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Book Review of *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* by Herbert A. Davidson

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In recent years important works by Richard Sorabji and William Lane Craig have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the medieval Islamic discussions of creation, God, and eternity and of their roots in ancient Greek thought. The present book by Herbert A. Davidson (completed in 1980) is an ambitious effort to provide an exhaustive discussion of philosophical arguments for eternity, creation, and divine existence in Arabic and Hebrew. For such a work to be successful, it would have to explore the complexity of the Greek sources available in medieval Islam and to range widely across the whole corpus of complicated and frequently obscure theological and philosophical works from early Islamic *Kalām* to the more purely philosophical discussions of later thinkers such as Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides. It would also have to do so with a focus on the arguments, without being distracted by fascinating, albeit secondary, side issues. Moreover, it would have to display the details of the more historically and philosophically important arguments and also the attempts, successful and otherwise, of later thinkers to undermine them. Finally, it would have to contain a critical discussion of modern philosophical views (perhaps themselves derivative of medieval sources) of some of the same issues, a discussion which will enable philosophers and students of the history of philosophy to see clearly the value of the insights of key medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers. In all these areas and many more Davidson has been extraordinarily successful.

Davidson begins with proofs for eternity. One chapter contains proofs from the nature of the world and another those from the nature of God, with the former subdivided into proofs from matter, possibility, motion, time, the vacuum, and celestial spheres and the latter into proofs based on the impossibility of a particular moment's being chosen for creation, on the unchangeability of the cause, and on God's eternal attributes. In each chapter the explication of proofs is followed by a discussion of responses. (What is done here very much sets the philosophical tone for the entire book: arguments and counterarguments are critically examined methodically in each chapter. The breadth and depth of work with primary sources also set the scholarly tone of a volume which is as well a source book for further research by other scholars.) Here it is made clear that the central philosophical figure on the question of eternity as proved from the nature of the world is Aristotle and that his position and the arguments for it unquestionably exert the greatest influence on the discussions. Still, while Aristotle's influence is easily identified in relation to the proofs from the nature of the world, only vaguely is he present in proofs from the nature of God. Rather, "Proclus apparently was the main source or channel through which medieval Arabic philosophers received the three proofs for eternity from the cause of the world" (p . 51).

Davidson's treatment of proofs of creation begins with the thought of John Philo­ ponus (John the Grammarian, Yaḥyā al-Naḥwī, as he was known in Greek and Arabic) because of the powerful influence his work exerted on arguments formulated by theological and philosophical thinkers. His proofs consist of one group founded on the impossibility of an infinite number and another based on the notion that a finite body with finite power would lack the power to sustain a universe in being infinitely into the past. The proofs were drawn upon by al-KindI and Saadia, but what is perhaps most interesting is the detailed account of the extent to which they were drawn upon by Islamic theologians (as well as later Jewish and Christian thinkers) without awareness of the ultimate source. In new hands, of course, old arguments took on new life and were put to new uses. " Naẓẓām is reported to have refuted the Manicheans by contending that the denizens of darkness could never have crossed their own infinite realm to reach the realm of night, which they allegedly attack. For, Naẓẓām explains, 'traversing an infinite is impossible, ... and exhausting something shows it to be finite.' Here we have Philoponus' first proof of creation transferred to the subject of the body of the universe" (p. 125). Davidson also detects the possible influence of Philoponus in the commonplace *Kalām* proof of creation from accidents and feels more confident that the influence was there in versions which were supplemented by proofs from the impossibility of infinite number. Arguments from com­ position may likewise evidence the remote presence of the thought of Philoponus. The use of a form of the particularization argument with these then made possible the inference of the existence of a creator, for if creation took place, an agent must select out particularizing characteristics "tipping the scales" toward the actual existence of possibles. A form of this argument was used by Maimonides and may indeed be detected in Avicenna.

Other arguments for the existence of God which Davidson discusses are teleological or cosmological in nature and arise from considerations respecting design or contingency of motion or of existence. Of these the most influential is that of Avicenna for a being which exists necessarily by virtue of itself. According to Davidson, behind this notion lie Neoplatonic passages which "were mediated through the *Liber de causis,"* a work sometimes attributed to Aristotle in the Arabic tradition (p. 294). (This may indeed be true to the extent that the sorts of arguments found in the *Liber de causis* or *Kalām fī maḥḍ, al-khair [Discourse on the Pure Good]* and derived from Proclus are at work in Avicenna's mind. Nevertheless, there is no evidence for - and Davidson does not unequivocally assert - the idea that the *Liber de causis* was directly known by Avicenna or al-FarabI. Both did know the pseudo-Aristotelian *Theology of Aristotle,* and it is there that Avicenna saw the sort of terminology he uses in his own discussions of self-sufficiency and subsistence.) In his analysis of the argument and of the philosophical response to it by Averroes, Davidson goes well beyond other modem scholarly discussions and finds that Averroes did not know the precise details of Avicenna's argument and also that critical reflection on it and on his own earlier attempts at its refutation ma y have forced him to the position of Avicenna (p. 335). But Avicenna himself also failed to establish his conception of a single being existing necessarily by virtue of itself, as Ghazali's critique made evident.

The concluding chapter of the book "Sub sequent History of Proofs from the Concept of *Necessary Existence,"* provides the indispensable link between medieval Islamic and Jewish thought and (in particular that of Avicenna and his conception of a being which exists necessarily by virtue of itself) with modem (Cartesian and post­Cartesian) proofs of God as necessarily existent. Comparison of the Avicennian arguments with those of the modern era requires 'the careful distinction of the cosmological proof from the ontological and from versions which mix the cosmological with the ontological (and thereby allow for refutation of the latter whole because of problems with the ontological part). For philosophers unfamiliar with Islamic thought or with medieval thought in general, this chapter should be read first. Davidson's argument here requires cautious evaluation but clearly furnishes a bridge which will enable those well versed in modern thought to move into the medieval discussions and those well versed in the medieval discussions to see the place of such discussion in modem philosophy.

Davidson's book is an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the history of ideas; it is also a stimulating essay of philosophical analysis. It is a volume which, for its breadth and depth of insight, belongs on a shelf with the works of scholars such as H. A. Wolfson.

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