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While the ontological arguments of Anselm and Descartes continue to be the source of controversy among philosophers and theologians in the West, scant attention has been paid to the ontological argument first formulated by Ibn Sina (370/980 – 429/1037), and thereafter reformulated by various Muslim philosophers throughout the centuries up to the present day. Here several versions of the argument will be presented in historical sequence, and some of the most important recent discussions of the argument by contemporary Muslim philosophers will be mentioned. Some reflections on the argument and the discussions of it will then be presented along with comments of a comparative nature regarding contemporary Islamic philosophy and Western philosophy of religion.

The form of ontological argument developed by Muslim philosophers was given the epithet the “Proof of the Sincere” (*burhan al-sidiqin*) after the comments of Ibn Sina in his *Kitab al-isharat wa al-tanbihat* on his own proof:

Consider how our presentation of the proof of the First, its uniqueness and its abstaining from silence [His unfailing existence] is not flawed by consideration of anything other than existence itself. It does not need regard for creation or divine action, even though these may be reasons. But this way is the firmest and most noble, since our consideration of the state of existence bears witness to existence *qua* existence, and it bears witness after that to what is necessary beyond this. This is like that which is indicated in the Divine Book:

“Soon We will show them Our signs in the horizons and in their own selves until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth.”(41:53).

I declare that this judgment is for one people. Then it is said:

“Is it not sufficient for your Lord that He is a witness over all things?” (41:53).

I declare that this is the judgment of the sincere who bear witness to Him, not [those who bear witness

by some evidence] for Him. [1](#)

The proof which precedes these comments is what is usually termed the argument from contingency, and is usually considered a kind of cosmological argument. Regardless of how one might assess the proof today, Ibn Sina's own assessment is worthy of attention in its own right, for it is the idea that God's existence might be established directly by consideration of His existence itself that has fascinated later Muslim philosophers. This fascination is aroused as much for religious as for philosophical reasons. It bespeaks a desire for direct awareness of Divinity through the commerce of the intellect with existence itself.

Other means of coming to know God are also possible, through the signs on the horizons and in the self, but for those most sincere in faith, God Himself is the witness to His own existence, that is, He is known through Himself rather than by such intermediaries as the wonders of the macrocosm or microcosm.

Thus, while Anselm and Descartes attempt to prove God's existence through an analysis of the concept of God, in the Proof of the Sincere the attempt is made to arrive at God's existence through an analysis of existence itself, on the presumption that the unique Necessary Existent is God.

Ibn Sina argues that if we consider any existent at all and attend solely to its existence, this existence will either be necessary or not. If it is necessary, then this is God, the Necessary Existent (*al-Wajib al-wujud*). If it is not necessary, then it must be either impossible or contingent. It cannot be impossible, for it was supposed we begin with an actual existent, so it must be contingent. So, considering its existence alone, every existent is either the Necessary Existent or is a contingent existent.

The contingent is described as that in itself for which neither existence nor non-existence is prior, so that something else is needed to tip the metaphysical balance toward being. Hence, the existence of a contingent being is by another, in Arabic, *bil-ghayr*, and in the Latin of the scholastics, *ab alio*. The preponderant which brings the contingent into existence will itself be either necessary or contingent. If it is necessary, this is God, *al-Wajib al-wujud*. If it is contingent, it will be in need of an external preponderant.

The series of external preponderants will either be finite or infinite. If it is finite, the series will end with God, for the last member of the series will not need a cause, and that which does not need a cause is by definition the Necessary Existent. If the series is infinite, where each member of the series is contingent, then the series as a whole will also be contingent, because the existence of the series as a whole is dependent upon the existence of its members, and that whose existence is thus dependent is contingent.

The fact that the series has contingent members establishes the contingency of the series as a whole, for the dependence of the whole on its contingent parts prevents the whole from being necessary. Supposing that the whole does not require any cause at all, so that it is necessary and non-contingent, [2](#) Ibn Sina asks, "how can this be while it will be necessitated only by its units?" Thus, on the basis of its

dependence on its elements, Ibn Sina establishes the contingency of any sequence of contingent causally related effects, even if the series is infinite.

Before continuing with our exposition of the Avicennan argument, two points should be noted.

First, there is no fallacy of composition to be found in this proof. It is not argued simply that since a series is composed of contingent elements, that the series itself must be contingent. Rather, the contingency of the series is established on the basis of the definition of contingency as dependence on another, and the observation that a series is dependent upon its elements. This is a point other commentators have often failed to observe. Herbert A. Davidson, for example, claims that Ibn Sina “does not give any reason why that thesis [that the necessary existent is composed of contingent beings] is absurd.”³ To the contrary, at least in the *Isharat* the reason is clear: every composite depends for its existence on its components, and that which depends on something for its existence is by definition contingent rather than necessary.

