

Chapter I:

Pure Quiddity in Context

1 Introducing the problem

Quiddity or essence, for Avicenna, designates the ‘whatness’ or ‘what-it-isness’ of a thing, its essential structure and principle, as well as its meaning and intelligibility to the mind. As such, it is what makes conception or conceptualization (*taṣawwūr*) possible. Quiddity is what is referred to by the definition (*ḥadd*), according to which a thing is what it is and not something else, regardless of the mode in which it exists. In other words, the definition informs us about its thingness (*shay’iyyah*) in abstraction from that thing’s existence, that is, whether it exists and how or in what mode it exists.¹ Quiddity as such is apprehended as a unitary

¹ This is the general definition of quiddity embraced by virtually all Arabic philosophers and by many theologians as well. Avicenna provides definitions of *māhiyyah* in various places, especially in the sections dealing with logic (see, for example, *Salvation*, 12–13; *Pointers*, vol. 1, 219–232; *Logic of the Easterners*, 15–17). There he explains that the reply to the question ‘What is it?’ (*mā huwa*)—the Arabic term *māhiyyah* is derived from this expression—needs to include the various essential (*dhātiyyah*) or constitutive (*muqawwimah*) elements of the definition for it to be complete and accurate. Additionally, there are various ways of framing the answer to this question, the most common or direct of which is the definition through genus and differentia. In this manner, one refers to the species through its constitutive features, such as when one answers ‘rational animal’ in reply to the question of what a human being is, where ‘animal’ indicates the genus and ‘rational’ the differentia. The species (*naw’*), for Avicenna, is what corresponds most directly and fully to the actual existent and the primary substance and is therefore the recommended way of elucidating the quiddity of a thing. For it includes, in the case of human, “substantiality, corporeity, faculties of nourishment, growth and reproduction, of sense, movement, speech and others” (Avicenna, *Salvation*, 13.3–5; translation by Ahmed in Avicenna’s *Deliverance*, 9). In other words, it contains all the differentiae that distinguish human beings from other species of animals. Alternatively, one can explain the quiddity of a thing through reference to genus alone, such as when one says of a human being that it is an animal, or of a human being and a horse that they are both ‘animal’; yet, this approach is more general and less precise, since it does not include all the essential features and differentiae that characterize humanness or horseness as a species. It is important to note that the same thing can be both genus and species depending on the question asked and on the kind of quiddity that is defined. Thus, ‘animal’ is a genus in the definition of ‘human being,’ but it is itself a species when included in the definition of ‘body,’ since it qualifies or specifies generic body into animal body, which in turn is a genus for the various animal species (see *Salvation*, 15–16). One important Avicennian specificity is added to this relatively standard logical account: the master distinguishes *sensu stricto* between quiddity in itself and ‘being a species’ or ‘being a genus,’ that is to say, between the pure nature (e.g., humanness or animalness) and universal genusness and universal speciesness. For genusness (*jinsiyyah*) and speciesness (*naw’iyyah*) are added as exterior intentions or meanings (*ma’ānī*) to pure quiddity in the mind. In itself, horseness is neither universal nor genus. I shall discuss these important points later on in detail. Much later in time, the lexicologist al-Tahānawī (fl. 1740s), *Dictionary*, 1423–4, distinguishes between the views of the logicians (*al-mantiqiyyin*), according to whom quiddity is the answer to the question “What is it?” (*bi-mā huwa*), and those of

idea and meaning (*ma'nā*) in the mind. It is what represents a thing's essential or foundational nature (*ṭabī'ah*) and true reality (*ḥaqīqah*).² This is because quiddity contains, and is constituted by, a set of internal and essential components that determine its very nature and, thus, the nature of an existent thing as well. These are what Avicenna calls the constitutive elements or constituents (*muqawwimāt*) of quiddity, which are its inner, essential, and formal constituents. These are sharply distinguished from (a) the external concomitants (*lawāzim*), which, in contrast, are non-constitutive (*ghayr muqawwimah*) and hence do not enter into the quidditative core, although they necessarily accompany quiddity when a thing actually exists; and (b) the accidents proper (*a'rāḍ*), which are also external to quiddity, but do not necessarily attach to quiddity in existence and always remain separate from it.³

Thus, whereas the *muqawwimāt* are internal (sing., *dākhil*) to thingness, the *lawāzim* and *a'rāḍ* are external (sing., *khārij*). These external attributes essentially follow the constituents and can always be conceptually dissociated from them. In Avicenna's epistemology, these external intentions in the mind include concomitants and accidents as diverse as universality and particularity, oneness and multiplicity, genusness and speciesness, actuality and potentiality, etc. Anything that does not enter into the constitutive core of quiddity will be external to it, either as a necessary concomitant, i.e., something that necessarily attaches to quiddity when a thing exists either in the mind or in concrete reality (e.g., oneness) or as an accident proper, i.e., something that may or may not attach to the essence, but which in any case remains essentially separable from quiddity even when a thing exists (e.g., musical in Socrates). By way of example, whereas shapeness (*shakl*, *shakliyyah*) is always constitutive of triangle, and thus one of its *muqawwimāt*, being 'one' triangle, existing concretely as an individual wooden triangle or in the mind as a universal triangle, or even having three angles equal to two right angles are all things that are external

the theologians and philosophers (*al-mutakallimīn wa-l-ḥukamā'*), according to whom it answers the question "What makes the thing what it is?" (*mā bi-hi l-shay' huwa*). This nuance is interesting inasmuch as it underlines the logical and ontological/causal implications of quiddity, both of which find important roots in the Arabic intellectual tradition in the works of Avicenna.

2 As I will show on various occasions throughout this study, the terms *māhiyyah*, *ṭabī'ah*, and *ḥaqīqah* are interrelated and often used interchangeably by Avicenna to designate essence, even though they may convey different nuances depending on the context.

3 For informative discussions of the term and notion of *lāzim*, see Goichon, *Lexique*, 364–369; Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 615–616; Lizzini, *Fluxus*, especially 557–561; Kalbarczyk, *Predication*; and Benevich, *Essentialität*. The last two authors focus mostly on the logical context. Although some scholars differentiate between the meanings of the terms *lāzim* and *lāḥiq*, it seems to me that Avicenna uses them quite loosely and interchangeably, so I treat them as broadly synonymous in this study. What is important for my purposes is that they express a state of externality or extrinsicity vis-à-vis pure quiddity; both the *lawāzim* and *lawāḥiq* are external to (*khārij*), non-constitutive of (*ghayr muqawwimah*), and follow and are entailed by (*lazima*, *laḥiqa*) essence. It should be noted that the term *lāzim*/*lawāzim* also appears frequently in the context of Avicenna's discussions of God, for which see De Smet and Sebtī, *Avicenna's Philosophical Approach*. I discuss this issue in detail in chapter V.

and concomitant to the pure quiddity ‘triangleness.’⁴ In brief, pure quiddity refers strictly to the internal constituents of essence, as well as to the unitary concept that emerges in the mind as a result of their essential and intrinsic relation. When used in this technical sense as meaning essence or quiddity, the Arabic term *māhiyyah* is the direct counterpart of a set of Greek expressions that Aristotle used in his metaphysics, and which are usually translated into English as ‘essence’: *τό τί ἐστι* (as in *Posterior Analytics* 89a32) and *τό τί ἦν εἶναι* (*Topics* 132a4 and *Metaphysics* 993a18 and 988a10). Although Avicenna inherited this concept from Greek philosophy thanks to the translation movements from Greek and Syriac to Arabic, he developed it considerably in his own philosophical reflection and teaching, thereby making a valuable contribution to metaphysics, and one which was to profoundly influence subsequent intellectual history in Islam and the Latin West. In his system, the concept of quiddity becomes a foundational concept, a metaphysical cornerstone, surpassed perhaps only (and arguably) by the concept of existence (*wujūd*).⁵

One of Avicenna’s major contributions to the philosophical discussion about quiddity he inherited from antiquity was his insistence on the fact that quiddity can be conceptually distinguished from any other consideration—even from the consideration of existence—and apprehended strictly in itself. This claim, or rather, the implications Avicenna teased out of it, proved to be epistemologically and metaphysically momentous, but they remain somewhat obscure and tantalizing, even though they have been the object of a considerable amount of scholarship. One important upshot of Avicenna’s view is that existence is not constitutive of quiddity and of the ‘whatness’ or essential core of a thing. We can reflect on the quiddity or thingness of a thing without broaching the question of whether that thing exists in actuality and in what mode (concrete or intellectual) it exists. To know the quiddity of horseness, horseness ‘in itself,’ is clearly a different kind of knowledge from knowing whether a particular horse exists in the concrete world. It is also distinct from the apprehension of the universal concept ‘horse’ in the mind, which is a single universal form that can be predicated of many (*maqūl ‘alā kathīrīn*). This distinction between the knowledge of essence and the knowledge of existence reflects two other sets of distinctions frequently encountered in Avicenna’s works: that between conception (*taṣawwūr*) and assent or conviction (*taṣdīq*); and that between the ascertainment of quiddity (*taḥaqquq al-māhiyyah*) and the ascertainment of existence (*taḥaqquq al-wujūd*). According to Avicenna, then, there is a knowledge of quiddity that is ‘in

4 The triangle is one of Avicenna’s favorite examples to illustrate the relation between the constitutive elements and the external concomitants of essence, as well as the distinction between essence and existence; see *Introduction*, I.6, 34.10–15; *Categories*, II.1, 61–62; *Metaphysics* I.5, 31.5–9; *Pointers*, vol. 1, 182, 199; vols. 3–4, 441–442. The example of the triangle to discuss essence was used by Aristotle at *Posterior Analytics*, II.792b.14 ff.

5 For the various Greek terms and expressions that lie behind the Arabic word *māhiyyah*, as well as for the relevant texts that informed this notion, see Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology*, 12–13, 274–276, and especially Endress, *Proclus arabus*, 79 ff.

itself' or about quiddity 'and nothing else.' The object of this rarefied and fully abstract conception Avicenna calls 'pure quiddity' or 'quiddity in itself.' Everything that is not internal to it or constitutive of it, such as universality, oneness and multiplicity, actuality and potentiality, etc., and even existence (*wujūd*) itself, can be described as external intentions and concomitants that do not participate in its definition. This kind of abstract thinking is possible, because according to Avicenna the rational soul has the ability to analyze and synthesize concepts at will. Thanks to these mental operations, our mind can distinguish quiddity from other concepts and intentions and apprehend its pure meaning (*ma'nā*).

Avicenna's epistemological claims on behalf of quiddity have received considerable attention in the modern scholarship, where they have been discussed in connection with other important notions the master deploys in his works, especially universality and intentionality.⁶ If one peruses the modern historiography, one notices that the lion's share of the scholarly attention has fallen on the relationship between quiddity and existence, an issue that has ramifications not only with regard to human thought and mental existence, but also with regard to the concrete existence of extramental beings. According to Avicennian doctrine, existence is one of the non-constitutive concomitants that are entailed by quiddity and apply to it from the outside; hence, it does not enter into the definition of the 'whatness' of a thing, nor is it included in the very conception (*taṣawwur*) of quiddity. As an external concomitant (*lāzim*), attribute (*ṣifah*), and intention or meaning (*ma'nā*), however, it bears an ambiguous relationship with quiddity. In the modern historiography on Avicenna, this relationship has been described variably as an 'accident' or 'accidental,' as one of 'necessary concomitance,' 'co-relatedness,' and 'co-implicativeness,' or simply as a 'relationship.' These are notions that have most often been construed as indicating a purely 'conceptual' or 'logical' connection established by the mind. Whatever the case may be, these two concepts—quiddity and existence—make a distinct and irreducible intensional claim: they can be jointly apprehended and conceptually connected in the mind without ever fusing or losing their semantic and conceptual distinctiveness.⁷

The questions of how these notions relate to one another as metaphysical principles and what their status in concrete reality amounts to have been discussed from

⁶ See notably Izutsu, *Basic Problems*; Marmura, *Quiddity and Universality*; idem, *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals*; Pini, *Absoluta*; Benevich, *Die 'göttliche Existenz'*; and Tahiri, *Mathematics*, especially section 4.1. The most comprehensive treatment of essence in Avicenna conducted from an epistemological and logical perspective is now Benevich, *Essentialität*.

⁷ The only exception to this rule in Avicenna's philosophy is God or the First Cause, in whom quiddity and existence cannot be meaningfully separated, even at the purely conceptual level or as a mere consideration (*bi-l-i'tibār*). Accordingly, scholars have interpreted Avicenna as saying either that God has no quiddity or that His quiddity is identical with His existence, two formulations that are supported by the textual evidence from Avicenna's corpus. Either way, the key idea is that quiddity and existence do not amount to a duality in God, neither in reality, nor in the thinking mind.

the early reception of Avicenna's works in the Arabic and Latin traditions up to the modern scholarship on this thinker. Yet, in spite of remarkable contributions, the problem of the relationship between essence and existence continues to be among the most abstruse and difficult in Avicennian studies. It is also one that has for years divided—and continues to divide—scholarly opinion in a way that few other topics in the field of Arabic philosophy have.⁸ From a historical perspective, the seeds of this disagreement lie in the postclassical Islamic period and in the Latin Middle Ages, which were heirs to Avicenna's metaphysical doctrine. Starting shortly after Avicenna's death, disciples and detractors alike felt compelled to address his doctrine of essence and its relation to existence. Scholars stemming from the Arabic, Persian, Latin (and to a lesser extent, Hebrew) traditions formulated various answers to the problem in commentaries on the master's works as well as in independent treatises. In the process of commenting on the master, they often made the Avicennian essence/existence distinction—or rather their interpretation of it—the cornerstone of their own metaphysical system.

In this regard, the medieval and modern discussions revolving around the relationship of quiddity and existence are by no means based on a monolithic or homogeneous problematic. Rather, they consist of a set of distinct, albeit related, issues, all of which present their own character and difficulty. Three points in particular have proven profoundly fertile. The first is the issue of the intensionality of essence and existence, of their philosophical meaning and structural and semantic relationships. The second is the issue of their extensionality, the spectrum of entities or things these notions cover and whether these spectrums partly overlap, are identical, or differ altogether. Finally, there is the more specifically Avicennian problem of the epistemological and ontological status of quiddity in itself, a topic to which Avicenna alludes on various occasions in his works, but which he never analyzes in a systematic way.⁹ These three issues are all interrelated. The second issue of extensionality obviously hinges on the meaning of 'quiddity' and 'existence,' whereas problem three is directly dependent on the other two, especially on the second one: if quiddity is said to be extensionally broader than existence, or if not all quiddities are actual existents, then what is its ontological status? In other words, what is the ontological status of those instances of quiddity that cannot be directly correlated with an actual

⁸ This is true not only of modern scholars, but also of some of the postclassical followers and critics of Avicenna in Islam, who devoted much attention to the master's doctrine of essence and existence. For an overview of some of these developments in the post-Avicennian tradition with a particular focus on essence, see Wisnovsky, *Essence and Existence*; and idem, *Towards a Genealogy*. Other major doctrinal points of contention in the modern literature on Avicenna focus on the place and nature of intuition and abstraction in his epistemology, on his views on divine knowledge, and on the place of mysticism in his works.

⁹ For the distinction between the extensionality and intensionality of essence and existence, and for an insightful analysis of these notions, see the groundbreaking study by Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics*.

existent? While there is a certain scholarly consensus concerning the first point (intensionality), there is only partial agreement concerning the second (extensionality), and major disagreements concerning the third (the epistemic and ontological status of pure quiddity). It is accordingly with the last two problems, and especially with the third problem, that this study will deal. In the meantime, additional comments regarding these three core issues of Avicennian metaphysics are in order.

The intensional or semantic distinction between quiddity and existence is recognized by virtually all medieval and modern interpreters as constituting one of the foundational tenets of Avicenna's philosophy. As scholars have shown, this question, as it is framed in the Avicennian works, was informed by two distinct traditions. On the one hand, there is the Aristotelian contribution, as encapsulated especially in *Metaphysics* and the appendant commentaries on this work. These texts, with which Avicenna was thoroughly acquainted, are always in the background of his own philosophical analysis. Even though Aristotle does not press the distinction between quiddity and existence in the way Avicenna does, some passages of the Aristotelian corpus, such as *Posterior Analytics* II.7, are certainly at the origin of Avicenna's reflection on the subject. In addition, scholars have suggested that some late-antique Peripatetic and Neoplatonic texts could have influenced Avicenna's approach to this question: these include, among others, Alexander's *Quaestio* 1.3 and 1.11 and passages from *Theology of Aristotle*. Thus, many of the Greek texts that were rendered in Arabic and consulted in classical philosophical circles in Islam informed the discussion concerning essence and existence.¹⁰

At any rate, Avicenna's novelty in this regard was not merely to distinguish between the 'whatness' and 'thatness' of an existing thing, that is to say, between *what* a thing is (i.e., its essence) and *that* a thing is (i.e., its actual existence). Rather, it lies in the claim that we can conceive of quiddity in complete abstraction from existence, that is, by omitting to consider whether a thing exists or not in actuality. Knowing what horseness is and the definition of horseness does not in any way require the awareness that this individual horse exists in the extramental world. This realization encouraged Avicenna to enshrine mental existence as a particular ontological category that stands side by side to concrete existence. This in turn had the effect of shifting the focus of the analysis of quiddity away from extramental ontology to mental ontology. By the same token, however, this approach posed the acute question of how quiddity relates not to existence *simpliciter*, or to concrete, extramental existence, but specifically to mental existence. Avicenna—and virtually every thinker

¹⁰ The literature on essence and existence in Avicenna and on the relation of his theories to the Greek philosophical tradition is immense and cannot be cited in full. Here I mention only some representative studies in order to orient the reader: Goichon, *La distinction*; Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics*; Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics*; idem, *The Distinction*; Belo, *Essence*; Menn, *Avicenna's Metaphysics*; Lizzini, *Ibn Sīnā's Metaphysics*; eadem, *Wuğūd-Mawğūd*. This study will focus on the much more narrow issue of pure quiddity in Avicenna, and especially on its ontological status. Relevant studies pertaining to this topic will be cited in the course of the analysis.

who flourished in his stead—struggled to clarify exactly what this view entailed in terms of how quiddity relates to mental existence and whether it can be said to possess some kind of intellectual entitativity.

