

Translation of an Even-Shmuel Footnote on the History of Proofs of God's Existence

by Scott Alexander

The following is my translation from Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Even-Shmuel's Introduction to his commentary on Book 2 of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, of his footnote 284 on page 108, regarding the history, particularly in Muslim and Jewish scholasticism, of the treatment of Aristotle's proofs for the existence of God.

R. Even-Shmuel makes several points that were new to me, and I had not seen this approach taken before.

He writes the footnote in an impressionistic style. The translation is loose, but even so I had to introduce extensive explanations and reconciliations parenthetically. All parentheticals are mine. For a biography of Even-Shmuel, see https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/a8eec7_c26f3ba570894fa8a8fbd2bc6ae3d151.pdf

I will follow this with the translation of his note 285 on page 111, which is R. Even-Shmuel's polemic against contemporary critics of Maimonidean philosophy. I am translating those footnotes for their intrinsic interest, and also because they would not be otherwise available to interested American and English readers.

Maimonides considered **Aristotle's** proofs for the existence, unity, and incorporeality of God to be irrefutable.

But he was aware that **Avicenna** had grave doubts about those of Aristotle's proofs that were based on the principle of universal motion. Avicenna's argument came from Themistius.

His argument was: "Every logical demonstration is based on its prior premises or hypotheses, for that is the starting point for any proof. (But any such demonstration regarding the existence of God would require such prior premises). For a truly first cause there could be no prior premises. So, from where would you get the logical first premise for the demonstration of such a prior cause?"

That is why Avicenna only acknowledged the proof from God's absolute existence vis-à-vis the other contingent existences, which he introduced as his doctrine of *absolute and contingent existences*.

(Harry Wolfson explains Avicenna's problem with the proof of God from motion differently. Avicenna believed that the Aristotelian proof of a "first mover" from the motion of the cosmos only proves the existence of an immovable first intelligence. It does not prove that this immovable first intelligence is God, but only the existence of the first intelligence emanated by God. Moreover, Wolfson cites the Jewish Avicennan Avraham Ibn Daud's interpretation of Avicenna: "His Avicennan conception of a God transcending the intelligences would naturally make it impossible for him [Avicenna] to use the ...argument from motion as a proof for the existence of God. The argument, as may be recalled, established only the existence of an immutable mover, but according to Ibn Daud [as for Avicenna] the intelligences are no less immovable than God." Harry A. Wolfson, "Notes on the Proofs of the Existence of God in Jewish Philosophy," page 561, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, Volume 1, 577)

Maimonides, by contrast, already provided the answer to this fundamental difficulty (i.e., how do you get around having a first cause without a first premise justifying such a first cause? The question boils down to: how does a perfect being cause anything?) in the first volume of the *Guide*, chapters 1:2 and

1:4. If the first cause was like all other causes this would be a difficulty, however, we contend that such a first cause must be completely different from all other causes, and only then could it really be first (and not follow any known causal paradigms).

(The point is that the first cause is an absolutely necessary being. It cannot have a prior cause, but must uniquely be the cause of itself. Note that R. Even-Shmuel is not really showing his hand here with his references to *Guide* 1:2 and 1:4. Those two chapters are not at all about this Maimonidean doctrine of the differentiation of causes as he suggests. See my comment at the end for the reason why R. Even-Shmuel cited those two chapters for this whole subject of the proof of God's existence.)

The First Cause is different from all the others by reason of its incorporeality. Its essence is uniquely incorporeal, such that the only thing we (who are embodied) grasp of it is its action, not its essence. This is also true in the case of man. We recognize our mental power only by its actions.

But Aristotle could not make this argument (a *kal v'khomer, ad minori*, argument, from the limited ineffability of human mind to the complete ineffability of divine mind) because the first cause for him was the purposive or ultimate cause (*telos/taklit*). It was the cause that inspires its desirous spheres' rotation, by its manifestation as the teleological God, the God of all purposes, and therefore the ultimate Mover. (in other words, the human mind was irrelevant to the thought-thinking-itself of the unmoved Mover and therefore could not provide Aristotle the basis for an *ad minori* proof for the ineffable incorporeality of God.)

But didn't Aristotle call the First Cause the actual first mover, i.e. the cause of all actualization? However, Aristotle strictly limited the class of all such active motivating causes. (For this reason, Avicenna, followed by Maimonides, does not call the First Cause the first mover; see Wolfson, *Crescas*, 606, and *Guide* 2:1). He acknowledged the "conduct" of the universe by means of the First Cause, (and its motivation of the first movement of the sphere), but not its *creation* of the universe.

Nonetheless, with respect to the proof of the existence of *rukhniut*, i.e., the incorporeality of the Unmoved Mover's absolute being, the absolutely existing mind: the proof of its existence is the proof from its activity: its activity in the conduct of the world (which could not be explained apart from it).

Maimonides also understood **Averroes' critique of Avicenna's absolute existence of God argument.**

Averroes recognized Avicenna's attack on Aristotle's proof from motion for what it was (and he opposed it). Averroes held that there could be no other way to prove the existence of God except from the existence of the world (and its motion). On the other hand, the proof from "absolute and contingent existence" was founded on a logical error, a distortion of Aristotle's method.

Every existing thing, Averroes argued, emerged from the category of possibility, and once having come forth, has thereby attained necessary existence.