Second, the proof does not rest on any argument for the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes, although in passages between the argument described above and Ibn Sina’s remarks about the Proof of the Sincere, there are arguments that there can be no infinite regress and that every sequence must end with the Necessary Existent. However, there is also independent argument that no series of causes, even an infinite series, can itself be anything but contingent, depending on something outside this series. The cause for this infinite series as a whole must be either contingent or necessary, and if contingent, we are launched again on a regress which the arguments against infinite regress are designed to prevent. At the lowest level, it seems that Ibn Sina was prepared to allow an infinite regress of efficient causes, but when considering the series of causes of this base series, he was unwilling to allow another infinite series.

In order to fully dispense with the arguments against infinite regresses, what Ibn Sina requires is not the argument of the *Isharat* beginning with a single contingent being and considering the sequence of its causes, but rather an argument which considers all contingent existents as a whole. The cause of this totality cannot be one of its own members, furthermore it must have some cause of its existence, since it has contingent existence, and so the cause must be an existent outside the set of all contingent existents, and that must be the Necessary Existent. Later we shall see that Suhrawardi provides precisely such an argument, along with several others.

The version of the Proof of the Sincere described above and found in the *Isharat* markedly differs from its nearest ancestor in Islamic philosophy, that ascribed to al-Farabi (259/872 – 339/950) in a commentary on Zeno.⁴ Unlike his predecessor, al-Kindi (185/801 – 260/873), who had argued against an infinite series of causes in time, al-Farabi accepts the temporal eternity of the world, but claims that the cosmos as a whole is contingent and in need of a cause, and that there cannot be an infinite causal regress for the cosmos as a whole.

In the succession from al-Kindi to al-Farabi and then to Ibn Sina, it is seen how a cosmological argument evolves into an ontological argument. This evolution is further extended by Ibn Sina's successors. Al-Kindi's argument is based on the need for a first cause in time. Al-Farabi rejects this argument and views creation as an atemporal emanation rather than as a particular temporal event. Like Ibn Sina, al-Farabi also bases his argument on the distinction between the necessary and the contingent, where the latter is identified as needing an external cause of its existence. Ibn Sina repeats al-Farabi's argument in various places and in various forms, finally coming to the realization in his *Isharat* that an examination of the nature of existence itself is sufficient to establish the existence of the Necessary Existent, and this without need for an appeal to the impossibility of a regress of efficient causes.⁵

Returning to Ibn Sina's Proof of the Sincere, we have seen how Ibn Sina establishes that a series of contingent effects must itself be contingent. Given the definition of contingency as existence *ab alio*, the atheist as well as the theist could accept the argument up to this point. Each event in an infinite series of effects will be contingent, and the series as a whole can be considered contingent insofar as its existence is dependent on its constitutive members. The whole would not exist without its members, so the existence of the whole as such will be contingent, i.e., dependent for its existence on something other than itself, for the part is other than the whole.

The move from this point to the conclusion of the argument is the most questionable part of Ibn Sina's proof. The continuation of his argument seems to require the assumption that since the series is contingent in the sense of being dependent for its existence on other factors, namely its contingent constituents, it must also have a total cause for its existence, where the total cause of a thing is that which is both necessary and sufficient for its existence. The total cause cannot be the collection of all its constituents, for the series is nothing over and above this collection, and a thing cannot be said to be a cause of itself. It is equally clear that no proper part of the causal series could be the total cause of the whole, for no proper part of the series has ontological priority over any other part by virtue of which it could be singled out as the cause of the whole. The only alternative which remains is to consider the total cause of the series to lie outside the series itself, and this, Ibn Sina asserts, is *al-Baqi* (the Everlasting), God.

One might object to this final inference, from the need for a total cause outside any contingent causal series to the claim that this must be God, for one could always posit that the external cause of the series was yet another contingent cause, leading back to the controversy over the impossibility of an infinite regress, or to the argument mentioned above (later formulated by Suhrawardi) for the need of a cause for the totality of all contingent beings. However, leaving aside this inference, even if Ibn Sina could successfully establish the penultimate stage of his argument, he would have gained a significant achievement: the establishment of the need for a transcendent cause for even an infinite series of effects.

