

Ayman Shihadeh. *Doubts on Avicenna: A Study and Edition of Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī's Commentary on the Ishārāt*. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016. viii + 289 pages.  
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With the possible exception of al-Bayhaqī's lost commentary on Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbihāt* (*Pointers and Reminders*), Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī's *Shukūk* (*Doubts on Avicenna*) was probably the earliest commentary on this most celebrated, but forbiddingly laconic, of Ibn Sīnā's works. The *Shukūk* predates by a decade the famous commentary by another major contemporary, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for the latter actually responded to al-Mas'ūdī on Ibn Sīnā's behalf in his *Jawābāt al-Masā'il al-Bukhāriyya* before composing his own commentary, the famous *Sharh al-Ishārāt*, some ten years later (2). In this useful and valuable volume, Shihadeh offers us an *editio princeps* of al-Mas'ūdī's text and an analysis of it that occupies at least two-thirds of the book. Al-Mas'ūdī's book (fairly concise at around 90 pages of Arabic in a large font) is not a lineal commentary and is, therefore, highly selective in its approach to the *Ishārāt*.

Shihadeh's study nevertheless amply demonstrates the text's dense argument and philosophical richness. His volume has four basic parts: a chapter introducing al-Mas'ūdī's life and works (7–43); a chapter in which the *Shukūk* is introduced and outlined section by section (44–85); the main part of Shihadeh's analysis, consisting of four chapters that carefully examine selected issues or problems within the *Shukūk* (namely, efficient causation, the ontology of possibility, Ibn Sīnā's proof of God, and hylomorphism) (86–168); and an introduction to the critical edition of the Arabic text together with the edition itself (169–289).

Al-Mas'ūdī (d. before 600/1204, according to Shihadeh [19]) constitutes a neglected but key representative of the post-Ghazālian convergence of *kalām* theology (especially in its Ash'arite form) and philosophy (especially in its Avicennian form) – one of the most fascinating and challenging phenomena of Muslim intel-

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lectual history. It is significant that, along with Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī himself (d. 505/1111), who is generally credited with heralding this wider phenomenon, al-Mas‘ūdī is also sometimes honoured with the title *muqtadā al-fariqayn*, alternatively *qudwat al-fariqayn*, “the paragon of the two parties,” namely, both the *kalām* theologians and the philosophers (33).

Contemporary witnesses were divided on how to identify him, such that Ibn Ghaylān al-Balkhī saw him as a *kalām* thinker, comparing him in this regard to al-Ghazālī himself (18), whereas Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī viewed him as a philosopher, albeit one situated within a distinct trend deriving not so much from Ibn Sīnā, but from Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (30), whom al-Mas‘ūdī sometimes praises very highly in the *Shukūk* (80). Not having written any specifically *kalām*-based treatises of his own, al-Mas‘ūdī’s classifiability as a *mutakallim* (aligned with Ash‘arism) seems to be borne out by the respect he shows to al-Ghazālī, whose *Iqtīṣād* he quotes with approval (significantly, on the problem of the beatific vision, 41) and by his praise for al-Ghazālī’s defence of (broadly) Ash‘arite doctrines against the alleged slips of Avicennism in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (135).

In many ways, al-Mas‘ūdī’s own *Shukūk* can likewise be read as an implicit defence of *kalām* teachings – witness, say, his attack on the Avicennian view that the contingent’s need of its agent is in its continuing existence, as opposed to the standard *kalām* position that its dependence is rooted in its origination (99). This clearly points the way to a *kalām* understanding of the world’s need for God as being based on its temporal incipency.

Again, al-Mas‘ūdī’s main contention with Ibn Sīnā’s argument for God’s existence is that the latter takes the series of past contingents to regress to infinity but still insists upon treating them as a whole (*jumla*). Al-Mas‘ūdī counters that being a ‘whole’ is the attribute of a *finite* quantity – there would thus be no existent ‘whole’ here, such that a separate cause for contingents *in globo* is to be invoked (68–69). In opposition to the *kalām* theologians, Ibn Sīnā refuses to treat given sets consisting of incepted things (e.g., past celestial rotations or past souls) as themselves incepted, and yet he inconsistently allows himself to treat the set of contingent entities as itself contingent.