But Avicenna had distinguished between necessity of existence with respect to itself, and necessity of existence with respect to another (i.e., God). This distinction, according to Averroes, had no basis in any logical category. (Being is just being. Cf. Wolfson, *Crescas*, 680, note 1.).

But Maimonides had already responded to this. His argument was that only someone who thought that the universe was eternal would fail to notice the differences between levels or grades of existence. Only one who saw the universe as a "given" existence, as eternal, would also (erroneously) call the *created*

and the *Creator* by one name. One thing really is and must be absolute in its existence (cf. *Mishneh Torah* 1:1). There is only one *absolute* existence. Every other existence has its source in and from an existence that *is* absolute existence, i.e. God. We can arrive at this only as an *intellectual* conclusion.

(The key here is that this conclusion is an intellectual attainment, not a mere product of the imagination. See my comment below. Note that Maimonides accepted Avicenna's distinction between absolute and contingent existence in *Guide* 1:63. He even argued that the Jewish teaching on the name of God anticipated Avicenna's doctrine of absolute existence of God; see my commentary essay on 1:63, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/a8eec7_e51a62e428c942309e3c3a895f644db4.pdf, particularly the section on "Essence and Existence,")

With respect to criticism of Aristotle's proofs from motion by subsequent generations, in the times of Hume and Kant, Maimonides anticipated them. He stated that there is a decisive answer to anyone doubting the existence of divinity. He held that our *understanding* leads us not just to intellectually logical conceptualizations, but to actually observe the *substantial existence* of such divine intelligence. (The perfect activity apparent in the world can only be explained if it is the action of God. A "substance" is an entity that exists in itself and by virtue of itself. It is the opposite of an "accident," which is a nonessential attribute of a substance).

However, the imagination (which only possesses images of reality) cannot possess a concept like the substantial existence of divine intelligence. Such substantiality (however the human mind arrives to that conceptualization of absolute substance) is a true bridge between us and God, for He has such substantial existence. Anyone who rejects His substantial existence is still caught up in the net of imagination (and therefore cannot produce a clear conceptualization of the creation of being.)

(This is where Even-Shmuel's *Guide* 1:2 and 1:4 become relevant: those chapters begin Maimonides' distinction between intellect and imagination, read together with his doctrine of the intellect's participation in prophetic revelation. These final formulations of R. Even-Shmuel seem to flow from a combination of an ontological type of proof for God, a variety of which Maimonides accepted, on the one hand, taken together with the kind of certainty only achievable through prophecy's conjunction with the active intellect. As to the types of proofs of God accepted by Maimonides and Jewish philosophy, see Wolfson "Notes on the Proofs of God," above, in general, and in particular 562, 563).

My Comment:

The steps in the argument are as follows: Aristotle insists that the proof of the unmoved mover comes from the need to explain universal motion. However, Avicenna objects, essentially, that this conceives the higher in the light of the lower. It would require prior premises to support such a hypothesis; but there could be no such prior premises. He therefore inaugurates his argument from above for the existence of an absolute substantial Being. This being is different from all the other contingent beings that rely on It to actualize their merely contingent existence. Averroes rejects this, arguing instead that things really are here, fully and non-contingently, for nature does not act in vain. All existing things are necessary with respect to themselves. Moreover, Avicenna's concept of an absolute existence against all the other contingent existences is a distortion of Aristotelian method. There is no category in logic to support Avicenna's distinction between absolute and contingent existences (existence is just existence). Maimonides rejects this flattening of existence. He comes back appreciating Avicenna's metaphysical proof for the absolute existence of God, while conceding with Averroes that things do exist necessarily

with respect to themselves. But Maimonides argues that Averroes' commitment to Aristotle's uncreated eternal universe blinds him to distinctions, grades, and levels among different types of existences, as well as between different types of causes. Whether coming from an ontological argument for the existence of God, or from the panoply of all the other arguments taken together, or from prophetic impetus to believe, Maimonides contends that the acceptance of an absolutely existing substance is a purely intellectual concept which man can and should attain. But this intellectual concept is impossible for people caught up in the web of imagination, in this case, the imagination that the eternity of the universe is either proven or otherwise incumbent upon rational belief, which he denies.

I put the point differently in previous writings and in my recent video (on *Guide* 1:76). My argument is that Rambam never articulated his own proof of the existence of God, but only canvassed those that previously existed. It was not the point of the *Guide* to create such proofs, but only to create the certainty in the mind of the prophet without which prophecy could not take place. That is what makes the *Guide* modern. In our times we do not rely on such creaky proofs, but on our own certainty of the existence of God. (See, generally, Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*).

R. Even-Shmuel suggests that we consider *Guide* 1:2 and 1:4 because our concept of God will ultimately derive from prophetic revelation. 1:4 examines the different ways of "seeing," and many biblical terms for seeing. Maimonides comes to the conclusion that real "sight" with respect to God has nothing to do with sense data, or even the contemplation of true concepts. It is rather more like what a "seer" does, i.e., prophetic revelation. The point of 1:2 is that all false concepts of God, including those of the eternalist philosophers, ultimately derive from the imagination, not the intellect.

Copyright © 2019, Scott Michael Alexander, no copying or use permitted without express written permission of the author.

You may reach me at scottmalexander@rcn.com

My website, with my commentary essays on each chapter of the *Guide to the Perplexed* (Volume 1) is at <https://www.maimonides-guide.com/>, where you will also find my new video introducing *Guide* 1:76, other podcasts, and important links.