Ibn Sina would appear to be arguing that the contingent requires a sufficient cause, or it would remain poised between being and non-being. The supposed infinite series of effects is not itself necessary, because it depends on its contingent elements. Since it is not necessary, it is contingent and requires a sufficient cause which cannot be identified with all or some of its elements. Those who reject cosmological arguments often base their rejection on a denial of the form of the principle of sufficient reason to which the argument under question appeals.⁶ This path of denial and rejection is also open to the opponent of Ibn Sina. The opponent might simply deny that the contingent requires a sufficient cause. The series of effects remains contingent because of its dependence on necessary conditions or causes, such as its elements, but given these necessary conditions, nothing whatsoever tips the metaphysical balance in favor of existence; it just happens to come out for being instead of nothingness.

Of course, the kind of opposition to Ibn Sina sketched above is not something to which we could expect him to have a reply. He would have considered it absurd to suppose that something could just happen to exist without any sufficient cause. Following a suggestion by Richard M. Gale, the very least that can be said for Ibn Sina's argument is that it shows that if the causal series which constitutes the cosmos is to have any explanation for its existence at all, that explanation must appeal to the existence of something that transcends the series itself and its members. What would then be left of the Proof of the Sincere is the argument that reflection on the nature of existence itself is sufficient to show that a transcendent being must be posited on pain of admitting inexplicable contingency.

The next important restatement of the Proof of the Sincere to be found in the history of Islamic philosophy occurs in Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi's (549/1155 – 587/1191) *Kitab hikmat al-ishraq*. The importance of Suhrawardi's version is due to two facts: first, that it expresses gnostic (*'irfani*) ideas which would later be formulated in the school of Ibn al-'Arabi; and second, that Sadr al-Din Shirazi (979/1571 – 1050/1641) claimed that his own version of the proof is close to that of the Illuminationists, i.e., to Suhrawardi and his followers.⁷ Suhrawardi uses his own particular terminology along with that of Ibn Sina, and this is also employed later by Sadr al-Din Shirazi. For example, Suhrawardi identifies the Necessary Existent with the Light of Lights (*Nur al-anwar*), and refers to contingent being as poor (*faqir*) and necessary being as rich (*ghani*).

If immaterial light were poor in its essence, then its need would not be for a dusky dead substance, for it would not be proper that the more noble and complete should be founded on that which is not in that direction [toward nobility], and how could the dusky benefit the light? So, if the immaterial light is needy in its occurrence, then there should be for it a supporting light. Then the ordered supporting lights will not go on to an infinite regress, as you know from the proof for the necessity of an end for things ordered into collections. So, there must be an end to the supporting lights, and their accidents and *barzakh* [mediation] and shapes are [directed] to a light beyond which is no further light, and that is the Light of Lights, the Comprehensive Light, the Self-Subsistent Light, the Sacred Light, the most Magnificent and Lofty of Lights, and this is the Almighty Light, and this is the absolutely needless, for no other thing is beyond it.⁸

Suhrawardi goes on to demonstrate that the Light of Lights is unique, and then gives several other versions of his argument for its existence. While the above argument depends on the impossibility of an infinite regress, some of the subsequent versions are independent of this assumption.

And also by another route: A thing does not require its own nonexistence, otherwise it would not occur. The Light of Lights is a unity; in itself it has no conditions. All else is subject to it. Since it has no condition and no opposite, there is nothing which can void it, so it is self-sufficient and everlasting. And the Light of Lights is not attached to any sort of shape, whether luminous or dark, and attributes are not possible for it in any aspect.⁹

The above passages are found in Suhrawardi's most important work, *Hikmat al-ishraq*, and they contain several elements important for the subsequent development of the Proof of the Sincere. At first glance, the first argument seems completely unoriginal, for supposing light to be a symbol for existence, it claims that if an existence is contingent then it requires a causally supportive existence, and then, since a regress is held to be impossible, there must be a first support. So, one might be tempted to dismiss the argument as a mere restatement of the first cause argument in terms of the metaphor of light. The light imagery, however, is more than decorative. First, it suggests that existence itself comes in various intensities with the weaker dependent on the stronger.

In Mulla Sadra this doctrine became known as the analogical nature of being or the gradedness of existence (*tashkik al-wujud*). Secondly, Suhrawardi's statement of the argument begins by speaking of existence (immaterial light) itself. If existence itself were contingent, then, given the impossibility of a regress, there would have to be a first. This suggests that attention to being itself independent of any other consideration is sufficient for the establishment of its necessity in a way that goes beyond that which was stated by Ibn Sina, for while Ibn Sina begins by asking us to consider an existent, any existent, and stating that its existence must be either necessary or contingent, Suhrawardi begins with existence itself in the guise of immaterial light and argues that this light requires the positing of a Light of Lights, a First Support, a most intense existence.

