Most scholars of Islamic intellectual history now agree on the distortedness of the traditional Western portrayal of al-Ḡazālī (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-Ḡazālī’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-Ḡazālī’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-Ḡazālī’s teacher, the Aš’arite al-Ḡuwaynī (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’āḥḥirūn* (“late” or “modern”), lies not with al-Ḡazālī but with Avicenna himself, and that the turn in Sunnī kalām was therefore Avicennian, not Ḡazālian.

*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-Māturīḍī’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-Māturīḍī 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 (ṣīfāt 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-Māturīḍī’s ordering of topics in the Kitāb al-Tawḥīd provided a template which most subsequent Sunnī mutakallimuṁān followed in their own independent treatises and textbooks. In the Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, al-Māturīḍī 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-Māturīḍī’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 (māḥiyya) and existence (wuġūd) and between the necessary of existence in itself (wāġīb al-wuġūd bi-dātihi) and the necessary of existence through another/possible of existence in itself (wāġīb al-wuġūd bi-ġayrihi/mumkin al-wuġūd 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 (ḥīss), report (ḥabar) and speculation (naẓār) – and between two types of knowledge – acquired (muktasab) and a priori (ḍarūrī) – were eclipsed by post-Avicennian Sunnī-kalām distinctions between

the two most basic objects of knowledge – essence (maḥiyya) and existence (wuğūd) – and between three modes of knowledge – necessary (wağib), possible (ğāʾiz or mumkin) and impossible (mustahīl or muntaniʿ). 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 (wağib al-wuğūd bi-dātīhi) and the world’s being possible of existence in itself (mumkin [or ǧāʾiz] al-wuğūd bi-dātīhi). 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). 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

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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 *waḡīb al-wuḡūd bi-dātihi* and *waḡīb al-wuḡūd bi-ḡayrihi/mumkin al-wuḡūd 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 Ašʿarite 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 eternality (*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 Muʿtazilite 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 Shiʿite, 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 Fārābīan (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 mutakallīmūn 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-Nazẓām (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 mutakallīmūn 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-Ġubbārī (d. 915), who taught al-Aš‘ārī (d. 935) before al-Aš‘ārī’s defection to Kullābism, defined qadīm as “that which comes before in existence” (mutaqādīm fī...
al-wuğūd).

In other books, according to ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār, al-Ḡubbā‘ī defined qadīm as “that whose existence has no beginning” (mā lā awwal li-wuğūdīhī). Despite al-ʿAṣ’arī’s defection from the Muʿtazilites, both of al-Ḡubbā‘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-ʿAṣ’arī himself used. 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. This is because “origin” is ambiguous: like the Greek term arkhē, 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 eternality 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-Ḡabbār, al-Ḡubbā‘ī had treated qadīm (eternal) and muḥdat (originated) as contradictories: holding a single thing to be qadīm and muḥdat results in mutual contradiction (yatana qaḍu). And for a Muʿtazilite, 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 eternality which dulls
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,

12 Al-Aš’arī, Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn, p. 165.5.
13 Al-Aš’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-dātīhi) and are “neither identical to God nor other than He” (lā hiya Allāhu wa-lā hiya gāyruhi).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-sīfātīhi]”.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-Aš’arī, Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn, pp. 169.2–170.3.
16 I shall comment only briefly on the problem of whether some or all of the attributes are eternal. As far as the classical Aš’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 eternity 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’zām, no ed. (Cairo, 1837–38), p. 21.18–21; and Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 983), Šarh al-fiqh al-absaṭ li-Abī Ḥanīfā, 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’ eternity. This was a stance he took in opposition to the ‘Abbāsid 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 eternity 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

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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 eternity. 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-eternity 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 eternity 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-nafiṣīhī), 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 (ṣifat) is eternal in itself (qadīma bi-nafiṣihat). 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 As’arite mutakallim and mystic al-Quṣayrī (d. 1072), Šarḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā, ed. T.’A. Sa’d and S.H.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 Kullābīte 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 Kullābīte 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.  

On the other hand a Kullābīte 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 qadīmun lam yazal bi-asnāʾīhi 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.  

