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**Author(s):** Kaukua, Jari

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*Arguments for God's Existence in Classical Islamic Thought: A Reappraisal of the Discourse* by Hannah C. Erlwein (Berlin & Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019), ix + 249 pp., bibliography, indices. Price HB €86.95. EAN 978-3-11-061764-1.

It is especially engaging to read, let alone to review, new scholarship that ventures to revise the foundational assumptions of a discipline. In this regard, Hannah Erlwein's recent monograph, based on her 2016 SOAS dissertation, definitely delivers the promise of its subtitle. Scholars working on the history of Islamic philosophy almost unanimously agree that one of the central concerns and great contributions of mediaeval Islamic theologians and philosophers consists in the proofs they presented for God's existence. Erlwein's central thesis explicitly counters this consensus, for she seeks to show that "medieval Islamic theologians and philosophers did not *intend* or *seek* to prove that God exists" and that "to identify certain arguments in their works as arguments for God's existence [...] seems to pose a misunderstanding of what their arguments are meant to establish" (4). Reviewing the relevant material over the course of more than three centuries, from al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 225/860) to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), Erlwein seeks to show that instead of seeking to prove God's existence, the Islamic authors chose to remain "faithful to the Qur'ān's primary concern" (22), and designed their proofs to vindicate claims concerning God's nature and attributes, such as His incorporeality, necessity, and unicity, or His being a creator.

Erlwein rests her case on an interesting criterion which she claims any argument for God's existence must fulfil: "all arguments for God's existence seek to *introduce into* reality the existence of an entity" (7). This means that such arguments must refrain from the prior assumption of any "entity in addition to the world so as to only be concerned with showing that said entity is to be characterised [...] in this or that way" (8). In other words, an argument for God's existence should result in an ontological increase from the initial  $n$  entities that constitute the world into a demonstrated sum of  $(n + 1)$  entities. This is a criterion the Islamic proofs all fail to fulfil, because they invariably assume God's existence at the outset.

The criterion may seem harmless at first sight, but as an interpretative tool, it is far from unproblematic. Erlwein recognises that it does not require a lack of prior commitment to the truth of the claim one seeks to prove, as long as the proof does not rely on the truth of the claim. This makes sense, for it seems natural to think that as philosophers, we seek proofs for precisely those claims that we are already prone to hold, for whatever reason. However, once we grant this much, it seems odd to insist that a proof for God's existence must increase our ontology, because we can explicate the difference between unproven and proven belief without any

recourse to such increase. For instance, we can say that there is not only an epistemic difference between a believer's dogmatic belief in God's existence and her reasoned belief subsequent to a proof. In addition to this, the metaphysical claims that provide the content of the two beliefs are also different: at first, the believer uncritically believed that God exists, but once presented with a valid demonstration from indubitable premises, she knows that the same God *must* exist. It is not clear to me why the move from the first belief to the second should not suffice for a proof of God's existence – and yet we need not assume any increase in the believer's ontology.

When it comes to Erlwein's observation that the Islamic proofs for God's existence are primarily designed to show that He has one of the divine attributes, one could argue that features such as being a creator or being necessary are necessary means for arguing why God not only exists but *must* exist. To take Avicenna's (d. 427/1037) proof, discussed at great length by Erlwein, it proceeds from the observation that there are contingent entities, and building on the two principles that every contingent entity must be necessitated by a cause, and that no series of necessitating causes can be infinite, it concludes to the existence of an entity that is necessary by virtue of its essence, and that is then identified with God. Since the proof hinges upon necessitation, it is only natural that it should target God's necessity. Why is an argument for the need of a necessary entity not *ipso facto* an argument for the need of the *existence* of a necessary entity?

Since Erlwein's substantive analyses consistently build on the aforementioned criterion, the problems concerning it pose a threat to the entire book. What is more, the texts under investigation are seldom unambiguous about the exact objective of the alleged proofs. This lack of uncontroversial exegetical cues invites us to consider other standards for the evaluation of the respective merits of rival interpretations. One such standard is the principle of charity: do we want to consider the Islamic authors as candidates for inclusion in the historiography of the sort of critical and undogmatic reasoning that we evaluate as worthy of the normative title of philosophy? If they dogmatically assume the truth of God's existence, they emerge as comparatively more meagre thinkers than their mediaeval and early modern Christian peers, who supposedly accepted the claim only on the grounds of solid proof.