In the second passage from Suhrawardi it is claimed that the Light of Lights must exist because it has no conditions the failure to satisfy which could prevent it from existing.

These kinds of arguments later came to paramount importance in the theoretical mysticism of the school of Ibn al-'Arabi (560/1165 – 638/1240). According to the doctrine of the unity of existence, *wahdat al-wujud*, which was developed over the course of the two centuries after Ibn al-'Arabi, God is identified with absolute existence, *al-wujud al-mutlaq*, defined as existence as it is in itself, unconditioned by anything. Thus, Muhammad Turkah Isfahani (d. 850/1446) argues that existence in itself (*al-haqiqat al-wujud*) cannot admit nothingness on pain of contradiction, and that it must therefore be necessary. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jami (817/1414 – 898/1492) argues that existence must exist for if there were no existence, then nothing else could exist either, and furthermore, that existence must be God, the Necessary Existent, because existence must exist through itself rather than through another, otherwise

an infinite regress would result. [10](#)

As in Suhrawardi's second argument, the focus of such *'urafa* as Isfahani and al-Jami is clearly existence itself. Reflecting Suhrawardi's idea that the Light of Lights is unconditioned, is the claim of such Sufis as Ibn Turkah, al-Qunawi, 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani and al-Qaysari, that absolute existence (*wujud al-mutlaq*) is in itself the Necessary Existent, where absolute existence is defined as existence in itself, unconditioned by anything.

Thus, in Suhrawardi we find three elements which later surface in the arguments of the *'urafa*: first, the focus on pure existence in itself; second, the notion that existence must be necessary because it is unconditioned, and the third point again turns upon Suhrawardi's use of light imagery: the ability of lights to merge into each other to form a single light is highly suggestive of the doctrine that all existence is one, although it also suggests the possibility of differentiation on the basis of differing intensities. While the former idea was emphasized by the followers of Ibn al-'Arabi, the latter idea became one of the pillars of the philosophy of Sadr al-Muta'alihin. Later it will be seen that this difference in emphasis came to be a point of contention between the *'urafa* and *hukama* of Islam.

It has often been remarked that Sadr al-Muta'alihin combined elements of the peripatetic philosophy of Ibn Sina, the illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi and the theoretical gnosis of Ibn al-'Arabi. [11](#) Mulla Sadra's exposition of the Proof of the Sincere is a paradigm of this threefold synthesis. The proof is presented in various works in somewhat differing renditions, four of which will be examined below, but it is also worth mentioning something about Sadr al-Muta'alihin's own evaluations of the arguments of Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi.

With regard to the argument of Ibn Sina, Mulla Sadra objects that Ibn Sina's proof proceeds from observations about the concept of existence rather than from existence itself. This seems strange, for Ibn Sina claims that his proof is based on existence itself, and it is for this reason, after all, that he calls it the Proof of the Sincere. Sadra seems to feel that Ibn Sina's proof merely reaches the conclusion that there must be something which is the Necessary Existent on the basis of an analysis of the need of a cause for the contingent, without presenting the Necessary Existent itself. To the contrary, Sadra considers his own version of the Proof of the Sincere as establishing that the absolute core reality of existence is the Necessary Existent. The Necessary Existent is not a being whose existence is merely to be inferred on the basis of the nature of contingency, but is to be discovered by considering existence itself, that is, the reality or Truth of existence is one, and although existence has degrees according to Mulla Sadra, pure existence is the Necessary Being.

In his commentary on Mulla Sadra's *Asfar*, Mulla Hadi Sabzavari (1212/1797 – 1295/1878) remarks that Sadr al-Muta'alihin is speaking of existence itself while Ibn Sina uses the concept of existence to speak of particular existents and to reason to the existence of the Necessary Existent. In this sense, Sabzavari explains, Ibn Sina may be said to be speaking of the concept of existence. It is not that Ibn Sina is talking about the concept qua concept, but that he is using an analysis of the concept to reach his

conclusion.

