūd*) – and between three modes of knowledge – necessary (*wāğib*), possible (*ğā'iz* or *mumkin*) and impossible (*mustahīl* or *mumtani'*). As for (2), the proofs of God's existence, the pre-Avicennian Sunnī-*kalām* distinction between God's being eternal (*qadīm*) and the world's being originated (*muḥdat*) ceded ground to the post-Avicennian Sunnī-*kalām* distinction between God's being necessary of existence in itself (*wāğib al-wuğūd bi-dātihi*) and the world's being possible of existence in itself (*mumkin* [or *ğā'iz*] *al-wuğūd bi-dātihi*). And in the case of (3), God's oneness and attributes, pre-Avicennian Sunnī-*kalām* debates over the precise nature of the divine attributes' eternality (*qidam*) were superseded by post-Avicennian Sunnī-*kalām* debates over the precise nature of the attributes' necessity (*wuğūb*).

Some important though still preliminary work has already been undertaken on the history of the epistemological transition (most prominently by van Ess), and on the history of the use of necessity and possibility in post-Avicennian *kalām* proofs of God's existence (most prominently by Davidson), but to my knowledge no one has begun to investigate the arc described by the Avicennian turn in Sunnī-*kalām* discussions of God's attributes (*ṣifāt*).² My aim in this article is to locate Avicenna's theory of the necessary of existence in itself in the history of this last aspect of Sunnī theology.

In particular, I hope to show that in order to explain the nature of the eternality possessed by God and His attributes, Sunnī *mutakallimūn* moved away from earlier, pre-Avicennian attempts to argue that when we define an eternal thing as "that whose existence has no beginning" (*mā lā awwala li-wuğūdihi*), what we really mean is that an eternal thing is *uncaused*; to later, post-Avicennian attempts to argue that when we define an eternal thing as "that which has never ceased to be nor will ever cease to be" (*mā lam yazal wa-lā yazālu*), what we really mean is that an eternal thing *cannot possibly not exist*, and that therefore an eternal thing is *necessary of existence*. What is more, the different ways in which Avicenna constructed his theory should not only be seen as

² J. van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Aḥmadaddīn al-Īcī* (Wiesbaden, 1966), and H. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford, 1987).

influencing later *kalām* ideas, but also, in some important respects, as responding to earlier *kalām* discussions.³

I shall begin by focusing on the doctrinal commitments evident in pre-Avicennian *kalām* discussions of God's *ṣifāt*, and then analyze the philosophical dilemmas that arose as a result of those commitments. Then I shall turn briefly to the immediate sources of Avicenna's distinction between *wāğib al-wuğūd bi-dātihi* and *wāğib al-wuğūd bi-ğayrihi/mumkin al-wuğūd bi-dātihi*, and discuss Avicenna's two earliest formulations of the distinction, the first (dating from 1001) an attempt – at least in part – to resolve those earlier *kalām* dilemmas, and the second (dating from 1013) nearly identical to a (probably) contemporaneous Aš'arite discussion. Finally, I shall survey a number of passages taken from Sunnī *kalām* texts of the late-11th century, in order to highlight the rapid and widespread appropriation of Avicenna's theory.⁴

I. BEFORE

In the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. God's eternity (*qidam*) was held by Muslim theologians to be the most important of the divine attributes. This was because when a theologian said that God is eternal (*qadīm*) he used the term for two distinct purposes. The Mu'tazilite and then the Sunnī *mutakallimūn* based one of their proofs for the existence of God on the contradictory nature of the opposition between the eternal and the originated. Given the fact that nothing exists apart from what is eternal (*qadīm*) and what is originated (*muḥdat*), and given the fact that everything originated (*muḥdat*) requires an originator (*muḥdit*), then – in order to avoid an infinite regress – the chain of originated things and originators must terminate

³ For a brief survey of the attempts by post-Avicennian *mutakallimūn*, both Sunnī and Šī'ite, to appropriate Avicenna's distinctions between essence and existence, and between the necessary of existence in itself and the necessary of existence through another/possible of existence itself, see my "Avicenna and the Avicennian tradition", in P. Adamson and R. Taylor (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁴ Detailed discussions of the Aristotelian (Chapter 11), Neoplatonic (Chapter 10) and Fārābian (Chapter 12) background to Avicenna's theory, as well as of the evolution of Avicenna's own formulations of the theory (Chapter 14), can be found in my *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (London/Ithaca, N.Y., 2003). The first two parts of this article largely reproduce material from Chapter 13 of that book, though with a number of revisions; the third and final part is entirely new.

in an originator that is not originated. Since there is nothing – apart from the eternal – that is not originated, this ultimate originator must be eternal. This eternal, ultimate originator is God.

The Sunnī *mutakallimūn* also used God's eternality for another purpose: to stress their basic difference with the Mu'tazilites concerning the issue of the reality and distinctiveness of divine attributes such as God's knowledge (*'ilm*), power (*qudra*), life (*ḥayāt*) and so on. The Sunnīs, calling themselves "Upholders of the attributes" (*Aṣḥāb al-ṣifāt*) and following the early anti-Mu'tazilite *mutakallim* Ibn Kullāb (d. ca. 855), held that God's attributes (*ṣifāt*) were entities whose existence was real and distinct enough that they could not simply be identified with or subsumed under God's self (*dāt* or *nafs*), as early Mu'tazilites such as Abū al-Hudayl (d. 841) and al-Nazzām (d. ca. 840) had maintained. The Sunnīs reasoned that since the attributes were both real and divine, they were eternal just as God Himself is eternal.

In short, God's eternality performed a double service to Sunnī theologians, helping them demonstrate a created world's need for an eternal Creator, and helping them argue for the eternal and distinct reality of God's attributes. And yet a fundamental incompatibility existed between these two uses of eternality, the first directed against atheist Materialists (*dahriyya*), who believed in the eternity of the world, the second directed against the Mu'tazilites, who denied that the divine attributes enjoyed any meaningful distinctiveness or eternality. Resolving, or at least skirting, this problem of incompatibility was the engine that drove this aspect of the Avicennian turn in Sunnī theology.

One of the consequences of the use to which both Mu'tazilite and Sunnī *mutakallimūn* put God's eternality in their proofs of His existence, was that the term *qidam* (eternality) underwent a semantic shift, from referring to *beforeness* to referring to *uncausedness*.⁵ According to 'Abd al-Ġabbār (d. 1025), the Mu'tazilite al-Ġubbā'ī (d. 915), who taught al-Aṣ'arī (d. 935) before al-Aṣ'arī's defection to Kullābism, defined *qadīm* as "that which comes before in existence" (*mutaqādim fī*

⁵ On *qidam* in general see D. Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam* (Paris, 1988), pp. 164–9.

al-wuḡūd).⁶ In other books, according to ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, al-Ġubbā’ī defined *qadīm* as “that whose existence has no beginning” (*mā lā awwala li-wuḡūdihi*).⁷ Despite al-Aš‘arī’s defection from the Mu‘tazilites, both of al-Ġubbā’ī’s definitions turn up in the works of later Aš‘arites. Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015), for example, uses the “existential beforeness” definition, implying that it is the one al-Aš‘arī himself used.⁸ Another Aš‘arite, al-Ḥalīmī (d. 1012), applied the “beginningless” definition to *qadīm*; but al-Ḥalīmī uses the term *ibtidā’* (“origin”) in place of *awwal* (“beginning”), reflecting, I believe, the beginnings of the semantic shift I mentioned.⁹ This is because “origin” is ambiguous: like the Greek term *arkhê*, the Arabic *ibtidā’* can mean both a starting-point in time (*awwal*), as well as a principle (*mabda’*).

The rationale for this shift from beginninglessness to uncausedness is quite plain. If, as a *mutakallim*, my main interest in eternity is using it in proofs of God’s existence, I shall want the contradictory nature of the opposition between eternal (*qadīm*) and originated (*muḥdat*) to be basic to the meaning of the two terms. In other words, I shall have an easier time proving God’s existence if I define *qadīm* in such a way that it means not only “beginningless” but also “uncaused”. This is because “uncaused” will satisfy my intuitions about what an opposite of the passive participle *muḥdat* (“originated”) should look like, more completely than “beginningless” will.

According to ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, al-Ġubbā’ī had treated *qadīm* (eternal) and *muḥdat* (originated) as contradictories: holding a single thing to be *qadīm* and *muḥdat* results in mutual contradiction (*yatanāqaḍu*).¹⁰ And for a Mu‘tazilite, this seems obvious enough, given that God is the only thing which is eternal, everything other than God being originated. As with all contradictories, there is no middle ground between *qadīm* and *muḥdat*. As a Sunnī *mutakallim*, however, I shall have made another commitment concerning eternity which dulls

⁶ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *al-Muḡnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-al-‘adl*, ed. M.M. Ḥilmī *et al.*, 16 vols. (Cairo, 1958f.), vol. V, pp. 233.17–18; 234.15 and 235.1; see also *al-taqaddum fī al-wuḡūd* at p. 234.6–11.

⁷ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *al-Muḡnī*, V, pp. 233.1–2 and 234.7–9.

⁸ Ibn Fūrak, *Muḡarrad maqālāt al-Aš‘arī*, ed. D. Gimaret (Beirut, 1987), pp. 26.19–20; 27.19–20; and 42.19–20.

⁹ Al-Ḥalīmī, *K. al-Minhāḡ fī šu‘ab al-īmān* (ap. al-Bayhaqī, *K. al-Asmā’ wa-al-ṣifāt*, ed. M.Z. al-Kawṭarī [Beirut, 1970], pp. 29.12–30.5).

¹⁰ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *al-Muḡnī*, V, p. 233.5.

this otherwise sharp opposition. For unlike my Mu'tazilite counterpart, I believe that God Himself is not the only subject of which "eternal" (*qadīm*) may be predicated: God's attributes (*ṣifāt*), after all, are held to be eternal as well. I shall briefly review the history of the problem of the divine attributes' eternality, and then explain why this produced a dilemma for Sunnī theologians.

In order to buttress their strict understanding of God's unity, the Mu'tazilites had divided God's attributes into "attributes of the self" (*ṣifāt al-dāt*) and "attributes of the act" (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*). Attributes of the self, such as God's "knowledge" (*'ilm*), could be predicated of God without referring to His creation. Attributes of the act, such as God's "providing" (*rizq*), could be predicated of God only with reference to His creation. According to the Mu'tazilites, the attributes of the self, including God's knowledge, power and life, were in no sense to be understood as separate entities. Instead, God is "a knower in Himself" (*'ālimun bi-nafsihi*).¹¹ Abū al-Hudayl went so far as to claim that an attribute of the self was identical to God, asserting that God is "a knower through a knowledge which is identical to Him" (*'ālimun bi-'ilmin huwa huwa*).¹² Al-Nazzām phrased it differently, saying that God "never stops being" His attributes of the self. For example, God "never stops being a knower in Himself" (*lam yazal 'āliman bi-nafsihi*).¹³ Included in Abū al-Hudayl's and al-Nazzām's lists of attributes of the self was God's being eternal (*qadīm*). According to Abū al-Hudayl's formula, therefore, God is "eternal through an eternality which is identical to Him" (*qadīmun bi-qidamin huwa huwa*); according to al-Nazzām's formula, God "never stops being eternal in Himself" (*lam yazal qadīman bi-nafsihi*).