The only danger of adhering to Ibn Kullāb’s formula – apart from its opaqueness – is that it might tempt anti-Kullābītes to misrepresent the Kullābīte position by claiming that the Kullābītes 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 Kullābīte 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-Ašʿarī abandoned Muʿtazilism in favor of Kullābīsm, these were the dilemmas he found himself facing. If al-Ašʿarī 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-eternalities would result. If, on the other hand, al-Ašʿarī held that God was eternal in Himself and that the

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20 This is precisely the trap which the Muʿtazilite-influenced Šīʿī mutakallim al-Šayḥ al-Mufīd (d. 1022) accuses al-Ašʿarī of having fallen into: al-Šayḥ al-Mufīd, Awā’il al-maqālāt fī al-maḡāhib wa-al-muḥtārāt, ed. M. Muḥaqiq (Tehran, 1993), pp. 11.20–12.8.

21 Al-Ašʿarī, 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 (qadīma bi-nafsiḥā); and a pleroma of causally independent attribute-entities would result. Al-Aš'ārī 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 qadīmun lam yazal bi-asmaʿīhi wa-sīfātihi)" – 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'ārī 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". But al-Aš'ārī 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 Āṣ'arite mutakallim Ibn Fūrak admitted that opponents of his school were correct in criticizing al-Aš'ārī for flip-flopping on this issue. According to Ibn Fūrak, al-Aš'ārī 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-nafsiḥi) in other texts. In commenting on al-Aš'ārī'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-Muʿīn al-Nasafī (d. 1114), who claims that

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23 Ibn Fūrak, Muḥarrad maqāilat al-Aš'ārī, p. 326.7–12; see also p. 28.12–17. The texts Ibn Fūrak refers to explicitly are al-Īdāh (= K. Īdāh al-burhān fī al-radd 'alā ahl al-zayg wa-al-tughān: Ibn ʿAsākir, Ṭabīḥn kaddib al-muṭārīf fī-mā nusiba ilā al-Īmām Abī al-Ḥasan al-Aš'ārī, no ed. [Damascus, 1928], p. 130.3–4), where al-Aš'ārī adopts the qadīm bi-qidamin view; and al-Muḥṭazan (Ibn ʿAsākir, p. 133.2–5), where he follows the qadīm bi-nafsiḥi line.
the Māturīdites are the true heirs of Ibn Kullāb on this issue and condemns al-Āṣ‘arī for straying from Ibn Kullāb’s view. Ibn Fūrak’s Aš’arite contemporary, al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), however, follows the loose-constructionist line, holding that God is eternal in Himself (id li-nafsihi kāna qadīman).

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 eternity without allowing an uncontrollable proliferation of meta-eternalities. This choice, however, forced Sunnī mutakallīmūn 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 Mu’tazilite al-Ǧubbā’ī had treated qadīm (eternal) and muḥdat (originated) as contradictories: holding a single thing to be qadīm and muḥdat results in mutual contradiction (yatanaqadu). 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). 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 contradictories, 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,
possessed by) selves; and also because holding that an attribute is eternal in itself would assign it too much causal indepen-
dence, given that uncausedness was so basic to the \textit{kalām}
conception of eternality.

This raised a serious problem precisely because it was the
contradictory, not contrary, nature of the opposition between
the terms \textit{qadīm} and \textit{muḥdat}, which served as the basis for the
\textit{mutakallimīn}'s proof of God's existence: given that everything
which is \textit{muḥdat} (originated) requires a \textit{muḥdit} (originator),
we must terminate eventually in something which is not
\textit{muḥdat} in order to avoid an infinite regress. And since the only
thing which is not \textit{muḥdat} is \textit{qadīm}, the ultimate \textit{muḥdit} will be
\textit{qadīm}. But this proof will not work if the terms in use are
contraries rather than contradictories. If the terms are con-
traries, as \textit{qadīm li-nafsihi} and \textit{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 (\textit{qadīm}
\textit{li-ḡayrihi}) – which could then somehow be identified with
originated in itself (\textit{muḥdat li-nafsihi}). Only then will eternal
in itself (\textit{qadīm li-nafsihi}) and originated in itself (\textit{muḥdat}
\textit{li-nafsihi}) cover all possible entities, such that the contradic-
tory nature of their opposition be preserved.