Sadr al-Muta'alihiin also considers and rejects Suhrawardi's statement of the argument from contingency, which is stated briefly as follows:

The cause of the totality of contingents cannot be something contingent, for otherwise it would be of that totality. Hence it must be something which is not contingent, and since it cannot be impossible, the cause and preponderant of the existence of the totality of contingents must be the Necessary Existent. [12](#)

The problem Sadra raises against this argument is that the totality mentioned here has no real existence of its own, but is a mere mental or conventional entity, and as such requires no cause. The student of contemporary philosophy of religion will be reminded of the arguments of Hume and Paul Edwards that if the existence of each of the individuals in a collection may be explained, there is no need for any further explanation of the existence of the whole, [13](#) but one of the major differences between discussions of cosmological arguments in the West and the proofs from contingency given by Muslim thinkers is that the Western arguments focus on the epistemological question of the need for explanations, reading the principle of sufficient reason as an assertion that everything should have an explanation, while the Muslim philosophers are concerned with the analysis of existential dependence, the ontological need for a *causa essendi*, that which is necessary and sufficient to bring about the existence of an entity.

The focus on existence per se comes out clearly in the *Asfar*, where Sadr al-Muta'alihiin presents the Proof of the Sincere as follows:

And it is stated that existence, as was mentioned before, is a single, simple, objective reality (*haqiqah 'ayniyah*). There is no difference in the essences (*dhat*) of its individuals, but only in perfection and imperfection and in intensity and weakness, or in other matters [not related to existence itself], for example, that between the whatnesses (*mahiyyah*) of the same species. The ultimate perfection for which there is nothing greater is that which does not depend on anything else, and nothing greater than it can be imagined, for all imperfect things are dependent on others, and are in need of the more complete. It has become clear that the complete is prior to the imperfect, and activity is prior to potentiality. Existence is prior to nothingness. It has also been made clear that the completion of a thing is that very thing with an addition. Therefore, existence is either independent of others or essentially (*li dhat*) in need of others.

The First is the Necessary Existent, which is Pure Existence than which nothing is more complete, and It is unmixed with non-existence and imperfection. The second is other than this, but is Its actions and effects, which rest upon nothing but It. And, as was mentioned, the reality (*haqiqah*) of existence has no deficiency, and if any imperfection occurs in it, it is only due to its being an effect, and this is because the effect cannot be of an equal degree to the existence of its cause. So, if existence were not something made (*maj'ul*), dominated by that which brings it into existence and brings it about (as according to what it requires), it would not be imaginable that it should have any sort of imperfections. For the reality of

existence, as you know, is simple. It is unlimited, not determinate, except for pure activity and occurrence, otherwise there would be mixture in it or it would have some essence other than existence in it.

We have also mentioned that if existence is an effect, then it is in itself something which is made by a making which is simple, and its essence (*dhat*) in itself is in need (*muftaqra*) of a maker (*ja'il*), and it relies in its substance and essence (*dhat*) on its maker. Thus, it has been proven and made clear that existence is either complete reality (*haqiqah*) necessary in its ipseity (*huwiyah*), or it is essentially (*dhatan*) in need of it [i.e. that which is necessary in itself], substantially (*jawhariyah*) relying on it. According to each of these alternatives it has been proven and demonstrated that the existence of the Necessary Existent is in its ipseity needless of any other. This is what we intended. And know that this argument is extremely firm and strong, and its source is near to the way of the Illuminationists, which is based on the principle of light. [14](#)

In the first paragraph above we find allusions to what are sometimes called the “two wings” of the transcendent wisdom, as Sadra’s philosophy is called, the two principles of the analogical nature of being or gradedness of existence (*tashkik al-wujud*) and the fundamentality of existence (*‘asalat al-wujud*). According to the first principle, as is suggested by Suhrawardi’s light imagery, existence is seen as a continuum stretching from the summit of complete perfection, actuality and independence, down through the lowest forms of existent. According to the fundamentality of existence, the qualitative properties of a thing (in terms of which its whatness is defined) are seen as mere bounds within which existence is confined. Often times hylomorphic metaphors are used to explain this principle, as it is said that existence is like paper and whatness is like the shapes into which it is cut, or that existence is like an ocean which may take the form of a wave, where the shape of the wave is likened to the qualitative aspect, or whatness. Finally, all individual existences are divided between the dependent and the independent, the contingent and the Necessary.

In the first paragraph there are also allusions to ideas associated with the followers of Ibn al-‘Arabi who asserted the individual unity of existence. Mulla Sadra also claims that existence “is a single, simple, objective reality” and that “there is no difference in the essences (*dhat*) of its individuals”. Like the Sufis, Sadr al-Muta’alihin also emphasizes the fact that the Necessary Existent is unmixed and pure, but while many of the *‘urafa* also identified (or were interpreted as identifying) the Necessary Existent with the absolute totality of existence, Mulla Sadra identifies It with the pinnacle of the existential continuum. Sadra refers to this as *haqiqat al-wujud*, which literally means the Truth of existence, but is often translated as the reality of existence or even the inner-reality of existence. Everything which exists is either this pure existence itself or is something which depends upon it, and in either case the Truth of existence must exist and be independent of all else. Hence, the Truth of existence is the Necessary Existent, God.