While the late-antique Greek background was decisive for Avicenna's preoccupation with essence and existence, his approach was also informed by the early Arabic theological tradition (*kalām*), which discussed at length the relation between 'the existent' (*al-mawjūd*), 'the nonexistent' (*al-ma'dūm*), and 'the thing' (*al-shay'*), key terms that appear prominently in Avicenna's own metaphysical discussions.¹¹ The Arabic theologians had from an early stage onward initiated a discussion as to what constitutes the basic or primary entities and notions of reality. The *kalām* tradition was particularly influential in orienting Avicenna's approach to the issue of the extensionality of quiddity and existence, for a similar debate had flourished in Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite circles regarding whether 'the thing' encompassed both 'the existent' and 'the nonexistent' or only the former. While some, namely, the Ash'arites, claimed that 'the thing' and 'the existent' are identical and constitute primary conceptual notions as well as the actual building blocks of reality (i.e., all atoms or substances are 'things' and 'existents'), others, namely the Mu'tazilites, claimed that 'the thing' is extensionally greater than 'the existent' and inclusive of both it and 'the nonexistent.' This implies that 'things' can be divided into 'existent things' and 'nonexistent things,' a view that led to ontological conundrums regarding the status of 'the nonexistent thing.' As Wisnovsky and other scholars have shown, this specific *kalām* debate had an impact on Avicenna's terminology, on the way he frames the problem of essence, and even on the answers he formulated to the philosophical questions he found in the Greek and Arabic sources.¹²

Avicenna addresses the issues of intensionality and extensionality in earnest in what is probably his most famous work to date, *Metaphysics of The Cure*. Having clarified some key terms used in his general metaphysics (such as *shay'*, *mawjūd*, *wujūd ithbātī*, and *wujūd khāṣṣ*) in section I.5, Avicenna goes on to argue for the apparent co-extensionality, co-implication, and reciprocity of 'thing' (*shay'*) and 'existent' (*mawjūd*).¹³ Avicenna's comments on the relationship of these two notions are

11 The main study is Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics*, particularly chapters II.7, 8, and 13; see also Wisnovsky, One Aspect; idem, Notes; idem, *Avicenna*; Jolivet, *Aux origines*; Belo, *Essence*; and Benevise, *The Classical*. In general, it is Avicenna's relation to Ash'arite *kalām* that has been the main focus of attention, although Jolivet, Belo, and Wisnovsky (in *Avicenna*, 105–110) have pointed to the importance of Mu'tazilite theology to understand his metaphysics.

12 Wisnovsky, Notes; idem, *Avicenna's Metaphysics*; idem, *Avicenna*.

13 An important clarification here concerns the distinction between the terms 'thing' (*shay'*) and 'quiddity' (*māhiyyah*). Following some recent contributions, such as Bertolacci, *The Distinction*, and De Haan, *A Mereological Construal*, I will in what follows distinguish between *shay'* and *māhiyyah*. More precisely, I will distinguish between *shay'*, on the one hand, and the terms nature (*ṭabī'ah*), reality (*ḥaqīqah*), quiddity (*māhiyyah*), thingness (*shay'iyah*), and special existence (*wujūd khāṣṣ*), on the other. This cluster of terms refers to *what* a thing is, to the essence and quidditative reality of a thing taken in an abstract way, whereas *shay'* refers to an actual existent and

well known and have been extensively examined by modern scholars, starting with Goichon's classic monograph on Avicenna's metaphysics.¹⁴ Avicenna's principal aim throughout this section of *Metaphysics* appears to be to emphasize the close relationship and mutual dependence of 'the thing' and 'the existent,' of essence and existence. Moreover, Avicenna is keen in this passage to maintain a dual division of existents into mental and extramental and to correlate this division with two aspects of quiddity or essence: quiddity connected with concrete individuals, and quiddity connected with mental objects. Understandably, some scholars have taken *Metaphysics* I.5 as reflecting Avicenna's definitive stance on the issue and emphasized the thesis of the co-extensionality and co-implicativeness of essence and existence. This is the case, for example, of Bertolacci, who, on the basis of this text, has suggested that it would be more appropriate to speak of an essence/existence *relationship*, rather than an essence/existence *distinction*, given that these two notions are always co-implied and pertain to every existent, whether concrete or mental.¹⁵

merely *suggests* quiddity in that existent. Although 'the thing' has sometimes been construed as a synonym of quiddity or essence, and although Avicenna himself sometimes uses this term loosely to that effect, there is an important conceptual difference between these two notions. The term *shay'* really means, for Avicenna, *an existing* essence or thing. It refers to an entity that possesses *both* existence and essence and, hence, to something that can be pointed to (*al-mushār ilayhi*), and which is also, by the same token, an entity that is caused and complex or composite. As such, 'the thing' is always interrelated or correlated with 'the existent' and fully co-extensional with it. It is on these grounds that the formula *māhiyyāt al-ashyā'* can in most cases be replaced with the equivalent expression *māhiyyāt al-mawjūdāt*. The terms *māhiyyah* and *shay'īyyah*, in contrast, express quiddity in a more abstract and theoretical way and often designate 'pure quiddity' or 'quiddity in itself' specifically. According to Avicenna, it is this abstract notion that can be conceptually distinguished in the mind and separated from existence, as in the case of the consideration of the pure quiddity 'horseness' or 'humanness,' which, in itself, does not include any consideration of existence. In these cases, 'a quiddity' can only awkwardly be called 'a thing' (except, perhaps, in a non-technical sense), although the idiosyncratic but cognate term 'thingness' or *shay'īyyah* can be used more appropriately to refer to the same fundamental meaning. Hence, the distinction between *shay'* and *māhiyyah* is not merely a formal difference, but rather reflects a profound philosophical shift in perspective from studying the ontology and epistemology of quiddity as it is instantiated in composite or complex existent things (*shay'*, or quiddity *in the thing*) and as it is conceived of in itself and in an abstract mode (*māhiyyah*, *shay'īyyah*). In spite of this, there has been a general tendency in the Western interpretations of Avicenna to conflate these two notions, starting perhaps with Thomas Aquinas, who identifies 'being' and 'essence' (*esse* and *essentia*)—and not 'the thing' (*shay'*, *res*)—as the primary notions discussed by Avicenna in *Metaphysics* I.5 (see Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 1). Given that the term *shay'* does not illuminate in any useful way the issue of the ontological status of pure quiddity and is systematically contrasted with a cluster of terms designating pure quiddity in Avicennian technical parlance, the present study will focus primarily on the terms *māhiyyah* and *shay'īyyah*.

¹⁴ Goichon, *La distinction*. As I will point out in due course, some of my conclusions overlap with those of Goichon.

¹⁵ Bertolacci (The Distinction, 287) proposes to use the term 'relationship' instead of the term 'distinction' favored by Goichon and many others after her to describe essence and existence. The point, I presume, is that the latter stresses not only the difference, but also the separateness of essence and

However, it is with regard to the second problem of extensionality that scholars' opinions begin to diverge in significant ways. One group, representing by far the majority of scholars, has argued for a perfect and strict co-extensionality of quiddity and existence, maintaining that all essences are actual existents and that all actual existents must necessarily have an essence that makes them what they are. On their view, whatever is an existent (*mawjūd*) is also a thing (*shay'*) endowed with a quiddity (*māhiyyah*) or possessing thingness (*shay'iyyah*), and vice versa, so that all quiddities must exist in actuality, either in the concrete, extramental world or, at the very least, in the human mind thinking them. This approach in effect reduces the relation of essence and existence to that between 'the thing' and 'the existent.' As Bäck noticed, it also implies a "weak principle of plenitude" concerning the existence of mental quiddities: in order to 'exist,' all quiddities must have at least mental existence, and some of them may in addition become realized in concrete existence.¹⁶ Since Avicenna posits only two kinds or modes of existence in his works—concrete extramental existence, and intellectual universal existence—these scholars reason that all quiddities must be subsumed under one or both of these categories. Accordingly, some quiddities can be said to exist in the physical, extramental world (e.g., this particular horse) *and* in the human mind apprehending it (the universal, intelligible form 'horse'), while others (e.g., the universal form of the phoenix or an artificial form like a heptagonal house) will presumably exist only in the mind.

As a consequence, it would seem that quiddity is never found in a state that is fully free from existence (*wujūd*). Although these scholars are aware that Avicenna

existence, and also suggests strongly a mental or conceptualist context, inasmuch as a distinction is performed by the mind, and so it seems from the outset to create a certain bias in our thinking about these notions. The term 'relationship' in contrast seems more neutral and puts the emphasis on the complicated interface between these two notions as they interact in the mind and in the concrete world, which is the crux of the problem facing modern scholars. However, as Olga Lizzini pointed out to me, a relationship necessarily presupposes a distinction of some kind, so these notions appear ultimately to be roughly interchangeable, and it remains unclear what benefit there is to talk of a relationship rather than a distinction. This point notwithstanding, given what was said above concerning the distinction between *shay'* and *māhiyyah*, it is important to adduce an additional qualification: the terms *al-shay'* and *al-mawjūd* pertain primarily to actual existents, whether to things that can be pointed to in concrete reality, or to distinct objects in the mind. In view of this, it is normal that whenever Avicenna is talking about these entities, he would stress the co-extensionality of quiddity and existence, since these notions are always found together in contingent beings; in other words, a thing *both* exists *and* has a quiddity. In this connection, it is also important to stress that 'the thing' is always, at least conceptually, complex, and, as a result, also caused and contingent (accordingly, God, for Avicenna, is not a *shay'*). As can be seen, this metaphysical template does not provide an ideal—and arguably even an adequate—framework to examine the ontological status of quiddity in itself. The reason for this is that, as can be inferred from its very appellation (quiddity *in itself*), pure quiddity is taken in abstraction from existence, and so there is no direct link between it and the mode of existence that applies to *the things*, i.e., to the actual, caused, composite or complex existents.

¹⁶ Bäck, *Avicenna's Conception*, 233, 236.

also mentions a third consideration of quiddity in some of his works, namely, that of quiddity in itself (*al-māhiyyah bi-mā hiya tilka l-māhiyyah*), which is described as being independent of both mental and extramental existence, they argue (or assume) that this aspect of quiddity cannot possess any kind of autonomous existence and, hence, corresponds to a purely conceptual or epistemological aspect of quiddity that excludes existence altogether. In that way, the Avicennian proposition that we can consider quiddity in itself does not, on their view, conflict in any way with the thesis of the perfect overlap and co-extensionality between essence and existence. From a textual perspective, this position relies heavily on *Metaphysics* I.5 of *The Cure*, which argues most explicitly for the co-implication and co-extensionality of quiddity and existence, or rather of *shay'* and *mawjūd*, a chapter which these scholars regard as the *locus classicus* of the Avicennian theory of essence. Indeed, in this section of his work, Avicenna's main thesis throughout seems to be that thing (*shay'*), and, hence, also quiddity (*māhiyyah*), are co-extensional with, and co-implicative of, the existent (*mawjūd*), and, hence, that every 'thing' or 'essence' is also an 'existent' and has existence (and vice versa), although the meanings and intensionality these terms carry differ. This view seems to be substantiated by other passages in the Avicennian corpus, such as when Avicenna explains in *Salvation* that "the thing is either a concrete existent or a form that exists in the estimation or in the intellect."¹⁷ This reading of the evidence may be called the default or 'standard' position in Avicennian studies and is the one most frequently encountered in modern accounts of this thinker's metaphysics.¹⁸

Other scholars, however, have rightly brought attention to the fact that Avicenna sometimes intimates that quiddity is extensionally broader than existence (in its concrete and mental modes). In other words, there are reasons to think that quiddity can exist in a mode of being that is separate from its instantiations in mental and extramental objects. In claiming that essence or quiddity may be conceived of in itself and in abstraction from particular concrete existents and universal mental existents, Avicenna appears to posit an aspect of quiddity that does not immediately fall under, nor even connect with, existence as such. Since the *three aspects of quiddity* that Avicenna outlines in *Introduction* I.2 (in extramental particulars, in universals in the mind, and in itself) do not square perfectly with the *two aspects of existence* he rec-

17 Avicenna, *Salvation*, 179: *al-shay' immā 'ayn mawjūdah wa-immā šūrah mawjūdah fī l-wahm aw al-'aql*.

18 Rahman, *Essence and Existence in Ibn Sīnā*; idem, *Essence and Existence in Avicenna*, was one of the first modern exponents of the essence/existence co-extensionality thesis and of the view that pure quiddity does not exist as such in any special way. He was also a staunch advocate of the view that the essence/existence distinction in Avicenna is purely conceptual. His general interpretation of Avicenna's metaphysics has been followed and expanded by many other scholars up to the present day. Rahman's approach was defined largely by what he perceived as an erroneous European or western interpretation of Avicenna, which had crystallized in the works of the Latin Scholastics and some modern scholars stemming from this tradition, such as Gilson and Goichon.

ognizes (actual existence in the extramental world and in the mind), the hypothesis is that quiddity could be extensionally broader than existence and would cover a spectrum that only partially overlaps with that of the actually existent things (*maw-jūdāt*). As Wisnovsky observes,

A commentator could fairly infer from Avicenna's assertion that essence is not only logically prior to existence, it is also extensionally broader than existence. After all, Avicenna now holds that there are essences which are neither mental nor concrete existents; therefore every existent will also be an essence, but not every essence will be an existent.¹⁹

Having made this observation, Wisnovsky does not proceed in his book to settle this issue in any detail. Yet, his comments attest to the profound ambiguity of Avicenna's position and to the degree of uncertainty affecting modern interpretations on this topic. Understandably, scholars have spilled much ink trying to elucidate what Avicenna meant in this and other related passages when he describes quiddity in itself as pertaining to neither mode of existence. On a first reading, the aforementioned *Introduction* 1.2 does suggest that quiddity is extensionally broader than existence, that is, broader than the two spheres consisting of mental and extramental existents, since the third class of quiddities mentioned—quiddity 'in itself' or 'insofar as it is quiddity' (*al-māhiyyah bi-mā hiya tilka l-māhiyyah*)—cannot apparently be subsumed under either of these two ontological groups. And indeed, the evidence that can be adduced from the various texts studied by Wisnovsky is problematic: If essence or quiddity is extensionally broader than existence, and if the two concepts are intensionally distinct, then how is one to construe the nature of quiddity in itself in abstraction from concrete and mental existence? What ontological status, if any, can be ascribed to it? More specifically, if it is a consideration or concept in the mind, then how exactly does it relate to mental existence? Put more bluntly, can it be conceived at all without amounting to a certain mental existent?²⁰

These observations lead to the third, and arguably the most intricate, issue, namely, the ontological status of quiddity in itself, which is central to the present study.²¹ Since the two other aspects of quiddity—quiddity in concrete extramental en-

¹⁹ Wisnovsky, *Avicenna*, 109–110.

²⁰ In his study on Avicenna's metaphysics, Wisnovsky does not engage directly with these issues and does not proffer a solution regarding the problem of the ontological status of pure quiddity, even though he lays valuable ground for its examination. He adopts what may best be called an agnostic or skeptical position regarding the issue of quiddity. But in his more recent publications, Wisnovsky is more keen to stress the co-extensionality of essence and existence, rather than the greater extensionality of essence, and he states explicitly that there is "no independent existence of essence in Avicenna, only essential priority of essence" (*Essence and Existence*, 28–29). He therefore restricts quiddity to the two classes of mental and extramental existents.

²¹ As Pini, *Absoluta*, 388, pointedly noted, "Poche dottrine sono tuttavia altrettanto problematiche, se non addirittura misteriose per l'interprete contemporaneo." Here I am using the expression 'ontological status' in a hypothetical manner as part of the objective or *skopos* of this study and do not

tities and quiddity in mental entities—are said to overlap with the two modes of existence (universal mental existence and concrete extramental existence) usually described by Avicenna, it is quiddity in itself (and only this aspect of quiddity) that could potentially constitute an exception to the rule of co-extensionality and justify the greater scope of quiddity over existence. But from the instant that the greater extensionality of quiddity over existence is posited, then it becomes a priority to clarify what ontological status quiddity in itself could be said to possess. Does it have another, distinct, and autonomous mode of existence that differs from the two mentioned previously? Is it a nonexistent thing, which can nonetheless be conceived of in the mind? Or is it to be regarded as a kind of universal mental existent after all, in spite of the provisos Avicenna emits in this regard?

It is in respect to these last points that the greatest disparities in scholarly opinion have become manifest, with a variety of interpretations being formulated, but no consensus emerging from the literature. What is more, it is not only modern scholars who have been puzzled by these questions, but also the postclassical Muslim thinkers involved in the reception, interpretation, and transmission of Avicenna's philosophical system. In this connection, Wisnovsky has drawn a useful list of difficult philosophical issues that later commentators on Avicenna inherited from the master and which they tackled in their own works. Among these issues, Wisnovsky includes the ontological problem of pure quiddity. He writes:

In one famous passage [*Introduction* I.2], Avicenna says that essence (or quiddity, *māhiyya*) has three aspects: one when the essence is considered as a universal, i.e. as a mental existent; another when the essence is considered as a concrete individual, i.e. as an extramental existent; and a third aspect, when the essence is considered in and of itself, i.e. as unrelated to either mental or concrete existence. If it has neither the ontological status of a universal nor the ontological status of a concrete individual, what exactly is the ontological status of essence when it is considered “in and of itself” in this third way?