Although such arguments suggest al-Mas‘ūdī’s hostility to Avicennian philosophy, his Avicennian philosophical credentials are, in fact, impressive. Gauging the extent to which he is to be categorised as a *mutakallim* of Ash‘ari leanings or as a philosopher is a challenge that inevitably informs and orientates Shihadeh’s entire analysis of the *Shukūk*. It is surely significant that the majority of al-Mas‘ūdī’s *oeuvre* was dedicated to definitely ‘philosophical’, albeit theologically neutral, disciplines

such as astronomy, meteorology, medicine, algebra, and logic (22–26). He supposedly studied the *Shukūk*'s target text, Ibn Sinā's *Ishārāt*, with 'Umar al-Khayyām, who had studied it with Ibn Sinā's favourite disciple Bahmanyār b. Marzubān, notwithstanding Shihadeh's scepticism about the true extent of al-Mas'ūdī's association with al-Khayyām (14).

Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that in addition to the *Shukūk*, in which al-Mas'ūdī problematised features of Ibn Sinā's thinking, he also responded to criticisms of Ibn Sinā's logic in a now lost work, *al-Ajwiba 'ala al-Tawṭī'a li al-Takḥṭī'a* (*Responses to the Prolegomenon to the Refutation*), and wrote a thorough, fundamentally sympathetic commentary on Ibn Sinā's *al-Khuṭba al-Tawḥīdiyya* (*The Sermon on Divine Unity*). This last work was an unusual rhyming prose text in which Ibn Sinā promoted key ideas concerning his theology and cosmogony (20–22, 33–43). It may, incidentally, be relevant that 'Umar al-Khayyām had also shown an interest in the *Khuṭba*, which he translated into Persian.

When taken in isolation, al-Mas'ūdī's *Sharḥ al-Khuṭba* suggests a thinker in surprisingly strong accord with Ibn Sinā and one who, moreover, is concerned with pointing out the correspondence of the latter's teachings with Muslim scripture. Al-Mas'ūdī proposes, for instance, that the controversial principle informing Ibn Sinā's entire cosmogony, namely, that only one proceeds from the One, is supported by the prophetic *ḥadīth* that "The first thing that God created was the intellect" (40). Again symptomatic of al-Mas'ūdī's simultaneously religious and philosophical disposition is his attempt to link Ibn Sinā's notion that, for an otherwise developed soul, post-mortem suffering may result from its transient fixation with the body, to the Ash'arī teaching that even for those who have committed major sins, punishment will be non-eternal if they are believers, based on proof-texts like Qur'ān 4:48 (42–43). The unexpected, perhaps tenuous, character of al-Mas'ūdī's equation of these two separate teachings simply serves to bring out the strength of his aspiration to co-ordinate Avicennism with his own notions of scriptural orthodoxy: He is speaking, here at least, as a religious apologist for Ibn Sinā.

He likewise argues that one may acknowledge divine names, such as those invoked by Ibn Sinā in opening his *Khuṭba*, while maintaining the central Avicennian theological tenet of divine simplicity. These names, he proposes, signify nothing beyond the divine essence itself, or relative attributes (*ṣifāt idāfiyya*) posited through the essence's relation with other entities, or else pure negations (35). However, Shihadeh notes that in the *Shukūk* al-Mas'ūdī also affirms a divine complex of essence and attributes in line with Ash'arī teachings (36).

