

Laura Hassan. *Ash‘arism Encounters Avicennism: Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī on Creation*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020. xi+317 pages. ISBN: 9781463207199.

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Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233) was a prominent figure during the verificatory (*taḥqīq*) period in the history of Islamic philosophical theology. While not much is known about his scientific production or views, his influence as an author and thinker cannot be understated. As a contemporary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), he distinguished himself through a distinctive approach that bridged the gap between theology and philosophy while offering innovative solutions to classical problems, all of which contributed to his significant influence in the field. To address the paucity of information, Laura Hassan has conducted a significant study on Āmidī’s theory of creation, examining its place between Ash‘arism and Avicenna (d. 428/1037). Hassan’s doctoral thesis, defended at SOAS University of London in 2017, serves as the foundation for this book, which consists of eight main chapters. The book begins by delving comprehensively into Āmidī’s life and works, presenting his writings in chronological order from *al-Nūr al-bāhir* to *Ghāyat al-marām* while considering the philosophical and theological significance of each. The biography section, which serves as the opening portion of the book, offers a chronological account of Āmidī’s travels, scientific and political relationships, and intellectual genealogies in both the rational and religious sciences. This section concludes by discussing the contradictions found in works that have examined al-Āmidī’s life, thereby shedding light on the complexities surrounding his legacy.

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The book's second chapter positions Āmidī's theory of creation between Ash'arī atomism and Avicennian hylomorphism. The chapter highlights Avicenna's integration of the Neoplatonist notion of creation into an Islamic framework, as well as the Ash'arī atomist ontology rooted in the distinction between the eternal (*qadīm*) and the temporally originated (*ḥādīth*). Hassan asserts that Avicenna's conception of creation prompted the Ash'aris to reconsider their perspectives, and Āmidī, as a scholar straddling the line between rational theology and philosophy, drew from both doctrines. While the former's doctrine explained the pre-eternity of the world metaphysically by distinguishing between possible and necessary existence, the latter offered a physical explanation by stating that everything other than God originates in time. The third chapter delves into the contextual background of this issue through Āmidī's association of the concepts of possibility and necessity with the Ash'arī concepts of the eternal and the temporally originated. The author mentions various examples of how possibility has been discussed within Ash'arism using different terminology and under different categories. These include defining the existent as "the real, generated thing," (p. 75) as well as rejecting the possible existents based on God's power and continuous recreation and al-Juwaynī's (d. 478/1085) proof based on particularization (*takhṣīṣ*). According to the author, the most significant divergence between Avicenna and the Ash'aris lies in God's attribute of knowledge. While the Ash'aris argued God's knowledge of the non-existent and His unlimited power to necessitate an infinite number of possibilities that have yet to occur, Avicenna posits that every possible becomes actualized once God wills it.

The fourth chapter traces the distinction between possibility and necessity in Āmidī's philosophical works, with this distinction holding significant importance across all his writings. The chapter explores the historical origins of this distinction, starting with Ghazālī's departure from the perspective of the philosophers by equating the possible with the temporally originated. Shahrastānī's (d. 548/1153) characterization of possibility as a mode of existence and his view of the world as possible, as well as Rāzī's alignment of possibility with the temporally originated, had served as crucial developments in Ash'arism. While Āmidī deviates from the tradition in his theological works by basing his proof of the Necessary of Existence on the necessity of the possible for a determinant that creates *ex nihilo*, he does not equate the possible with the temporally originated, nor does he link the possibility of existence to temporal origination (*ḥudūth*). By providing a philosophical

definition of possibility, he challenges the conventional characteristics of the possible and the necessary. His exploration of God's attributes of power and knowledge places the relationship between existence and essence at the core of his investigation into possibility. According to Āmidī, everything is possible in relation to God's power, and knowledge of the non-existent merely entails conceptualizing its existence in relation to absolute existence. Thus, God's power is inherently possible without implying a separate essence. The distinction between the possible and the necessary is based on one's capacity to rationally conceive of these, while the necessary non-existent is deemed impossible and completely unconceivable. God's knowledge encompasses "everything that can be known," (p. 116) including all possible non-existents. Consequently, Āmidī's perspective on possibility contradicts Avicenna's view, which asserts that all possibilities must be actualized and that God's knowledge of possibilities is restricted to their actualized states.