What we have here is less a proof than a vision, that is, we are presented with an entire philosophy of

existence, the acceptance of which, including the doctrines of the causal continuum of being and the fundamentality of existence, requires one to accept the existence of a First Necessary Existent. One could accept that there was a continuum extending upward infinitely, but this would be to deny that there is any such thing as pure existence, as required by the doctrine of the fundamentality of existence. Indeed, once the doctrine of the fundamentality of existence is fully appreciated, it may be seen to directly imply that pure fundamental existence is the Necessary Existent.

According to the doctrine of the fundamentality of existence, reality itself corresponds to existence, and the properties which are ascribed to reality, as when it is said that this is a man, merely indicate the limits within which existence manifests itself. Particular attributes, such as a given redness or humanity are seen as the mental frameworks, called whatnesses (*mahiyyat*), within which existence may or may not display itself. Reality itself is existence, not whatness. The realization of whatness in a particular always depends upon existence. Existence, on the other hand, depends on nothing, for there is nothing else on which it might depend, and that which depends on nothing is by definition the Necessary Existent.

Another version of the Proof of the Sincere given by Sadr al-Muta'alihin occurs in his commentary on the passage from the Qur'an:

“Allah witnesses that there is no god but He” (3: 17).

Mulla Sadra writes:

Know that the greatest of proofs and firmest of ways, the brightest path, the most noble and most secure is reasoning to the essence (*dhat*) of a thing by its essence (*dhat*). And that which is the most manifest of things is the nature of absolute existence (*al-wujud al-mutlaq*) in so far as it is absolute, and it is the Truth (*haqiqah*) of the Necessary Itself, the Exalted, and there is nothing except the First Truth (*al-Haqq al-Awwal*) which is the Truth (*haqiqah*) of existence itself, for whatever is other than It is either a whatness (*mahiyyah*), or an imperfect existence mixed with imperfection, or impotence and nothingness. There is nothing among them to be an instance of the meaning of existence by its essence (*dhat*). The Necessary Existent is pure existence than which nothing is more complete [more properly an instance of existence]. It has no limit [or definition] and has no end and it is not mixed with any other thing, whether a universality or specificity, nor [is It mixed with] one attribute in contrast to another besides existence.

So we say: If there were not a Truth of Existence in existence, there would not be anything in existence, for whatever is other than the Truth of Existence is either a whatness (*mahiyyah*), and it is obvious that in respect to its essence (*dhat*) it would be other than existent, or it is an imperfect and incomplete existence, so there would be no alternative but to require composition and specification at a determined level and specific limit of all existence. Then a cause would be needed to complete its existence, and that which limits by a specific limit and brings it from potentiality to actuality and from contingency to necessity, for everything whose truth is not the truth of existence will not in its essence require existence,

and neither will its ipseity require a specific limit of existence. So it will need something to dominate and limit it to benefit it with a determinate level. And that is the preponderant that is prior in existence to all, with a priority in simplicity over the composed, over the imperfect, the rich over the poor, and the gracious over the graced. So the Truth of the First Truth is the proof of its essence (*dhat*) and is the proof of all things. As is said by God:

“Is it not sufficient for your Lord that He is a witness over all things?” (41:53).

So this is the way of the Sincere, those who rely upon Him by Himself and who reason from Him to Him and who witness by His existence to other things, not by the existence of things to Him. [15](#)

Here again, we find elements drawn from the Muslim peripatetics and from the *‘urafa*. The passage begins with an affirmation of the Sufi claim that the sole reality is God, identified with absolute existence: “there is nothing except the First Truth (*al-Haqq al-awwal*) which is the Truth (*haqiqah*) of existence itself”. In order to prove that absolute existence must be God, i.e., the Necessary Existent, it is argued that no other candidate is independent, not whatness, not existence mixed with imperfection, and certainly not impotence and nothingness. So, if there is a God, it must be pure absolute existence, and if it can be shown that this Truth of Existence itself exists, is instantiated, this will amount to a proof of the existence of God.