The first of these two steps – creating a new category of
"eternal through another" (\textit{qadīm li-ḡayrihi}) – seemed to be
acceptable to some Sunnī \textit{mutakallimīn}. In his Qur'ān com-
mentary, entitled \textit{Interpretations of the Sunnīs}, al-Māturīdī (d.
944) claims that the verse "And therein [viz., in Heaven] shall
they dwell forever" (\textit{wa-hum fıḥā ḥālidūn = Suṣrat al-baqara
25}) can be understood as a refutation of the Jahmite ultra-
monotheists who, in their zeal to protect God's being the
only First, Last and Eternal a parte post (\textit{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 \textit{tašbīḥ}, 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 \textit{bi-dātihi}
("in itself") and \textit{bi-ḡayrihi} ("through another"). If they had
understood and applied this distinction they would have realized that God is eternal \textit{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 \textit{a parte post} through something other than them (bāqiyyatun bi-ḡayrihā).\textsuperscript{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 Aš’arite scholar al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066) pointed out, God’s attribute of baqā’ can be seen to encompass His eternality \textit{a parte ante} as well as His eternality \textit{a parte post}; whereas the baqā’ of heaven and hell, which are created things, can refer only to their eternality \textit{a parte post}.\textsuperscript{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” (muḫdat li-nafsihi) will still run counter to a mutakallim’s basic intuition that qadīm and muḫdat ought to be distinguished on temporal as well as causal grounds.

\textbf{II. DURING}

In the metaphysics section of his earliest philosophical \textit{summa}, the \textit{Ḥikma ‘Arūdiyya}, 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 muḫdat (“originated”), let alone equating qadīm bi-ḡayrihi (“eternal through another”) with muḫdat bi-nafsihi (“originated in itself”):

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Ibn Sīnā, al-Ḥikma al-‘Arūdiyya, 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
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{28} Al-Bayhaqī, \textit{K. al-Asmā’ wa-al-ṣifāt}, p. 33.6–12.
another [qad̄īman bi-ḡayrih̄ā]. Now “originated” [al-muḥdat̄] and “brought-into-being” [al-mutakawwin] consist in that which did not exist at some time or other [ašlādī kāna laysa fī waq̄tin 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 wuġūdīn]; 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 Ašʿarite such as al-Bāqillānī will resist describing the attributes as either muḥdat̄a li-nafsihā (“originated in themselves”) or qad̄īma li-ḡayrihā (“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 muḥdat̄a li-nafsihā or li-dātīhā, 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 muḥdat̄ 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 muḥdat̄a, will be seen to be temporally bounded rather than eternal, and the Qurān, understood as God’s attribute of speech, will be seen to be created instead of uncreated.

On the other hand, if the attributes are qad̄īma li-ḡayrihā, an alarming degree of otherness (ḡayriyya) 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 eternality.

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-īstāḥāla 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 *muḥḍat* 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” (*waḡib al-wuḡūd*) – not just being “impossible of non-existence” (*mustaḥīl 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.

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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 (wāqībun an yakūna [or yūgada] 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 predicatable 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 Kullābīte dilemma better than eternality did. For unlike eternality, 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 eternality, why were pre-Avicennian Sunnī mutakallimūn so reluctant to take that final little step and assert openly that since eternality is now to be defined as impossibility of non-existence, and since impossibility of non-existence is identical to necessity of existence, God’s eternality 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-Maḡmū’ fī al-muhīṭ 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-Ḡubbā’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-wujūbī hāḏīhi al-ṣīfātī lahu) of eternity, power, knowledge, life and so on (152.7–14). His son Abū Ḥāšim 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 wasfī 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 \textit{waḡib} 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 \textit{a priori} truth, they turned to the term \textit{darūrī}. For example, the proposition “the whole is greater than any of its parts” is \textit{darūrī}.$^{33}$

By contrast, early mutakallimūn had understood the active participle \textit{waḡib} as connoting religious or moral obligation (\textit{fard}), and used \textit{waḡib} with the preposition ‘\textit{alā} to mean “morally incumbent upon”.$^{34}$ It is true that many of those same mutakallimūn turned to the root \textit{w-ḡ-b} to render the idea of logical entailment. For example, in his \textit{Vindication of the Science of Kalām}, al-Aḥṣarī uses \textit{waḡaba} in this way:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

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 \textit{[waḡaba]} that He be originated in every respect. And if He resembled it in one respect, it would follow necessarily \textit{[waḡaba]} 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 \textit{waḡib}’s semantic field by stressing the rather Muʿtazilite idea that knowledge of the concepts of right and


$^{34}$ On the distinction between \textit{waḡib} and \textit{darūrī}, see van Ess, \textit{Die Erkenntnislehre des ‘Aṭudaddīn al-Iṣṭ}, pp. 118–19. Instances where \textit{waḡib} and \textit{fard} appear to be interchangeable include Ibn Fūrak, \textit{Muğarrad maqālāt al-Aḥṣarī}, pp. 16.3–6; 32.7–17; 180.17; and 199.8–9; and al-Bāqillānī, \textit{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.\textsuperscript{35} Still, using the active participle \textit{waḡib} – as opposed to the verb \textit{waḡaba/yagibu} – to denote the necessity of a proposition remained rare in pre-Avicennian Sunnī \textit{kalām}.