In his philosophical works, Āmidī rejected the realism of Avicenna's concept of possibility and described it not as existent (*wujūdi*) but as negational (*salbi*). To describe something as possible is to conceive of both its existence and non-existence. This is because rational and negational attributes do not require a substrate of matter in which to inhere, which contradicts the philosophical doctrine that suggests a substrate is necessary for possibility prior to temporal occurrences. While the cause of a possible existent is not associated with non-existence, Āmidī states that possible existents are accompanied by their efficient causes. He argues the cause whose effect is never non-existent to be superior to the cause that does not prevent the absolute non-existence of its effect and the God who creates the pre-eternally existing world to be more powerful than the God who creates the world out of non-existence. Hassan states that, in Āmidī's theological works, the impossible non-existent is not within God's power, and the fact that the possible is within His knowledge and creation does not necessitate its existence. In his proof of the Necessary of Existence, Āmidī includes the notion of efficient cause and explains that God sustains existents both potentially and in actuality. In his philosophical works, Āmidī argues for the pre-eternity of the world based on the distinction between the possible and the necessary, while in his theological works, he employs the Ash'arī concept of possibility and its relationship to God's power. In his later works, Āmidī endorses the Ash'arī idea that the possibility of things is a conceptual fact and that essences are none other than concrete existents instead of the notion of essence separate from existence.

In the fifth chapter, the author addresses classical Ash‘arī natural philosophy’s influence on Āmidī. The Ash‘arīs rejected the existence of immaterial substances and maintained instead that everything other than God is made up of substance and accidents. They explained all observable reality with reference to their doctrine of accidents and based their view of creation on the non-endurance of accidents. On the other hand, Avicenna’s natural philosophy investigates the sensible body insofar as it is subject to change and without any theological implications, wherein the belief in immaterial substances nullifies the proof for creation from accidents. One obvious difference of Avicenna’s physics from Ash‘arī atomism is its affirmation of the continuity of matter and its infinite divisibility. Explaining how Āmidī’s theory differs from both that of the Ash‘arīs and Avicenna’s, Hassan goes on to examine Āmidī’s views on substance, accident, and body in the sixth chapter. In *al-Nūr al-bāhir*, Āmidī embraces Avicenna’s theory of nature and criticizes atomism. In *Rumūz al-kunūz*, Āmidī proves that the majority of philosophical theories do not contradict theological doctrine. Hassan states that not only did Āmidī not base the pre-eternity of the world and creation on temporal origination and atomism, he even allowed for the divisibility of matter by presenting arguments against atomism. Hassan invokes the tradition here and states that, although Ghazālī did not include physics in discussions about rational theology, he did not consider it heretical. Rāzī, on the other hand, defended the creation of the world according to the classical Ash‘arī physical theory and made natural philosophical issues an integral part of the investigation of truth in his later works. For this reason, although Āmidī’s physics in *Abkār al-afkār* unfolds in the theological context of creation *ex nihilo* and shows Rāzī’s influence, it marks a break with the tradition and is more aligned with philosophical physics. In *Ghāyat al-marām*, however, this was altogether abandoned.

The book argues that Āmidī rejects the definition of substance proposed by Avicenna and the Mu‘tazila. Instead, he defends the viewpoint that existence and essence are identical in all existents. Moreover, he differentiates God from the status of substance by asserting that God sustains His own existence. Therefore, his definition of substance reflects Ash‘arī characteristics, such as the belief that everything other than God has no reality beyond its existence. The author observes that, like Rāzī, Āmidī approached the concept of the atom with caution due to philosophical notions regarding the divisibility of matter and arguments against atomism. Āmidī also presented innovative arguments supporting the

existence of atoms that deviate from traditional perspectives. Additionally, he refuted the notion of infinite divisibility of motion and conceived of time as a succession of discrete instants. Throughout the book, Hassan emphasizes that Āmidī's departure from the continuity of matter distanced him from his school of thought, necessitating explanations and justifications regarding topics such as human nature and causality. Furthermore, Āmidī regarded occupying space (*taḥayyuz*) as a fundamental quality of substance. He dismissed the idea of the world emanating through intellects, harmonized the philosophical categories of accidents with Ash'arī accidents, and, in justifying creation, posited that every atom should possess at least the attribute of coming-to-be (*kawn*). Although Āmidī defined the body as an aggregate (*mu'allaf*), he did not fully embrace the concept of indivisible parts nor accept the tension between these two notions. Consequently, while exploring uncertain territories concerning the foundations of Ash'arī physics, he acknowledged the problematic implications of being unable to prove abstract entities in this context. By emphasizing Āmidī's endeavor to grapple with the deep paradox arising from the stark contrast between his adherence to rational theology and his undeniable engagement with philosophical principles, the author also draws attention to a more encompassing situation surrounding the fundamental structure of thought related to the concept of verification (*taḥqīq*).

