

‘ABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-JĀMĪ’S ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF EXISTENCE

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Before taking up al-Jāmī’s arguments for the existence of existence¹ I should like first to explain briefly why it was that al-Jāmī was concerned with trying to prove that existence exists.

Al-Jāmī, who died in the year 898 of the *hijrah*, was, first of all, an adherent of the “oneness of existence” or *waḥdat al-wujūd* school of Islamic mysticism. The doctrines of this school go back to Ibn al-‘Arabī,² but they were subsequently, and particularly during the seventh and eighth centuries A.H., greatly developed and clarified by such men as Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī,³ ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī,⁴ and Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī.⁵

As these doctrines were developed, however, they began to encounter the opposition of some of the more rationalist theologians, such as al-Taftāzānī,⁶ because, as these theologians claimed, they contradicted reason and could not, therefore, be true.

Now this position of the theologians was based on their belief that the truth of Islam, as revealed in the Qur’ān, depended ultimately upon truths which could be arrived at only through reason. That is, before one could accept the revelation of the Qur’ān as true one had first to use reason to prove the existence of God, that God has certain attributes, that it is possible for Him to send prophets, that Muḥammad is a prophet sent by God and that he is truthful. If one could not prove any of these points, then there was no reason why one should believe the Qur’ān

¹ These arguments may be found in al-Jāmī’s *Risālah fī al-Wujūd*.

² Muḥyī al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638 A.H.). See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, I, 571 (441), S, I, 790.

³ Ṣadr al-Dīn Abū al-Ma‘ālī Muḥammad ibn Ishaq al-Qūnawī (d. 772 A.H.). See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, I, 585 (450), S, I, 807.

⁴ Jamāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 730 A.H.). See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, II, 262 (204), S, II, 280.

⁵ Dāwūd ibn Maḥmūd al-Rūmī al-Qayṣarī (d. 751 A.H.). See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, II, 299 (231), S, II, 323.

⁶ Sa’d al-Dīn Mas‘ūd ibn ‘Umar al-Taftāzānī (d. 791 A.H.). See his *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, I, 54-55 and his *Risālah fī Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. This latter work is also ascribed to ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Bukhārī (d. 841 A.H.) with the title *Fāḍiḥat al-Mulḥidīn wa-Nāṣiḥat al-Muwahḥidīn*. See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, I, 573 (422), S, I, 794.

to be true. Moreover, if any part of revelation seemed to contradict what reason determined to be true then that part of revelation must be interpreted in such a way as to be in accord with reason. Otherwise it could be said that revelation invalidated the very thing upon which it was ultimately based.⁷

In the same way it was claimed that knowledge gained through mystical experiences, like the knowledge gained from revelation, must not include anything that reason showed to be impossible. Mystical experiences, like revelation, were valid sources of knowledge but they had to be interpreted in such a way as to remain within the realm of what was rationally possible.

Because the opposition of the theologians to the Sufi doctrine of the oneness of existence was based on the argument that it contradicted reason, the Sufis, in defense of their doctrine, had to show that it could, on the contrary, be explained in a completely rational way; and in the ninth century we find a number of Sufis, including al-Fanārī,⁸ al-Mahā'imī⁹ and al-Jāmī, attempting to do just this.

Now the basic doctrine of the oneness of existence school is that God is absolute existence or *al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*, and that this absolute existence is the only thing that really exists. The doctrine is based on the experience of the Sufi in the state of *fanā'*, or annihilation, in which the external world, as well as the Sufi's awareness of his own self, disappears and he is conscious of God alone as the one Reality.

The conclusion that this one reality is absolute existence seems to have been arrived at as follows. First, a distinction was made between essence or quiddity on the one hand and existence on the other. Then existence was asserted to be a quality which could be predicated of quiddities. But because it would be absurd to say that existence itself did not exist, existence was then thought of as existing necessarily, and, since God is defined as the one necessarily existent being, God and existence must be one and the same being.

To this the rationalist theologians objected that absolute existence, insofar as it is an attribute common to everything said to exist, is a universal concept that exists only in the mind and can have no existence in the external world as a particular, individual thing.¹⁰ God, on the other hand, is an individual existing in the external world and cannot therefore be the same as absolute existence.

It is in answer to this objection of the theologians that al-Jāmī attempts to show in his *Risālah fī al-Wujūd* that absolute existence can be said to exist in the external world as a single individual entity and that it can therefore be God.

Using a simple *modus tollens* argument he says that if existence did not exist, then nothing would exist at all; and since the consequent of this statement, that

⁷ See al-Jurjānī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, II, 48-58.

⁸ Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ḥamzah al-Fanārī (d. 834 A.H.) in his *Miṣbāḥ al-Uns*. See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, II, 303 (233), S, II, 328.

⁹ 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Mahā'imī (d. 835 A.H.) in his *Ajillat al-Ta'yīd fī Sharḥ Adillat al-Tawhīd*. See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, II, 286 (221), S, II, 310.

¹⁰ It was considered a natural universal (*kullī ṭabī'ī*) or concept of the second intention (*ma'qūl thānī*).

is, that nothing would exist at all, is obviously false, then the antecedent, that existence does not exist, is also false and that therefore existence does exist.

Now the truth of the statement that “if existence did not exist nothing would exist at all” is shown as follows: First, essences or quiddities in themselves are non-existent externally unless external existence is added to them. But if existence is also non-existent, then we will not be able to predicate it of a similarly non-existent quiddity and get, as a result, a quiddity existing externally. This is so because, in order to predicate an attribute of a subject, the subject must first exist and there is no reason to think that this rule does not apply in the case of predicating existence of a quiddity. Therefore, if the subject cannot be said to exist externally, we shall have to say that at least the predicate, or existence, must exist externally, and if this is so we can reverse the relationship and make existence the subject and predicate a quiddity of it. In other words, instead of saying that a certain quiddity exists, we can say that existence is a certain quiddity.

Existence then becomes the only real externally existent thing and quiddities remain purely mental entities inhering in existence; and since quiddities are purely mental entities existing only in the mind, existence can be the subject of many different and contradictory predicates.

Furthermore existence must exist through itself rather than through another existence superadded to it, for otherwise an endless chain of existences would result. Also, if it exists through itself, it must necessarily exist and, if this is so, it must be identical with God. Thus God or absolute existence becomes the one externally existing Reality, and the physical universe is reduced to a mere mental existence in God’s knowledge.

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