The next move is typical of the *‘urafa*. It is claimed that if there were no Necessary Existent, no Truth of Existence, then there would be nothing at all. At this point, however, Sadra ceases to follow the line of the Sufis and takes a more peripatetic form of reasoning, claiming that the Truth of Existence is needed by all other existents as a cause. Whatness by itself cannot be responsible for existence, for if we consider merely the properties exhibited by reality, it will be a contingent fact that they are instantiated. If someone claims that there is no pure existence but only mixed imperfect existences, Sadra replies that they rely upon pure existence in two respects. First, the imperfect existent will require a cause, since no imperfect being in and of itself can be responsible for its own existence; and second, a cause is needed for the imperfect to determine its level of limited actuality, for the imperfect will not be able to determine a specific level or grade of being for itself on its own, but needs to be dominated from above, as it were.

As in the statement in the *Asfar*, we find reference to the Sufi theme of the unity of existence, but this comes to be explicated in terms of the major principles of Sadra’s own transcendental philosophy: the fundamentality of existence and the gradedness of existence. Necessary and contingent are defined in terms of causal dependence, as in Ibn Sina, and the ultimate cause is then shown to be the Truth of existence.

There is also a discussion of the Proof of the Sincere in the Epilogue to his *Kitab al-masha’ir*. [16](#) Here it is first admitted that there are many paths toward God, but that the strongest and most noble is that in which He alone can be the middle term of the argument, and that this direct route is that of the Prophets and of the Sincere. The discussion is punctuated with passages from the Qur’an, including those

mentioned regarding the Proof of the Sincere by Ibn Sina. Those who take the route of the Sincere first consider the reality or Truth of existence, *haqiqat al-wujud*, and understand that this is the principle or origin (*‘asl*) of each thing, and that this is the Necessary Existent.

Contingency, need and privation do not attach to existence because of its *haqiqah*, but because of flaws and privations external to this original *haqiqah*. This realization is said to give rise to an understanding of the unity of the Divine Attributes, and then from the Attributes to the qualities of His states and their effects. Then it is confessed that the sun of *haqiqah* arises from *‘irfan* (gnosis), by which it is known that existence is a simple *haqiqah*, without genus, difference, definition, description or proof.

The differences among the particular instances of reality are attributed to differences in grade of perfection, causal priority and independence. Pure existence is identified with infinite intensity of being, ultimate perfection. All other existences are of various degrees of imperfect existence. It is denied that deficiency in existence is implied by the Truth of Existence itself, because deficiency is a privation lacking positive ontological status. Rather, limitation and imperfection are a by-product of creation, since the effect is necessarily inferior to its cause.

In his *al-Hikmat al-arshiyah* we find yet another statement of the Proof of the Sincere by Sadr al-Muta’alihin. [17](#) This work opens with the definition of the Truth of Existence as pure being without the admixture of generality or particularity, limits, whatness, imperfection or privation. This pure being is identified with God, the Necessary Existent, and it is argued that if the Truth of existence did not exist, nothing would exist.

This is taken to establish the existence of the Truth of existence. In order to show that the Truth of Existence possesses necessary existence, it is argued that everything which exists imperfectly depends on being while pure being itself depends on nothing. The imperfect is that which results from the mixture or composition of being with some whatness or particularity. That which is mixed is posterior to and dependent on its simple elements. The element of whatness is really a privation or limitation of being without any independent reality of its own, so the imperfect is totally dependent on the perfect. Mixed being is dependent on the Truth of existence which itself is without need of anything. This statement is followed by another argument which is similar to that given by such *‘urafa* as Ibn Turkah and al-Jami, to the effect that true predication presumes being:

For to affirm any concept of something and to predicate it of that thing—whether (the concept be) a whatness or some other attribute, and whether it be affirmed or denied of something—always presupposes the being of that thing. Our discussion always comes back to Being: either there is an infinite regression (of predications and subjects) or one arrives in the end at an Absolute Being, unmixed with anything else. [18](#)

The philosophical theology which finds expression here is far from any sort of pantheistic identification of the world or nature with God, but rather is an attempt to strike a balance between extreme immanence

and extreme transcendence while retaining both. The pantheistic tendency sacrifices transcendence for the sake of immanence while more traditional theologies do the reverse. In Sadr al-Muta'alihin, divine immanence is maintained by identifying the deity with existence, while transcendence is maintained by insisting that what is meant here is not the imperfect world, but absolutely pure existence.

The synthesis discovered by Mulla Sadra has inspired and continues to inspire numerous commentaries and elaborations on the themes of his philosophy.