The seventh chapter of the book discusses Ghazālī, Shahrastānī, and Rāzī as the forerunners of Āmidī's account of creation. The author expresses the view that the influence of Avicenna on rational theology, which began with Ghazālī, became more prominent with Shahrastānī and Rāzī. For instance, temporal origination, which Ghazālī initially associated with causality, was eventually replaced with the concept of possibility. Religious texts led Rāzī to the idea of the world's creation by a creator possessing power and will, while Shahrastānī argued that ontological precedence to the world does not necessarily require its creation. The author emphasizes that the core of Ash'arism lies in the ontological distinction between the creator and the created, as well as the discontinuous structure of the world. Hassan states that Avicenna made both positive and negative contributions to this aspect. Positively, Avicenna's principle that the possible world is based on a cause aligned with Ash'arism. Negatively, Avicenna's idea that creation included necessity contradicted it.

In the eighth and final chapter of the book, the author presents Āmidī's theory of creation based on all the information presented so far. Hassan highlights the

integration of the challenging theological principle of Avicennian metaphysics with Ash‘arism through the emphasis on creation *ex nihilo*, a volitional agent, while also recognizing the distinction between necessary and possible existence as an effort to reconcile the complex theological principles of Avicennian metaphysics and Ash‘arism. In this way, resolving the relationship between necessary and possible existence provides Āmidī with a context to construct the attributes of will and power. While basing the possibility of existence on the existence of a cause in *Abkār al-afkār*, Āmidī expresses the view in his theologically oriented works that the preponderator (*murajjih*) needed by the possible is not the essence of the cause but a volitional particularizer. By developing the difference between efficient cause and particularizing cause while drawing on the classical Ash‘arī concept of will, Āmidī resolves the discussion about the delayed effect of divine will between theologians and philosophers by introducing a particularizing cause. Although he considers the Avicennian view here, he defends the notion that agency is a necessary consequence of the association (*ta‘alluq*) of will and power at a particular moment in the world. Regarding the relationship between eternal will and temporally originated will, Āmidī also attempts to solve problems such as the ontological and causal status of this association, the change in the eternal quality of the will due to its occurrence at a certain time, and infinite regress.

According to the author, Āmidī was dissatisfied with Rāzī’s views, who found philosophers inadequate at explaining the relationship between eternal will and creation *ex nihilo*. Although Abu’l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī’s idea of will as the necessary cause of the world aligns closely with Āmidī’s, the existence of will by itself fails to solve the problem of eternity. Thus, Āmidī states that the necessary cause of association does not require pre-eternity and, therefore, does not need to support the willful nature of the world’s creation *ex nihilo*. Accordingly, the world’s need for a cause is the essential possibility, and the only valid relationship between the necessary and the possible is the voluntary movement of the necessity of existence. Similar to Shahrastānī, Āmidī prefers creation by a voluntary cause rather than creation by the essence of the cause, as it facilitates the creation of the world *ex nihilo* and grants freedom to the divine attributes. Avicenna agreed with many of the principles of the notion of efficient cause causing the divine will to create the eternal world through association. The author interprets the misunderstanding and mixing of opposing evidence in *Abkār al-afkār* as a general failure.

Based on the proof from accidents in *Abkār al-afkār*, Āmidī objects to Rāzī's defense of creation *ex nihilo* and asserts that this proof falls short of proving the possibility of the world. He finds Shahrastānī's claim that a changing world cannot be necessary to be valid only in terms of visible existents. He accepts that the necessary existence with the attributes of will and power can create the possible world but opposes Rāzī's insistence that the world created by a volitional agent cannot be eternal. Against Rāzī's argument that existence is super-added to essence, he presents the identity of existence and essence in all existents as a new expression of classical Ash'arī views, such as their belief in the thing (*shay'*). He criticizes Shahrastānī, who in turn criticizes Avicenna, arguing that the necessary does not cause the possible by virtue of its essence. Shahrastānī asserts that the world derives not its necessity but its existence from its cause and that a preponderator is required. According to Āmidī, the necessary encompasses both the necessary by virtue of its essence and the necessary through another, and Shahrastānī had confused these two categories.

According to the author's statement, Āmidī agrees with Shahrastānī in rejecting the notion of the necessary creation of the world. He also aligns with Avicenna regarding the concept of the togetherness or simultaneity of the efficient cause with its effect. According to this view, the efficient cause represents the association of eternal will and power, which emerges at a certain time. Consequently, divine will either delays or brings about the effect of divine power. In criticizing Avicenna for combining causal and existential precedence with essential precedence, Āmidī argues under Shahrastānī's influence that God precedes the world not temporally or spatially but ontologically and that His existence is in no way concomitant with the world. The world, being an outcome of the association of divine will, allows Avicenna to endorse all levels of precedence and the notion of efficient causality. This association ontologically and causally preceding the world does not require eternity because the efficient cause is not the essence itself but the eternal will. The divine will precedes the world and activates its outcome through a determinant cause. Therefore, eternal power and will do not render something they have determined as eternal.