Perhaps most surprising of all, in the *Sharḥ al-Khuṭba* al-Mas'ūdī evidently attempts to reconcile Ibn Sīnā's commitment to the universe's pre-eternality with the scriptural teaching that the universe is something that comes about in time (*muḥdath zamāni*): The world is indeed temporally generated insofar as much of its content is temporally generated; however, such data as time in itself and the celestial spheres (and so, presumably, also the matter which the latter involve) are not temporally generated (38–39). He even proposes that revelation may be interpreted as only advocating the world's temporal generation in this qualified sense. Thus co-ordinating the Qur'ānic and Avicennian accounts is feasible and is, indeed, imperative since “revelation never contradicts reality” (38). To deflect religious suspicion, al-Mas'ūdī is careful to include a ‘disclaimer’ (‘We seek refuge in God from harbouring any beliefs contrary to religion’ etc.), stressing that his immediate goal is to expound upon Ibn Sīnā's thinking on the basis of its own methods and principles, and not to attack it (21). Yet as Shihadeh himself points out, the fact that he sometimes takes an independent initiative in the *Sharḥ al-Khuṭba* to put forward scriptural and religious defences of Ibn Sīnā's ideas “suggests genuine eagerness to champion these views” (34).

In contrast, the *Shukūk* itself needed no such disclaimers insofar as it constituted a clear challenge to Ibn Sīnā's ideas. Yet even in this case al-Mas'ūdī's project is not truly refutational, and so Shihadeh seeks to distinguish its tone from, say, that of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut*. If the latter is, at bottom, a polemical text, “the *Shukūk* offers an ‘insider’, philosophical critique of a philosophical system” (84). Whereas the *Tahāfut* is restricted to areas of Ibn Sīnā's system of specific concern to *kalām*, such as metaphysics and ‘human ontology’, al-Mas'ūdī's ‘insider’ interest, as displayed in the *Shukūk*, extends to areas like Ibn Sīnā's physics. Al-Mas'ūdī sometimes formulates his own arguments to advocate philosophical doctrines whose defence by Ibn Sīnā he has found wanting – a notable case being his alternative theory of hylomorphism (156 ff). He even frankly states that he harbours a desire to solve, himself, the objections he has raised in regard to Ibn Sīnā's philosophy in the course of his text (51).

The deep ambiguity of the author's doctrinal positioning is reflected in the wider genre into which his commentary fits. At the beginning of chapter 2, Shihadeh compares the distinct varieties. ‘Aporetic commentaries’ (*shukūk*) like al-Mas'ūdī's, insofar as they problematise the target text, are to be distinguished, on one side, from the fully empathic genre of ‘exegetical commentary’ (*sharḥ* or *tafsīr*), the most radically empathic kind of which is the sub-genre of defensive or solutional commentary (*ḥall* or *jawāb*). On the other side, the stance of an aporetic commentary

is quite distinct from the avowed hostility of the refutation proper (*ibṭāl*, *radd* or *naqd*). Shihadeh also mentions, in passing, the series of so-called ‘adjudicative’ commentaries (*muḥākamāt*) in which a later commentator explores and judges the disputes between earlier commentators (4, 49).

As stated earlier, the discussion from chapters 3 to 6 of problems within the *Shukūk* plunges us into the minutiae of al-Mas‘ūdī’s treatment of four select issues that Shihadeh states are all subjects in metaphysics (5), despite the fact that the problem of ‘matter and form’ (to which chapter 6 is dedicated) surely refers to the physics of Ibn Sinā’s *Ishārāt*. At any rate, issues in physics and cosmology inevitably impinge deeply upon much of this material. Shihadeh states that he has chosen these *Shukūk* or ‘aporiae’ (amounting to five out of the fifteen dealt with by al-Mas‘ūdī, but not presented in the order they have in the original text, which follows the structure of the *Ishārāt*) because they typify the author’s broader perspective and method, and also because of their ‘inherent philosophical interest’.

The discussion of ‘efficient causation and continued existence’ in chapter 3 is a clear example of the intimate association of physics and metaphysics through the implicit role in the latter of analogies from the former. It is highly relevant that Ibn Sinā’s kinematics views all locomotion as dependent upon the constant input of a sustaining cause (*‘illa mubqiyā*). Roshdi Rashed has argued that Ibn Sinā adopted this theory, involving the permanent renewal of the accident of motion in the object that moves, straight from Mu‘tazilism, but has obviously then applied it shorn of its original context of *kalām* atomism. Even an ostensive counterexample such as, say, a hurled object’s motion, is carefully interpreted by Ibn Sinā to fit in with the thesis that some sustaining cause is always involved. Here he postulates, as the alternative to what we would think of as the object’s own momentum, the presence of a ‘forced inclination’ (*mayl qaṣrī*) that remains quite foreign to the object, deriving from the hand, or whatever, that launched it. This ‘forced inclination’ replaces the thrower, and the object could not move, even for an instant, if it were disengaged from it.