[1.](#) From *Kitab al-isharat wa al-tanbihat*, ed. Sulayman Dunya (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1957–1968), Vol. 3, pp. 54–55. The ayah of the Qur'an quoted is 41:53. The reference to “the sincere” is also an allusion to the Qur'an:

“And those who believe in God and His Apostles, these it is who are the sincere and witnesses with their Lord; for them shall be their recompense and their light.” (57: 19).

I have translated *al-sidiqin* as ‘the sincere’, since it is the opposite of hypocritical. The word has the grammatical form in Arabic called *sighah mubalighah*, which is used to indicate an extreme attribution, so that *al-sidiqin* is used for one who is extreme in faith and truthfulness, noteworthy both for honesty of speech and for conformity of deed to word, and moreover it indicates faithfulness in intention and to the divine covenant. The *sidiqin* are among those of the highest degree of faith. Other translators have used ‘the truthful’, ‘the just’, ‘the upright’.

[2.](#) In an alternative manuscript it is written ‘not an effect’ instead of ‘non-contingent’.

[3.](#) Herbert A. Davidson, “Avicenna’s Proof of the Existence of God as a Necessarily Existent Being” in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), p. 178. Davidson also mentions that Hume had suggested that perhaps the physical world should be considered to be the necessary existent in Part IX of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Davidson speculates that Ibn Sina rejects this suggestion on the basis of his proof that the Necessary Existent cannot be composite.

[4.](#) *Sharh risalat zinun al-kabir al-yunani* (Hyderabad: Da'irat al-ma'arif al-'uthmaniyah, 1349/1030–31). Cf. Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 124. Also see Dr. 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, “Uyun al-masa'il” in *al-Musu'at al-falsafah* (Beirut: al-Mu'assisah al-arabiyah li al-darasat wa al-nashr, 1984), part 2, p. 102, where al-Farabi is quoted as first distinguishing the necessary from the contingent, and that which is necessary by another from that which is necessary in itself. Al-Farabi allows that the contingent may be pre-eternal (*qadim*) or originated (*huduth*), but he denies the possibility of an infinite series of causes and effects, holding that the ultimate cause must be necessary in itself.

[5.](#) Although Netton claims that a good case could be made for saying that all of Ibn Sina’s proofs are various aspects of a single cosmological argument, and that all “are underpinned by Ibn Sina’s conviction that an infinite regress of a finite series is impossible”. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, p. 174. This seems to be an overstatement, for the Proof of the Sincere does not rest on the absolute rejection of any infinite series, and there are considerable differences among the argument to a First Mover, al-Farabi’s argument, and the Proof of the Sincere, such that it would seem more appropriate to conclude that each proof was developed as a result of meditation on the previous one. (Note also the infelicity of Netton’s phrase “infinite regress of a finite series”.)

Davidson also claims that Ibn Sina’s proof requires the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes (p. 180), although he himself shows how the proof may proceed directly without the aid of this assumption and then how the impossibility of the regress may even be generated “as a sort of corollary” (p. 179).

[6.](#) For the denial of the principle of sufficient reason, see J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 84–87; also see Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) Ch. 7.

[7.](#) Sadr al-Din Muhammad Shirazi, *al-Hikmat al-muta'allihyah fi al-asfar al-'arba'*, Vol. 6, p. 16.

[8.](#) Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, *Majmu'ah musannifat shaykh ishraq*, ed. Henry Corbin (Tehran: Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977) Vol. 2, p. 121.

[9.](#) Ibid., pp. 122–123.

[10.](#) See Nicholas Heer, “Al-Jami’s Treatise on Existence” in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), pp. 223–256.

[11.](#) See, for example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sadr al-Din Shirazi and His Transcendent Theosophy* (Tehran: 1978) and Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Albany: SUNY, 1975).

[12.](#) From the “Partow Nameh”, in Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, *Majmu’ah musannifat shaykh ishraq*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977) Vol. 3, p. 33.

[13.](#) See the discussion in Richard M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 252 ff.

[14.](#) Sadr al-Din Muhammad Shirazi, *al-Hikmat al-muta’alimah fi al-asfar al-’arbah* (Qom: Mustafavi, 1386/1966) Vol. 6, pp. 14–16.

[15.](#) Sadr al-Din Shirazi, *Asrar al-ayat*, ed. Muhammad Khajavi (Tehran: Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1981), pp. 25–26.

[16.](#) Translated by Parviz Morewedge as *The Metaphysics of Mulla Sadra* (New York: The Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy and Science, 1992).

[17.](#) Translated as *The Wisdom of the Throne* by James Winston Morris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[18.](#) Ibid., p. 96.

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