Immediately afterwards, Wisnovsky adds: “The exposure of these and other apparent inconsistencies and contradictions prompted post-Avicennian thinkers to create a newly systematized version of Avicenna's philosophy.”²²

At root, the problem of the ontological status of pure quiddity arises from a paradox embedded in the textual evidence. On the one hand, Avicenna explicitly affirms that quiddity in itself exists *neither* in the concrete world *nor* in the mind, which would suggest that it does not exist at all, since Avicenna only recognizes—on the traditional interpretation—two spheres or modes of existence: particular/concrete and universal/mental. Accordingly, one can have a vague mental awareness or entertain a logical consideration of quiddity in itself, without it amounting to any kind of

want to imply from the outset that quiddity in itself *does* possess existence; rather, as I will show shortly, the ‘ontological status’ referred to in my introduction can correspond to a ‘positive,’ ‘neutral,’ or ‘negative’ status, depending on one’s interpretation of the evidence.

²² Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Islamic Reception*, 202.

distinct and autonomous existent. On the other hand, Avicenna repeatedly refers to the existence (*wujūd*) of quiddity in itself in *Metaphysics* V.1 of *The Cure*, and even at 205.1–2 to its “divine existence” (*wujūd ilāhī*), an expression that has puzzled medieval exegetes and modern researchers alike. If it is quite clear that, according to Avicenna, quiddity in itself does not exist independently in the concrete world along the lines of a Platonic Form, its relation to mental existence is in contrast much more obscure. Avicenna routinely describes it in mental, intellectual, and intentional terms, and he also dispenses some effort to explaining how the mental state of quiddity in itself can be distinguished from that of the universal existent, with the implication that these two objects are located in the human mind. Hence, the possibility that pure quiddity possesses *at the very least* a distinct mental existence has to be seriously taken into consideration. Admittedly, this seems to flatly contradict the previous claim to the effect that pure quiddity does not exist in the mind. What is more, and to compound the problem, Avicenna also asserts that quiddity in itself exists *in* concrete beings. He appears to claim that it exists as a part (*juzʿ*) of concrete entities. At first glance, this seems contradictory, since the expression ‘in itself’ would seem to cancel out that possibility and to allow only (and purely hypothetically) for an immaterial and separate mode of existence of quiddity comparable to that of the Platonic forms. What is more, assuming that this kind of extramental existence were possible, one would then have to explain how quiddity in itself could be located in two very different ontological contexts, the mental and the concrete. How these various claims and features of Avicenna’s doctrine relate to one another and what exactly ‘in itself’ means in these different contexts are questions that remain to be clarified.

Understandably, scholars have been baffled by these paradoxical statements, and the number and variety of answers they have proffered over the years to try to resolve them testifies to the complexity of the issues at stake. Part of the problem has to do with the sheer number of concepts, terms, and issues that need to be tackled for an examination of the topic to claim any degree of comprehensiveness. Avicenna articulates his views on essence in logical, psychological, and metaphysical contexts, and these intersect with many other problematics in his works. As a result, the textual evidence that is relevant to the subject and that needs to be considered is scattered over a large number of works. If used in a haphazard or partial way, it can serve to support any number of interpretations, most of them irreconcilable with one another. This is the case, for instance, of Avicenna’s views on universality and the universals, which are highly complex and nuanced, and whose analysis must rely on additional texts apart from the famous passage in *Metaphysics* V.1. As a preliminary to the task of comprehensively and systematically analyzing this subject, I provide an outline of the main issues to be tackled and the various interpretations forwarded by scholars.

2 The *status quaestionis* on the issue of the ontological status of quiddity in itself

It will seem sensible that the scholars who defend the strict co-extensionality of quiddity and existence, or rather of ‘thing’ and ‘existent,’ regard the issue of the ontological status of quiddity in itself as somewhat moot. Since quiddity and existence are always co-implied or co-related, there cannot, as a rule, be a quiddity that is devoid of existence. Since Avicenna recognizes only two modes of existence, the mental existence of universals and the concrete existence of particulars—an ontological spectrum covered by the Arabic technical term *al-wujūdāyn*—then quiddity must assume one or both of these ontological modes and exist in one or both of these ontological contexts. No quiddity will lie ‘outside’ of their scope, and there is no third, special ontological mode corresponding to pure quiddity. Another way of substantiating this position is as follows: since Avicenna claims that quiddity in itself is considered in abstraction from existence and does not relate to any of the existents or modes of existence—he says at *Metaphysics* V.1.196.11 that it exists “neither in the mind nor in the concrete world”—quiddity in itself must be regarded as something nonexistent or as lacking the status of an existent proper.

On this view, quiddity in itself will be a mere mental aspect or consideration devoid of any entitative or substantive quality, of any independent and distinct existence. It can be described at most as a logical or epistemic consideration in the mind, without ever assuming the status of an intellectual existent proper. Accordingly, whenever Avicenna discusses quiddity in itself, he does not intend to present it as an autonomous or special case of quidditative existence that would be distinct from particular and universal existence, but as a purely logical, psychological, or epistemic object. Whatever the case may be, quiddity exists only as a universal in the mind or in concrete individuals in the exterior world, and there is no special, third mode of existence attached to pure quiddity.²³ And if ever it is possible to regard this consid-

23 This view may be called ‘standard’ in Avicennian studies. It has been either explicitly defended or implicitly endorsed by many specialists of Avicenna: see, among others, Rahman, *Essence and Existence in Avicenna*, and idem, *Essence and Existence in Ibn Sīnā*; McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 35; idem, *Logic and Science*, especially 168–171; Druart, *Shay’*, 133 ff.; Bertolacci, *The Distinction*; Germann, *Ibn Sīnā*; Lizzini, *Wuğūd-Mawğūd*, and eadem, *Ibn Sīnā’s Metaphysics*; Menn, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics*, especially 153–158; Galluzzo, *Two Senses*, 311–312. Menn and Wisnovsky, *Yahyā ibn ‘Adī On the Four Scientific Questions*, 76, assert: “Avicenna, drawing on his distinction between essence and existence, denies that the quiddity has a third mode of existence. Although a quiddity can be considered in itself, it exists only as bound up either with the mind or with enmattered individuals.” Even scholars working on the Latin philosophical tradition and with Latin translations of Avicenna, such as M.M. Tweedale (*Duns Scotus’s Doctrine*, 85), have held this view, in spite of the fact that several medieval Latin interpreters of Avicenna developed a theory of *esse essentiae* on the basis of the Persian master’s works. As mentioned above, Bertolacci recommends speaking about the *relationship*, rather than the *distinction*, between essence and existence. Unlike the latter term, the former presupposes the necessary co-extensionality of these notions, which is presumably why Bertolacci opts for it. This nat-

eration itself as somehow existing in the mind *qua* consideration, its object or referent—quiddity in itself—would be deprived of any kind of positive and distinct existence in the mind.²⁴ Just as we can have a consideration of the nonexistent and of prime matter, this does not mean that the nonexistent and prime matter actually exist in the world. It may not even be the case that they exist as valid intelligible forms in our minds. They may, like the absolute void, be counted among what Avicenna in *Physics* II.8 calls “vain intelligibles” (sing., *ma‘qūl mafrūgh*). The most we can say regarding our mental consideration of these objects is that it may be located at the level of the imagination or estimation, rather than intellection proper.²⁵ Like-

ually implies that quiddity cannot exist on its own. Bertolacci, *The Distinction*, also contends that existence always precedes essence causally and ontologically in the concrete, extramental world, although it may be said to follow it conceptually in the mind. For Goodman, *Avicenna*, 78, as well, existence is “prior logically and ontologically to the full determination of any essence,” and there is “nothing prior to existence.” See also Lizzini, Wuğūd-Mawğūd, 120–121, 125, concerning the co-extensionality and priority of existence; Lizzini makes the same claims more forcefully in eadem, *A Mysterious Order*, 238, 254. Quite disarmingly, many of the scholars who uphold the strict co-extensionality of quiddity and existence do not comment in any detail on the Avicennian texts that focus on quiddity in itself and its ontological implications, topics which are broached, for example, in *Introduction* I.2 and I.12 and *Metaphysics* V.1 of *The Cure*. At any rate, since they uphold the necessary co-implicativeness of quiddity and existence, it is clear that they do not regard pure quiddity as constituting a special case of autonomous existence. Being devoid of existence, it is by definition ‘nothing’ or ‘something lesser than an existent,’ such as a logical object, so that quiddity exists only as a mental universal and/or as a concrete particular. In contrast, a recent article by Benevich, *Die ‘göttliche Existenz,’* has focused expressly on the issue of the ontological status of pure quiddity. Benevich develops a mereological interpretation and argues that the “divine existence” Avicenna mentions in *Metaphysics* V.1 (205.1–2) is that of quiddity in itself as it is caused to exist by God as a part of contingent existents both in the mind and the extramental world. Benevich provides valuable insight into the matter; in particular, he connects the issue of pure quiddity with other central issues in Avicenna’s philosophy, such as divine causality and human knowledge, and explores the interface between the ontological and epistemic planes in Avicenna. One aspect that is lacking in his study, however, is a detailed investigation of how pure quiddity relates to mental existence.

24 This point concerns the relation between a consideration (*i‘tibār*) and the object of a consideration. In other words, should one distinguish between the ontological status of a consideration in the mind and the ontological status of the object to which it refers? This point will be examined in more detail later on.

25 It remains unclear, however, whether prime matter should be placed in the same class of mental objects as the nonexistent. There are important epistemological and ontological differences between the two. As one learns in *Notes*, 135–136, section 181, matter is to be counted among the things that are simple (*al-basā‘it*). This, as in the case of other simple essences (the First Cause, the separate intellects), makes it difficult for the mind to actually apprehend it with clarity. Like the void and absolute nonexistence, pure matter can hardly be known in a scientific way, since no *positive* essence corresponds to it. But as Fariduddin Attar reminds me, Avicenna posits prime matter as the result of a philosophical reasoning that requires a fundamental substrate for all change. This reasoning may be intellectual in nature, and it is deployed in Avicenna’s works on physics and metaphysics. In this regard, McGinnis (Space, 61) defines prime matter as “a hypothetical limit of a process of abstraction that a full analysis of physical bodies requires.” What is more, Avicenna does not say that prime matter does not exist, but rather that it has potential existence (for the ambiguous ontological status of

wise, our having a consideration of quiddity in itself does not imply its independent existence, whether in the concrete world or as an intelligible form in the mind. This view seems to find some traction in Avicenna's famous statement in *Metaphysics* V.1 to the effect that "in itself, it [the pure quiddity horseness or *farasiyyah*] is nothing at all except horseness. For, in itself, it is neither one nor many and does not exist in concrete things and in the soul [*lā mawjūd fī l-a'yān wa-lā fī l-nafs*]." ²⁶ Given that, on most scholars' account, these two modes of existence—mental/universal and concrete/particular—are the only ones posited by Avicenna, if horseness as such does not exist in the mind or separately in the concrete world, then it is tantamount to being a nonexistent or a philosophical chimera.

One could conclude, as some scholars have, that Avicenna denied any existence to quiddity in itself, in a manner reminiscent of the way in which some Stoics denied any substantive existence to the Platonic Forms and considered them mere 'nothings.'²⁷ Since quiddity and existence are strictly co-extensional, any 'excess' quiddity or essence that could be posited (such as, hypothetically, quiddity in itself) will have to be regarded as a nonexistent. Since Avicenna upheld the principle of the excluded middle, according to which something either exists or does not exist, quiddity in itself would either exist or not exist, and, if the former, it could only exist as a mental or extramental concrete existent. Hence, upholders of the thesis of the strict co-extensionality of essence and existence are compelled, on their own premises, to regard pure quiddity as nothing over and above the quiddities existing in these beings, since, on their view, quiddity is always accompanied by existence and actualized as an existent. Accordingly, quiddity in itself can be described as a 'nothing,' a nonexistent, or *at most* as a mere mental consideration or epistemic object produced by the rational mind, but one which in itself does not amount to true mental existence. From an ontological perspective, this consideration of pure quiddity will not be distinct from the universal aspect of quiddity, but will merely represent a different way of conceiving of the universal: thus the quiddity in itself 'horseness' and 'universal horse' in the mind are one and the same ontological entity, but amount to two dis-

prime matter, see section IV.2.6). So in spite of corresponding to a concept of pure potentiality in the mind, and not existing in itself actually in the world, prime matter is not tantamount to pure non-existence. It remains somehow intelligible and is also hypothetically a principle of physics.

²⁶ Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Cure*, V.1, 196.11. Whether the statement *lā mawjūd fī l-a'yān wa-lā fī l-nafs* is best translated as "does not exist in concrete things and in the soul" or as "exists neither in concrete things nor in the soul" is secondary at the moment. The point here is that both formulations seem to leave little leeway for another kind or mode of existence that could hypothetically be ascribed to quiddity in itself. For on the traditional interpretation, Avicenna posits only two aspects or modes of existence in his works, which he often calls *al-wujūdayn*, literally "the two existences," i.e., mental and concrete existence.

²⁷ Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology*, 111, 118, describes quiddity as "ontologically void." For the Stoic view, see Sorabji, *The Philosophy*, vol. 3, 129 and 147; idem, *Universals Transformed*, 106–108.

tinct ways of considering or conceiving of the same concept. Their extensionality will be the same, but their intensionality will differ.²⁸

This ‘standard’ interpretation, however, is not without its difficulties. To claim that quiddity in itself is *merely* a consideration of the human mind, a logical or epistemic aspect that arises as a result of some mental operation, but which, as such, does not participate in mental existence, is problematic on various counts. First, it conflicts with the terminological evidence that can be gleaned from Avicenna’s works and with his technical descriptions of essence. This is especially true, not so much of the term *i’tibār*, but of the terms *ṣūrah*, *ma’nā*, and *ma’qūl*, which Avicenna frequently employs to describe pure quiddity, and which suggest that it does possess substantiality or an existential content in the mind. In addition, there is the problem of accounting for the doctrinal evidence in *Metaphysics* V.1–2, which includes frequent references to the “existence” (*wujūd*) of pure quiddity. Finally, this position would seem to go against the grain of recent research, which stresses the strong connection between logic and metaphysics in Avicenna’s works and which identifies a tendency in his thought to ‘ontologize’ logical categories and notions, in line with a particular reading of *Eisagoge*, the seminal logical work written by Porphyry (d. ca. 305 CE).²⁹

But perhaps more egregiously from a methodological perspective, the problem with this approach is that it raises the very question it attempts to answer. For in drawing attention to the fact that quiddity in itself is *merely* or *only* a logical construct or consideration, these scholars inadvertently point to the issue of what this consideration exactly amounts to ontologically in the human mind. What is the ontological status of this special object that is pure quiddity? And what *kind* of consideration or object are we talking about in the first place? Should we not assume that considerations (*i’tibārāt*), according to Avicenna, have mental existence, or, at the very least, that the intellectual ones do?³⁰ Recall in this connection that, for Avicen-

28 This is what Pini, *Absoluta*, 396–404, calls the “gnoseological interpretation” of the problem, since it draws a purely mental or epistemic distinction between pure quiddity and universal quiddity in the mind without ascribing a different ontological status to each one. This interpretation recognizes the existence of the universal alone and makes pure quiddity a mere epistemological aspect of the universal.

29 Bertolacci, The ‘Ontologization’; Kukkonen, Dividing Being.

30 In this fashion, a fundamental ambiguity undermines the analyses of many modern scholars who reject the existence of pure quiddity, and yet refuse to regard it as a mere ‘nothing.’ In their view, although a nonexistent, it is endowed with some kind of ‘reality,’ which, however, is not properly defined. Thus, Pasqua, *L’essence*, 79, writes: “Si l’essence n’est rien de réellement existant, elle a donc simplement une réalité intelligible représentant une réalité extra-mentale.” Likewise, Geoffroy tantalizingly mentions the “être définitionnel” of essence, while not ascribing to it a proper ontological status (in de Libera, *L’art*, 648, note 4). In his articles, Bäck repeats the claim according to which “quiddities in themselves do not exist, yet have ‘being’ (*kuwn*) [sic],” without, however, explaining in any way how this ‘being’ should be interpreted (Bäck, *The Triplex*, 134; idem, Avicenna’s Ontological Pentagon, 94). Elsewhere he writes: “he [Avicenna] insists that quiddities in themselves do not exist,

na, concepts and universals exist in the mind and are full-blown existents (*mawjūdāt*). This is true, of course, of the intelligibles, but it might also apply to a lesser extent to the objects of the estimation and imagination, which may also exist in the soul, albeit not *qua* intelligibles.³¹ At any rate, one needs to clarify the nature of an *i'tibār*, especially as it relates to intellectual entities, and to determine whether the very awareness and consideration of quiddity in itself, or, alternatively, whether its intellectual conceivability or conception, are implicative of mental existence. Since, for Avicenna, we can have a consideration of almost anything, regardless of how that thing relates to concrete existence, elucidating the relationship of an *i'tibār* to its object and to that which is being considered is crucial for the present inquiry. Admittedly, describing quiddity in itself as a consideration (*i'tibār*), a 'notion' or 'meaning' (*ma'nā*), and a form (*ṣūrah*) says nothing about its ontological status until these terms have been analyzed, their content identified, and their relationship to mental existence clarified.³² By way of illustration, in *Introduction* I.2 Avicenna also calls universal quiddity in the mind a 'consideration' (*i'tibār*), but in that case it can be unambiguously identified with an intellectual *existent*. These remarks call for a detailed examination of Avicenna's terminology, as well as of the criteria he attaches to mental existence in his philosophy.