The point in all of this is that Ibn Sinā evidently transfers this same paradigm into his analysis of agency in his metaphysics, in which what is being explained is no longer locomotion, but rather existence itself. The sustaining cause in his theory of motion is a model for the effective cause (*sabab mu‘aththir*), which is central to his understanding of efficient causation in his metaphysics.

Al-Mas‘ūdī, for his part, accepts Ibn Sinā’s account of motion but treats it as a special case of something’s accident making it behave in a way that conflicts with its nature. It is thus, in reality, an exception to the rule that effects only need their

agents in coming to be and not in continuing to be (101). Light, which, according to what was understood in contemporary optics, needs the continuous presence of its source, is another example from physics that Ibn Sinā sometimes evokes in his wider theory of cause-effect concomitance. But al-Mas'ūdi proposes that light, like locomotion, may turn out to be another exceptional case – even if we are ignorant of the scientific specifics of its case. It might turn out to be a type of accident whose nature is comparable with motion in its need for constant renewal, or perhaps it will be discovered to be contrary to the nature of the air through which it passes and thus must be forced on it continuously in order to be transmitted (104).

In chapter 4, concerning the ontology of possibility, Shihadeh compares al-Mas'ūdi's and al-Ghazālī's critiques of Ibn Sinā's argument for the pre-eternality of the matter of the universe. He proposes that al-Mas'ūdi improved upon al-Ghazālī's critique and that it is likely that he should be credited with introducing the important terminology of 'dispositional possibility' (*al-ḥikmān al-isti'dādī*) (118), albeit articulating an idea already attested in Ibn Sinā's thought, where it serves to express the old Aristotelian concept of potentiality (*al-quwwa*) in terms appropriate to Avicennian 'modal metaphysics' (120). Quoting from *faṣl* 6 of *namāṭ* 5 in the *Ishārāt*, the gist of Ibn Sinā's argument for matter's pre-eternality is that anything that enters existence in time is preceded by its existence's possibility (*ḥikmān*) and that this 'possibility', as a relational (*iḍāfi*) reality, requires a subject or substrate which is 'matter'. Thus, anything that comes about in time presupposes matter (114).

Shihadeh situates al-Mas'ūdi's contribution within the history of the criticism of this reasoning. In his earlier rejoinder in the *Tahāfut*, al-Ghazālī only treats 'possibility' globally and without differentiation when he argues that possibility is not a reality that needs a substrate, but is, rather, a purely mental judgment (121). It is al-Mas'ūdi who later carefully distinguishes essential possibility (*al-ḥikmān al-dhātī*, translated by Shihadeh as per se possibility) from dispositional possibility (*al-ḥikmān al-isti'dādī*). Whereas the former is a permanent trait of the entities in question, which may be eternal and immaterial (i.e., the celestial intellects), the latter pertains instead to non-eternal, material entities and passes away when they come to be. It refers to the 'preparedness' (*isti'dād*) of the material from which such non-eternal entities are generated (118).

In line with al-Ghazālī's mentioned point, essential possibility is evidently not conducive to Ibn Sinā's conclusion and thus Ibn Sinā exploits only dispositional possibility, namely, the kind that is 'relational' (*iḍāfi*) and therefore needs a substrate, notwithstanding the fact that Ibn Sinā effectively lumped the two kinds of possibility together in his argument. Shihadeh, however, ingeniously tries to exonerate him