At first glance Ibn Kullāb's view seems like a combination of Abū al-Hudayl's and al-Nazzām's formulae. According to Ibn Kullāb, God "never stops being a knower through a knowledge" (*lam yazal 'āliman bi-'ilmin*). However, Ibn Kullāb resists Abū al-Hudayl's identification of the attribute with God,

¹¹ Al-Aṣ'arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. H. Ritter, vol. I-II (Istanbul, 1929-30), p. 164.13-14. On Mu'tazilite theories of attributes generally, see *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, pp. 164.10-165.13 and 484.5-487.14.

¹² Al-Aṣ'arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, p. 165.5.

¹³ Al-Aṣ'arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, p. 486.11-12.

saying instead that God is a knower through a knowledge which “He possesses (*lahu*)”, and which “is subsistent in [or ‘with’] Him (*qā’im bihi*)”. Ibn Kullāb’s new formula is then applied in an identical way to 29 further attributes which he lists in addition to knowledge. In general, he claims, the attributes “belong to His self” (*li-dātihi*) and are “neither identical to God nor other than He” (*lā hiya Allāhu wa-lā hiya ḡayruhu*).¹⁴ What is striking about the description of Ibn Kullāb’s doctrine is that “eternal” is not included in his list of 30 attributes. Instead, Ibn Kullāb appends a rather cryptic parenthesis to the end of his list, saying about God that “He is an eternal [thing] who never stops being [so] in [or ‘with’] His names and attributes [*innahu qadīmun lam yazal bi-asmā’ihi wa-ṣifātihi*]”.¹⁵

Why did Ibn Kullāb single out “eternal” for special treatment when Abū al-Hudayl and al-Nazzām had seen it as just another attribute of the self? My guess is that Ibn Kullāb was hinting that *qadīm* is special because it is a meta-attribute rather than a regular attribute. The most important characteristic of meta-attributes such as *qadīm* is that they are attributable not only to God Himself but also to some or all of God’s regular attributes.¹⁶ For example, once a Sunnī *mutakallim* had determined that God was a *mawḡūd* (existent), and that God

¹⁴ Al-Aṣ’arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, pp. 169.2–170.3.

¹⁵ Al-Aṣ’arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, p. 169.9–10.

¹⁶ I shall comment only briefly on the problem of whether some or all of the attributes are eternal. As far as the classical Aṣ’arites were concerned, only the attributes of the self could be called eternal, the attributes of the act being originated. Their reasoning was that if an attribute of the act, such as “providing” (*rizq*), were eternal, then the object of that act – namely, the creatures for whom God provides – would also have to be eternal. According to the Māturīdites, who were probably following the lead of the Ḥanafite scholar al-Ḥakīm al-Samarqandī (d. 953) on this point, attributes of the act as well as attributes of the self are eternal. The Māturīdites explained the eternality of the attributes of the act by appealing to a distinction that for all intents and purposes is the same as Aristotle’s famous distinction, in *De anima* 2.1, between first *entelekheia* and second *entelekheia*. According to the Māturīdites, the transition from possessing the capability to provide (first *entelekheia*) to exercising that capability (second *entelekheia*), like the transition from knowing how to write but not writing, to writing, does not fall under any of Aristotle’s categories of change – from one substance to another, from one quality to another, from one quantity to another or from one location to another – but refers instead to a single thing’s transition from one state of being to another state of being. Cf. al-Ḥakīm al-Samarqandī, *K. al-Sawād al-a’ẓam*, no ed. (Cairo, 1837–38), p. 21.18–21; and Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 983), *Sharḥ al-fiqh al-absaṭ li-Abī Ḥanīfa*, ed. H. Daiber (as *The Islamic Concept of Belief in the*

therefore possessed the attribute of *wuğūd* (existence), he had to decide whether or not each of God's attributes likewise possessed the attribute of *wuğūd*.

The reason why *qadīm* came to be seen by Ibn Kullāb as a meta-attribute, when the Mu'tazilites by contrast had seen it merely as one of several attributes of the self, is that Ibn Kullāb was so firmly committed to affirming the attributes' eternality. This was a stance he took in opposition to the 'Abbāsīd Inquisition (*miḥna*) of 833–48, during which jurists were forced to confess the Mu'tazilite dictum that the Qur'ān was created.¹⁷ By Ibn Kullāb's reckoning, the Qur'ān, conceived of as God's attribute of speech (*kalām*), was not only distinct in some sense from His self, but also co-eternal with Him. For this reason, it seems, Ibn Kullāb wished to distinguish God's attribute of eternality from His other attributes.

But the special status which Ibn Kullāb assigned to *qadīm* confused his followers, who had to decide between two alternatives. The first alternative was to hold that Ibn Kullāb's general principle of attributes, that "God is P through a P-ness which he possesses", applied equally to "eternal"; in this case God will be eternal (*qadīm*) through an eternality (*bi-qidamin*) which He possesses. The second alternative was to hold that God's eternality (and by extension, His other meta-attributes, such as existence) was exempt from Ibn Kullāb's general principle of attributes; in this case God will be eternal in Himself (*bi-nafsihi*), and not through an eternality which He possesses.¹⁸

Neither alternative was free from difficulties. Although the first alternative enjoys the benefit of consistency, it forces its adherents into a sticky situation: let us allow, for the purpose

4th/10th Century [Tokyo, 1995]), lines 527–626 (= pp. 138.4–160.3) at 568–569 (= pp. 147.4–148.1).

¹⁷ On this see W. Madelung, "The origins of the controversy concerning the creation of the Koran", in J. Barral (ed.), *Orientalia Hispanica: sive studia F.M. Pareja octogenario dicata* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 504–25; J. van Ess, "Ibn Kullāb und die Miḥna", *Oriens*, 18–19 (1965–66): 92–142 (esp. pp. 102ff.) and "Ibn Kullāb", *Encyclopaedia of Islam (New Edition)*, Suppl., pp. 391–2; and H. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 235–303. On the attributes in general, see Wolfson's "Philosophical implications of the problem of the divine attributes in the Kalam", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 79 (1959): 73–80, and *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, pp. 112–234; and M. Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins dans la doctrine d'al-Aš'arī et de ses premiers grands disciples* (Beirut, 1965).

¹⁸ Al-Aš'arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, pp. 170.4–6; 171.16–172.3; 517.14–16.

of argument, that God is eternal through an eternality which He possesses. What about the other attributes, such as God's knowledge, power and speech – are they eternal or not? If they are not eternal, then God's attribute of speech will not be eternal either, and nor, therefore, will the Qur'ān be eternal. But this is precisely the Mu'tazilite position a Kullābite is so keen to steer clear of.

If, on the other hand, the attributes are eternal; and if it is correct to infer that since God is eternal through an eternality which He possesses, each attribute will similarly be eternal through an eternality which it possesses; then all the attributes will possess their own individual meta-attributes of eternality. Now what about the meta-eternalities which each of the regular attributes possesses – will each of these meta-eternalities also be eternal through a further meta-meta-eternality which each meta-eternality possesses? It seems that if a Kullābite goes down this route a proliferation of eternalities will be hard to avoid.¹⁹

The upshot was that in order to steer clear of the Mu'tazilite position that the Qur'ān is created, and in order to pre-empt the infinite-regress problem just described, a follower of Ibn Kullāb will be forced to maintain that Ibn Kullāb's general principle of attributes, that "God is P through a P-ness which he possesses", does *not* apply to meta-attributes, and that God is eternal not through an eternality but in Himself. True, the formula that God is eternal in Himself smacks of Mu'tazilism, since for all intents and purposes it is identical to al-Nazzām's formula mentioned above. Nevertheless, the specific concern with upholding the Qur'ān's uncreatedness at all costs and with avoiding a proliferation of eternalities trumped the worries about sounding too much like al-Nazzām.

Having decided in favor of God's being "eternal in Himself" (*qadīm bi-nafsihi*), a Kullābite is still left with the problem of how to describe the eternality which His attributes enjoy. Two options present themselves. On the one hand a Kullābite could claim that like God, each attribute (*ṣifa*) is eternal in itself (*qadīma bi-nafsihā*). This raises a couple of serious problems, however. First of all, attributes are not, strictly speaking,

¹⁹ For evidence that an infinite regress of meta-eternalities was a real worry to Sunnī thinkers, see the Aš'arite *mutakallim* and mystic al-Quṣayrī (d. 1072), *Ṣarḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Ṭ. 'A. Sa'd and S.Ḥ.M. 'Alī (Cairo, 2001), pp. 55.8 and 392.5–7.

selves (*anfus* or *dawāt*), but only things which are predicated of (or, by extension, possessed by) selves. Second, the more explicitly a Kullābite affirms that God's attributes are eternal, the more causally independent the attributes might appear to be, given the trend, described earlier, towards seeing uncausedness and not simply beginninglessness as basic to the idea of eternity. In other words, if a Kullābite explicitly asserts that the attributes are all eternal in themselves, he will run the risk of painting a picture in which all God's attributes can be viewed as separate, uncaused divinities; and that in turn will expose him to accusations of *širk*, or polytheism.²⁰

On the other hand a Kullābite could stick like glue to Ibn Kullāb's rather ambiguous formula – that God “is an eternal [thing] who never stops being [so] in [or ‘with’] His names and attributes (*innahu qadīmūn lam yazal bi-asmā’ihi wa-ṣifātihi*)” – and thereby dodge any accusations of *širk* which might arise as a result of explicitly affirming that each of God's attributes is eternal.²¹ The only danger of adhering to Ibn Kullāb's formula – apart from its opaqueness – is that it might tempt anti-Kullābites to misrepresent the Kullābite position by claiming that the Kullābites held God to be *caused* to be eternal by His attributes. This is because one of the derived meanings of the preposition *bi-* (at least in theological and philosophical texts) is causal: “by”, “through” or “by means of”. In short, if a Kullābite holds that God is eternal *bi-ṣifātihi*, he runs a risk – admittedly slight – of being accused of implying that God is eternal *through* or *by* His attributes, when what he means is simply that God is eternal *in* or *with* His attributes.

When al-Aṣʿarī abandoned Muʿtazilism in favor of Kullābism, these were the dilemmas he found himself facing. If al-Aṣʿarī held both that God was eternal through an eternity (*qadīm bi-qidāmin*) and that the divine attributes were eternal, he might be seen to be committing himself to the position that each of God's attributes was eternal through a further attribute of eternity (*qadīma bi-qidāmin*); and an infinite regress of meta-eternities would result. If, on the other hand, al-Aṣʿarī held that God was eternal in Himself and that the

²⁰ This is precisely the trap which the Muʿtazilite-influenced Šīʿī *mutakallim* al-Šayḥ al-Mufīd (d. 1022) accuses al-Aṣʿarī of having fallen into: al-Šayḥ al-Mufīd, *Awāʿil al-maqālāt fī al-madāhib wa-al-muḥtārāt*, ed. M. Muḥaqqiq (Tehran, 1993), pp. 11.20–12.8.

