Avicenna’s Proof of the Existence of God: Problem 7

In Section 7 of the Shukūk, al-Masʿūdī targets Avicenna’s well-known cosmological argument from possibility for the existence of the First Cause, God. In what follows, we begin with a reading of the proof as it appears in the Ishārāt, referring where relevant to the corresponding discussion in the Najāt, and then make a quick detour to the Shifāʾ, where Avicenna addresses a closely related puzzle. We then consider al-Ghazālī’s objections to the proof, before turning to the complaint raised by al-Masʿūdī.

5.1 Avicenna’s Proof from Possibility

The proof of the existence of the Necessary of Existence through Itself appears in Chapter 4 of the Physics and Metaphysics of the Ishārāt (II.4.9–15). Following a discussion of causation, Avicenna introduces the concepts ‘possible existent’ and ‘necessary existent’, and submits that every existent must be either possible of existence in itself, or necessary of existence in itself (Ishārāt II.4.9). A thing that is possible in itself is predisposed as such to neither existence nor nonexistence. So if such a thing becomes existent, there must be something other than itself that tips the balance and renders its existence preponderant to its nonexistence. Therefore, the existence of a possible thing must be caused by another (Ishārāt II.4.10). What Avicenna intends by ‘cause’ here is a ‘metaphysical’ efficient cause (that is, a cause of existence), as opposed to a ‘physical’ efficient cause (that is, a cause of motion). As such, the cause of a possible existent must coexist with its effect.

1 Avicenna, Ishārāt, 3, 19–27. For a discussion of the proof as it appears in the Najāt, see McGinnis, Avicenna, 163–168.
2 Avicenna, Ishārāt, 3, 19.
3 Avicenna, Ishārāt, 3, 20.
4 On this distinction, see Section 3.2 above.
5 This reading finds explicit confirmation in the Najāt (567; cf. Davidson, Proofs for Eternity, 299ff.). In his commentary on the proof as it appears in the Ishārāt, al-Rāzī rightly points out that it lacks a vital ingredient—namely, an indication of whether the series of successive causes possible of existence are ordered temporally, or are simultaneous. He writes that
Now, it is obvious that possible existents do actually exist. Each possible existent must be caused either by another possible existent, or by an existent necessary through itself. As the existence of the latter has yet to be demonstrated, the argument proceeds on the assumption that the cause is a possible existent. If this second possible existent is caused by yet another possible existent, which is caused by yet another possible existent, then the series of successive causes possible of existence may be either infinite or finite. The next passage (Ishārāt II.4.11), therefore, begins with the disjunctive ‘either’ (immā), although Avicenna here only considers the former disjunct, namely that the series is infinite (which is why, in what follows, I have replaced ‘either’ with ‘if’). He writes:

If [the series of causes possible of existence] regresses ad infinitum, then each unit in this series will be possible in itself. The whole (jumla) is dependent on these [units]. Therefore, it too is not necessary, but must be necessitated by another.⁶

The second disjunct—that the series of causes possible in themselves is finite—is omitted, as it points straightforwardly to the existence of an ultimate cause necessary through itself.⁷ What is deserving of consideration is only the notion that the series of causes possible of existence could regress ad infinitum, which ostensibly would leave no room for an ultimate, first cause. Both disjuncts are mentioned in the Najāt.⁸

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⁶ Avicenna, Ishārāt, 3, 21.
⁷ Cf. al-Rāzī, Sharḥ, 2, 347.
⁸ Avicenna, Najāt, 567.