In this particular segment of the book, the author emphasizes the importance of *Abkār al-afkār*, as it provides a proof of creation *ex nihilo*. The argument heavily relies on the well-known Ash'arī proof from accidents, incorporating different iterations and perspectives from Rāzī and Ghazālī. In *al-Nūr al-bāhir*, however, the

proof from accidents is regarded as inconclusive and inadequate for establishing the eternity of abstract existents. The author argues that Āmidī's endeavor to reconcile philosophy with Rāzī's methods, alongside the inherent conflict between Ash'arī physics' aspiration to substantiate creation *ex nihilo* and its skepticism toward a foreign ontology, resulted in an unsuccessful resolution of the fundamental issues arising from the encounter of these two ontologies.

Moreover, Āmidī's defense of creation lacks theological significance and falls short in substantiating an effective alternative philosophical ontology. Despite objecting to its premises, Āmidī employs a physical theoretical framework. Despite his claim of avoiding "unsatisfactory" (p. 273) methods and detailed investigations, Āmidī criticizes Rāzī's comprehensive method of verification (*taḥqīq*) that thoroughly examines numerous arguments supporting a specific position or belief. Instead, Āmidī directs his attention toward identifying a singular piece of evidence that demonstrates the soundness of Ash'arī beliefs by proving a specific doctrine. However, even in his most authoritative work, *Abkār al-afkār*, which represents his mature thought, the proof from accidents remains disconnected from genuine theology, and the attempt to establish creation *ex nihilo* in opposition to philosophical ontology falls short of adequately fulfilling its classical purpose. Consequently, Āmidī bases his original proof on the argument from the impossibility of infinite regress, a concept rooted in Ghazālī's ideas, and juxtaposes the idea of efficient causality against the pre-eternity of the world. By observing how the effects witnessed in the world have a temporal origin, he rejects pre-eternity and posits that abstract existents are not eternal within Avicennian ontology, contrary to the assumption that the latter cannot prove the eternity of abstract existents. Highlighting the weakness of Ash'arī physics in the face of the Avicennian view, Āmidī proposes abandoning it as a framework for creation *ex nihilo*. Instead, he establishes the proof of God based on the distinction between the possible and the necessary, on the cause of the world through the analysis of the possible-necessary relationship, and in particular on divine will and power. Furthermore, his support for creation *ex nihilo* does not precede his support for the fundamental doctrines concerning God's essence and nature.

While defending creation *ex nihilo*, Āmidī's belief that the efficient cause is not responsible for the absence of the effect but rather simultaneous with its effect in time is influenced by his engagement with the philosophical tradition. In contrast to Avicenna, he emphasizes that the pre-eternal attributes of power and will

rather than essence itself serve as the efficient cause for the ontological and causal formation of the world. However, the notion of the eternal existence of these attributes contradicts Rāzī's argument that the actions of a volitional agent (*fā'il mukhtār*) should have a temporal origin. The concept that the pre-eternal world is an act of God contradicts the Ash'arī belief in creation *ex nihilo*, and abandoning this theological function of divine creation may impose limitations on divine power and freedom. This is because an agent who wills the pre-eternity of the world is considered more powerful than one who allows its absence for a certain time. Shahrastānī and Rāzī defended creation *ex nihilo* within the boundaries of physics, and the challenge of refuting the existence of abstract entities is significant with regard to their physical proofs of creation. On the other hand, Āmidī developed the utilization of physics in this context. While he initially adopted the proof from accidents in *Abkār al-afkār*, he later abandoned physics in his defense of creation in *Ghāyat al-marām*, instead embracing an argument based on the impossibility of infinite regress. This can be understood as a rejection of the Avicennian theory of creation and a refusal to apply classical Ash'arī physics. On the contrary, Rāzī's objection to the integration of philosophy and rational theology led him to reject the proofs of creation derived from Avicenna. He believed that this reconciliation jeopardizes the defense of the fundamental tenets of Ash'arī thought. Avicenna's influence on the theories of physics compelled Rāzī to dismiss proofs based on accidents and similar reasoning, not as a matter of choice but as an inevitable outcome. He advocated creation *ex nihilo* in an allegedly innovative manner but with a tendency to argue against pre-eternity rooted in the pre-theological tradition.