²¹ Al-Aṣʿarī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, pp. 172.1–3.

divine attributes were eternal, he might be seen to be committing himself to the position that each of God's attributes was eternal in itself (*qadīm bi-nafsihā*); and a pleroma of causally independent attribute-entities would result. Al-Aš'arī could, of course, avoid this particular dilemma by denying that the attributes were eternal at all; but that was unacceptable because it would force him to admit that the Qur'ān, *qua* God's attribute of speech, was created. Alternatively, he could adhere to Ibn Kullāb's cryptic formula – that God “is an eternal [thing] who never stops being [so] in [or ‘with’] His names and attributes (*innahu qadīm lam yazal bi-asmā'ihī wa-ṣifātihi*)” – and leave it at that; but philosophically speaking that would represent a retreat into ambiguity rather than an advance towards greater precision, an ambiguity which opponents could exploit.

Al-Aš'arī clearly saw himself as a Kullābite as far as the eternality of the divine attributes was concerned, claiming at one point that the “evidence points to the eternity of the Creator *and* His knowledge”.²² But al-Aš'arī never decided whether God should be seen as “eternal through an eternality” or “eternal in Himself”, probably because of the serious consequences that arose from choosing one option or the other. In fact the Aš'arite *mutakallim* Ibn Fūrak admitted that opponents of his school were correct in criticizing al-Aš'arī for flip-flopping on this issue. According to Ibn Fūrak, al-Aš'arī adopts a strict-constructionist interpretation of Ibn Kullāb's view (that God is “eternal through an eternality” – *qadīm bi-qidamin*) in some texts, and a loose-constructionist interpretation (that God is “eternal in Himself” – *qadīm bi-nafsihi*) in other texts.²³ In commenting on al-Aš'arī's ambivalence Ibn Fūrak confirms that the strict-constructionist interpretation is the one that reflects Ibn Kullāb's genuine opinion, a judgment repeated a century later by the Māturīdite *mutakallim* Abū al-Mu'īn al-Nasafī (d. 1114), who claims that

²² Al-Aš'arī, *K. al-Luma'*, ed. R.J. McCarthy (in his *The Theology of al-Aš'arī* [Beirut, 1953]), pp. 12.21–13.2.

²³ Ibn Fūrak, *Muğarrad maqālāt al-Aš'arī*, p. 326.7–12; see also p. 28.12–17. The texts Ibn Fūrak refers to explicitly are *al-Idāḥ* (= *K. Idāḥ al-burhān fī al-radd 'alā ahl al-zayg wa-al-ṭuḡyān*: Ibn 'Asākir, *Tabyīn kaḍīb al-muftarī fī mā nusiba ilā al-Imām Abī al-Ḥasan al-Aš'arī*, no ed. [Damascus, 1928], p. 130.3–4), where al-Aš'arī adopts the *qadīm bi-qidamin* view; and *al-Muḥtazan* (Ibn 'Asākir, p. 133.2–5), where he follows the *qadīm bi-nafsihi* line.

the Māturīdites are the true heirs of Ibn Kullāb on this issue and condemns al-Ašʿarī for straying from Ibn Kullāb's view.²⁴ Ibn Fūrak's Ašʿarite contemporary, al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), however, follows the loose-constructionist line, holding that God is eternal in Himself (*id li-nafsihi kāna qadīm*).²⁵

A Sunnī *mutakallīm* such as al-Bāqillānī could feel that, having departed from Ibn Kullāb's formula by maintaining that God is eternal in Himself and not through an eternality, he had at least skirted the Kullābites' original dilemma, namely, affirming God's eternality without allowing an uncontrollable proliferation of meta-eternalities. This choice, however, forced Sunnī *mutakallimūn* not only to come to grips with the obvious question of whether or not God's attributes were similarly "eternal in themselves", but also to rethink their use of *qadīm* in proofs of God's existence.

As I mentioned earlier, the Muʿtazilite al-Ġubbāʾī had treated *qadīm* (eternal) and *muḥdat* (originated) as contradictory: holding a single thing to be *qadīm* and *muḥdat* results in mutual contradiction (*yatanāqaḍu*). But a Sunnī *mutakallīm*, having avoided the old Kullābite dilemma by holding that God is eternal in Himself (*qadīm bi-nafsihi*) rather than eternal through an eternality (*qadīm bi-qidam*), will now be inclined to articulate the two opposites as eternal in itself (*qadīm bi-nafsihi*) and originated in itself (*muḥdat bi-nafsihi*), and this is exactly what al-Bāqillānī does (though using the slightly less causative *li-nafsihi*).²⁶

Strictly speaking, however, al-Bāqillānī's opposition between eternal in itself (*qadīm li-nafsihi*) and originated in itself (*muḥdat li-nafsihi*) is one between contraries, not contradictions, because there is a middle position between them. For although it is impossible to be both *qadīm li-nafsihi* and *muḥdat li-nafsihi* at the same time, it is possible to be neither. One of God's attributes (*ṣifāt*), for example, is eternal (*qadīma*) – it most certainly is not originated (*muḥdata*) – but it is difficult to see how an attribute can be eternal in itself (*qadīma li-nafsihā*). As I mentioned above, this is because attributes in general, and the divine attributes in particular, are not selves, but only things which are predicated of (or, by extension,

²⁴ Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī, *K. Tabṣirat al-adilla*, ed. C. Salamé (Damascus, 1993), p. 56.2–10.

²⁵ Al-Bāqillānī, *K. al-Tamhīd*, ed. R.J. McCarthy (Beirut, 1957), p. 29.18.

²⁶ Al-Bāqillānī, *K. al-Tamhīd*, pp. 29.17–30.2.

possessed by) selves; and also because holding that an attribute is eternal in itself would assign it too much causal independence, given that uncausedness was so basic to the *kalām* conception of eternity.

This raised a serious problem precisely because it was the contradictory, not contrary, nature of the opposition between the terms *qadīm* and *muḥdat*, which served as the basis for the *mutakallimūn*'s proof of God's existence: given that everything which is *muḥdat* (originated) requires a *muḥdit* (originator), we must terminate eventually in something which is not *muḥdat* in order to avoid an infinite regress. And since the only thing which is not *muḥdat* is *qadīm*, the ultimate *muḥdit* will be *qadīm*. But this proof will not work if the terms in use are contraries rather than contradictories. If the terms are contraries, as *qadīm li-nafsihi* and *muḥdat li-nafsihi* appear to be, there will be things – the divine attributes, at least according to the Sunnīs – which are eternal but not eternal in themselves. Put another way, there will be things which are eternal, but not causally independent. The proof will only work if a new category is created – eternal through another (*qadīm li-ḡayrihi*) – which could then somehow be identified with originated in itself (*muḥdat li-nafsihi*). Only then will eternal in itself (*qadīm li-nafsihi*) and originated in itself (*muḥdat li-nafsihi*) cover all possible entities, such that the contradictory nature of their opposition be preserved.

The first of these two steps – creating a new category of “eternal through another” (*qadīm li-ḡayrihi*) – seemed to be acceptable to some Sunnī *mutakallimūn*. In his Qur'ān commentary, entitled *Interpretations of the Sunnīs*, al-Māturīdī (d. 944) claims that the verse “And therein [viz., in Heaven] shall they dwell forever” (*wa-hum fīhā ḥālidūna* = *Sūrat al-baqara* 25) can be understood as a refutation of the Jahmite ultra-monotheists who, in their zealousness to protect God's being the *only* First, Last and Eternal *a parte post* (*al-awwalu wa-al-āḥiru wa-al-bāqī*), felt constrained to maintain that Heaven would pass away. Otherwise, the Jahmites reasoned, both Heaven and God would be Eternal *a parte post*, and that would be a sin of *tašbīh*, or “likening” – likening anything created to God, that is.

Where the Jahmites got it wrong, al-Māturīdī reckons, is that they did not make the requisite distinction between *bi-dātihi* (“in itself”) and *bi-ḡayrihi* (“through another”). If they had

understood and applied this distinction they would have realized that God is eternal *a parte post* in Himself (*al-bāqī bi-dātihi*), just as He is First in Himself (*al-awwalu bi-dātihi*); whereas Heaven and all it contains are eternal *a parte post* through something other than them (*bāqiyatun bi-ḡayrihā*).²⁷

It would be too bold to call the distinction which al-Māturīdī offers in this passage a coherent and full-fledged theory. First of all, as the later Ašʿarite scholar al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066) pointed out, God's attribute of *baqā'* can be seen to encompass His eternality *a parte ante* as well as His eternality *a parte post*; whereas the *baqā'* of heaven and hell, which are created things, can refer only to their eternality *a parte post*.²⁸ Nor is al-Māturīdī's *bi-nafsihi/bi-ḡayrihi* distinction here meant to help explain how an eternal God and His eternal attributes are eternal in different ways, the former eternal in Himself, the latter eternal through another. Finally, even if we allow the creation of a new category of thing, "eternal through another", identifying that new category with "originated in itself" (*muḥdat li-nafsihi*) will still run counter to a *mutakallim*'s basic intuition that *qadīm* and *muḥdat* ought to be distinguished on temporal as well as causal grounds.

II. DURING

In the metaphysics section of his earliest philosophical *summa*, the *Ḥikma 'Arūḍiyya*, composed in 1001 when he was only 21, Avicenna, like al-Māturīdī before him, embraces the distinction between "eternal in itself" and "eternal through another" which is implicit in al-Bāqillānī's attachment of the rider *li-nafsihi* ("in itself") to *qadīm* ("eternal"). And like al-Māturīdī Avicenna also resists applying the distinction between "in itself" and "through another" to *muḥdat* ("originated"), let alone equating *qadīm bi-ḡayrihi* ("eternal through another") with *muḥdat li-nafsihi* ("originated in itself"):

Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ḥikma al-'Arūḍiyya*, MS Uppsala, Or. 364, fol. 4r14–17

"Eternal" is said of all that has never been non-existent. Something may be eternal in itself [*qadīman bi-dātihi*] and it may be eternal through

²⁷ Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna* (= *Tafsīr al-Māturīdī al-musammā Ta'wīlāt ahl al-sunna* [Cairo, 1971]), vol. I, pp. 76.16–77.4; cf. also p. 131.13. Al-Māturīdī also appeals to the *bi-dātihi/bi-ḡayrihi* distinction at *K. al-Tawḥīd*, ed. F. Kholeif (Beirut, 1970), p. 43.8–9.