Another approach to the present quandary consists in situating quiddity in itself in a sphere between existence and nonexistence and as describing it as something possessing ontological neutrality or ambiguity. Accordingly, pure quiddity can be said neither to exist nor not to exist; it is neither an existent (*mawjūd*) nor a nonexistent (*ma'dūm*), but might instead be said to 'subsist,' where subsistence means something quite different from actual existence. Some time ago, Gilson described quiddity in itself as "ontologically neutral" ("existentiellement neutre").³³ He was followed by

though they have a sort of reality" (The *Triplex*, 143). As I explain below, a similar ambiguity manifests itself in the studies of Izutsu and Marmura.

31 On this issue, see Black, *Mental Existence*; eadem, *Avicenna on the Ontological*. This last point, however, requires further clarification and will be examined later on.

32 In addition to Marmura, Bäck, *Avicenna's Conception*, 236, also keenly perceived this difficulty: "The problem lies in two areas: mental supposition and intellectual intuition. Does either of these suffice to generate something existing *in intellectu*?" Bäck adds that "what inevitably comes to exist *in intellectu* is the mental act of supposing or imagining or intuiting; what is the object or content of that mental act need not exist *in intellectu*." This point becomes even more problematic when one remembers that Avicenna distinguishes between the intellect, intellection, and its object in the case of human thought.

33 Gilson, *L'être et l'essence*, 131. Here an important semantic clarification is called for. The expression "ontological neutrality" poses an interpretive problem, because it is ambiguous and has been used in different ways. On the one hand, there is a weak interpretation of quiddity's 'neutrality,' which has a long history in the reception of Avicenna's philosophy, and which refers to quiddity's ontological 'indifference' to actual mental and concrete existence. In this regard, scholars often speak of the 'indifference of essence'; cf. de Libera, *L'art*, 501, who refers to "l'indifférence de l'essence." In this case, it is used merely to stress that quiddities can exist either as concrete or mental beings, without a preference or preponderance for either mode of existence. This interpretation

Nuseibeh who, in a study devoted to Avicenna's epistemology, argued for a distinction between "subsistence" (*thubūt*) and "existence" (*wujūd*) and contended that the Avicennian quiddity in itself "subsists rather than exists."³⁴ More recently, an article by Marwan Rashed has dealt directly with this issue. Consisting largely of a comparative analysis between the views of the Christian philosopher Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (d. 974 CE) and Avicenna, it contextualizes the question in light of the philosophical dialogue they initiated with ancient authorities such as Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. ca. 200 CE) and Themistius (d. ca. 385 CE). Rashed argues that Avicenna borrowed and transformed Yaḥyā b. 'Adī's threefold scheme of existents ('natural,' 'logical,' and 'divine') and that he ascribed one of these three ontological modes to pure quiddity.³⁵ According to Rashed, the Avicennian pure essences fall neither under the class of mental objects nor under that of extramental existents. This third class is characterized by a special and distinct ontological status, which Rashed describes as ontologically neutral. In addition, Rashed argues that Avicenna located these neutrally existing quiddities in the divine mind. Hence, on Rashed's interpretation, Avicenna creatively modified Ibn 'Adī's threefold scheme in order to integrate this third and special type of entities, which would correspond to the divine quiddities in themselves. Rashed's study is by far the one that argues most clearly and forcefully for

goes hand in hand with Avicenna's claim that quiddity can be considered or envisaged logically in abstraction from mental and extramental existence. 'Indifference' and 'neutrality' in this case do not refer to a distinct and special ontological status that would be proper to quiddity in itself—in the sense that it would be neither existent nor nonexistent—but rather to the fact that quiddity can be conceptually associated and dissociated from concrete or intellectual existence. In this regard, de Libera, *La querelle*, 240, also speaks of pure quiddity's "tolérance ontologique." On the other hand, there is a strong construal of the ontological neutrality of quiddity, according to which quiddity possesses its own special 'neutral' ontological status, which is identical neither with nonexistence nor with concrete and mental existence. In that case, it refers to a *third ontological status or mode* in Avicenna's philosophy that would belong exclusively to quiddity in itself. Although it is unclear in what sense Gilson originally used this formula, others, such as Izutsu, Nuseibeh, and Marwan Rashed seem to intend it in this strong sense; see below.

34 Nuseibeh, Al-'Aql al-Qudsi, 48–49. Izutsu emphasizes a similar view. According to him, pure quiddity is "neither existent nor non-existent," and is "in itself neutral to both existence and non-existence" (*The Fundamental Structure*, 65). Although he does not elaborate on this point in this work, Izutsu appears in other writings (*Basic Problems*, 8 ff.) to regard pure quiddity as existing in an epistemically transcendent realm. It should be stressed that Izutsu's interpretation is deeply informed by the postclassical exegetical tradition on Avicenna as well as by modern European philosophy. In *La querelle*, de Libera also sometimes comes close to ascribing a special neutral ontological status to pure quiddity understood in this manner. He asks whether pure essence is "une chose intermédiaire entre l'abstrait et le séparé qui ne serait ni abstraite ni non abstraite, ni séparée ni non séparée, d'un mot : un objet *pur*, indifférent à toute existence comme à toute non-existence" (*La querelle*, 239). De Libera's allusion to an "objet *pur*" recalls Meinong's theory of objects. Yet, in his later work *L'art des généralités*, de Libera definitively rejects the hypothesis that pure quiddity has its own ontological mode, construed either in a neutral or positive way; see *L'art*, 577–584.

35 Rashed, Ibn 'Adī; for an English translation and brief analysis of Yaḥyā's treatise, see Menn and Wisnovsky, Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī *On the Four Scientific Questions*.

the view that a third and distinct mode of existence be devoted exclusively to quiddity in itself. On his reconstruction, this third mode coincides with the ontological neutrality (construed in a ‘strong’ sense) of pure quiddity.³⁶

The modern proposition that Avicenna attributes a neutral ontological status to quiddity is not as odd as it may seem at first. It relies on certain classical and post-classical Islamic theories of ontological neutrality. Perhaps the most famous one is the Mu‘tazilite Bahshamite theory of the special ontological mode of the states (*aḥwāl*) and attributes (*ṣifāt*), which, according to the technical parlance of this school, are neither existent (*mawjūd*) nor nonexistent (*ma‘dūm*), but possess a special kind of reality or actuality (*thubūt*) that is proper to them. Another important instance occurs in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 1210 CE) metaphysics, which, at least according to a report by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274 CE), posits essences in the concrete world that possess a subsistence (*thubūt*) that is distinct and prior to their existence (*wujūd*).³⁷ It is in this regard that Rāzī has sometimes been described as advocating an extreme essentialist interpretation of Avicenna’s doctrines. At any rate, Rashed’s study opens new interpretive possibilities concerning Avicenna’s doctrine of quiddity and will prove useful for my own analysis in a subsequent chapter of this book. Nevertheless, for the present purposes, suffice to say that the contention concerning the ontological neutrality of pure quiddity is problematic, if it is understood as implying more than the mere logical ‘indifference’ of essence to mental and concrete existence. As I see it, there are two main problems with this thesis. First, Avicenna does not mention anything that could even remotely be taken to suggest ontological neutrality in the strong sense, nor is there an Arabic term or expression used in his

36 As Rashed, Ibn ‘Adī, puts it: “En maintenant le terme “ existence ”, *wujūd*, pour les quiddités pures, Avicenne conserve les trois grandes classes entitatives de son prédécesseur [Ibn ‘Adī]. Mais en substituant le propre à l’essentiel, il entend rompre avec un réalisme des quiddités...” (149–150); and 159; “elle [quiddity in itself] est coextensive au réel tout en jouissant d’un principe d’indépendance ontique dépassant un statut simplement logique” (113–114). Nevertheless, some ambiguity arises when one compares Rashed’s various claims and tries to pinpoint his exact views on the ontological status of these pure quiddities. For although Rashed endows the essences with an independent status of their own and claims that Avicenna regarded them as a third group of ontological entities—this suggests that Avicenna held a tri-partite ontology—he is at the same time reluctant to regard these essences as having positive existence or as existents proper. Thus, he mentions the “ontological neutrality” (“neutralité” ontologique”) of the quiddities and the fact that they dwell in a realm “beyond existence” (“espace entitatif au-delà de l’existence”), and he also insists at times that they are not really existents (*mawjūdāt*) (see Rashed, Ibn ‘Adī, 122, 116, and 142 respectively). But in other places Rashed is keen to regard them as existents or at least as having some kind of existence (122, 130, 149–150). These various claims are not easy to reconcile. Nevertheless, for my purposes, Rashed’s contentions (a) that the pure quiddities have their own ontological status, and (b) that, as such, they are to be located in the divine mind, are inspirational. The present study builds on Rashed, although it also departs from his interpretation regarding the mode of existence of the pure quiddities.

37 Ṭūsī, *Commentary on Pointers*, vols. 3–4, 462.24–463.1.

works that would correspond to this notion.³⁸ And while it is true that Avicenna was familiar with the views of previous and contemporary (especially Bahshamite) theologians who did employ the concept of ontological neutrality in their systems, and that Avicenna himself might have borrowed extensively from these *kalām* sources, there is virtual no evidence that the master was keen to elaborate on this specific aspect of their ontology.³⁹ In fact, Avicenna staunchly adhered to the principle of non-contradiction as formulated in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Γ.3, 1005b19–20, and he expressly criticized other scholars for failing to uphold this principle. According to this postulate, “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect.” Translated to the context of Avicenna's metaphysics, this means that something either exists or does not exist, and there is no alternative or middle ground to these two options. The second difficulty with the notion of ontological neutrality is Avicenna's occasional ascription of existence (*wujūd*) to quiddity in itself, especially in *Metaphysics* V.1. This textual evidence indicates that, if an ontological status is to be ascribed to pure quiddity, then it would be a positive one rather than a neutral one.

It is the desire to bypass the conceptual pitfalls associated with these interpretations of quiddity that has motivated scholars to seek other solutions to the problem. Rather than deflating or plainly negating the existential status of quiddity in itself, attempts were made to salvage or rehabilitate it. Three distinct strategies have been implemented in this regard. The first is to identify pure quiddity with a mental existent and, hence, to attribute mental existence to it, but one distinct from the mental existence of the universals—and this, in spite of Avicenna's dictate that pure quiddity does not exist in the mind. This approach was briefly and hesitantly advocated—uniquely to my knowledge—by Michael Marmura in two important articles devoted to Avicenna's theory of essence.⁴⁰ Marmura, on the basis of a new distinction he established between quiddity ‘in itself’ and quiddity ‘by itself,’ argued that humans can envisage pure quiddity in their minds and that this conception must amount to a kind of mental existence alongside that of the universal. He proposed that while the former (‘quiddity in itself’) is merely a logical consideration, the latter (‘quiddity by itself’) seems to correspond to a kind of separate mental existent,

³⁸ The interpretation articulated by some postclassical commentators on Avicenna as well as by some modern scholars such as Izutsu to the effect that quiddity is neither existent nor nonexistent is a later exegetical development that should be construed in light of Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite ontology and, more specifically, of attempts by postclassical scholars to reconcile Avicenna's philosophy with *kalām*. But the formula *lā mawjūd wa-lā ma'dūm*, which some of these theologians apply to the states (*ahwāl*) in their system, is to my knowledge never used in Avicenna's works to describe essence.

³⁹ For Avicenna's reliance on *kalām* ideas in his metaphysics, see Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics*, II.7–8 and 13; idem, Notes.

⁴⁰ Marmura, Quiddity and Universality; idem, Avicenna's Chapter on Universals, especially 46.

albeit one distinct from the universal existent.⁴¹ Although Marmura's suggestion is stimulating, it was merely hinted at in his study and not developed at any length. Moreover, this insight ultimately led him to a conundrum that he was unable to solve satisfactorily: the challenge of having to reconcile his interpretation of quiddity with Avicenna's statement to the effect that quiddity in itself exists neither in the concrete world nor in the mind. This obstacle notwithstanding, Marmura also experienced difficulty explaining exactly how pure quiddity could be regarded as an instance of mental existence. If it exists in a manner distinct from the universal in the mind, then what mode of existence does it possess? It would seem either that it is a universal, or that it does not exist at all. As a result, and ostensibly puzzled by this paradox, Marmura oscillated inconclusively with regard to the ontological status of pure quiddity.⁴²

41 Bäck, *The Triplex*; idem, *Avicenna's Ontological Pentagon*; idem, *Avicenna's Conception*, also focuses on the task of distinguishing between quiddity in itself and the universal aspect of quiddity in the mind (especially in the first study), but he approaches the problem mostly from a logical angle. As a result, he has little to say about the ontological status of pure quiddity.

42 Marmura, *Quiddity and Universality*, especially 83–86. Marmura recognizes this paradox when he states (Avicenna's Chapter on Universals, 38–39): "In places, he [Avicenna] insists that this essence is neither mental nor extramental. In other places ... he refers to it as existing only in the mind." Overall, Marmura's analysis waivers between regarding quiddity as a distinct ontological entity and as a mere logical consideration. Izutsu appears to have hesitated between these two options as well, and his position is in any case not spelled out in detail. He sometimes describes quiddity in itself as a mere mental consideration or aspect, but at other times (e.g., Izutsu, *The Fundamental Structure*, 71–72) he designates it more straightforwardly as a "concept" in the human mind, which is suggestive of mental existence. In fact, Izutsu's position is mystifying, as illustrated by the following quotation: "The reason why [existence] is regarded as 'concomitant' (*lāzim*) is that a 'quiddity' cannot subsist, whether in the external world of reality or in the mind, without 'existence,' although conceptually and on a high level of abstraction 'quiddity' can be differentiated from 'existence' and considered in itself as pure 'quiddity' without regard to 'existence,' whether external or mental" (69, note 18). Izutsu does not explain what this conception of quiddity at a "high level of abstraction" amounts to in the human intellect and why it should not qualify as a kind of mental existent. In fact, in another article (*Basic Problems*, 8 ff.) dealing with some postclassical sources, he is much more inclined to regard pure quiddity as somehow existing in the mind. According to Izutsu, some Muslim philosophers conceived of it as a kind of transcendental mental object that lies beyond consciousness and the reach of reason. It is "in a primary mode of being, and as such the light of consciousness is not shed upon it" (8). Izutsu's interpretation relies in part on the difficult and obscure concept of *nafs al-amr*—crucial for postclassical authors, but scarcely researched by modern scholars—which he construes here as being indicative of ontological reality. In the end, it is difficult to pinpoint Marmura's and Izutsu's exact understanding of the ontological status of pure quiddity, as they were visibly puzzled by the evidence they found in Avicenna. In spite of this, I believe that Marmura was correct in his main hypothesis and that he deserves credit for envisaging the mental existence of pure quiddity as a serious interpretive option. It should be noted that the key difference between Marmura's interpretation and the 'standard' one revolves around whether Avicenna's description of quiddity in itself as a distinct mental consideration or aspect (*i'tibār*) implies or entails any kind of mental existence of its own. In other words, is Avicenna's claim merely logical and epistemic, or ontological as well? While

A second and more common approach has been to adopt a mereological interpretation and to regard pure quiddity as existing merely as a *part* of the universal in the mind. Although Marmura himself envisaged the mereological construal of essence in connection with the universal, he was reluctant to emphasize this kind of existence as philosophically significant and confined himself generally to the epistemological aspects of quiddity. Others, on the other hand, have developed a more robust ontological interpretation of quiddity based on Avicenna's mereological theory, thereby exposing an important way in which existence could be ascribed to pure quiddity in a manner consistent with other Avicennian dictates.⁴³ In this case, the fundamental premise is that pure quiddity cannot exist on its own and autonomously from either universals or concrete beings, although it underlies them and forms a part of their ontological reality. This interpretation strikes one as a kind of compromise between Avicenna's insistent refutation of Platonic realism and his claims that pure quiddity somehow exists together with, or in, mental and concrete things. Needless to say, this approach raises a host of difficult questions regarding the exact mode of existence of pure quiddity in composite things and how it relates to the other 'parts' of the composite. For instance, it is not clear whether its being a 'part' of the universal in the mind is the same or different from its being a 'part' of the concrete entity; how it can be conceived of simultaneously as 'a part' and 'in itself'; whether it remains distinct even when it is with other things, etc. So this interpretation merely defers the key issue of the ontological status of quiddity taken 'in itself.' Moreover, this mereological approach appears to cover only certain specific comments that Avicenna makes, but seems inadequate to address others, such as his recognition of a distinct consideration of quiddity 'in itself' in *Introduction* I.2.

In view of the limitations inherent to a mereological approach, it is not surprising that some scholars have attributed a special sense or mode of being to pure quiddity that would correspond neither to the existence of the concrete things nor to the existence of the universals in the human mind. Accordingly, essence in itself would have a third and special ontological mode that is proper to it. This interpretation of Avicenna's metaphysics is associated with the reception of his philosophy in the Latin West and with scholastic theories of 'the being of essence' or *esse essentiae*. In the process of elaborating their own metaphysical systems, these philosophers simultaneously engaged in the task of interpreting Avicenna's philosophy, and in so doing they put forth a certain interpretation of his thought that was to have a lasting and consequential influence on the later philosophical tradition. Now, it is extremely challenging to provide a coherent and systematic account of the various ways in which the formula *esse essentiae* has been used in the medieval Latin context and

most scholars deny that pure quiddity exists in the mind, Marmura intuited that it did, although he struggled to explain how.