from the charge of conflation (134). Al-Mas'ūdi's main criticism, then, concerns this role of dispositional possibility in Ibn Sīnā's argument, for he insists upon the falsity of the assumption that all entities generated in time have dispositional possibility such as to require a substrative matter. He gives no examples (Arabic text, 271), but presumably means such time-bound but immaterial entities as the rational soul that al-Ghazālī had also used as a counter-example in the *Tahāfut* (126). In brief: Ibn Sīnā must demonstrate that the 'possibility' of a temporally generated thing is truly a dispositional possibility such as would need a substrate in which to inhere (131). Al-Mas'ūdi's critique obviously implies the defensibility of *kalām* creationism from the point of view of matter, which is, after all, *not* presupposed by everything temporally originated, and so need not be pre-eternal.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to al-Mas'ūdi's critique of Ibn Sīnā's proof of God. There is obviously no scope here to go over the full details of this proof, whose correct interpretation is, anyway, somewhat contested. The aspect of the argument that seems to be of most concern in Mas'ūdi's discussion is Ibn Sīnā's hypothesis that the series of contingent entities constituting the world might regress to infinity. But Ibn Sīnā crucially states: "The whole (*jumla*) is dependent on these [unit contingents]. Therefore [the whole] too is not necessary, but must [itself] be necessitated by another". Shihadeh, in passing, states in a footnote (143–144) that he differs from my own view, which I presented in an article on the proof some fifteen years ago.<sup>1</sup> I queried there the accuracy of al-Rāzī's criticism in his famous commentary on the *Ishārāt* that the proof at this juncture should have included the premise that efficient causes are *simultaneous* with their effects, for according to al-Rāzī, without acknowledging such a causal chain that by its nature is fully actualised in contrast with a causal chain that has been gradually unfolding through time, "it would not be impossible to attribute every contingent thing to the next one prior to it, to infinity"<sup>2</sup>. I simply observed, *pace* al-Rāzī (*et* Shihadeh!), that no such premise seems requisite for Ibn Sīnā's argument, provided that I have grasped the portion quoted above correctly, concerning the need of the series of contingents to be 'necessitated by another' even if the said series is infinite.

It is true that in contexts like his *Najāt*, Ibn Sīnā includes the premise to which al-Rāzī refers, but it seems to have been intentionally omitted here in the *Ishārāt*. The *Shaykh al-Ra'is* conceivably omitted it to test the acumen of his readers, whom

1 Toby Mayer, "Ibn Sīnā's 'Burhān al-ṣiddiqin'," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12/1 (2001): 18–39.

2 Ibn Sīnā et al., *Sharḥay al-Ishārāt*, ed. Sayyid 'Umar Ḥusayn al-Khashshāb, part 1 (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Khayriya, 1325/1907), 195, line 28.

he expected to supply it, given that one of the reasons for his book's allusive style was to challenge students of philosophy to think matters out for themselves. But it also seems likely that Ibn Sinā believed he could argue that the series must be brought about by something outside of it, *simply* through the fact that the series, which is generated from its units, cannot itself be necessary and thus must be contingent. In other words, he felt no need to introduce here the mentioned distinction between simultaneous causal chains and gradually unfolding ones in order to infer that the series is dependent upon something external. This was the point I wished to make in relation to al-Rāzī's 'suppressed premise' allegation.

Indeed, it seems the version of the proof given in the *Ishārāt* entirely dispenses with the principle that 'an actual infinite is impossible' and reaches 'a being, per se necessary' through a quite separate line of reasoning. Shihadeh's encapsulation of that reasoning is substantially accurate:

... even a series that consists of an infinite number of causes possible of existence and includes absolutely all such causes must, as a whole, have a cause that falls outside it. This cause cannot be possible of existence, but must be necessary of existence in itself. What Avicenna concludes here is effectively that even if an infinite series of possible causes is postulated, it cannot be self-sufficient with respect to its existence; for if this infinite series is 'bracketed' and considered as a self-contained whole, it must depend ultimately on a cause necessary of existence, beyond which no further cause exists (145).

Note that he nowhere evokes the simultaneity of efficient causes with their effects, or the principle that an infinite whose elements simultaneously exist is absurd.