²⁸ Al-Bayhaqī, *K. al-Asmā' wa-al-ṣifāt*, p. 33.6–12.

another [*qadīman bi-ġayrihi*]. Now “originated” [*al-muḥdat*] and “brought-into-being” [*al-mutakawwin*] consist in that which did not exist at some time or other [*alladī kāna laysa fī waqtin mā*], and which will not exist except through another. It cannot help but come from matter, because all that is brought into being has been preceded by the possibility of some existence [*fa-qad taqaddamahu imkānu wuġūdin*]; otherwise it would not exist.²⁹

The problem remains, then, that even if by identifying “originated in itself” with “eternal through another”, he were seen to be referring to an intelligible category of thing, an Aś‘arite such as al-Bāqillānī will resist describing the attributes as either *muḥdata li-nafsihā* (“originated in themselves”) or *qadīma li-ġayrihā* (“eternal through another”), because doing so raises further *kalām*-specific problems, some familiar, others new. On the one hand, if an attribute is said to be *muḥdata li-nafsihā* or *li-dātihā*, its possessing a *nafs* or *dāt* (“self”) will assign it too much ontological independence, when – as mentioned above – an attribute is not, strictly speaking, a self but only something predicated of (or, by extension, possessed by) a self. What is more, given that *muḥdat* must mean originated *in time* if it is to be useful in proofs of God’s existence which rely on an equation of prior non-existence and causedness, the attributes, if described as *muḥdata*, will be seen to be temporally bounded rather than eternal, and the Qur’ān, understood as God’s attribute of speech, will be seen to be created instead of uncreated.

On the other hand, if the attributes are *qadīma li-ġayrihā*, an alarming degree of otherness (*ġayriyya*) will infect the relationship between God’s attributes and God’s self, with the result that the attributes will fail to satisfy Ibn Kullāb’s condition of being neither identical to nor other than God. What is worse, positing a significant degree of otherness between God and His attributes will run the risk of allowing a host of eternal entities to proliferate – entities which are caused by something other than them, it is true, but which are still eternal and separate. In short, the ambiguous status of the attributes – eternal, yet not causally independent – flushes out the problems latent in the pre-Avicennian Sunnī trend towards seeing uncausedness as basic to eternity.

²⁹ For a transcription of this passage, see my *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context*, p. 278.

In attempting to grapple with this problem the Aš‘arites al-Bāqillānī and al-Ḥalīmī offer another meaning for *qadīm*: “that whose non-existence is impossible”.³⁰ They could even cite the founder of their school for support of their new definition:

Al-Aš‘arī, *Kitāb al-Luma‘*, p. 11.14–15

If the opposite of knowledge were eternal [*qadīm*], it would be impossible for it not to exist [*la-istahāla an yabṭula*].

At first glance, it is hard to see how this new definition does al-Bāqillānī and al-Ḥalīmī much good. For even if they apply the new understanding of the eternal – as that whose non-existence is impossible – to their argument for God’s existence, they will still run aground on the rocky shores of the divine attributes. This is because their proof remains reducible to an appeal to the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes and effects, so whichever phrase is chosen to describe the eternal, the term’s basic meaning must remain “uncaused” if it is to be opposed to *muḥdat* and thereby useful in their proof of God’s existence. As before, the problem arises when that newly chosen phrase – “impossible not to exist” – is similarly applied to the attributes.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which, if another little step is taken, and being “necessary of existence” (*wāǧib al-wuǧūd*) – not just being “impossible of non-existence” (*mustahīl al-‘adam*) – is held to be the basic criterion of eternality, the horns of the old Kullābite dilemma will at least be blunted. Eternality, let us recall, was held to be predicable both of God’s self and of His attributes, though perhaps in different ways. Necessity, by contrast, is not merely a meta-attribute but also a mode of predication, since necessity can be seen to govern the very act of predicating attributes of a subject.

³⁰ Al-Bāqillānī, *K. al-Tamhīd*, p. 29.5: “because the non-existence of the eternal is not possible (*li-anna al-qadīma lā yaǧūzu ‘adamuhu*)”; al-Ḥalīmī, *K. al-Minhāǧ fī šu‘ab al-īmān* (ap. al-Bayhaqī, *K. al-Asmā’ wa-al-ṣifāt*, 33,1–5): “If He is existent neither from a beginning nor through a cause, then neither extinction nor non-existence will be possible for Him (*li-annahu idā kāna mauǧūdān lā ‘an awwala wa-lā bi-sababīn lam yaǧuz ‘alayhi al-inqidā’u wa-al-‘adamu*)”.

What I mean is that in propositions such as “God is an existent”, “God is a knower” and “God is a provider”, the modal qualifier “necessary that” (or “necessarily”) could be added to describe *how* each of the predicates or attributes holds of its subject: for example, it is necessary that God be (or “exist as”) a knower (*wāğibun an yakūna* [or *yūğada*] *Allāhu ‘āliman*). The result is that “necessity of existence” can be seen to obtain in the copula which binds the predicates (God’s attributes) to the subject (God’s self), and not simply to be predicable of the subject and of each of the attributes in turn, as was the case with meta-attributes.³¹ Put in medieval Latin terms, the Sunnī *mutakallimūn* could take advantage of the absence, in Aristotle as well as in classical Arabic logic, of a sharp distinction between *de re* necessity, in which the necessity is held to obtain in the *thing* being predicated of the subject (S is **necessarily** – P), and *de dicto* necessity, in which the necessity is held to obtain in the *statement* or predication itself (Necessarily: S is P).³² Partly because of this conflation, necessity of existence blunted the horns of the old Kullābite dilemma better than eternity did. For unlike eternity, necessity of existence can be held to describe the divine attributes *only* insofar as they are predicated of God’s self, with the result that the danger of inadvertently positing a pleroma of causally independent attribute-entities is eliminated, or at least minimized.

Given the clear advantages of necessity over eternity, why were pre-Avicennian Sunnī *mutakallimūn* so reluctant to take that final little step and assert openly that since eternity is now to be defined as impossibility of non-existence, and since impossibility of non-existence is identical to necessity of existence, God’s eternity will refer at the most basic level to His

³¹ There is some evidence (in an admittedly very compressed and difficult passage: *ap. Ibn Mattawayh, K. al-Mağmū’ fī al-muḥīt bi-al-taklīf*, ed. J. Houben [Beirut, 1965], vol. I, pp. 152.7–154.17) that this move may have been anticipated by the Mu’tazilite al-Ġubbā’ī, who appears to have maintained that God’s distinctiveness from all other beings consisted in the necessity with which God possesses His essential attributes (*bi-wujūbi ḥādīhi al-ṣifāti lahu*) of eternity, power, knowledge, life and so on (152.7–14). His son Abū Hāšim disagreed, apparently maintaining that this copulative necessity, being ultimately reducible to God’s eternally warranting His attributes, is not real enough to account for God’s distinctiveness from other beings (152.15–19).

³² On this absence, and on Avicenna’s new distinction between *waṣfī* and *dātī* readings of modal propositions, see now Tony Street, “Logic”, in Adamson and Taylor (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*.

necessity of existence? The short answer is that they were uncomfortable using the term *wāğib* in this way. When the early *mutakallimūn* wished to refer to a proposition's being axiomatic or intuitively necessary, in the sense that a necessary proposition expresses an *a priori* truth, they turned to the term *ḍarūrī*. For example, the proposition "the whole is greater than any of its parts" is *ḍarūrī*.³³

By contrast, early *mutakallimūn* had understood the active participle *wāğib* as connoting religious or moral obligation (*fard*), and used *wāğib* with the preposition 'alā to mean "morally incumbent upon".³⁴ It is true that many of those same *mutakallimūn* turned to the root *w-ğ-b* to render the idea of logical entailment. For example, in his *Vindication of the Science of Kalām*, al-Aš'arī uses *wağaba* in this way:

Al-Aš'arī, *Risālat istiḥsān al-ḥawḍ fī 'ilm al-kalām*, ed. McCarthy (in his *The Theology of al-Aš'arī*), p. 92.12–16

We say: If God were to resemble something, He would resemble it either in every respect or in one respect. If He resembled it in every respect, it would follow necessarily [*wağaba*] that He be originated in every respect. And if He resembled it in one respect, it would follow necessarily [*wağaba*] that like it He be originated to the extent that He resembled it, given that each of two similar things will be judged to be similar in the respect in which it resembles the other. Yet it is impossible for what is originated to be eternal, and for what is eternal to be originated.

The later *mutakallimūn* could, of course, justify adding syllogistic necessity to *wāğib*'s semantic field by stressing the rather Mu'tazilite idea that knowledge of the concepts of right and

³³ Examples of *bi-al-ḍarūra*, *ḍarūrat*, *ḍarūrat al-'aql*, *ḍarūrī* (and, less often, *bi-al-idṭirār*, which is usually paired with *bi-al-ṭab'*, "by nature", and contrasted with *bi-al-iḥtiyār*, "by choice") in an epistemological context in pre-Avicennian *kalām* include (for the Mu'tazilites) al-Aš'arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, pp. 136.10–15; 393.5–14; 480.6–10; al-Nāṣi' al-Akbar (d. 906), *al-Kitāb al-Awsaṭ fī al-maqālāt*, ed. J. van Ess (Beirut, 1971), pp. 109.13–110.11 (= #148); and Sa'diyā al-Fayyūmī (i.e., Saadia Gaon, d. 942), *Kitāb al-Amānāt wa-al-i'tiqādāt*, ed. S. Landauer (Leiden, 1880), pp. 12.17–13.10; 16.19–20.18; and (for the Sunnīs) al-Māturīdī, *K. al-Tawḥīd*, pp. 5.13; 7.11; 8.14–17; 42.20; al-Aš'arī, *K. al-Luma'*, pp. 41.10–42.15; al-Bāqillānī, *K. al-Tamhīd*, pp. 7.4–10; 8.6–13; 9.2–15; 52.4–7; and Ibn Fūrak, *Muğarrad maqālāt al-Aš'arī*, pp. 12.1–20; 13.25–14.20; 18.21–19.6; 20.9–21.13; 222.16–19; 247.17–249.22; 284.15–18; 324.4; 328.14–19.

³⁴ On the distinction between *wāğib* and *ḍarūrī*, see van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Aḩudaddīn al-Īcī*, pp. 118–19. Instances where *wāğib* and *fard* appear to be interchangeable include Ibn Fūrak, *Muğarrad maqālāt al-Aš'arī*, pp. 16.3–6; 32.7–17; 180.17; and 199.8–9; and al-Bāqillānī, *K. al-Tamhīd*, p. 187.1.

wrong was both morally incumbent and intellectually necessary, since a human endowed with responsibility for his actions (a *mukallaf*, that is) both possessed an intuitive knowledge of right and wrong, and was under a moral obligation to act according to that intuitive knowledge.³⁵ Still, using the active participle *wāğib* – as opposed to the verb *wağaba/yağibu* – to denote the necessity of a proposition remained rare in pre-Avicennian Sunnī *kalām*.