Unlike most \textit{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 \textit{Iḥwān al-Ṣafā’} (fl. ca. 985?) at one point refer to God as \textit{al-waḡib al-wuḡūd} in their \textit{Rasā’il}.\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{wa-idā kāna al-wuḡūdu fīhi kā-mā qulnā dātiyyan fa-laysa yaḡūzu an yutawḥhama ma’dūman fa-huwa waḡibu al-wuḡūdi wa-mā kāna waḡiba al-wuḡūdi fa-huwa dā’imu al-wuḡūdi wa-mā kāna dā’ima al-wuḡūdi fa-huwa azaliyyun}).”\textsuperscript{37} And the phrase \textit{waḡib al-wuḡūd} appears with the rider \textit{bi-dāṭihi}, again in reference to God, in the \textit{K. al-Amad ‘alā al-abad} of al-‘Āmirī (d. 992).\textsuperscript{38}

Al-‘Āmirī in fact appears to be the most likely direct source of Avicenna’s distinction, for a number of reasons. First of all, al-‘Āmirī was the first to predicate the entire expression \textit{waḡib al-wuḡūd bi-dāṭihi} (“necessary of existence in itself”) of God. Second, though trained in Baḡdād, al-‘Āmirī moved to Buhārā, and was active in the same Sāmānid court and studied in the same Sāmānid library where, only a decade or so later, the


\textsuperscript{38} Al-‘Āmirī, \textit{K. al-Amad ‘alā al-abad}, p. 78.12; \textit{waḡib al-wuḡūd} appears without the rider \textit{bi-dāṭihi} 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 wāḡīb al-wuḡūd bi-dāṭiḥī appears. Finally, in his Kitāb al-Taqrīr li-awḡuh al-taqdíṛ, 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-maʿād (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-taqdíṛ between that which is necessary of existence in itself (bi-al-dāṭ) 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-maʿād.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” (wāḡīb al-wuḡūd) – sometimes with the rider “in itself” (bi-dāṭiḥī), 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 ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār and the Ašʿarite belletrist al-Rāġib al-Īṣfahānī. In fact, some scholars have wondered whether there might be a causal link between, on the one hand, ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār’s presence in Rayy between 1013 and 1015 and the occurrence of terms such as wuḡūb al-wuḡūd in ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār’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-taqdíṛ, 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.
'Abd al-Ġabbār and towards the younger Avicenna.\textsuperscript{41} This perception is reinforced by Averroes' famous comment in the \textit{Tahāfut al-tahāfut} that Avicenna pinched the idea of distinguishing necessary and possible existence from the Mu'ṭazilites (\textit{wa-huwa ṭarīqun aḥadahu Ibnu Sīnā min al-mutakallimīnā [ . . . ] hādā huwa i'tiqādu al-Mu'ṭazilati qabla al-Aš'āriyyati}).\textsuperscript{42}

What truth might there be to Averroes' claim? According to the \textit{Kitāb al-Maghmū' fī al-muḥīṭ bi-al-taklīf} 'Abd al-Ġabbār does toy with the idea that God's eternality (\textit{qidam}) can somehow be explained by referring to the necessity of His existence (\textit{wuḡūb al-wuḡūd}).\textsuperscript{43} 'Abd al-Ġabbār also comes close to making a distinction in that work between intrinsic and derivative necessity (\textit{al-wuḡūbu li-dātihi lā li-šay’in siwāhu}).\textsuperscript{44} In his \textit{Muğnī} the two trends are joined together a little more closely.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Muğnī}, the volumes which cover the topic of \textit{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 \textit{wāḡīb al-wuḡūd}.

Of course, if we accept (as I think we should) that the Uppsala \textit{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 \textit{Ḥikma 'Arūḍiyya}:

\textsuperscript{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.), \textit{Before and After Avicenna} (Leiden, 2003), pp. 127–44.