Finally, the author also highlights that Āmidī exhibited a tension between the limited theological significance of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and the fervent defense of the classical Ash'arī doctrine. While the beginning of the world was initially demonstrated within the framework of Ash'arī physics, this posed challenges for Āmidī due to his expressed uncertainties regarding key aspects of the theory. In fact, the abandonment of physics in *Ghāyat al-marām* indicates a decline and shift in the role of physics as the primary paradigm supporting the theological assumptions of Ash'arism. Hence, while physics had on one hand been separated from theology by the Avicenna metaphysics-natural philosophy dichotomy, Ash'arism also evidently demonstrates adaptability in incorporating challenging philosophical concepts such as the necessary-possible dichotomy. According to the author, beneath the inconsistencies found in the two theological

works, fundamental questions lie at the core of the Ash‘arī tradition. These include such questions as which aspect of Ash‘arism can be abandoned without compromising its identity, what was the significance of preserving methods in comparison to doctrines and schools, to what extent did Avicenna’s metaphysics exert dominance over the structure and content of Ash‘arī theology, and was the classical Ash‘arī physical framework suitable for theological purposes? As noted by Hassan, Āmidī tackled these questions by strongly reacting to the innovations Rāzī had introduced. He meticulously examined the evidence supporting or opposing various positions on these issues and offered a detailed evaluation.

The summary framework presented above sufficiently highlights the abundance of additional data available in the book. In this context, Āmidī’s approach to integrating philosophy and rational theology has been elaborated in great detail by encompassing important topics, concepts, and propositions from both systems, as well as their prominent figures. Grasping all this information requires a meticulous review. While the book provides a method and program for studying a post-classical scholar, it also raises various challenges associated with the task. While there were specific schools in the early period, later periods necessitate examining each figure individually and subjecting relevant data and sources to scrutiny. Importance is also had in considering contemporary figures and intertextual relationships, tracing the development of thought in both vertical and horizontal dimensions, and not overlooking the chronology of works and personal or biographical history. In addition to the aforementioned principles, following each work in its chronological order and examining their contents accordingly are crucial for enhancing the reader’s understanding of Āmidī. This approach serves as an essential starting point for resolving the apparent contradictions found across different texts. By utilizing this method, emphasizing the need for a guide for reading and understanding will be important for a full comprehension of the period defined by scholars known as “verifiers” (*muḥaqqiq*). The summary sections at the end of the chapters and the comprehensive conclusion section in the work also contribute to a better understanding of the subject matter.

The fact that Rāzī, who was both a contemporary and rival of Āmidī, tempered Avicenna’s influence on Āmidī and motivated him to transcend the limits of tradition regarding the relationship between God and the world highlights how Rāzī’s influence in the post-classical period had shaped Avicenna’s impact. Likewise, Āmidī’s resolution of the conflict between rational theologians and philosophers

regarding pre-eternal volition and the temporally originated world through the differentiation of efficient and determinant causality, the reformulation of pre-eternal possibility and temporal creation, and the emphasis on the concept of association in this context also warrants thorough consideration. The concept of association usually suggests a standpoint favoring relational causality over essentialist causality, and Āmidī in this context appears to have drawn upon the criticisms and objections put forth by the Ash‘arīs concerning the differentiation between the divine act of creation (*takwīn*) and the created entity (*mukawwan*) within Maturidism. In the discussion concerning the attribute of will, which Āmidī deems to be of paramount importance, he assumes a middle ground between the Mu‘tazila and Ash‘arism. Furthermore, the observation that physics within his system departs from its classical role in creation necessitates an examination of Āmidī’s perspective on physics, as well as his stance between atomism and hylomorphism, in relation to concepts like time, motion, space, and causality. Similarly, the relationship between creation and moral issues such as the problem of evil, as well as theories like divine custom (*‘āda*), dependence (*i‘timād*), and generation (*tawlīd*), remains a subject of great curiosity. In rational theology, the concept of continuous creation is just as significant as creation *ex nihilo* when trying to understand the relationship between divine attributes and the world. In this context, delving further into the matter of the absurdity of infinite regress and highlighting Āmidī’s contributions to classical proofs would have been beneficial. In *Abkār al-afkār* and *Ghāyat al-marām*, Āmidī shows a strong inclination toward employing the concept of the absurdity of infinite regress and its primary proof, known as the argument from correspondence (*burhān al-taṭbīq*). Moreover, re-creation in this framework should at least be alluded to, as knowing Āmidī’s position on the question of the proof of bodily resurrection (*i‘āda*), which relies on the restoration of accidents, would be highly intriguing.