Unlike most *mutakallimūn*, a number of polymaths and litterateurs of the late-tenth and early-eleventh centuries had no qualms about concluding that since God is impossible of non-existence, He is necessary of existence. For example, the Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' (fl. ca. 985?) at one point refer to God as *al-wāğib al-wuğūd* in their *Rasā'il*.³⁶ Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030), who despite his death date was a generation or two older than Avicenna, also argues that “If, as we asserted, the existence in Him is essential, He could not possibly be imagined to be non-existent; thus He is necessary of existence, and whatever is necessary of existence will be perpetual of existence, and whatever is perpetual of existence will be eternal (*wa-idā kāna al-wuğūdu fīhi ka-mā qulnā dātiyyan fa-laysa yağūzu an yutawahhama ma'dūman fa-huwa wāğibu al-wuğūdi wa-mā kāna wāğiba al-wuğūdi fa-huwa dā'imu al-wuğūdi wa-mā kāna dā'ima al-wuğūdi fa-huwa azaliyyun*)”.³⁷ And the phrase *wāğib al-wuğūd* appears with the rider *bi-dātihi*, again in reference to God, in the *K. al-Amad 'alā al-abad* of al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992).³⁸

Al-ʿĀmirī in fact appears to be the most likely direct source of Avicenna's distinction, for a number of reasons. First of all, al-ʿĀmirī was the first to predicate the entire expression *wāğib al-wuğūd bi-dātihi* (“necessary of existence in itself”) of God. Second, though trained in Bağdād, al-ʿĀmirī moved to Buḥārā, and was active in the same Sāmānid court and studied in the same Sāmānid library where, only a decade or so later, the

³⁵ Ibn Fūrak, *Muğarrad maqālāt al-Ašʿarī*, p. 285.7–20; al-Bāqillānī, *K. al-Tamhīd*, pp. 8.4–5; 379.11–380.15.

³⁶ Iḥwān al-Ṣafā', no ed. (Beirut, 1957), *Rasā'il*, vol. II, p. 471.1.

³⁷ Rowson (*K. al-Amad 'alā al-abad*, ed. and trans. E. Rowson [New Haven, Conn., 1988], p. 233) refers to the Cairo, 1907, edition of Ibn Miskawayh's *K. al-Fawz al-asğar*: 15f.; in the edition I have access to (*K. al-Fawz al-asğar*, no ed. [Beirut, 1901]), this sentence appears on p. 20.10–12.

³⁸ Al-ʿĀmirī, *K. al-Amad 'alā al-abad*, p. 78.12; *wāğib al-wuğūd* appears without the rider *bi-dātihi* at p. 170.12.

21-year-old Avicenna would write his first philosophical *summa*, the *Ḥikma 'Arūḍiyya*, which is also the first Avicennian text in which *wāḡib al-wuḡūd bi-dātihi* appears. Finally, in his *Kitāb al-Taqrīr li-awḡuh al-taqdīr*, al-ʿĀmirī again makes the distinction between necessary, possible and impossible of existence, and illustrates what he means by necessary of existence with the example “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”, the same example which Avicenna later used in both his *Ḥikma 'Arūḍiyya* (written in 1001) and in his *Mabda' wa-ma'ād* (written in 1013).³⁹ (I admit that “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is such a prosaic example that its use in two or more texts does not constitute definitive proof of some kind of filiation between them.)

Al-ʿĀmirī also makes the distinction in the *Kitāb al-Taqrīr li-awḡuh al-taqdīr* between that which is necessary of existence in itself (*bi-al-dāt*) and that whose existence is necessary as a consequence of a relation (*bi-al-idāfa*), the same distinction which Avicenna was to make in his *Mabda' wa-ma'ād*.⁴⁰ Of course it is not certain whether Avicenna derived his ideas directly from the courtesy copies which al-ʿĀmirī doubtless left in the Sāmānid library, or whether Avicenna and al-ʿĀmirī read the same texts there and were independently influenced by them.

The appearance of “necessary of existence” (*wāḡib al-wuḡūd*) – sometimes with the rider “in itself” (*bi-dātihi*), other times without – in descriptions of God, is also a characteristic of a small number of *kalām* texts produced during the thirty years between 985 and 1015, including those by the Muʿtazilite ʿAbd al-Ġabbār and the Ašʿarite belletrist al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī. In fact, some scholars have wondered whether there might be a causal link between, on the one hand, ʿAbd al-Ġabbār’s presence in Rayy between 1013 and 1015 and the occurrence of terms such as *wuḡūb al-wuḡūd* in ʿAbd al-Ġabbār’s works, and, on the other hand, Avicenna’s presence in Rayy around 1014–1015 and Avicenna’s own evolving ideas about necessary and possible existence. The assumption has generally been that if there were any influence, it must have come from the older

³⁹ Al-ʿĀmirī, *Kitāb al-Taqrīr li-awḡuh al-taqdīr*, pp. 28–30 [MS Princeton 2163 (393B), fols. 26–76]; here I am following the synopsis by Rowson in his commentary on the *Amad*, pp. 232–3.

⁴⁰ Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mabda' wa-al-ma'ād*, ed. ʿA. Nūrānī (Tehran, 1984), p. 3.2–15.

‘Abd al-Ġabbār and towards the younger Avicenna.⁴¹ This perception is reinforced by Averroes’ famous comment in the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* that Avicenna pinched the idea of distinguishing necessary and possible existence from the Mu‘tazilites (*wa-huwa ʔarīqun aḥadahu Ibnu Sīnā min al-mutakallimīna* [. . .] *hādā huwa i‘tiqādu al-Mu‘tazilati qabla al-Aš‘ariyyati*).⁴²

What truth might there be to Averroes’ claim? According to the *Kitāb al-Maġmū‘ fī al-muḥīṭ bi-al-taklīf* ‘Abd al-Ġabbār does toy with the idea that God’s eternality (*qidam*) can somehow be explained by referring to the necessity of His existence (*wuġūb al-wuġūd*).⁴³ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār also comes close to making a distinction in that work between intrinsic and derivative necessity (*al-wuġūbu li-dātihi lā li-šay’in siwāhu*).⁴⁴ In his *Muġnī* the two trends are joined together a little more closely.⁴⁵ But in neither work does ‘Abd al-Ġabbār articulate the distinction clearly and coherently, let alone in the canonical way that Avicenna does. It is difficult to be definitive about this question because we do not possess the first three volumes of the *Muġnī*, the volumes which cover the topic of *tawḥīd* (divine oneness) and hence those which would have provided the obvious context for ‘Abd al-Ġabbār to expound most fully on the issue of *wāġib al-wuġūd*.

Of course, if we accept (as I think we should) that the Uppsala *Ḥikma ‘Arūḍiyya* manuscript we now have access to is really an accurate copy of the very text which Avicenna composed when he was 21, in the year 1001, then the distinction appears in Avicenna’s work a dozen years before Avicenna ever could have laid eyes on ‘Abd al-Ġabbār in Rayy, and we can dismiss any claim of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s personal influence on purely historical grounds. Here is what Avicenna says in the *Ḥikma ‘Arūḍiyya*:

⁴¹ On the possible relationship between Avicenna and ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, see now A. Dhanani, “Rocks in the Heavens?! The encounter between ‘Abd al-Ġabbār and Ibn Sīnā”, in D. Reisman (ed.), *Before and After Avicenna* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 127–44.

⁴² Ibn Rušd, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut, 1930), p. 276.4–9.

⁴³ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār *ap.* Ibn Mattawayh, *K. al-Maġmū‘ fī al-muḥīṭ bi-al-taklīf*, I pp. 50.24; 99.21–22; 141.10–12; and 142.1.

⁴⁴ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār *ap.* Ibn Mattawayh, *K. al-Maġmū‘ fī al-muḥīṭ bi-al-taklīf*, I p. 51.20–21.

⁴⁵ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *al-Muġnī*, IV, p. 250.4–15; and XI, p. 432.11–15.

Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ḥikma al-‘Arūḍiyya*, fols. 3v16–4r12

“The Necessary” [*al-wāḡib*] is that which is necessary of existence in respect of the way it is [*al-ḍarūriyyu al-wuḡūdi ‘alā mā huwa ‘alayhi*], this being either in itself [*bi-dātihi*] (such as the principle of existents [*ka-mabda’i al-mawḡūdāti*]) or through another (such as the fact that two and two are four). The necessary is either eternal (such as the principle of existents) or is at one time and not another [*fī ḥālin dūna ḥālin*] (such as the eclipse of the moon at that moment). All that is necessary of existence in itself has no cause. Whatever has a cause will be neither necessary of existence in itself nor impossible of existence in itself (for otherwise, it would never come to exist); with respect to itself [*min ḥaytu dātihi*], therefore, it [*i.e.*, that which has a cause] will be possible of existence [*mumkinu al-wuḡūdi*], while [at the same time] being necessary of existence through its cause. Now the existence of whatever has no cause is not itself divisible into two states [*wa-mā lā ‘illata lahu fa-inna wuḡūda dātihi lā yanqasimu min ḥālatayni*], in virtue of which it [*i.e.*, the existence of whatever has no cause] would come to be caused in both states; for there would be no way out of being caused, nor any escape from causedness. All that is subject to change is in these two states, neither one of which it possesses in itself; rather, it possesses both of them through a cause (there being no alternative to them [*i.e.*, there being no alternative to being in the two states]). Thus all that is subject to change will itself be caused and possible, whereas all that is necessary of existence in itself will be necessary of existence in every respect, and no type of change whatsoever will be attributable to it. “The possible” is the existent which is not necessary [*laysa bi-ḍarūriyyin*]. “The possible” is said to be whatever is not impossible; and “the possible” is said to be whatever is not impossible and which exists and [then] is non-existent, and [in general] whatever does not exist at some time or other.⁴⁶

This is not to say, of course, that ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s works, or other Mu‘tazilite works which are now lost, may have been contained in the Sāmānid library and read by Avicenna before he composed the *Ḥikma ‘Arūḍiyya*. But given the lack of textual evidence that other Mu‘tazilites thought of this distinction first; and given the hints at that distinction by al-‘Āmirī, who worked in the Sāmānid library only a dozen years before Avicenna; my tentative conclusion is either that Avicenna’s work influenced ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s, or, as seems more likely, that Avicenna and ‘Abd al-Ġabbār came up with the idea independently, the former in a sustained and precise way and building directly upon earlier work by al-‘Āmirī, and the latter

⁴⁶ For a transcription of this passage, see my *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context*, p. 278.

almost in passing. My guess is that Averroes' comment might well be an expression of his discomfort at the astonishingly rapid and widespread incorporation of Avicenna's distinction into *Sunnī-kalām* proofs of God's existence and into their discussions of epistemology and God's attributes, in the century or so following Avicenna's death.⁴⁷