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

“The Necessary” [*al-wāgib*] is that which is necessary of existence in respect of the way it is [*al-ḍarūriyyu al-wuḫūdi ʿalā mā huwa ʿalayhi*], this being either in itself [*bi-dātihi*] (such as the principle of existents [*ka-mabdaʿi 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-wuḫūdi*], 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 là ʿillata lahu fa-inna wuḫūda dāṭihi là yansimu 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-ḠABBĀR’s works, or other Muʿtazilite works which are now lost, may have been contained in the Sāmānīd library and read by Avicenna before he composed the *Ḥikma ʿArūḍiyya*. But given the lack of textual evidence that other Muʿtazilites thought of this distinction first; and given the hints at that distinction by al-ʿĂMĪRĪ, who worked in the Sāmānīd library only a dozen years before Avicenna; my tentative conclusion is either that Avicenna’s work influenced ‘Abd al-ḠABBĀR’s, or, as seems more likely, that Avicenna and ‘Abd al-ḠABBĀR came up with the idea independently, the former in a sustained and precise way and building directly upon earlier work by al-ʿĂMĪRĪ, 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 waġīb al-wuġūd to describe God is al-Rāġib al-İsfahānī. I shall not go into too much detail concerning the uncertainty over al-Rāġib’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’tiqaḏāt, al-Rāģib argues that existsents and originated things cannot help but terminate eventually in an existentiator and originator (ilā mūḏīda wa-al-muḥdītan), and that this existentiator and originator must be One, Eternal, and Necessary of Existence in Himself (wa-anna ḍālika al-mūḏida wa-al-muḥdīta yāḏibu an yakūna wāḥidan azāliyyan wāḏiba al-wuḵūḏi li-dātihi).49 Later on, al-Rāġib explains what he means when he says that God is necessary of existence:

Al-Rāģib al-İsfahānī, al-I’tiqaḏāt, pp. 56.9–57.11

Proof that He, may He be exalted, is an existent which is necessary of existence [mawḏūḏun wāḏibu al-wuḏūḏi] 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 wāḏibul al-wuḏūḏi aw mumtani’u al-wuḏūḏi aw mumkinu al-wuḏūḏi]. 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-waḏibul al-wuḏūḏi huwa alladā idā furūḏa ǧayra mawḏūḏin lazima minhu mūḥalun  ka-ḫuṣūli arba’atīn 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 Bagdāḍī school of Mu’tazilism and a student of al-Ḥayyāṭ and of al-Ǧubbā’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.


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 [wāqibu al-wuğūdī lā li-dātihi bal li-amrin āhara], 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-wāqibu al-wuğūdī li-dātihi lā li-say’in āhara wa-huwa al-bārī ta’ālā]. The necessary of existence is that which, when postulated as non-existent, an absurdity occurs [īdā furīda ɣayra mawgūdīn ḥaṣala minhu muhālun]; 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 muṭḥaţţun fi̇ wuğūdīhi ilā say’in yūgīduhu 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-wāqibu al-wuğūdī huwa al-ladī lā yaftaqiru fi wuğūdīhi ilā say’in ɣayri 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-Rāġib’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 ‘Arūḍīyya):

Ibn Sīnā, Mabda’ wa-ma’ād, p. 2.5–17

The Necessary of existence is the existent which, when postulated as non-existent [matā furīda ɣayra mawgūdīn], 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-dārūrī], while the possible of existence is that in which there is no necessity at all [al-ladī lā ċarūrata fīthi], 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 [wāqibu al-wuğūdī 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 poten-
tiality (I mean [the potentiality] to burn and be burned) is postulated.

As with ‘Abd al-Ḡabbār, 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-ʿĀmirī is
the most likely direct source of Avicenna’s theory, since
al-ʿĀmirī is the one author whose works were probably in the
right place (Buḥrān) 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 *wāġīb
al-*wuḡūd*. 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-Rāģib and in Avicenna’s
*Mabdā’ wa-*maʿād* – that resonated most powerfully with post-
Avicennian Sunnī *mutakallimūn*. Perhaps this was because
al-Rāģib had come up with this definition at the same time as
Avicenna, and could therefore provide the definition with an
Aš’ārite provenance. But given al-Rāģib’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 incon-
ceivable or impossible allowed a post-Avicennian Aš’ārite, at
least, to identify the necessary of existence with the eternal by
explicitly appealing to al-Baġillānī’s definition of the eternal as
that whose non-existence is impossible. After all, citing al-
Baġillānī, a far more prominent Aš’ārite thinker than al-Rāģib,
would more effectively “Aš’ārize” Avicenna’s distinction.