Turning back to al-Mas'ūdi himself. His criticisms of the proof in the *Shukūk* partly result from his distinctive reading of it, shown by his paraphrase in the *Sharḥ al-Khuṭba* (151). The crux seems to be the reason he pinpoints for the claim that the infinite series of contingents is itself contingent: "the totality of [caused] existents, qua a single whole, must be caused, for it obtains from caused individuals, and the whole that obtains from caused individuals is, by necessity, itself caused..." (151). It seems to me that al-Mas'ūdi thus frames Ibn Sinā's central inference, more or less, as: 'If X has no status apart from contingents, X is itself contingent'. This rendering implicitly likens it to the dictum often evoked in *kalām* arguments for a Creator: 'If X has no status apart from incepted things, X is itself incepted' (*mā lā yashbiqū l-ḥādith fa-huwa ḥādith*).

Ibn Sinā, with his confidence in the eternity of the universe, of course attacked the *kalām* dictum head-on, for instance in his discussion of motion in the *Physics*.

The claim that “If every motion comes to be in time, the whole (*kull*) and totality (*jumla*) of motions come to be in time” is declared incorrect because such a series does not constitute an actual whole and therefore “lacks any real attributes” (148). It is Ibn Sīnā’s apparent inconsistency in this that turns out to be a major thrust of al-Mas‘ūdī’s problematic of Ibn Sīnā’s proof. It is not just the incipency of individual celestial rotations that Ibn Sīnā excuses himself from attributing to the series of rotations as a whole, but also his refusal to view the set of past souls as subject to the incipency to which individual souls are subject (153). Yet in his eternal cosmology he brazenly applies the individual contingents’ attribute of contingency to the series of them ‘as a whole’ (*jumla*).

Finally, the first comes last in the sense that the last major *aporia* treated in Shihadeh’s book, in chapter 6, is the very first in al-Mas‘ūdī’s *Shukūk*: Ibn Sīnā’s teaching on matter and form. Al-Mas‘ūdī’s discussion is heavily indebted to Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, and it is important to note that Ibn Sīnā and Abū al-Barakāt (hence al-Mas‘ūdī) are elaborating alternative versions of Aristotelian hylomorphism. The *aporia* thus brings out with particular clarity that al-Mas‘ūdī cannot possibly be construed as an antagonist of the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition. Nevertheless, the upshot of his position is radical and could, it seems to me, be interpreted as re-affirming a ‘physicist’ framework closer to the sensibility of *kalām*, without the latter’s atomism.

Ibn Sīnā attributes the body’s potential divisibility to matter and the body’s actual continuity to form. This in effect grounds the corporeal in separate principles that are *not*, in themselves, corporeal. The alternative theory propounded by al-Mas‘ūdī seems to ground the corporeal firmly *in* the corporeal. Ibn Sīnā’s argument, which is admittedly tendentious, is that the ultimate principle that explains a body’s continuity cannot be the same as the principle that explains that body’s divisibility. These two antithetical attributes of the body must be explained through two distinct principles, for the body’s continuity passes away when it is fragmented. Against this, Abū al-Barakāt protests that Ibn Sīnā’s incorporeal ‘prime matter’ is neither a perceptible, empirical datum nor truly imposed by reason, as long as alternative, less immoderate, explanations remain available (162). We do not find the body’s continuity, in itself, passing away when the body is fragmented; we simply find continuity’s multiplication on smaller and smaller scales. Thus no ‘prime matter’ emerges from the body’s division – other, that is, than ‘body’ itself. This is radically opposed to Ibn Sīnā’s reading of hylomorphism, according to which matter *qua* matter is divested of corporeity and is a principle that is presupposed by corporeity but, in itself, is incorporeal.

Shihadeh's painstaking efforts in this study-cum-edition have finally supplied scholars with the missing first episode in the long story of the commentary tradition on Ibn Sīnā's *Ishārāt*. Al-Mas'ūdī's relatively concise commentary has also, until now, been a missing piece within the wider puzzle of the dialogic engagement of *kalām* and *falsafa* during the sixth/twelfth century and beyond. There is some frustration that the intimate labyrinth of argumentation that Shihadeh plots out for us here is not traversed to a satisfactory conclusion in every issue, but this is, of course, in the very nature of al-Mas'ūdī's text, which is narrowly 'aporetic' in intent. A great deal, nevertheless, may be learnt along the way.