The one Aš'arite contemporary of Avicenna who uses the phrase *wāğib al-wuğūd* to describe God is al-Rāğib al-Iṣfahānī. I shall not go into too much detail concerning the uncertainty over al-Rāğib's death date. Rowson, in the most recent synopsis of this question, reckons that he flourished around 1010, and I am convinced by his arguments, which build upon earlier work by Madelung.⁴⁸ In his *I'tiqādāt*, al-Rāğib argues that existents and originated things cannot help but terminate eventually in an existentiator and originator (*ilā mūğidin wa-muḥditin*), and that this existentiator and originator must be One, Eternal, and Necessary of Existence in Himself (*wa-anna dālika al-mūğida wa-al-muḥdita yağibu an yakūna wāḥidan azaliyyan wāğiba al-wuğūdi li-dātihi*).⁴⁹ Later on, al-Rāğib explains what he means when he says that God is necessary of existence:

Al-Rāğib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-I'tiqādāt*, pp. 56.9–57.11

Proof that He, may He be exalted, is an existent which is necessary of existence [*mawğūdun wāğibu al-wuğūdi*] consists in the fact that whenever we assume or imagine Him to be an existent, it must be in one of three ways: necessary of existence, impossible of existence, or possible of existence [*immā wāğibu al-wuğūdi aw mumtani'u al-wuğūdi aw mumkinu al-wuğūdi*]. The necessary of existence is that which, when postulated as non-existent, an absurdity is logically entailed, e.g., [when] the occurrence of four from the existence of two and two [is postulated as non-existent] [*fa-al-wāğibu al-wuğūdi huwa alladī idā furida gayra mawğūdin lazima minhu muḥālun ka-ḥuṣūli arba'atin min*

⁴⁷ To be fair to Averroes, there may be evidence of Mu'tazilite anticipations of Avicenna's distinction currently unavailable to us. One possible precursor is al-Ka'bī al-Balḥī (d. 931), a prominent member of the (relatively) *falsafa*-friendly Bağdādī school of Mu'tazilism and a student of al-Ḥayyāṭ and of al-Ğubbā'ī, since he was an active participant in debates in Ḥurāsān and Transoxania during the first third of the tenth century and may have left disciples there. But until al-Ka'bī al-Balḥī's work is fully edited – at the moment most remains in manuscript – and his influence studied, this must remain only a suggestion.

⁴⁸ E. Rowson, "al-Rāğhib al-Iṣfahānī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam (New Edition)*, VIII, 389–90 and W. Madelung, "Ar-Rāğib al-Iṣfahānī und die Ethik al-Ğazālīs", in R. Gramlich (ed.), *Islamwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen Fritz Meier zum 60sten Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden, 1974), pp. 152–63.

⁴⁹ Al-Rāğib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-I'tiqādāt*, ed. Š. al-ʿAğālī (Beirut, 1988), p. 48.15–20.

wuğūdi itnayni wa-itnayni]. The impossible of existence is that which, when postulated as existent, an absurdity is logically entailed, e.g., [when] the occurrence of four from the existence of two and three [is postulated as existent]. The possible of existence is that which, when postulated as existent or non-existent, no absurdity is logically entailed, e.g., [when] the coming of rain in the winter [is postulated as existent or non-existent].

The necessary of existence is of two types: the necessary of existence not in itself but through something else [*wāğibu al-wuğūdi lā li-dātihi bal li-amrin āḥara*], such as the existence of four which follows necessarily from the occurrence of two and two; and the necessary of existence in itself, not through anything else, namely the Creator, may He be exalted [*wa-wāğibu al-wuğūdi li-dātihi lā li-šay'in āḥara wa-huwa al-bārī ta'ālā*]. The necessary of existence is that which, when postulated as non-existent, an absurdity occurs [*idā furiḍa ḡayra mawğūdin ḥašala minhu muḥālun*]; nor does it need, in its existence, anything to make it exist; and it is eternal, this being God, may He be exalted [*wa-lā muḥtāḡun fī wuğūdihi ilā šay'in yūğiduhu wa-yakūnu azaliyyan wa-dālika huwa Allāhu ta'ālā*] [. . .]. The necessary of existence is that which has no need, in terms of its existence, for anything other than itself [*wa-al-wāğibu al-wuğūdi huwa alladī lā yaftaqīru fī wuğūdihi ilā šay'in ḡayri dātihi*]. It is established therefore that it is correct to say that there is only one necessary of existence in itself, this being God, may He be exalted.

The wording of al-Rāğib's explanation – which we can date, following Rowson's conjecture, to around 1010 – is strikingly similar to that found in a corresponding passage from Avicenna's *al-Mabda' wa-al-ma'ād*, composed in 1013 (that is, twelve years after his first stab at the idea of necessary existence in the *Ḥikma 'Arūḍiyya*):

Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda' wa-ma'ād*, p. 2.5–17

The Necessary of existence is the existent which, when postulated as non-existent [*matā furiḍa ḡayra mawğūdin*], an absurdity occurs. The possible of existence is that which, when postulated as either non-existent or existent, no absurdity occurs. The necessary of existence is the necessary [*al-ḍarūrī*], while the possible of existence is that in which there is no necessity at all [*alladī lā ḍarūrata fīhi*], i.e., neither in its existence or in its non-existence. This is what we mean by “possible of existence” in this context [. . .]. Next, the necessary of existence may be in itself [*bi-dātihi*] and it may be *not* in itself [*lā bi-dātihi*]. That which is necessary of existence in itself [*wāğibu al-wuğūdi bi-dātihi*] is that on whose account [*li-dātihi*] (and not on account of anything else, whichever thing that might be) postulating its non-existence becomes absurd. The necessary of existence *not* in itself is that which becomes necessary of existence on account of postulating [the existence of] something which is not [identical to] it, such as the fact that four is necessary of

existence not in itself, but [only] when two and two are postulated; and the fact that being burned and burning [*i.e.*, burning something else] are necessary of existence not in themselves, but [only] when contact between the natural active potentiality and the natural passive potentiality (I mean [the potentiality] to burn and be burned) is postulated.

As with ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, because of the absence of whose *Muġnī* I–III we cannot definitively solve the problem of who influenced whom, so the uncertainty over al-Rāġib’s dates forces us to be tentative about who came up with the new formulation first, Avicenna or al-Rāġib. Nevertheless, I believe the burden of proof lies with those who deny that al-‘Āmirī is the most likely direct source of Avicenna’s theory, since al-‘Āmirī is the one author whose works were probably in the right place (Buḥārā) at the right time (ca. 1000) to spark the young Avicenna’s metaphysical imagination.⁵⁰

III. AFTER

What is certain is that in the century following Avicenna’s first articulation of his theory, a number of prominent Sunnī *mutakallimūn* began to describe God explicitly as *wāġib al-wuġūd*. More precisely, it is the definition of the necessary of existence as that whose non-existence is inconceivable or impossible – the definition found in al-Rāġib and in Avicenna’s *Mabda’ wa-ma’ād* – that resonated most powerfully with post-Avicennian Sunnī *mutakallimūn*. Perhaps this was because al-Rāġib had come up with this definition at the same time as Avicenna, and could therefore provide the definition with an Aš‘arite provenance. But given al-Rāġib’s marginal status as a *mutakallim*, the more likely reason is that the definition of the necessary of existence as that whose non-existence is inconceivable or impossible allowed a post-Avicennian Aš‘arite, at least, to identify the necessary of existence with the eternal by explicitly appealing to al-Bāqillānī’s definition of the eternal as that whose non-existence is impossible. After all, citing al-Bāqillānī, a far more prominent Aš‘arite thinker than al-Rāġib, would more effectively “Aš‘arize” Avicenna’s distinction.

⁵⁰ As I mentioned in fn. 4, detailed discussions of the Neoplatonic, Aristotelian and Fārābian background to Avicenna’s distinction can be found in my *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context*, Chapters 10–12. Other intriguing evidence that Avicenna inherited rather than invented the distinction has been highlighted by A. Hasnaoui, “Un élève d’Abū Bišr Mattā b. Yūnus: Abū ‘Amr al-Ṭabarī”, *Bulletin d’études orientales*, 48 (1996): 35–55 at p. 37.

Admittedly, most Sunnī *mutakallimūn* of the first and second post-Avicennian generations – including the Ḥanbalite Abū Ya‘lā ibn al-Farrā’ (d. 1066), al-Fīrūzābādī al-Šīrāzī (d. 1083), who seems to have wavered between Aš‘arism and Ḥanbalism, and the Aš‘arite al-Mutawallī (d. 1086) – held back from reasoning that since God is eternal, since the eternal is impossible of non-existence, and since what is impossible of non-existence will also be necessary of existence, God will therefore be necessary of existence. Instead they stuck to al-Bāqillānī’s earlier assertion that whatever is eternal will be impossible of non-existence.⁵¹

In spite of the hesitation of his Sunnī colleagues, al-Ġazālī’s teacher, the Aš‘arite scholar Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Ġuwaynī (1028–1085) takes the plunge, by openly arguing that since eternality implies impossibility of non-existence, and since impossibility of non-existence implies necessity of existence, eternality and necessity of existence will be co-implied:

Al-Ġuwaynī, *al-Šāmil fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. ‘A.M.M. ‘Umar (Beirut, 1999)

292.19–20: We say: necessity of existence is an expression for the negation of the possibility of non-existence, and [as such] is not reducible to the affirmation of an attribute. So in terms of its necessity of existence, “eternal” is not an essential attribute; instead, what is meant by that is the negation of the possibility of non-existence.

308.9–10: [We say:] The eternal is that whose existence is necessary, the impossible that whose negation is inescapable. This is the meaning of the Imāms’ assertion that the Eternal is what is necessary in respect of its existence, while the originated is what is possible in respect of its existence.

⁵¹ Ibn al-Farrā’, *K. al-Mu‘tamad fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. W.Z. Ḥaddād (Beirut, 1974), p. 47.15–16: “Non-existence is not possible for Him [...] non-existence is impossible for Him (*wa-lā yağūzu ‘alayhi al-‘adamu* [...]) *istaḥāla ‘alayhi al-‘adamu*)” and 48.8–9: “Evidence pointing towards the fact that he is eternal *a parte post* (*bāqin*) [...] consists in what has been covered previously regarding the existence of the fact that He is eternal unendingly [in the past and future] (*fī-mā lam yazal wa-lā yazālu*), and in the fact that non-existence is impossible for Him (*wa-anna al-‘adama yastahīlu ‘alayhi*)”; al-Fīrūzābādī al-Šīrāzī, *al-Isāra ilā maḍhab ahl al-ḥaqq*, ed. Marie Bernand (in *La profession de foi d’Abū Ishāq al-Šīrāzī*) (Cairo, 1987), p. 20.13–18: “The non-existence of the eternal is impossible (*al-qadīm yastahīlu ‘adamuhu*)”; al-Mutawallī, *Kitāb al-Muḡnī*, ed. M. Bernand (Cairo, 1986), p. 6.5: “Because the non-existence of the eternal is impossible (*li-anna al-qadīma yastahīlu ‘adamuhu*)” (followed by an explanation at 6.10–19); p. 21.4–5: “For the non-existence of the eternal is impossible (*fa-inna al-qadīma yastahīlu ‘adamuhu*)”; and p. 31.11: “The non-existence of the eternal is impossible (*wa-yastahīlu ‘adamu al-qadīmi*)”.