Although I think these worries are serious, I nevertheless believe that the substantive chapters on al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm, al-Kindī (d. 256/873), al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936), al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), Avicenna, al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Averroes (d. 595/1198), and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, each merit close attention. Concerns of space prevent me from a proper engagement with them, but by way of an example, let us revisit an argument presented in the last chapter devoted to Rāzī. Here, consistently with many of the preceding

chapters, Erlwein's objective is to show that Rāzī wanted "to prove that God, whose existence [he] took for granted and did not seek to prove, is to be *described* as the creator of the world" (202) – in other words, Rāzī is concerned with God's attributes, not His existence.

Erlwein's central source in the chapter is Rāzī's great work of *tafsīr*, the *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*. In this work, Rāzī defines the task of *kalām* as "to speculate about the created things insofar as they are proofs for the existence of the creator (*wujūd al-ṣāni`*) and His attributes" (206), seemingly at odds with Erlwein's claim. Moreover, the proofs that Rāzī recognises are four, and as Erlwein points out, they amount to variations of the traditional *kalām* and Avicennian proofs (207), thus suggesting that these proofs might have been understood as proofs for God's existence all along.

However, Erlwein observes that when introducing the four proofs, Rāzī corroborates the third one, namely the *kalām* proof from the temporal emergence (*ḥudūth*) of bodies, by a reference to Q 6:76 (*I do not like things that set*). Turning to the *tafsīr* of this verse, she finds that according to Rāzī, the main concern of the verse is Abraham's argument for God's unicity (*tawḥīd*), or the fact that there is only one God and that other seemingly lofty entities, such as the stars, are not worthy of worship (208-209). Once this interpretation of Abraham's argument is brought to bear on the reference to the verse in the earlier introduction of the four proofs for God's existence, we see that the point of the third proof "is not to introduce into existence yet another entity", namely God, but merely to establish that "the *attribute* of being creator belongs to God" (210). Furthermore, since the third proof has the same aim as the other proofs, the conclusion applies to them all, *mutatis mutandis*.

Erlwein also applies Rāzī's *tafsīr* to rule out an argument from design for "the existence of the creator" (211-213). When presenting the argument in the *Maṭālib al-mashriqīya*, Rāzī refers to Q 2:164: *In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sail the seas with goods for people, in the water which God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth [...]: there are signs in all these for those who use their minds*. In his *tafsīr* of the verse, he then states that despite the reference to human agency in the case of ships, it is God who has made shipbuilding possible in the first place by providing the materials and other such conditions. For Erlwein, this is evidence for the claim that contrary to Rāzī's express words, the argument from design is not a proof for God's existence but designed to make "a point about the contentious and much debated issue of human efficient causality" (212), namely that even if we accepted relations of agency and causality to pertain between creatures, the only entity to which we can ascribe creation in the robust sense of the word is God.

As far as I can see, this is Erlwein's central way of argumentation. The roughly twenty-five remaining pages on Rāzī do include interesting further cases, but because I cannot engage with them at any depth here, I have to content with a simple pointer to why I do not find the present case decisive. Even if Rāzī chooses to emphasise the claim to God's unicity in Q 6:76, it seems plausible to assume that he would have recognised multiple meanings in Qur'ānic verses. Thus, if a passage like Q 6:76 can point to *both* a proof for God's existence *and* a proof for His uniqueness, the latter cannot be appealed to as evidence against the former. Furthermore, there is a close connection between the two proofs, for once we fill the gaps, we see that the argument for unicity hinges on the temporal emergence of bodies. In order to be a real god worthy of worship, an entity must not have a temporal beginning. Thus, having shown that the stars are bodies, it is precisely on the basis of the *kalām* proof in question that we show them to be subject to time, and thus unworthy of worship.

This is just one among many arguments analysed by Erlwein, and to be fair, one of her book's strengths is the breadth and richness of the ground it covers, consistently subjecting it to scrutiny under one and the same criterion. Having said that, however, I do find the argument exemplary in the sense that most, if not all, of the material is open to a comparable kind of interpretative debate. Since the book's claim challenges the received view, this means that endorsers of that view are unlikely to find compelling reasons for changing their minds. The debatability does not falsify Erlwein's thesis either, of course, but it does bring the discussion back to the more general worries concerning the criterion a proof for God's existence must fulfil and the question of whether a principle of charity should govern our interpretation of the primary sources. For this reason, I still find it plausible to speak of *kalām* and Avicennian proofs for God's existence.<sup>1</sup>

Jari Kaukua

University of Jyväskylä

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