⁴³ See Pini, *Absoluta*, 396–404 (this is what Pini describes as his "ontological interpretation," which is one of two interpretations he articulates in his study); De Haan, *A Mereological Construal*; and especially Benevise, *Die 'göttliche Existenz.'*

in the modern historiography.⁴⁴ This expression has been applied to a wide array of theories and views, which are not always compatible with one another. But quite apart from its intrinsic historiographical and philosophical interest, this scholastic legacy profoundly informed the modern reception of Avicenna's metaphysics. One witnesses its mark particularly in the neo-Thomistic circles that flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As a result, a theory of essential being is—either implicitly or explicitly—ascribed to the master (often alongside a 'real' distinction of essence and existence) in the studies of M.D. Roland-Gosselin, Étienne Gilson, Louis Gardet, A.-M. Goichon, and Joseph Owens.⁴⁵ More recently, and working from different perspectives, Alain de Libera, Marwan Rashed, and Pasquale Porro have also resorted to the notion of *esse essentiae* in their interpretation of Avicenna.⁴⁶ It should be noted in this regard that modern scholars have understood it in different ways: either in connection with common nature and the extramental universals, or with a third ontological realm distinct from concrete and mental existence, or, more frequently, with an aspect of universality 'before multiplicity' that would be identical with the objects of God's thought.⁴⁷ According to the last interpretation, essence would have a special being, an 'essential being,' by virtue of existing in God's intellect, and, hence, in a state or mode distinct from that of concrete beings and concepts in the human mind. Even though the textual underpinnings of this view are rarely spelled out in detail, one assumes that Avicenna's rather cryptic reference to the "divine existence" of quiddity in *Metaphysics* (V.1, 205.1–2), combined with his insistence that the First knows all things in a universal way and his recognition, at the beginning of *Introduction* I.12, of a class of universals that exist "before multiplicity" (*qabl al-kathrah*), all played a key role in steering the discussion in this direc-

⁴⁴ I discuss this issue in more detail in section I.3.1.

⁴⁵ Goichon, *La distinction*, 31, 211, 222; eadem, *La philosophie*, 29–35; Gilson, *L'être et l'essence*, especially 129–131; idem, *Being*, 76; Gardet, *La pensée religieuse*, 58–61; and Owens, *Common Nature*; idem, *The Relevance*, especially 44–46. Owens, for one, enthusiastically advocated this reading of Avicenna's metaphysics, which he took for granted from the works of the Scholastics. To his credit, however, his assessment of Avicenna's influence on the Latin tradition was largely positive and regarded as beneficial. Others, such as Goichon and Gilson, tend to regard the theory of essential being and other aspects of Avicenna's metaphysics (such as the essence/existence distinction) as fundamentally flawed, while at the same time acknowledging their influence on scholasticism, an ambivalent attitude that was common in Thomistic circles.

⁴⁶ De Libera, *La querelle*; Rashed, *Ibn 'Adi*; Porro, *Universaux*.

⁴⁷ I am not quite certain where to place the interpretation of other scholars, such as Marc Geoffroy, who regard the reference to *wujūd khāṣṣ* in *Metaphysics* I.5 as amounting to a kind of "definitional being" or "être définitionnel" (in de Libera, *L'art*, 648, note 4). Although Geoffroy presumably does not intend this "être définitionnel" as a distinct mode of existence in Avicenna, it is hard to conceive that it would not consist of a kind of intelligible being in the mind. So such an approach immediately raises the question of whether we are dealing here with another kind or mode of mental existence. This approach would intersect with some interpretations of *esse essentiae* that have been put forth, especially in the Latin tradition.

tion.⁴⁸ Among the Scholastics, this particular reconstruction of Avicennian metaphysics and theology was proposed notably by Henry of Ghent in *Quodlibeta* I.9 and III.9, as well as by Albert the Great and Duns Scotus along different lines from those of Henry. Although the view that the essences exist in God's mind is chiefly associated with the reception and interpretation of the *Avicenna latinus*, it has also been endorsed by specialists of Avicenna working within the Arabic tradition.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, this theological interpretation of essence is not without its own set of problems. First, are the quiddities to be located in God alone or in all the separate intellects? Scholars have oscillated on this question. While some have located them chiefly in God's mind, others have identified the Avicennian Giver of Forms (*wāhib al-ṣuwar*) or Agent Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*), rather than God, as the main seat of the pure quiddities, perhaps in an attempt to skirt a cluster of theological problems, which are formulated below. Second, what kind of mode of existence would these quiddities possess in their divine habitat? How would this divine intellectual existence differ from human intellectual existence? And are the quiddities contemplated by these intellects universal and, if so, according to what sense of universality? These points are fraught with ambiguity in the scholarship, where little effort has been dis-

48 The term 'divine,' *ilāhī* in Arabic, like the Greek term θεῖος, can refer to God or to any of the immaterial and eternal existents of ancient and medieval cosmology that exists in the superlunary world. Although not on a par with God or the One, the gods of Greek philosophical systems and the separate intellects (*al-'uqūl al-mufāriqah*) of Arabic philosophical systems possess many of the qualities that also define the Godhead, such as oneness, immateriality, eternality, immutability, intellection, etc. In Avicenna's cosmology, there is also the distinction between the Agent Intellect, the 'Giver of Forms,' and the other separate intellects. So one key question that arises here is that of the 'localization' of the quiddities in the divine world. Although by far the most common interpretation of the being of essence has been to locate the pure quiddities in God's mind, in which case the meaning of 'divine' is either confined to, or construed chiefly in connection with, the First Cause, another closely related trend has been to attribute knowledge of the pure quiddities to all the separate intellects of Avicenna's cosmology and especially to the Agent Intellect, the 'Giver of Forms.' The latter has been regarded by some as the main seat of the quiddities and forms in the divine world, removing God Himself from any kind of association with the essences.

49 See Bäck, *Avicenna's Conception*, 236; idem, *Avicenna on Existence*, 364–365; Rashed, Ibn 'Adi; Porro, *Universaux*; and de Libera, *La querelle*, 231–232; and idem, in *L'être et l'essence*, 24–26. Deborah Black touches on this subject in her study on fictional beings in Avicenna. Although she does not examine Avicenna's theory of quiddity in any depth, she nonetheless states that in "both the *Isagoge* and the *Metaphysics*, Avicenna recognizes that those quiddities which become universals in our minds have a prior existence in the pure intellects of God and the separate intelligences" (Black, *Avicenna*, 11); see also eadem, *Mental Existence*, 26–27, and 12: "And since Avicenna upholds the existential dependence of all beings upon God and the other separate intellects, all real quiddities must pre-exist in the divine intellect in some way." Black therefore sides with Bäck and Rashed in locating the quiddities in God's mind. Porro, *Universaux*, especially 38–40, and 44–46, provides a comparative analysis of the views of Henry of Ghent and Avicenna and argues that the latter likely endorsed a version of the theory of *esse essentialae*, which was also later ascribed to him by the Scholastics. In chapter V, I approach the problem of quiddity from this theological angle, reaching conclusions that are in many ways congruent with the views of these scholars.

pensed toward distinguishing between the divine and human modes of intellection and existence of the quiddities. One factor behind this uncertainty lies in Avicenna's theory of universality, which he ascribes to human and divine mental objects, but which is at the same time the subject of various criteria and qualifications.⁵⁰

Furthermore, if one locates the essences in God, a host of theological complications ensues. To begin with, this move raises the question of how these quiddities could exist in God without causing multiplicity in the divine essence. The issue at stake here is how God can remain one if His essence contains all the other essences and if He contemplates them in order to create external things.⁵¹ A second issue focuses on the idea that the actual existence of the quiddities in God would precede their actual existence in caused things. If the quiddities in themselves can be said to possess their own kind of existence and to assume a special ontological status in the divine mind, then it would seem that they can be said to somehow pre-exist the divine creation or causation of concrete beings in the external world. The question then becomes one of explaining how these two kinds of existence relate to one another and how existence can be superadded to existence, which seems tautological and absurd. The third issue runs as follows: if the quiddities exist in God, they are possible (*mumkin*) of existence and, hence, dwell in the divine mind *qua* a set of not yet realized possibles (*mumkināt*). But this would introduce possibility in the very core of the divine essence, which Avicenna describes as pure necessity or necessary existence. If God is said to necessarily exist in Himself and to necessarily

50 Some scholars, like Benevich, Die 'göttliche Existenz,' recognize only one kind of universal mental existents, which are ascribed to both human and divine thought. Porro, *Universaux*, especially 44, distinguishes between human mental existence and divine intellectual existence and argues that the special existence of essences should be construed in connection with the latter. It is not entirely clear, however, whether Porro regards the quiddities in the divine intellects as kinds of universals or as the pure quiddities Avicenna mentions in such passages as *Introduction* I.2; in fact, Porro does not elaborate on the difference between these two aspects of quiddity in connection with the divine world. But since he seems to ascribe a theory of *esse essentiae* to Avicenna (40, 46), it stands to reason that he would recognize three aspects or modes of existence of essence, the third of which would correspond, presumably, to the divine existence of the pure quiddities in the Agent Intellect or God. Rashed, Ibn 'Adi, provides valuable insight into this issue and an elegant solution concerning the existence of the quiddities in God.

51 To solve this problem, Rashed argues that the pure quiddities can be said to exist in God in a neutral state or in a state "beyond existence," and, hence, in a way that would not conflict with His perfect unity and simplicity. In contrast A.-M. Goichon, who also located the quiddities in God (*La distinction*, 211, 222, 276–284), believed that Avicenna had not convincingly addressed this point. She regarded this as one of the main shortcomings of his theology and metaphysics. Louis Gardet, *La pensée religieuse*, also implicitly maintained the theory of the divine existence of the quiddities and regarded this aspect of Avicenna's metaphysics as foundational in the master's explanation of creation, a theme dear to Muslim and Christian scholars alike. Unlike Goichon and Rashed, however, Gardet does not seem to think that this represents a theological problem. It should be noted that the issue of the divine provenance or localization of quiddity in itself is distinct from the issue of its ontological status, although they are obviously related. In other words, scholars need not agree on these two points in tandem.

cause things to exist from Himself (whence His name of Necessary of Existence, *wājib al-wujūd*), then how can this absolutely necessary being co-exist with a multitude of possible things?⁵² Finally, and to complete this rather disquieting account, Avicenna describes God's knowledge as being a universal kind of knowledge. But if one posits that the pure quiddities—which are by definition abstracted from universality—exist in God, then how could they constitute the basis of a *divine universal* knowledge?⁵³

It is apparent, then, that the theory of the *esse essentiae* that was ascribed to Avicenna—both in its medieval and modern articulations—has serious implications for his theology and metaphysics. To put it mildly, locating the quiddities in God or in the Agent Intellect raises a host of intricate questions that need to be addressed in detail. In light of the foregoing, one may legitimately wonder about the rationale for defending this thesis. If anything, Avicenna's discussion of quiddity in itself unfolds overwhelmingly within the context of human—not divine—noetics, so that locating these pure quiddities in the divine mind may seem an unwarranted interpretive leap. This approach also presents some textual difficulties. For example, is Avicenna's isolated reference to the "divine existence" (*wujūd ilāhī*) of quiddity in *Metaphysics* (V.1, 205.1–2) really to be construed as a statement about the localization of quiddities in God? Many scholars have denied this.⁵⁴ Moreover, why is it that Avicenna does not articulate more clearly a threefold scheme of existents that would include the pure quiddities in their divine environment, if that had in fact been his doctrine? In any case, one pressing issue associated with the move of attributing a special existence to the pure quiddities becomes that of *localization*: if these quiddities possess their own mode of existence (whether neutral or positive), where are they supposed to exist? Are they to be located solely in the human mind? In God's mind? In the Agent Intellect and in all the separate intellects? In a realm or sphere

52 This difficulty has been at the forefront of a dialogue between Zedler and Lizzini. Zedler, Saint Thomas and Avicenna, argues that an order or sphere of pure possibles (or pre-existing essences) must be posited to make sense of Avicenna's theology and theory of divine creation. Replying to Zedler's interpretation, Lizzini, A Mysterious Order, argues that the theory of the pre-existence of essence is incorrect, and she defends the co-extensionality thesis whereby all essences need correspond to a mental or concrete existent. In a nutshell, Lizzini argues that, for Avicenna, essence and existence are inseparable, that possibility and necessity attach only to the essence *qua* existing thing, and that God creates both the existence and essence of things (on this last point, see also Benevich, Die 'göttliche Existenz'). As a corollary, Lizzini argues that all possible essences either exist or must eventually come to exist, which leads her to conclude that Avicenna's philosophy posits a principle of plenitude. Lizzini's views reflect those of many other scholars working on the Arabic Avicenna, but that is not to say that there is even the shadow of a consensus looming, as the previous survey has shown.

53 The scholars mentioned above have not addressed these points in detail, even though the latter are a direct effect of locating the pure quiddities in the Agent Intellect and/or in God. With that being said, the expression *esse essentiae* is equivocal, since it can mean different things to different people, and can (but need not) be connected with existence *in* God. Providing qualifications is therefore a requisite in each individual case.

54 Menn, Avicenna's Metaphysics, 155 and note 25; Benevich, Die 'göttliche Existenz.'

of their own, as Platonic Forms or the pure objects posited by Alexius Meinong? This issue of localization cannot be avoided the moment one tackles the problem of the ontological status of pure quiddity in a committed way.

At this juncture, a word should be said about two important contributions to the topic by Alain de Libera. In his two massive surveys of the problem of the universals in medieval philosophy, *La querelle des universaux* (1996) and *L'art des généralités* (1999), de Libera devotes a detailed treatment to Avicenna's theory of essence and its impact on Latin scholasticism. Taken together, these sections amount to the most sustained and substantial analysis of Avicenna's theory of pure quiddity that has been offered in the modern literature.⁵⁵ In view of this, it is somewhat ironic that these studies were conducted chiefly (albeit not exclusively) on the basis of the Latin translations of Avicenna, in addition to translations of his works in modern European languages. In spite of this, de Libera articulates a highly engaging and sophisticated analysis of Avicenna's position on various issues, ranging from the topic of common nature in the concrete world to the conception of pure quiddity in the mind. Although he emphasizes in particular the logical aspects of the master's doctrines, de Libera also explores some of the ontological implications that arise from Avicenna's theory of essence and devotes some pages also to the theory of *esse essentiae*. One remarkable feature of de Libera's analysis is that it weaves together material taken from the Greek, Arabic, and Latin traditions in an effort to precisely contextualize Avicenna's theories, especially vis-à-vis the late-antique and medieval debates regarding the universals and common things. Although de Libera insists on regarding Avicenna's works as aligned with what he calls "l'épistémé alexandrienne"⁵⁶ and as an elaboration on the views put forth by Alexander of Aphrodisias, he also evokes the potential influence of the Mu'tazilites on the master's thought and seeks to chart some key features of his Latin reception. In this regard, de Libera's contextualist approach represents a model for the present book.

When it comes to the more pointed issue of the ontological status of pure quiddity, de Libera's works are stimulating, but inconclusive. One reason for this is that his interpretation of the evidence underwent considerable change. The later work *L'art des généralités* decidedly shifts the emphasis away from ontology and towards logic and rejects unequivocally the hypothesis of 'the being of essence,' which had been envisaged in de Libera's earlier works. In *La querelle des universaux*, the author examines some key Avicennian passages that led to the formulation of the theory of *esse essentiae* in the Latin context. In the process, he also recognizes the ambiguity of Avicenna's position on this issue and the possibility that the master may have entertained such a theory. This view is reiterated more explicitly in another work by de Libera published the same year.⁵⁷ But in *L'art des généralités*, the author depicts such

⁵⁵ De Libera, *La querelle*, 223–262; idem, *L'art*, 499–607.

⁵⁶ De Libera, *L'art*, 501.

⁵⁷ De Libera, *La querelle*, 238–239, 261–262; idem, *L'être et l'essence*, 23–26.

interpretations of Avicenna as misguided and wrong: the Avicennian essence is neither endowed with its own being, nor is it comparable to the pure objects of Alexius Meinong. In fact, he perceives this work as an opportunity to “correct” these fallacious interpretations (“d’expliquer et de corriger ces deux erreurs”).⁵⁸ In that work, de Libera not only squarely rejects *esse essentiae*; he also aligns himself with a nominalist reading of Avicenna according to which the universals have absolutely no existence or reality in the exterior world.

Although it would be out of place to unduly criticize de Libera’s masterly studies, I wish to briefly highlight three problematic points that are relevant to the present book and have informed my analysis. The first is that although de Libera stresses the distinction between the concept of pure quiddity and the complex universal concept in the mind, he does not address in earnest the issue of the ontological status of the former in the context of human thought and of Avicenna’s theory of mental existence. In that regard, his analysis presents the same limitation as Marmura’s. Second, de Libera’s most consequential study of the subject, *L’art des généralités*, focuses exclusively on the epistemological and logical aspects of quiddity in the human mind. Unlike the earlier *La querelle*, it omits any contextualization of essence in Avicenna’s cosmology and does not discuss its relation to the divine world, the Agent Intellect, and God’s intellection. There is hardly any mention in *L’art* of the sense of universality ‘before multiplicity,’ which, following some Neoplatonists, Avicenna associates with the intellection of the First and the separate intellects, in spite of the fact that this connection had been duly acknowledged in *La querelle*. Finally, de Libera focuses disproportionately on the relation between Avicenna and Alexander, thereby neglecting other thinkers who may have been equally influential in shaping the master’s views.⁵⁹

The foregoing shows that we are far from having reached a scholarly consensus on the issue of the ontological status of pure quiddity. An overview of the most important and recent studies on the topic points to an unwieldy variety of approaches, arguments, and conclusions, most of which are incompatible with one another. Although a vibrant and constructive dialogue has arisen, partly within the field of Arabic philosophy, and partly between Arabists and Latinists working on the *Avicenna latinus*, the way in which Avicenna’s theory of quiddity in itself connects with other aspects of his philosophical system continues to puzzle scholars.⁶⁰ This is un-

58 De Libera, *L’art*, 577.

59 Given these points, it is not clear to me that *L’art des généralités* should be regarded as consistently improving on the earlier *La querelle des universaux*, in spite of de Libera’s claim to that effect. The latter often provides a more balanced account of Avicenna’s position, which addresses the cosmological and theological aspects of the problem in addition to the logical ones, and which seems less influenced by the staunch nominalist position that comes through in the former work.