Al-Ġuwaynī, *al-‘Aqīda al-Niẓāmiyya*, ed. M.Z. al-Kawṭarī (Cairo, 1948)

23.4–5: It is necessary to be unambiguous about the fact that God, may He be exalted, is eternal *a parte post*, and [that] the non-existence of that whose eternality is necessary is impossible. Thus the eternal is that which the intellect determines to be necessary of existence [*yağību al-qat‘u bi-anna Allāha ta‘ālā bāqin wa-mā wağaba qidamuhu istahāla ‘adamuhu fa-inna al-qadīma huwa alladī qaḍā al-‘aqlu bi-wuğūbi wuğūdihi*].

Al-Ġuwaynī, *Luma‘ fī qawā‘id Ahl al-sunna wa-al-ğamā‘a*, ed. Michel Allard (in *Textes apologétiques de Ġuwaynī*) (Beirut, 1968)

137.9–10: The Lord, may He be glorified and exalted, is eternal *a parte post*, [and] necessary of existence [*al-rabbu ‘azza wa-ğalla bāqin wāğību al-wuğūdi*], since his eternality [*qidamuhu*] has been established in what we said earlier, and the eternal is impossible with respect to its non-existence [*wa-al-qadīmu yastahīlu ‘adamuhu*] by general agreement among scholars [*bi-ittifāqin min al-‘uqalā*], and this makes clear that He is eternal *a parte post* and continuous of existence [*bāqiya mustamirra al-wuğūdi*].

Probably for the reasons mentioned earlier, al-Ġuwaynī hints that al-Bāqillānī himself was the first to draw this conclusion, and again claims that God’s being necessary of existence is a matter of near unanimity, at least among Sunnī scholars:

Al-Ġuwaynī, *al-Šāmil fī uṣūl al-dīn*

365.7–11: The Qāḍī [al-Bāqillānī] often refined his point in another way, saying: It has been established that for the originator of the world to require an originator is impossible, since that leads to infinite regress. Every existence which has been established as not requiring a cause is necessary.

358.11–13: Know that those who affirm the existence of the Maker are in agreement over the necessity of His existence. Not one of them is said to disagree on this issue, with the exception of the Bāṭiniyya and the Zanādiqa – may God curse them! – for they refrain from using the terms existence and non-existence when describing the Maker.

But what about the attributes – are they necessary of existence as well? The farthest al-Ġuwaynī is willing to go is to assert that the divine attributes are necessary of God. That is to say, he takes advantage of the fact, discussed above, that existential necessity can be seen both as a predicate of God (“God is

necessary of existence”) as well as a modal qualifier which modifies the copula tying God *qua* subject to His attribute *qua* predicate (“It is necessary that God be [or ‘exist as’] a knower”). Al-Ġuwaynī follows roughly the same route in his *‘Aqīda niẓāmiyya* and his *Iršād*, discussing in separate chapters “what is necessary [to predicate] of God” (*al-kalām fī-mā yağibu li-Allāhi ta‘ālā: ‘Aqīda*, 16.19ff.; *bābu al-qawli fī-mā yağibu li-Allāhi ta‘ālā min al-ṣifāti: Iršād*, 17.16ff.); “what is impossible [to predicate] of God” (*al-kalāmu fī-mā yastahīlu ‘alā Allāhi ta‘ālā: ‘Aqīda*, 14.12ff; the *Iršād* does not devote a separate chapter to this category of predications) and “what is possible [to predicate] of God” (*al-kalāmu fī-mā yağūzu fī aḥkāmi Allāhi ta‘ālā: ‘Aqīda*, 25.3ff.; *bābu al-qawli fī mā yağūzu ‘alā Allāhi ta‘ālā: Iršād*, 94.3ff.).⁵²

In categorizing the divine attributes according to the modal qualifier that describes how an attribute may be predicated of God, al-Ġuwaynī moves decisively beyond the Ḥanbalite Ibn al-Farrā’, for example, who offers only the then-current subdivision of attributes of the self (*ṣifāt al-dāt*) into “essence” attributes (*ṣifāt nafsīyya*), such as God’s self-subsistence, whose non-existence, if postulated, would lead necessarily to the non-existence of the divine self; and “object” attributes

⁵² The *Iršād* references are to J.-D. Luciani, ed. and [French] trans., *El-Irchad par Imam el-Haramein* (Paris, 1938). Al-Ġuwaynī is followed in using “necessary” only to modify the copula that binds the attribute to God, by later Aṣ‘arites such as al-Sanūsī (d. 1490), *al-‘Aqīdat al-sanūsiyya* (ap. al-Bāġūrī [d. 1860], *Hāṣiya ‘alā matn al-sanūsiyya*, no ed. [Cairo, 1856]), pp. 57.8–58.2 (marg.): [God’s] independence from everything other than Him consists of the fact that existence, eternality *a parte ante*, eternality *a parte post*, otherness with respect to temporally originated things, and self-subsistence are necessary of Him (*wāğibatun lahu*); Ibrāhīm al-Laḡānī (d. ca. 1631), *Ġawharat al-tawḥīd* (no ed. [Cairo, no date]), pp. 28.1 and 31.1: “Everyone entrusted with obeying divine law must/Know what is necessary of God/And what is possible and impossible”; al-Faḍālī (d. 1821), *Kifāyat al-awāmm fī ‘ilm al-kalām* (ap. al-Bāġūrī, *Hāṣiya ‘alā kifāyat al-awāmm*, no ed. [Cairo, 1906]), pp. 31.1–33.1 (top): “Know that understanding the fifty forthcoming creedal statements is based upon three things: the necessary, the impossible and the possible. The necessary is that whose non-existence is inconceivable to the intellect, that is to say, the intellect will not assent to its non-existence”; p. 38.2–4 (top): “Thus if it is now said that power is necessary of God (*inna al-qudrata wāğibatun li-Allāhi*), the meaning will be that the intellect will not assent to the non-existence of God’s power”; p. 44.1: “The first and foremost of the attributes that are necessary of God is existence”.

(*ṣifāt ma'nawiyya*), such as God's knowledge, whose non-existence, if postulated, would not lead necessarily to the non-existence of the divine self.⁵³

Another adventurous Sunnī contemporary of al-Ġuwaynī was the Māturīdite *mutakallim* Abū al-Yusr al-Bazdawī (d. 1099), who, like al-Ġuwaynī, identifies the eternal with the necessary of existence, in the context of proving the originat-
edness of accidents:

Al-Bazdawī, *Kitāb Uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. H.P. Linss (Cairo, 1963), p. 15.7–11

Were accidents eternal their passing away would be inconceivable, since the eternal is necessary of existence, so neither passing away nor non-existence is conceivable for it [*fa-law kānat al-a'rādu qadīmatan la-mā tuṣawwuru buṭlānuhā li-anna al-qadīma wāğibu al-wuğūdi fa-lā yutaṣawwaru 'alayhi al-buṭlānu wa-al-'adamu*]. [This is] because if its non-existence were possible [*law gāza 'adamuhu*] at some time in the future, its non-existence would have been possible at some time in the past. Yet non-existence is inconceivable for this, just as it follows necessarily [*yağibu*] that when two is added to one there is three. If this is necessary [*wāğiban*] then it is inconceivable for there to be a time in which [adding *fīhi*] when two is added to one there is not three.

Unlike al-Ġuwaynī, who, as mentioned above, appears to have been content simply to allow eternality and necessity of existence to be co-implied, al-Bazdawī is somewhat clearer in preferring necessity of existence as God's most basic characteristic, with His eternality now seen to be in some way a derivative of His necessity of existence:

Al-Bazdawī, *Kitāb Uṣūl al-dīn*, p. 20.2–5

Because God is necessary of existence [*wāğib al-wuğūd*] – given that we have shown that originated things have no escape from an originator, and given that the non-existence of what is necessary of existence is impossible [*wa-mā kāna wāğiba al-wuğūdi yastahīlu 'adamuhu*], and if [its non-existence] is impossible, it will be specially characterized by eternality – He will also be eternal *a parte post* [*bāqin*], given that the non-existence of the eternal is impossible; given that the eternal is necessary of existence [*li-anna al-qadīma wāğibu al-wuğūdi*]; and given

⁵³ Ibn al-Farrā', *Kitāb al-Mu'tamad fī uṣūl al-dīn*, p. 44.3–14. Allard refers to al-Ġuwaynī's new, modal method of categorizing the divine attributes as "Plan A", with "Plan B" referring to the old method of distinguishing between *ṣifāt nafsīyya* ("les attributs essentiels") and *ṣifāt ma'nawiyya* ("les attributs entitatifs"): Allard, *Textes apologétiques de Ġuwaynī*, p. 11; see also his *Le problème des attributs divins dans la doctrine d'al-Aṣ'arī et de ses premiers grands disciples*, pp. 384–5.

that were its non-existence possible at one time, its non-existence would be possible at another time, and the eternality would be nullified.

Al-Bazdawī was less adventurous than al-Ġuwaynī as far as the attributes were concerned, hesitating to call them necessary of God (as al-Ġuwaynī had), let alone necessary of existence in themselves. However, al-Ġuwaynī's star student, the Aš'arite Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 1111), by clearly denying that the attributes are possible of existence, moved in that direction. Still, al-Ġazālī balks at openly affirming that the attributes are necessary of existence:

Al-Ġazālī, *Kitāb al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād*, no ed. (Cairo, 1971), p. 75.6–13

The [divine] attributes are all eternal. If they were generated, the Eternal, may He be praised, would be a substrate of generated things, which is impossible [. . .]. The first piece of evidence [showing that God cannot be a substrate of generated things] is that every generated thing is possible of existence [*ḡā'iz al-wuḡūd*], while what is eternal is necessary of existence [*wāḡib al-wuḡūd*]. If possibility [*al-ḡawāz*] were applicable to His attributes, that would contradict the necessity of His existence, since possibility and necessity contradict each other. Thus everything which is essentially necessary cannot have possible attributes. This is self-evident.

Al-Ġazālī's hesitation here may well have resulted from his realization that to make an explicit affirmation of the attributes' necessity would expose him to the same danger earlier Kullābite *mutakallimūn* had faced in clearly affirming the attributes' eternality. In al-Ġazālī's case, however, the danger would have consisted in an uncontrollable proliferation of meta-necessities rather than in an uncontrollable proliferation of meta-eternalities.