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50 As I mentioned in fn. 4, detailed discussions of the Neoplatonic, Aristotelian
and Fārābīan 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
Admittedly, most Sunnī mutakallimuṁ of the first and second post-Avicennian generations – including the Ḥanbalite Abū Ya’lā ibn al-Farrā’ (d. 1066), al-Fīrūzābādī al-Sirāzī (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-Ḡazālī’s teacher, the Aš’arite scholar Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Ḡuwaynī (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-Ḡuwaynī, 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.


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 [*yaḥibu al-qat'u bi-anna Allāha taʿāla alladī qaṭā al-ʿaqīl bi-wuṣūr bi-wuṣūr bi-wuṣūr*).

Probably for the reasons mentioned earlier, al-Ǧuwaynī hints that al-Ǧaqqalīnī 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:


137.9–10: The Lord, may He be glorified and exalted, is eternal *a parte post*, [and] necessary of existence [*al-rabbuʿ azza wa-ǧalla bāqin wa-ḡābub al-wuṣūd*], 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 yastahāluʿ adамuḥu*] by general agreement among scholars [*bi-ittifāq min al-ʿuqala*], and this makes clear that He is eternal *a parte post* and continuous of existence [*bāqiya mustamirra al-wuṣūd*].

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-Ǧuwaynī 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-Ğuwaynī follows roughly the same route in his ‘Aqīda nizāmiyya and his Irṣād, 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-ṣifāt: Irṣād, 17.16ff.); ‘what is impossible [to predicate] of God’ (al-kalāmu fī-mā yastaḥīlu ‘alā Allāhi ta‘ālā: ‘Aqīda, 14.12ff; the Irṣād 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: Irṣād, 94.3ff.).

In categorizing the divine attributes according to the modal qualifier that describes how an attribute may be predicated of God, al-Ğuwaynī 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 nafsiyya), 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 Irṣād references are to J.-D. Luciani, ed. and [French] trans., El-Irchad par Imam el-Haramein (Paris, 1938). Al-Ğuwaynī is followed in using ‘necessary’ only to modify the copula that binds the attribute to God, by later Aš’arites such as al-Sanūsī (d. 1490), al-‘Aqīdat al-sanāṣiyya (ap. al-Bağūrī [d. 1860], Ḥaṣiya ‘alā matn al-sanāṣiyya, 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 (wağibatun lahu’); Ibrāhīm al-Laqaṇī (d. ca. 1631), Ğawharat al-tawhīd (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-Faḍlālī (d. 1821), Kifāyat al-‘awāmm fī ‘ilm al-kalām (ap. al-Bağūrī, Ḥaṣiya ‘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 wağibatun 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-Ǧuwaynī was the Māturidite mutakallim Abū al-Ŷusr al-Bazdawī (d. 1099), who, like al-Ǧuwaynī, 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 [faraw kānat al-aʾrāḍu qadīmatan la-mā tuṣawwiru butālnuhā li-anna al-qadīma wāqību al-wuğūdī fa-lā yutaṣawwaru alayhi al-butlānu wa-al-ʿadamu]. \([This is] because if its non-existence were possible [law gaẓa ʿadamuhu] 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 [yaqību] that when two is added to one there is three. If this is necessary [wāqīban] then it is inconceivable for there to be a time in which [adding fīḥi] when two is added to one there is not three.

Unlike al-Ǧuwaynī, who, as mentioned above, appears to have been content simply to allow eternity and necessity of existence to be co-implied, al-Bazdawī is somewhat clearer in preferring necessity of existence as God’s most basic character-istic, with His eternity 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 \([wāqīb al-wuğūd]\) – 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 \([wa-mā kāna wāqība al-wuğūdī yastaḥīlu ʿadamuhu]\), and if [its non-existence] is impossible, it will be specially characterized by eternity – He will also be eternal a parte post \([bāqīn]\), given that the non-existence of the eternal is impossible; given that the eternal is necessary of existence \([li-anna al-qadīma wāqību al-wuğūdī]\); and given

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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-Ḡuwaynī as far as the attributes were concerned, hesitating to call them necessary of God (as al-Ḡuwaynī had), let alone necessary of existence in themselves. However, al-Ḡuwaynī’s star student, the Ašʿarite Abū Ḥāmid al-Ḡazālī (d. 1111), by clearly denying that the attributes are possible of existence, moved in that direction. Still, al-Ḡazālī balks at openly affirming that the attributes are necessary of existence:


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 [ḡāʿiz al-wuḡūd], while what is eternal is necessary of existence [wāḡib al-wuḡūd]. If possibility [al-gawāz] 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-Ḡazālī’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 *mutakallimuḥn* had faced in clearly affirming the attributes’ eternality. In al-Ḡazālī’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-Ḡazālī moves a half-step beyond his master al-Ḡuwaynī is in identifying the eternal not simply with the necessary of existence, but with the necessary of existence in itself (wāḡib al-wuḡūd bi-dāṭīhi). And al-Ḡazālī also moves slightly beyond al-Bazdawī by making it crystal clear that necessity of existence is basic, and eternality derivative:


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 *mutakallīm* Abū al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī (d. 1114), like his contemporary al-Ḡazālī, also clearly saw necessity of existence as basic and eternality as derivative:

**Abū al-Mu‘īn al-Nasafī, Kitāb Tabširat 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 yanbaṣī an yakīna waṣība al-wuṣūḍī], 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-bālī warā‘a ḥādihi al-aqṣāmī]. (I mean that it is either necessary of existence, possible of existence, or impossible of existence.)

The gradual subsuming of eternality under necessity of existence continued in Sunnī kalām, and as a result necessity of existence increasingly came to replace eternality as God’s core meta-attribute. 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 eternality, both proving God’s existence and serving as His core meta-attribute; and that this dual purpose created, for post-Avicennian Sunnī *mutakallīmun*, many of the same dilemmas that had so challenged the pre-Avicennians. For just as eternality 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 existence...

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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), *Umūd al-āqīda li-ahl al-sunna wa-al-ṣamā‘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 waṣību al-wuṣūḍī li-dāṭihi], 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-Ğuwaynî’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-Ğuwaynî’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 Sunnî kalâm. But as an illustration of the debate’s complexity and dynamism I shall translate two passages from the commentary on the Nasafite Creed (i.e., Nağm al-Dîn Abû Ḥafṣ al-Nasafî [d. 1142], al-‘Aqâ’id) by Sa’d al-Dîn al-Taftazânî (d. 1389) (whose theology is a synthesis of Aš’arite and Mâturîdite kalâm), in which al-Taftazânî tries to reconcile these two seemingly incompatible objectives:

Al-Taftazânî, Šarh al-‘aqâ’id al-nasafiyya, no ed., Cairo, 1916 [top inside box]

59.2–60.2 [ad “al-qadîm” at 58.6]: Some [mutakallimu¯n] go so far as to assert that “the necessary” and “the eternal” are synonymous [mutarrâdifa¯nî]. 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 [dawât]. Other modern [mutakallimu¯n] such as the Imam Ḥamîd al-Dîn al-Ḍarîr [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 existentiation 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.
It is indeed unimaginable for there to be a dispute amongst the Sunnis 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 ṭaṣīʿat al-‘ayn] by asserting that the attributes are necessary of existence “in themself” [wāqibat al-wuqūd li-dātiḥā]; instead it ought to be said that they are necessary not through something other than them [wāqibatun lā li-gaṣīraḥā] but [necessary] through that which is neither identical to them nor other than them [li-mā lāyṣa ‘aynahā wa-lā ṣayrahā] – 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 [wāqibatun li-dāti al-wāǧīb], whereas “in themself” they are possible [wa-ammā fī nafsīḥā fa-hiya mumkinatun]. There is no impossibility in the eternality of the possible as long as it [the eternity] subsists in the Eternal itself, is necessary of Him [wāqiban lāhu], 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 [aḏāhu taʿālā qadīmun bi-ṣifātīhī]. 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 Muʿtazilites and the falāsifa were led to deny [the real existence of] the attributes, the Karramites to deny their eternality, and the Ašʿarites to deny [both] their otherness [from] and their identity [with His self].

What al-Taftazānī 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-ṣifātīhī). 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-Taftazānī 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” (wāqibatun li-dāti al-wāǧībi), while “in themself” (they cannot be “selves”, after all) they are only possible (wa-ammā fī nafsīḥā hiya mumkinatun). In other words, al-Taftazānī 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-Taftazānī’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. 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. 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. 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 eternity of God’s attributes, and that later Sunnī mutakallimūn immediately

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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.