60 There is no doubt that this dialogue will continue unimpeded and even perhaps amplify in the coming years, as new manuscripts of Avicenna continue to be edited and interpretations honed. For example—and purely hypothetically—the discovery of the complete text of the *Easterners*, in

derstandable, because this issue intersects with other key aspects of the master's metaphysics and epistemology. Furthermore, it should be stressed that the stakes concerning this problem are high: not only does it in itself represent a core element of Avicenna's metaphysics, but it also has a potentially decisive bearing on other aspects of his philosophical system, such as his views on divine knowledge and creation, his theory of causation, and human epistemology and psychology, not to mention the theories of determinism and the principle of plenitude, which have been frequently assigned to the *shaykh al-ra'is* in the modern literature. To recap, the contemporary reader must grapple with a rich array of views and interpretations regarding pure quiddity in Avicenna. This poses a serious challenge to the coherence of the Avicennian metaphysical system and to the proper understanding of its legacy. The various interpretations thus far advanced by scholars can be synopsized as follows:

- (1) Quiddity in itself does not exist distinctly, separately, or autonomously in any way and does not possess a special kind of existence, which would amount to a third ontological mode in Avicenna's philosophy; as such, it is a mere mental or logical consideration or aspect, which does not possess a distinct mental existence; all quiddities exist either as universals in the mind or as concrete individuals in the extramental world.⁶¹
- (1a) Quiddity in itself possesses a mereological kind of existence and is an irreducible part (*juz'*) of the universal concept and of the concrete existent that is not identical with these existents taken as complex entities. Thus, in the mental context, it does not exist distinctly from the universal, but rather *in* the universal. Its existence at any rate is tied to that of the universal, and the two considerations (of pure quiddity and the universal) do not amount to two distinct existents in the mind, but to a single entity. Like (1) above, this mereological approach correlates the pure quiddities with mental and concrete existents.⁶²

which Avicenna is said to have discussed subtle points related to essence, divine creation, and possibility, could impact our assessment of specific Avicennian metaphysical doctrines. Indeed, in two passages of his *Commentary on Theology of Aristotle*, 58.7–9 and 61.22–24, where Avicenna discusses the complicated issue of how possibility and multiplicity relate to quiddity, he notes that he explored this topic in detail in *Easterners* and uses this to justify his short treatment of it in the commentary.

⁶¹ This is by far the most common view among modern scholars and may be accordingly described as the 'standard' or 'default' position; for an example, see de Libera, *L'art*, 499–607.

⁶² This mereological approach has been hypothesized most lucidly by Pini, *Absoluta*, 396–404; Be-nevich, *Die 'göttliche Existenz'*; and De Haan, *A Mereological Construal*. Marmura's articles also delve into the mereological aspect of Avicenna's doctrines in connection with the mental universals.

- (2) Quiddity in itself possesses a neutral ontological status between existence and nonexistence or one that is 'neither existent nor non-existent.' There is therefore a third ontological mode corresponding to the essence's 'indifference' or 'neutrality.'⁶³
- (3) Quiddity in itself possesses a kind of mental existence that is distinct from the mental existence of the complex universals in the human mind.⁶⁴
- (4) Quiddity in itself possesses a special 'divine' existence and (a) is to be located in God's mind, and/or (b) is to be located in the Agent Intellect.⁶⁵

Another convenient way of summarizing these various views would be to say that scholars have regarded the ontological status of quiddity in itself in a *positive* (1a, 3, 4a and 4b), *neutral* (2), or *negative* (1) way. The mereological construal of essence (1a) is complicated, because it is not clear on what grounds the existence of pure quiddity as a part of the composite substance is to be distinguished from the existence of the whole. Moreover, this mereological approach lends itself equally to epistemological and ontological distinctions.⁶⁶ At any rate, it should be noted that these various hypotheses are not mutually exclusive and have sometimes been combined with one another. This is especially true of hypotheses (2), (3), and (4a and 4b). Hypotheses (4a and 4b) in particular are reconcilable with hypotheses (2) and (3). Rashed, for instance, describes the ontological status of quiddity in itself as neutral (2), but also contends that it is to be located—in this neutral state—in God's mind (4a). Benevich for his part construes the 'divine existence' of pure quiddity solely in terms of its mereological existence (1a). Here one gets a sense of the difficulty involved in delineating the various positions that have been articulated in the scholarship. This is chiefly due to the intertwinement of the various threads that together constitute the problematic of quiddity in Avicenna, as well as to the fact that scholars have combined different elements in their interpretations, often in an incompatible way. For this reason, there is a pressing need to disentangle these various elements and address them separately in the analysis.⁶⁷

⁶³ This view has been intimated by Izutsu, Nuseibeh, and Rashed, although major differences between these scholars' arguments also have to be highlighted. Moreover, as indicated above, Rashed's position oscillates between (2) and (4).

⁶⁴ This view was briefly and tentatively put forth by Marmura. Bäck and Izutsu seem at times to have oscillated between (1) and (3). Yet, none of these authors articulates an elaborate argument concerning the distinct mental existence of pure quiddity.

⁶⁵ Goichon, Bäck, de Libera in *La querelle*, Porro, Black and Rashed all uphold a variant of this position.

⁶⁶ Pini, Benevich, and De Haan do not tackle this issue in depth.

⁶⁷ The complexity and interconnectedness of these various scholarly positions on Avicenna's theory of quiddity have to be recognized fully before a new interpretation is proffered. Benevich's overview

In hindsight, the studies listed above constitute the *status quaestionis* on the issue of the ontological status of quiddity in Avicenna. They have focused on various facets of the problem and have generated valuable insight without which further progress would not be possible. In spite of this, only few of these studies are devoted expressly to the issue of the *ontological status* of quiddity in itself. This specific question has in general been treated cursively in connection with other issues pertaining to essence or merely routinely in the context of a more general exposition of Avicenna's philosophy.⁶⁸ Moreover, the scholarly literature still does not include a comprehensive examination of the terminological and textual evidence pertaining to this issue. The tendency has been in general to focus on discrete textual segments, with the result that the interrelationships between the various passages in which Avicenna discusses quiddity have not been studied comparatively and systematically. In view of this, the aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive and systematic discussion of this topic by building on the previous scholarship and by exploring a cluster of key concepts and issues that lie at the heart of Avicenna's doctrine of quiddity. But before turning to this material, and as a propaedeutic to my own analysis, I wish to address what are in my eyes some of the main conceptual and terminological difficulties involved with the study of quiddity in itself in Avicenna. The following considerations, it is hoped, will also serve as an aid to those wishing to take a future stab at the problem.

3 Theoretical and methodological considerations

3.1 Whence *esse essentiae*?

Avicenna's influence on the development of medieval Latin philosophy has long been recognized by scholars. Even though the master's works had a significant impact on disciplines as varied as medicine, logic, psychology, physics, and metaphysics, it is arguably his metaphysical legacy that proved the most complex and momentous.⁶⁹ From the twelfth century onward—a time when some of his works become widely accessible in Latin—Avicenna's views were instrumental in shaping most of the discussions of essence and existence that were articulated by the Christian thinkers. More precisely, Avicenna's works are one of the sources—in many

of the scholarship on the topic of the ontological status of quiddity (Die 'göttliche Existenz,' 104–105) is incomplete and conveys an oversimplified picture of the variety of scholarly opinions that have been put forth, as well as of the major points of disagreement.

⁶⁸ Two exceptions are the studies by Rashed and Beneviseh mentioned above.

⁶⁹ For some insight, see Goichon, *La philosophie d'Avicenne*; Hasse, *Avicenna's De anima*; idem, *Influence*; and the various contributions in Hasse and Bertolacci (eds.), *The Arabic*. A general study that would survey the reception of Avicenna's metaphysics in Latin philosophy and provide a list of quotations and mentions of the Arabic thinker by name in the Latin sources is a desideratum.

cases, the main source—for a cluster of issues that lie at the heart of these medieval debates: the ‘real’ distinction between essence and existence; essence *qua* common nature in concrete beings; the tripartite division of the universals ‘before,’ ‘in,’ and ‘after multiplicity’; the pure conception of essence in the mind; and the ontology of essence, and especially the notion of *esse essentiae*.

The expression *esse essentiae* finds its origin in some medieval Latin texts written under the direct influence of Avicenna’s theory of essence. In developing their views on essence, these Latin authors relied on some of the translations from Arabic that had been achieved during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE, mostly in the city of Toledo in Spain under the supervision of Abraham Ibn Daud and Dominicus Gundissalinus or Gundisalvi (both flourished in the latter part of the twelfth century CE).⁷⁰ Although used primarily to qualify scholastic theories, the expression *esse essentiae* came by extension to describe the thought of other philosophers, including Avicenna himself. From a textual perspective, the key passages that informed this notion are *Metaphysics* I.5, where Avicenna ascribes one sense of existence, *wujūd khāṣṣ* (proper being), to essence, and *Metaphysics* V.1, where he discusses the existence (*wujūd*) of essence and alludes on one occasion to its “divine existence” (*wujūd ilāhī*). These texts inspired the Latin theories of *esse proprium* (the direct translation of *wujūd khāṣṣ*) and various notions of essential being. Two additional passages from *Introduction* further contributed to the development of this notion: the first in I.2, which displays Avicenna’s famous threefold distinction of essence, one of which is the essence taken ‘in itself’; and the other in I.12, where the master, following late-antique examples, distinguishes between the universals ‘before,’ ‘in,’ and ‘after multiplicity.’ Starting with Albert the Great, the latter text appears to have been responsible for the diffusion and wide endorsement of this tripartite paradigm in the Latin West.⁷¹

In spite of the direct textual and historical connection between Avicenna and theories of essential being in the Latin West, one wonders how relevant this expression really is in the context of Islamic philosophy, and whether it can be used constructively to study Avicenna’s system. This question is all the more relevant, given that modern scholars sometimes rely on the notion of essential being to study the Avicennian system, sometimes within a comparative approach and in relation to Latin thought.⁷² To begin with, it should be pointed out that even in the context of medieval Latin philosophy, the expression *esse essentiae* is ambiguous, because it

⁷⁰ For an overview of the translation movement from Arabic to Latin, see Burnett, *Arabic into Latin*; idem, *The Coherence*.

⁷¹ De Libera, *La querelle*, 322–335; Wéber, *Le thème avicennien*; for Albert’s relation to Arabic philosophy, see Endress, *Der arabische Aristoteles*.

⁷² This is true both of scholars who ascribe a theory of ‘essential being’ to Avicenna and of those who oppose it: see Owens, *Common Nature*; Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 87–88; Rashed, *Ibn ‘Adī*, 114–115, note 12; Porro, *Universaux*; Gracia, *Cutting the Gordian Knot*; and Black, *Mental Existence*, 25–27.

can refer to a wide range of views on the relation between essence and existence and on the ontological status of essence. In no way can it be made to neatly encapsulate all the theories articulated on these topics. Although primarily associated with Henry of Ghent and his distinction between *esse essentiae* and *esse existentiae*, the notion of essential being is also discussed in one form or other in the works of many other Scholastics, such as Martin of Dacia (d. 1304 CE), Boethius of Dacia (fl. 1275 CE), Siger of Brabant (d. c. 1284 CE), Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, John Wyclif (d. 1384 CE), Richard of Clive (d. after 1306 CE), John Capreolus (d. 1444 CE), Thomas Cajetan (d. 1534 CE), and Francisco Suárez. As Alain de Libera has shown, it seems that essential being was understood in at least three distinct ways: (a) as pointing to the special ontological status of the essence in itself—or to the ontological ‘indifference’ of essence—in abstraction from mental and concrete existence; (b) in connection with the divine intellection and as corresponding to the objects of God’s thought; and (c) as referring merely to mental existence or the existence of the universals in the mind.⁷³ (a) can be associated chiefly with Henry, although his position might bear also a relation to (b). (b) refers to the aspect of the universals ‘before multiplicity’ and can be reconciled, as in the works of Albert the Great and Aquinas, with a reading of the Platonic forms or the essences as existing in the mind of the Creator; (c) has sometimes been equated with a theory of mental existence, where essential being refers merely to the objects in the intellect. A rich set of terms was devised to buttress these theories, which bear varying relations to the notion of essential being. Among them are quidditative being (*esse quidditativum*), intentional being (*esse intentionale*), intramental being (*esse in anima*), proper being (*esse proprium*), diminutive being (*esse diminutum*), being as known (*esse cognitum*), objective being (*esse obiectivum*), and rational being (*esse rationis*). As some of these terms suggest, many Latin thinkers conceived of essential being—if they did at all—in a manner that bears a close relation to intelligible and conceptual being.⁷⁴ Overall, then, the expression ‘*esse essentiae*’ is relevant not because it refers to a specific interpretation of Avicenna, but rather because it captures the general awareness

73 de Libera, *L’art*, 578–579; idem, *La querelle*, 258–259.

74 The literature on these topics is too vast to be cited exhaustively. For general discussions of *esse essentiae* and the relation between essence and existence in the Latin West, see Owens, *Common Nature*; Wippel, *Essence and Existence*; DeGrood, *Philosophies of Essence*; Conti, *Essenza*; de Libera, *La querelle*, especially 255–262; idem, *L’art*, 577–580; Bertolacci, *The Reception of Avicenna*; and Twetten, *Really Distinguishing*. The theory of *esse essentiae* taken in a robust sense is associated chiefly with Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibeta* I.9 and III.9, who distinguishes between *esse essentiae* and *esse existentiae* (see Porro, *Universaux*; idem, *Henry*). Godfrey of Fontaines discusses *esse essentiae*, but chiefly in order to refute Henry (Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought*, 136–138). Starting from a different angle in Avicenna, Duns Scotus explores essential being, or rather the existence of the universals, in connection with both human thought and the ‘common natures’ (sing. *natura communis*) of concrete beings (Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot*; Cross, *Scotus’s Collatio*). See also Wood, Aquinas; Wippel, *The Reality*. For Wyclif’s construal of *esse essentiae*, see Conti, *John Wyclif*. For Cajetan, see Muñoz, *Dificultades*. Sanz, *La doctrina*, explores for his part the relationship between Henry and Suárez.

on the part of the medieval Latin philosophers that the master had articulated an ontology of essence.

As I argue in this book, it is plausible that these three principled ways of interpreting essential being are prefigured in the Avicennian works. In spite of this, they are best regarded as elaborations on the *Avicenna latinus* proper to medieval Europe, and they represent an important and intriguing feature of the scholastic discussions about essence and existence from Albert the Great to Francisco Suárez and beyond. It would seem at first glance that the theory—or rather the theories—of *esse essentiae* as they came to be articulated in the medieval European context have no counterpart in the Islamic tradition, at least not in the well-defined form in which they are found in the Latin texts. What is more, there is no standard Arabic equivalent to the Latin formula *esse essentiae* that promptly comes to mind and that would have been used by generations of Muslim thinkers. In fact, one struggles to find a correlate in the context of Avicenna's philosophy, who was the main responsible for triggering this trend in the West. Yet, it would be inaccurate to infer from these observations that notions of essential being were never discussed in the Islamic context, especially if one maintains a certain flexibility in the way in which this notion is understood. Discussions of mental existence and the objects of God's knowledge thrived in the classical and postclassical periods of Islamic thought. Hence, it would be surprising if the idea of essential being had never been envisaged in these ontological contexts. The first great Arabic philosopher, Kindī (d. c. 870 CE), broaches this topic when he defends a theological position (comparable in many ways to that of the Mu'tazilites) that subsumes all of the divine attributes under the divine essence. For Kindī, God exists and is one essentially, and he seeks to distinguish these senses of essential being and essential oneness from those that are predicated accidentally of all the other beings. So it is quite clear that for Kindī, God exists and is one 'by essence.'⁷⁵ Several years later, the Arabic Christian theologian and philosopher Yaḥyā b. 'Adī promotes a threefold distinction of essence modelled on late-antique sources, which also corresponds to three 'kinds' of existence (*aṣnāf al-wujūd*), and which puts forth a doctrine of the essential being of essence. On his account, there is one aspect of essence or form that has "essential existence" (*wujūd dhātī*) and "divine existence" (*wujūd ilāhī*).⁷⁶ As for Miskawayh (d. 1030), who was a contemporary of Avicenna, in his work entitled *Book of Triumph* (*Kitāb al-Fawz al-aṣghar*) he distinguishes between existence that is accidental (*al-wujūd bi-l-'araḍ*), which belongs to all contingent things, and existence that is essential (*al-wujūd bi-l-dhāt*), which belongs to God alone.⁷⁷ These precedents probably informed Avicenna's approach to metaphysics and theology: the First, or the Necessary Existent, for Avicenna, exists by virtue of Its essence; it has being essentially; and its quiddity is Its existence. What is more, Avicenna in *Metaphysics* V.1

⁷⁵ Adamson, *Al-Kindī*, 47 ff.; idem, *Before Essence*.

⁷⁶ See Menn and Wisnovsky, Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī *On the Four Scientific Questions*, 96; Rashed, *Ibn 'Adī*; and sections III.4.2 and IV.2.2.3 of this book.