Another sense in which al-Ġazālī moves a half-step beyond his master al-Ġuwaynī is in identifying the eternal not simply with the necessary of existence, but with the necessary of existence in itself (*wāḡib al-wuḡūd bi-dātihi*). And al-Ġazālī also moves slightly beyond al-Bazdawī by making it crystal clear that necessity of existence is basic, and eternality derivative:

Al-Ġazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī šarḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. F. Šahāda (Beirut, 1971), p. 159.8–13

The eternal *a parte post* [*al-bāqī*] is the existent whose existence is necessary in and of itself. When it is related in the mind to the future, it

is called eternal *a parte post*, and when it is related to the past it is called eternal *a parte ante* [*qadīm*] [. . .] When you say “the existence necessary in itself” it comprises all of this; these names [*i.e.*, *al-qadīm* and *al-bāqī*] are used only in so far as this [necessary] existence is related to past or future.

The Māturīdite *mutakallim* Abū al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī (d. 1114), like his contemporary al-Ġazālī, also clearly saw necessity of existence as basic and eternity as derivative:

Abū al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī, *Kitāb Tabṣirat al-adilla*, p. 61.12–15

[. . .] [This is] due to the fact that the eternal is something for which non-existence is impossible, and this is because the eternal must be necessary of existence [*li-anna al-qadīma yanbaġī an yakūna wāġiba al-wuġūdi*], because were it not necessary of existence, it would be possible of existence or impossible of existence, since there is no category of that which occurs to the [human] mind above and beyond these categories [*lā qismata li-mā yaḥṭuru bi-al-bāli warā’a hādihī al-aqsāmi*]. (I mean that it is either necessary of existence, possible of existence, or impossible of existence.)

The gradual subsuming of eternity under necessity of existence continued in Sunnī *kalām*, and as a result necessity of existence increasingly came to replace eternity as God’s core meta-attribute.⁵⁴ But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that necessary existence ended up performing the same risky double role that had previously been demanded of eternity, both proving God’s existence and serving as His core meta-attribute; and that this dual purpose created, for post-Avicennian Sunnī *mutakallimūn*, many of the same dilemmas that had so challenged the pre-Avicennians. For just as eternity had been used in two quite different contexts – to refer to uncausedness in proofs of God’s existence and yet to be predicable of God’s attributes in discussions of the *ṣifāt* – so too necessity of existence was pulled in opposite directions. The result is that when each of God’s attributes was held to be necessary of

⁵⁴ See, for example: the Māturīdites al-Ṣābūnī (d. 1184), *K. al-Bidāya min al-kifāya fī al-hidāya fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. F. Kholeif (Alexandria, 1969), pp. 36.9–37.15: “If it is established that He is necessary of existence in and of Himself, it is established that He is eternal, because His existence does not depend on anything else” (cf. p. 70.12 and 72.1–2); and Abū al-Barakāt ‘Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 1310), *Umdat al-aqīda li-ahl al-sunna wa-al-ġamā’a*, ed. W. Cureton, in *Pillar of the Creed* (London, 1843), pp. 4.18–5.1: “That whose survival is impossible will not be eternal, because the eternal is the necessary of existence in and of itself [*li-anna al-qadīma wāġibu al-wuġūdi li-dātihī*], and is thus impossible of non-existence.”

existence – let alone necessary of existence in itself – the attributes gained a degree of causal autonomy that made every one of them, in effect, a little god. True, al-Ġuwaynī’s nifty idea of holding that necessity obtained in the divine attribute only insofar as the attribute was predicated of God, had made necessity of existence more attractive than eternality as a meta-attribute. But even apart from the conflation of *de re* and *de dicto* necessity lurking beneath the surface of al-Ġuwaynī’s move, he had still not solved the basic dilemma that arose when necessity of existence was used to attain two competing goals.

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the contours of this problem’s history in post-Avicennian Sunnī *kalām*. But as an illustration of the debate’s complexity and dynamism I shall translate two passages from the commentary on the Nasafī Creed (*i.e.*, Naġm al-Dīn Abū Ḥaḥṣ al-Nasafī [d. 1142], *al-‘Aqā’id*) by Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 1389) (whose theology is a synthesis of Aš‘arite and Māturīdite *kalām*), in which al-Taftazānī tries to reconcile these two seemingly incompatible objectives:

Al-Taftāzānī, *Šarḥ al-‘aqā’id al-nasafiyya*, no ed., Cairo, 1916 [top inside box]

59.2–60.2 [*ad* “*al-qadīm*” at 58.6]: Some [*mutakallimūn*] go so far as to assert that “the necessary” and “the eternal” are synonymous [*mutarādifānī*]. But this is not correct, in light of a precise differentiation of the two concepts. Discussion of their equivalence will consist solely in taking into account what [the two terms] hold true of. Some maintain that “the eternal” is the more general [term], since the attributes of the Necessary may be said to be eternal, in contrast to “the necessary”, which does not hold true of them; yet there is no impossibility in reckoning [that there are] a number of eternal attributes. What is impossible is reckoning that there are a number of eternal selves [*dawāt*]. Other modern [*mutakallimūn*] such as the Imām Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Ḍarīr [d. 1267] assert that the necessary of existence in itself is God *and* His attributes, citing the axiom that whatever is eternal will be necessary in itself; and if it [an attribute] were not necessary in itself, it would be possible of non-existence in itself, and would require, in terms of its existence, something to individuate it, and would thus be originated, since we mean by “originated” nothing other than that whose existence is dependent upon the existentionation of something else [. . .]. This is a discussion of the utmost difficulty, since to speak of reckoning [that there are] a number of [things to which the designation] necessary in itself [applies] is incompatible with [the principle of] divine oneness; while on the other hand speaking of the possibility of the attributes contradicts their assertion that every possible thing is originated.

72.1–10 [*ad* “*wa-hiya lā huwa wa-lā ġayruhu*” at 70.13]: It is indeed unimaginable for there to be a dispute amongst the Sunnīs about the multiplicity of the attributes and [about] their being reckoned to be mutually distinguishable or not. The most proper thing to say is that reckoning them to be eternal selves is impossible; but [what is] not [impossible is reckoning that there is] a [single] self with [many] attributes. [It is also most proper] not to go out on a limb [*an lā yaġtari’a*] by asserting that the attributes are necessary of existence “in themself” [*wāġibat al-wuġūd li-dātiḥā*]; instead it ought to be said that they are necessary not through something other than them [*wāġibatun lā li-ġayriḥā*] but [necessary] through that which is neither identical to them nor other than them [*li-mā laysa ‘aynahā wa-lā ġayrahā*] – I mean God’s self [*dāt Allāh*]. This is the intention of one who says that the necessary of existence in itself is God *and* His attributes, meaning that they [the attributes] are necessary of the Necessary’s self [*wāġibatun li-dāti al-wāġib*], whereas “in themself” they are possible [*wa-ammā fī nafsiḥā fa-hiya mumkinatun*]. There is no impossibility in the eternality of the possible as long as it [the eternality] subsists in the Eternal itself, is necessary of Him [*wāġiban lahu*], and is not distinct from him. Not every eternal thing is a god, so the existence of [a plurality of] gods will not be entailed by the existence of [a plurality of] eternals. On the contrary, it ought to be said that God is an eternal [thing] in [or “with”] His attributes [*allāhu ta’ālā qadīmun bi-ṣifātihi*]. Saying “eternals” should not be extrapolated, lest one become deluded by the idea that each of them [the eternals] is subsistent in itself and is [itself] to be characterized by divine attributes. Because of the difficulty of this topic the Mu’tazilites and the *falāsifa* were led to deny [the real existence of] the attributes, the Karrāmites to deny their eternality, and the Aš’arites to deny [both] their otherness [from] and their identity [with His self].

What al-Taftāzānī suggests, in effect, is that when discussing the divine attributes’ eternality, fellow *mutakallimūn* should fall back upon Ibn Kullāb’s ambiguous formula from five centuries before, namely, that God is “an eternal [thing] in [or ‘with’] His attributes” (*qadīmun bi-ṣifātihi*). This is because of the troublesome consequences (well known by this stage) that follow any more precise statement about the nature of the attributes’ eternality. With necessity and possibility, however, al-Taftāzānī has more room to maneuver. God remains necessary in Himself. The attributes, by contrast, are now held to be “necessary of the Necessary’s self” (*wāġibatun li-dāti al-wāġibi*), while “in themself” (they cannot be “selves”, after all) they are only possible (*wa-ammā fī nafsiḥā hiya mumkinatun*). In other words, al-Taftāzānī has appealed to the spirit of Avicenna’s distinction between the necessary of existence in itself and the necessary of existence through another/possible of existence in itself, since al-Taftāzānī’s and Avicenna’s aims

are the same: providing a coherent way to distinguish between something eternal which is causally self-sufficient (God, for Avicenna; God's self, for al-Taftāzānī), and something eternal which is *not* causally self-sufficient (the celestial intellects, souls and spheres, for Avicenna; the divine attributes, for al-Taftāzānī).

By embracing a slightly modified version of Avicenna's distinction and then using it in a credal commentary to blunt the horns of an old Sunnī-*kalām* dilemma that arose from the ambiguous status of the divine attributes, al-Taftāzānī vividly demonstrates what A.I. Sabra has called, in reference to the history of Arabic science, the processes of appropriation and naturalization.⁵⁵ In al-Taftāzānī's case, however, what is being appropriated and naturalized is not Greek science but Avicenna's metaphysics.

In an article published in an earlier issue of this journal I argued that Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence owed as much to preceding *kalām* discussions about things and existents as it did to preceding Greek treatments of this issue, and that in some texts, Avicenna's position on how things and existents relate to each other is closer to that of tenth-century Aš'arite and Māturīdite *mutakallimūn* than it is to that of al-Fārābī, his fellow *faylasūf*.⁵⁶ In another article I tried to make the case that the positions on essence and existence articulated by post-Avicennian *mutakallimūn*, both Sunnī and Šī'ite, are much closer to Avicenna's own position than the positions articulated by the post-Avicennian philosophers al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191) and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1641), whose radical essentialism and radical existentialism, respectively, placed them outside the bounds of what might meaningfully be called the Avicennian tradition.⁵⁷ In the present article I have attempted to show that Avicenna's formulation of the theory of the necessary of existence in itself was in part a response to preceding Sunnī *kalām* discussions of the eternality of God's attributes, and that later Sunnī *mutakallimūn* immediately

⁵⁵ A.I. Sabra, "The appropriation and subsequent naturalization of Greek science in medieval Islam: A preliminary statement", *History of Science*, 25 (1987): 223–43.

⁵⁶ R. Wisnovsky, "Notes on Avicenna's concept of thingness (*šay'iyya*)", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 10.2 (2000): 181–221.

⁵⁷ Wisnovsky, "Avicenna and the Avicennian tradition".

seized upon Avicenna's theory as a potential escape route from the dilemmas produced by those earlier discussions. In each article my ultimate conclusion has been that while *mutakallimūn* and *falāsifa* often presented their respective projects as being categorically dissimilar, the two strands of thought were so intertwined at the conceptual level that it is almost impossible to disentangle them without ripping apart the intricate tapestry of Islamic intellectual history.