⁷⁷ Miskawayh, *Book of Triumph*, 54.13–55.1; see also Gutas, *Avicenna*, 296–297.

describes pure quiddity as having ‘existence’ and even ‘divine existence.’ In a different context in *Physics*, he refers to the fact that form “is prior to it [matter] with regard to essential being [*mutaqaddiman ‘alayhā fī l-wujūd al-dhātī*].”⁷⁸ Shortly after the master’s death, Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) in *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Unbelief* (*Fayṣal al-tafriqah bayna l-islām wa-l-zandaqah*) provides a breakdown of the various senses of existence, one of which is essential being (*al-wujūd al-dhātī*), even though he uses this notion in a way that differs markedly from both Ibn ‘Adī and Avicenna.⁷⁹ Furthermore, there is evidence that the question of the ontological status of quiddity in itself was sometimes pointedly raised in the Arabic sources. Apart from Avicenna’s works, which constitute the *locus classicus* for this question, one finds this issue broached explicitly in Bahmanyār’s (d. 1066 CE) magnum opus, *The Book of Validated Knowledge*. There he asks: “Does humanness inasmuch as it is humanness exist or does not exist?”⁸⁰ Two centuries later, Taftāzānī notes that some philosophers uphold the mental existence of a fully abstract and ‘negatively-conditioned’ aspect of quiddity in the mind and proceeds to refute this position.⁸¹ Finally, when it comes to the other (not strictly Aristotelian) traditions in Islam, one could argue that both the Mu‘tazilite theory of the nonexistent things (*ashyā’ ma’dūmah*) and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theory of the fixed entities (*a’yān thābitah*) attribute a special and intrinsic ontological status to nonexistent objects, in a manner that recalls Alexius Meinong’s theory of the pure objects.

As we can see from these various examples, the presumption that some objects have a kind of essential being (regardless of the corollary issue of whether they are to be located in the human mind, in the divine mind, or in a realm of their own) has been occasionally entertained in Islamic intellectual history. This problematic is reflected in the use of such explicit Arabic terms as *wujūd dhātī*, *wujūd ilāhī*, *wujūd ‘aqlī*, as well as Avicenna’s celebrated formula *wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*, which means literally, ‘the Necessary of Existence by virtue of Its essence.’ These all imply a certain notion of essential being. But what is striking in this regard is that, as in the Latin context, the various aspects discussed by Arabic scholars that pertain to essential being cannot be grouped under a single heading, but belong to different fields, including theology, epistemology, ontology, and logic; and they bridge issues as diverse as the objects of God’s knowledge; the status of intellectual forms in the human mind; the status of natures and essences in real concrete beings; and the notion of uncaused existence as it applies to God. As a result, the nexus of

78 Avicenna, *Physics*, I.10, 66.9. McGinnis translates this segment as “essentially prior in existence to [the matter],” but the Arabic syntax connects *dhātī* to *wujūd*.

79 Ghazālī, *The Decisive Criterion*, 43, 45, and 49; for an analysis of this passage, see Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī*, 111–115. By *wujūd dhātī*, Ghazālī apparently intends the true existence of things in the exterior world, along the lines of an Ash‘arite position where existence and essence are one and the same thing.

80 Bahmanyār, *The Book of Validated Knowledge*, 499.14–15.

81 Taftāzānī, *Commentary on the Aims*, vol. 1, 404.

issues linked to the notion of essential being amounts to different philosophical problematics in the Islamic tradition, as it does in the Latin tradition. Finally, the formula *esse essentiae*, when it is used with regard to Islamic intellectual history, has the added disadvantage that it is imported from a foreign field. As a result, scholars may inadvertently minimize the differences between the Latin and Arabic contexts and draw comparisons whose value is questionable. Thus, if the expression *esse essentiae* seems inadequate to describe the diversity of views elaborated by Latin thinkers, it seems doubly inadequate to study the Arabic philosophical texts.

In light of these comments, we may conclude that one of the main obstacles in approaching the problem of essential being in the Islamic philosophical and theological traditions is terminological and definitional in nature. The formula *esse essentiae* appears imprecise, reductionist, and even misleading. Moreover, inasmuch as this notion can be amplified or distended to include such diverse problematics as mental existence, God's knowledge, the essential nature of concrete beings, or the ontological status of nonexistent things, it can be said to have traction in the Islamic context, albeit without contributing anything precise to the analysis at hand. In sum, it is not that this notion bears no relation to Islamic intellectual history, but rather that it should be studied through the terminological and textual evidence that characterizes that tradition. In view of this, I have systematically avoided using the term *esse essentiae* in this book and have prioritized the Arabic terminology instead. It is mentioned only when a direct connection is made between Avicenna's legacy and Latin philosophy.

3.2 Essence and the meaning of 'in itself' (*min ḥaythu hiya hiya*)

Many of the conceptual issues at play in this study are intricately connected with the terminological evidence that can be found in Avicenna's works, so that in most cases their investigation has to be accompanied by a process of terminological disambiguation. As can be expected from a study dealing with the ontological status of pure quiddity, the two concepts that will lie at the core of the forthcoming analysis are 'quiddity' and 'existence.' Let me provide some pointed remarks concerning each term. One vital task concerning the first term is to understand what Avicenna means exactly by the expression quiddity *in itself*, which is a shorthand in English for a variety of expressions one finds in the Arabic sources. On one interpretation, quiddity *in itself* refers to the state of quiddity considered in abstraction from everything else—that is, in a state of distinctness or separateness from all other things. But it is not obvious whether the qualification *in itself* here refers merely to an epistemic consideration or to an ontological state, or to both, albeit in different ways. In other words, *in itself* could be interpreted along different lines, as meaning either 'epistemologically distinct' or 'ontologically distinct or separate.' What is more, one should also differentiate between a state of 'ontological separateness' in a strong sense, i.e., as pertaining to the concrete world, and in a weak or secondary sense, i.e., as refer-

ring to distinct existents in the mind—which is what I shall call a state of ‘ontological distinctness.’ These distinctions can lead to widely divergent metaphysical implications and conclusions. Now, although there is surely one sense in which this qualification of distinctness is immediately true from an epistemological or psychological perspective—Avicenna assures us that we can have a consideration and a mental realization of quiddity *in itself* by abstracting it from all other things in our mind—it is unclear whether this psychological state *in itself* also corresponds to a putative ontological state *in itself* in the mind.

What is more, to limit one’s interpretation of *in itself* as expressing merely abstraction, distinctness, or separation (whether in an epistemic or ontological sense) would be reductionist, because Avicenna also believes that there is a sense in which quiddity in itself is *irreducible* and is present or exists *in* other things. Accordingly, another possible reading of Avicenna’s argument here is that quiddity exists as a simple and irreducible part, aspect, or principle of more complex existents. At *Metaphysics* V.1, the master explains that

The consideration of ‘animal in itself’ is possible [*i’tibār al-ḥayawān bi-dhātihi jā’izan*], even when it is with another [thing], because it [always] remains itself even when it is with another. Its essence, therefore, belongs to it in itself [*fa-dhātuhu lahu bi-dhātihi*], whereas its being with another is [merely] an accidental occurrence or a certain concomitant of its nature [*amr ‘arīḍ lahu aw lāzim mā li-ṭabī’atihi*], as in the case of animalness and humanness.⁸²

This mereological approach appears to be vindicated on the grounds that, according to Avicenna, concrete and mental complex existents are composed of pure quiddity and extraneous concomitants and accidents that attach to it. What is more, Avicenna and (especially) his later commentators appear to have endorsed a realist or formalist version of this mereological theory and not merely a conceptual and definitional one: pure quiddity exists in each concrete existent as a common nature and form. Accordingly, quiddity or nature *qua* ‘part’ can be said to exist in a different mode from the synthetic whole to which it belongs. In these cases, *in itself* can hardly be glossed over as meaning ‘separate,’ ‘in abstraction from,’ or ‘in isolation of.’ Rather, *in itself* here would convey a meaning closer to ‘irreducible’ or ‘foundational,’ with the idea that quiddity (in itself) always remains quiddity (in itself) and preserves its fundamental identity, regardless of whether it is envisaged as a distinct object or combined with other things. Here the qualification *in itself* would point to an irreducible, self-contained, simple, and constant entity, regardless of whether it can also be said to exist *with* other things.

The key distinction that emerges from these two cases is not one between quiddity *in itself* and quiddity *not in itself*, but rather one between quiddity *in itself in abstraction from all other things* and quiddity *in itself taken together with other things*. In other words, quiddity is always *in itself* according to one meaning (i.e., irreducibil-

⁸² Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Cure*, V.1, 201.8–10.

ity), even though it may not be *in itself* according to the other (i.e., distinctness or separateness). Avicenna's argumentation fully exploits these two conceptual aspects in subtle ways, and it is crucial to grasp this basic distinction in order to avoid dire misunderstandings concerning his terminology and doctrine of essence. At the same time, these remarks point to the inherent limitations of the English translations that have been relied upon to render the plethora of Arabic terms and expressions Avicenna uses when describing quiddity, which convey different meanings and intentions. At any rate, it is important to recognize from the outset that the problem of the ontological status of pure quiddity transcends the mere qualification of it as something *in itself qua* 'distinct' or 'separable,' and that the inquiry will consequently also focus on the alternative meaning of irreducibility.⁸³ In order to cope with these conceptual challenges, the present study will introduce a new methodological framework intended to facilitate the analysis. One fundamental feature of this framework involves the distinction between (a) essential irreducibility, and (b) essential distinctness, both of which qualify pure quiddity, and both of which can be intended by the Arabic expressions *fī nafsihi*, *min ḥaythu hiya hiya*, etc. This distinction is particularly useful in the context of human thought and intellectuality, where quiddity can be conceived of either as an irreducible part of a larger whole (viz., the complex universal concept), or in a distinct and abstracted state. These various distinctions and qualifications may or may not apply to the same aspect of quiddity, and it will be precisely the task of this study to examine how they can be said to apply to it in each case.

In light of the foregoing, the present study assumes that some of the major conundrums and scholarly disagreements associated with quiddity in Avicenna have arisen primarily from terminological or translational haziness. Accordingly, a systematic investigation into the technical vocabulary associated with quiddity can help to alleviate many of these concerns. Indeed, many other key terms that appear in the Avicennian sources, such as *i'tibār* and *ma'nā*, could be mentioned to illustrate the need for terminological scrutiny. But nowhere is this desideratum more strongly felt than with regard to the notion of existence (*wujūd*). For the apparently daunting questions regarding the co-extensionality of essence and existence and whether es-

83 For a recent exploration of the notion of irreducibility (among many others) in a logical context, see Strobino, *Per se*. Some scholars have recognized that 'in itself' can designate a kind of essential irreducibility in Avicenna's philosophy. McGinnis, *Logic and Science*, 170, writes: "he [Avicenna] is claiming that existing in the body or in the intellect are different descriptions of the essence in itself, neither one of which necessarily and essentially belongs to the essence in itself." Benevich's analysis also relies on a certain notion of essential irreducibility. He construes the 'divine existence' mentioned by Avicenna at *Metaphysics* V.1, 205.1–2, as referring to the existence of pure quiddity in composite things. However, Benevich restricts the divine existence of quiddity solely to this mereological reality, which he also regards primarily as an epistemic (as opposed to an ontological) aspect. In sum, it is not so much the idea of the irreducibility of quiddity that has proven controversial in the scholarship, as the hypothesis of its existing as a distinct or separate entity, which can also theoretically be implied by the expression 'in itself.'

sence possesses its own ontological mode depend entirely on one's definition and understanding of existence in Avicenna's philosophy.⁸⁴ These questions are liable to receiving nuanced answers based on a set of ontological distinctions Avicenna makes in his works. These distinctions need to be fleshed out for a proper assessment of his position on the ontology of quiddity to emerge.

3.3 Modulation (*tashkik*)

The issue of whether existence (*wujūd*) for Avicenna is best described as a univocal, equivocal, ambiguous, analogical, or modulated notion is one that has preoccupied the minds of medieval and modern interpreters alike and received divergent answers over the centuries.⁸⁵ Following some recent studies on the topic, I shall argue in chapter IV that existence for Avicenna is neither a pure univocal nor a pure equivocal term, but rather 'a modulated term' (*ism mushakkik*) and that, as a corollary, his doctrine of being is one of 'ontological modulation' (*tashkik al-wujūd*). The analysis of *wujūd* as a modulated notion enables a reassessment and reconsideration of how existence relates to quiddity and a reframing of the issue of the co-extensionality of essence and existence. In this regard, Alexander Treiger's study on ontological modulation (*tashkik al-wujūd*) was the first to emphasize the importance of this notion in Avicenna's metaphysics. Building on an earlier article by Wolfson, it also traces the roots of this notion in ancient Greek and classical Arabic philosophy.⁸⁶ What has not been sufficiently appreciated, however, is the fact that Avicenna extends the notion of modulation or *tashkik* to many of the crucial concepts underlying his physical and metaphysical system, and not just to existence or *wujūd*. In fact, most of the key philosophical terms used by the master are modulated or said 'by modulation' (*bi-l-tashkik*). This is the case of oneness (*waḥdah*),⁸⁷ priority (*taqaddum*),⁸⁸ necessity (*wujūb*),⁸⁹ form (*ṣūrah*), matter (*māddah*), and privation ('*adam*'),⁹⁰ as well as univer-

⁸⁴ It is somewhat ironic that, although the subject of the present study is quiddity, much of the discussion will revolve around Avicenna's understanding of existence. In particular Avicenna's views on the various modes, aspects, and senses of existence are elusive and have led to divergent scholarly interpretations. Yet, this point impacts directly on the inquiry into pure quiddity, for the issue of whether quiddity exists depends partly on a clarification of what one intends by existence.

⁸⁵ The issue of how to interpret the Avicennian concept of *wujūd* flares into a full-fledged debate already in the works of Shahrastānī, Ṭūsī, and Rāzī and extends all the way to the present day.

⁸⁶ Treiger, *Avicenna's Notion*; see also Wolfson, *The Amphibolous Terms*.

⁸⁷ Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Cure*, beginning of III.2.

⁸⁸ Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Cure*, beginning of IV.3.

⁸⁹ Avicenna, *Categories of Middle Compendium of Logic*, 31v.7–11 of the ms. Nuruosmaniye 2763, from Benevich, *Essentialität*, 57.

⁹⁰ Avicenna, *Physics*, I.3, 31.

sality (*kullīyyah*),⁹¹ in addition to existence (*wujūd*).⁹² Given that this point has not been firmly established in the scholarship, but that it will play a vital role later on in this study in fashioning a new interpretive paradigm of Avicenna's philosophy, it seems important to briefly go over some of the main features of modulation.

Avicenna is keen to point out that many of the central notions of his philosophy are modulated. For example, he begins chapters III.2 and IV.3 of *Metaphysics of The Cure*, which are devoted to oneness and priority respectively, by explaining that these notions are said "according to modulation" (*bi-l-tashkik*), and that it is by virtue of their modulated nature that they should not be regarded as pure equivocals. He also makes the same statement with regard to existence in various parts of his corpus, arguing that *wujūd* possesses a focal meaning, which, even though it can be modulated, does not result in pure semantic ambiguity or equivocity. As Wolfson and more recently Treiger and Wisnovsky have shown, Avicenna's discussion of existence as a modulated term is inscribed in a long philosophical tradition and was informed by Aristotelian and Neoplatonic sources.⁹³ One may hypothesize that Avicenna extended the notion of modulation he applies to existence to other notions of his philosophy. In this respect, the various 'senses' of core philosophical terms Aristotle outlines in Book Δ of *Metaphysics* was also likely a source of inspiration for the *shaykh al-ra'īs*, who similarly proceeds to disambiguate key notions of his metaphysics before engaging in their analysis proper. What is more, the idea that modulation characterizes a core set of philosophical terms and notions appears to have been endorsed also by some of Avicenna's immediate disciples.⁹⁴

As we can see from these remarks, modulation, for Avicenna, is not some haphazard idea, but a well-thought out theory that is consistently applied to the central concepts of his physical and metaphysical system. It is discussed in various works of the master and in different contexts (logic, physics, psychology, and metaphysics). As I will show later on, it is also grounded in, and articulated by, a set of well-defined modes or aspects (*anḥā'*, *aḥkām*). In the case of existence, these modes include such notions as priority and posteriority, possibility and necessity, autonomy and need, and even strength and weakness. Although the last two notions were trivial for Avicenna, they came to play a crucial role in the postclassical understanding of *tashkik al-wujūd*, particularly in the works of Mullā Ṣadrā. At any rate, these modes explain how modulation functions and also justify why existence or *wujūd* is best regarded as a modulated term as opposed to a strict univocal or equivocal term.

⁹¹ Avicenna does not explicitly describe universality (*al-kullīyyah*) as being modulated, but many of his comments seem to support such an interpretation; see Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, V.2, 207, and the analysis in chapters III and IV, especially III.2.5 and IV.3.

⁹² For a detailed discussion of the modulation of existence, see chapter IV.

⁹³ Wolfson, *The Ambibolous Terms*; Treiger, *Avicenna's Notion*; and Wisnovsky, *On the Emergence*.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Bahmanyār, *The Book of Validated Knowledge*, 35.16; 467.4; 281; and 294, who regards 'priority' and 'existence' as modulated notions.

The implications that derive from regarding the Avicennian philosophical terminology as a flexible, adaptable, and modulated one, as opposed to a rigid and fixed one, are momentous. For this hypothesis suggests that many of the issues that have plagued Avicennian studies up to the present day cannot, by definition, receive a dichotomic answer, and that they require instead a nuanced treatment that systematically takes into account the notion of modulation. Accordingly, such questions as: Is pure quiddity *universal*? Does pure quiddity *exist*? Is essence in any way *prior* to realized or established existence? What is the ontological status of a *form* (*ṣūrah*)? etc., cannot be answered simply in the affirmative or the negative, but call for an investigation of Avicenna's theory of modulation and of exactly how these terms are used in any given context. In light of these considerations, much attention will be paid in the present study to Avicenna's theory of modulation, particularly with regard to the three following questions: What are the aspects and structural features that inform and provide the rationale for modulation? In what way can modulation be regarded as a systemic feature of Avicenna's philosophy and one that is deliberately implemented to solve philosophical problems? Is its scope limited to the predicamental or categorial level or does it apply also to the transcendental or theological level? In other words, can modulation be invoked to explain God's existence and attributes as well? It is my contention that addressing these various queries will in turn cast some light on the central issues related to quiddity. The reason is that Avicenna explicitly and deliberately applies several of these modulated notions to pure quiddity. The challenge that confronts us then is to understand exactly how, and with what end in mind, he uses them to describe essence.

3.4 Mental existence

Mental existence remains a nebulous area of Avicenna's philosophy. But it is also a crucial one, which requires to be carefully probed in connection with quiddity.⁹⁵ Given that this thinker is sometimes credited with "the discovery of mental existence,"⁹⁶ one would assume that there would be a special link between this ontological mode and the equally original Avicennian theory of the essence in itself. Although this assumption seems compelling, we need first to adequately delineate Avicenna's theory of mental existence. Yet, this task is far from simple, and one can from the outset identify a series of difficulties. The first one is terminological. Avicenna relies on a wide array of terms and expressions to designate mental entities, such as *ma'ānī*, *ma'qūlāt*, *mawjūdāt*, *i'tibārāt*, etc. Moreover, these can be 'in

⁹⁵ For valuable insight into mental existence in Avicenna, see Marmura, Avicenna's Chapter on Universals; Black, Mental Existence; eadem, Avicenna on the Ontological; Wisnovsky, *Avicenna*; Beneich, Die 'göttliche Existenz'; idem, The Reality; and idem, *Essentialität*, 63–70, 368 ff.

⁹⁶ Adamson, Existence. Although one may object that this statement is an exaggeration, it adequately captures in my eyes the importance Avicenna devotes to this ontological mode in his various works.

the intellect' (*fī l-'aql*), 'in the mind' (*fī l-dhihn*), 'in conception' (*fī l-taṣawwur*), 'in the estimation' (*fī l-wahm*, *fī l-awhām*), and, more generally, 'in the soul' (*fī l-nafs*), with the last expression theoretically encompassing all the others. It is not always clear whether the master employs these terms synonymously and with the same extension and scope or whether they are intended to convey subtle differences in meaning. In spite of these terminological variations, when Avicenna speaks of a 'mental' or 'intellectual existent' (*mawjūd dhihnī* or *mawjūd 'aqlī*), he usually means a universal form (*ṣūrah*), idea (*ma'nā*), and intelligible (*ma'qūl*) in the human intellect, such as the universal idea of 'human' or 'triangle.'

But these considerations immediately raise another issue, which can be called the 'faculty issue.' This new problem concerns the possibility that other, sub-intellectual entities or objects could be said to exist in the mind or in the soul, albeit in a weaker sense. These objects would not fulfil all the criteria of the universal forms or intelligibles, but would be associated with the other psychological faculties, such as the inner senses of imagination, estimation, or memory. The point is that although they would not share the robust sense of mental existence that characterizes the universal forms in the intellect, these other kinds or classes of mental objects would nevertheless possess some kind of existence, presence, or reality in the mind according to some weaker sense. This problem is compounded by the fact that some of the terms used in Avicenna's psychology, such as *ma'nā*, are applied equally to the intelligibles in the intellect and to the objects of the estimation.⁹⁷ Hence, the hypothesis of sub-intellectual mental existents needs to be carefully tested by future scholarship, as it seems to find some traction in certain comments Avicenna makes regarding entities in the estimation or imagination. The key issue for my purposes will be to determine whether the notion of pure quiddity, which Avicenna often describes as a *ma'nā*, falls on the side of intellectual or sub-intellectual objects.

Unfortunately, Avicenna remains vague about the various classes of mental existents, and he does not at any rate provide a definitive and exhaustive list of the criteria that define mental existence. Although immateriality and universality are obvious candidates for mental existence to obtain, it is not clear that they apply exclusively to the intellectual forms. Objects of the inner senses, for example, apparently enjoy some degree of abstraction from matter. What is more, the modulated nature of universality and the fact that Avicenna recognizes various senses of 'the universal' (*al-kullī*) makes the issue more intricate. The questions of what exactly qualifies as a mental existent and of how many classes of mental existents there are still represent elusive points in the master's philosophy. This problem is compounded by Avicenna's use of the term 'consideration' or *i'tibār*, which is applied to a wide variety of objects in the mind, while remaining ontologically vague. In this regard, the fictional and artificial forms represent a particularly problematic

97 On this point, see Hall, *Intellect*, 65 and 80.

set of entities in Avicenna's philosophy whose ontological status remains unclear. Scholars have pondered extensively on the various classes of universals Avicenna outlines in *Metaphysics* V.1 of *The Cure* and on what constitutes a valid universal and a valid mental existent, but these questions are still a matter of ongoing discussion.⁹⁸ Many of these points are picked up later in chapter II.

Then there is the issue of 'cognitive identity.' Is the existence of the mental object distinct from that of the intellect or identical with it? Avicenna generally holds to the position that, in God, intellect, intellection, and intellectual object are absolutely one and fully identical, but that, in the case of human intellection, there is an irreducible difference between thinker (*ʿāqil*) and object of thought (*maʿqūl*). This is because, were the intellect ontologically identical with its object, it could only ever think one single thing and could not move from one intelligible to another. The only exception Avicenna seems to allow in this context focuses on self-awareness or self-knowledge, since this implies an irreducible, intuitive, and reflexive kind of cognition, where knower and thing known are essentially one.⁹⁹ But when it comes to the intellection of external intelligibles, thinker and object of thought appear to be always distinct. Yet, although the thinker is its own separate substance and possesses a distinct existence vis-à-vis the intelligible, it would seem, on the other hand, that we can conflate the act of thought or intellect (*ʿaql*) with its object (*maʿqūl*); that is to say, the existence of the act of intellection would be identical with the existence of the object of intellection, for as long as the thinking process lasts.¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, this hypothesis does not help us much with regard to the previous question about the different objects that could potentially be said to exist in the mind or in the soul. But it does suggest that whatever is thought of or reflected upon at the level of the intellect must necessarily exist in one way or other. All of the things that we can actually apprehend intellectually must somehow exist in the mind according to Avicenna.

Finally, there is a 'category' or 'context issue' pertaining to mental existence. What is the relation between human and divine mental existence? A basic distinction between *human intellectual existence* and *divine intellectual existence* has been maintained by some scholars and applied to their treatment of quiddity,¹⁰¹ but the exact conditions corresponding to these ontological modes have not been fleshed out in a satisfactory manner, particularly when it comes to the mental accidents and concomitants of essence, which seem to accompany human intellection, but would presum-

⁹⁸ Black, Avicenna, and Druart, *Avicennan Troubles*.

⁹⁹ For a discussion of self-awareness in Avicenna, see Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*; Adamson, *Avicenna*; and Alwishah, *Avicenna*.

¹⁰⁰ Avicenna, *Notes*, 4.5–6, section 1: "Knowledge [*al-ʿilm*] is a pattern that exists in the knower, and which exists with the existence of the object of thought [*wujūd al-maʿlūm*], and is cancelled with the latter's disappearance."

¹⁰¹ See, for instance, Adamson, *Non-Discursive Thought*; and Porro, *Universaux*. But this basic distinction implicitly underlies most modern discussions of intellection in Avicenna.

ably be absent from divine intellection.¹⁰² More specifically, there is the issue of whether the objects of human and divine intellection are characterized by the same kind of universality, whose primary definition according to Avicenna is a mental concomitant of essence in the human mind. This issue has rarely been addressed in earnest.

Avicenna's terminology is, yet again, partly responsible for this state of affairs, since the human and divine intellects can be described by resorting to the same set of Arabic terms and expressions (*'aql*, *ma'qūl*, *wujūd 'aqlī*, *kullī*, *ma'nā*, etc.). In addition, the master uses the same set of terms (*kullī*, *kullīyyah*) to designate the universals and universality in the human mind and in the supernal intellects. Thus, the Agent Intellect and God Himself are defined by Avicenna as separate intellects (sing., *'aql mufāriq*) that reflect universals (*kulliyāt*). But this is potentially misleading, because when Avicenna talks about a mental or intellectual existent in connection with quiddity, and when he talks about universality in the mind, he is almost always referring to human thought and psychology. This is clear from the very wording he relies on: 'existent in the mind' (*mawjūd fī l-dhihn*), 'existent in the estimation' (*mawjūd fī l-awhām*), 'existent in the soul' (*mawjūd fī l-nafs*), and even—in most cases—*mawjūd fī l-'aql* ('existent in the intellect') typically refer to *human* psychology and not to some divine intellect. Only the last expression, *mawjūd fī l-'aql*, together with the related expressions *wujūd 'aqlī* ('intellectual existence') and *mawjūd 'aqlī* ('intellectual existent'), are ambiguous, since they can potentially refer to the separate intellects, in addition to the human intellect. As we can see, a key desideratum is to engage in a nuanced analysis of Avicenna's terminology and theory of mental existence, and especially to delineate its relation to key notions such as universality and conceivability. Any attempt to locate the quiddities in God or in the Agent Intellect—a thesis that has been proposed by some scholars—calls for precise qualifications regarding the category of intellectual existence and its attributes, especially universality. Claiming that quiddity has an 'intellectual' and 'universal' existence in God or in the Agent Intellect says little about its exact ontological mode, apart from the fact that it is obviously an immaterial one. What would distinguish this mode of intellectual existence from that of the universals in the human mind? And on what grounds could they equally be called 'universal'? In this study, I shall discriminate between two distinct problems pertaining to mental existence: the problem of the intelligible mode of existence of pure quiddity, and the problem of its localization. Although these two questions are interrelated, they are not identical and call for a separate treatment. In addition, the analysis will attempt to disambiguate the problematic term *kullī*, which is loaded with late-antique philosophical connotations in Avicenna's philosophy.

¹⁰² This specific issue is broached in McGinnis, *Logic and Science*; idem, *Making Abstraction*; and Hasse, *Avicenna's Epistemological Optimism*.

The topic of mental existence acquires a new significance, and also a new level of difficulty, when it is connected specifically with Avicenna's theory of essence. The reason for this stems from his claim that we can conceive of quiddity in itself without thinking about existence. This immediately raises the question of the ontological status of the conception of pure quiddity in the mind. More specifically, the question of whether pure quiddity can be regarded as an instance of mental existence, as an existent mental object (*mawjūd dhihnī* or '*aqlī*'), or as something entirely different is a crucial one for the present inquiry. First raised by Marmura in an acute way, it has recently been the object of some scholarly scrutiny, but remains understudied.¹⁰³ In addressing this problem, I shall follow Marmura's initiative and rely on a series of studies he devoted to this subject. Yet, although Marmura provided groundbreaking insight into this issue, his conclusions were ultimately marred by his inability to produce a consistent and compelling account of how mental existence relates to quiddity. Perhaps baffled by the refractory nature of the evidence, Marmura wavered inconclusively between regarding quiddity in itself as a distinct mental existent and regarding it merely as a logical aspect in the mind. But it should be noted that this ambiguity is not idiosyncratic to Marmura and other modern scholars; it also underpins many of the postclassical commentaries written on the Avicennian works. In fact, the challenge of determining whether one should assign a distinct mental status to quiddity is an issue that generated much concern in the postclassical period. During this time, Arabic philosophers and theologians were faced with the task of interpreting Avicenna's philosophy, including his views on mental existence and its relation to essence.¹⁰⁴ This exercise in philosophical exegesis often assumed a highly theoretical or technical form, which suggests that the issue of how pure quiddity relates to mental existence was particularly perplexing to the generations of thinkers who came after the master. This issue underlies much of the postclassical discussion about quiddity, from Rāzī and Ṭūsī to Ḥillī (d. 1325 CE), Qushjī (d. 1474 CE), and beyond. Given the proliferation of answers they formulated, Avicennian thinkers of the postclassical period appear to have been highly interested in, and somewhat baffled by, this issue, to the extent that the distinctions they make between various aspects

103 Marmura, *Quiddity and Universality*, 82, had already pinpointed this as one of the crucial issues to be investigated further: "A main ambiguity in his [Avicenna's] writings is the relation of the quiddity in itself to mental existence." In my eyes, subsequent scholars have not sufficiently paid heed to Marmura's observation, and this has led to a conceptual quagmire in the scholarship. Generally speaking, scholars have endorsed Avicenna's claim that we can have a mental consideration of quiddity in itself, but interpreted it in purely logical terms, so that they have omitted to clarify its ontological status and exactly what this consideration amounts to in the mind. A detailed discussion of this crucial point is absent, for instance, from Pini's and Benevich's articles, as well as Tahiri's monograph, all of which nevertheless discuss aspects linked to intentionality and epistemology.

104 On this issue, see Benevich, *The Reality*; idem, *The Metaphysics*; and idem, *The Essence-Existence Distinction*.

of quiddity are often difficult to unravel with precision—at least, at this early stage in the study of postclassical Islamic intellectual history.¹⁰⁵

I believe there are three main factors that contributed to this state of perplexity concerning the relationship between pure quiddity and mental existence in the post-Avicennian tradition and in the modern scholarship on Avicenna. The first is the paradoxical evidence that can be found in the Avicennian works regarding this topic: at *Metaphysics of The Cure*, V.1.196.11, Avicenna claims that quiddity in itself exists “neither in the mind nor in the concrete world,” but in other passages of the same work, such as V.1.205.5–9 and especially V.1.204.1–7, he appears to claim that quiddity in itself does exist in the mind.¹⁰⁶ These contradictory claims can lead, and in some cases have actually led, scholars to two divergent and incompatible conclusions: either that pure quiddity exists *neither* in the concrete world *nor* in the mind; or that it exists *only* in the mind. The second factor stems from a reasoning that at first blush appears sensible, but which ultimately leads to a conundrum: (a) Avicenna contends that it is possible to have a consideration (*i’tibār*) and conception or conceptualization (*taṣawwur*) of quiddity in itself; (b) this conception would presumably amount to true knowledge, insofar as it focuses on the essence of a thing and is closely tied to its definition; (c) but any true cognition and scientific object of knowledge according to Avicenna must be a universal form and intelligible in the mind; (d) hence, the consideration of quiddity in itself must be a universal in the mind. Yet, confusedly, (e) Avicenna is keen to distinguish the consideration of pure quiddity from that of the universal, so that pure quiddity cannot ultimately amount to a universal existent, hence the paradox. The third reason emerges from the terminological and conceptual confusion surrounding the various qualifications or conditions (*sharṭ/shurūṭ*) Avicenna attaches to quiddity, and which he discusses in such central texts as *Introduction*, *Salvation*, and *Metaphysics* V.1: *lā bi-sharṭ shay’*, *bi-sharṭ lā shay’*, and *bi-sharṭ shay’*.¹⁰⁷ Although valuable insight into these conditions has been generated in the

105 This is the case notably of the distinction between quiddity in itself and universal quiddity, which is discussed in connection with mental existence. This distinction often becomes blurred in the works of postclassical authors and is difficult to delineate with precision (see sections I.3 and II.8). The category of mental existence generally appears to have greatly preoccupied these thinkers, and with good reason, since it was discussed extensively by Avicenna and his early commentators, so that one priority for any thinker who flourished after them was to clarify what these scholars had to say about it. But there were other causes and incentives as well, such as the development of a more sophisticated mathematical system, which raised questions pertaining to the mental status of mathematical objects and the planetary models hypothesized by mathematical astronomy; for insight into this issue, see Fazlhoğlu, *Between Reality*. The advent of algebra and the development of a highly theoretical realm of mathematical thought also likely played a role; see Roshdi Rashed, *Mathématiques*, 34–35; and Tahiri, *Mathematics*.

106 Cf. Marmura, Avicenna’s Chapter on Universals, 38–39, and note 30 above.

107 Clarifying these various conditions and their epistemic and ontological implications represents one of the keys to solving the problem of quiddity in Avicenna’s philosophy and in subsequent Avicennian philosophical systems. I have accordingly devoted much attention to this aspect of the problem.

modern literature, especially with regard to their logical dimension, there is still no systematic analysis available detailing the various ontological implications of these conditions as they apply to quiddity. This shortcoming affects not only our appreciation of Avicenna's metaphysics, but also our understanding of the later reception of his thought. For much of the postclassical discourse (from Rāzī and Ṭūsī to Qushjī) that grew out of these seminal Avicennian passages centers on the issue of how these conditions relate to the mental and concrete existence (*wujūd*) of quiddity. What is more, post-Avicennian thinkers appear to have used these expressions quite freely and creatively to suit their philosophical agenda, no doubt in an attempt to adapt Avicenna's concepts and theories to their own system, thereby articulating ideas that were not necessarily the ones Avicenna had in mind when he first composed *The Cure*.¹⁰⁸ In order to adequately explain some of these later argumentative elaborations, one must first elucidate how Avicenna himself intended these conditions and how, on his view, they relate to the various ontological contexts of quiddity.

There is therefore a concrete difficulty involved in pinning down the criteria of mental existence in Avicenna. As a result, scholars have attempted to devise useful methodological tools in order to cope with this problem, as well as with the more pointed issue of how pure essence relates to mental existence. One such proposal is to distinguish between 'the epistemic' and 'the ontological.' It points to one of the crucial features of the problem of quiddity in Avicenna: the need to distinguish between the cognitive, epistemological, and logical dimensions of his discourse of

108 These remarks illustrate the kinds of risks involved in using post-Avicennian commentaries to try to better understand Avicenna's own doctrines. With this in mind, I have devoted special sections of this book to discussing the reception of Avicenna's theory of quiddity in the works—commentaries on the master as well as independent treatises—of some major post-Avicennian thinkers. Although I often use this later material as additional evidence to support my own interpretations, the analysis of Avicenna and of his commentators is divided in discrete units in the book, and I try as much as possible to keep both issues separate. One should also be aware of the intentional differences between Avicenna and his later commentators, whose philosophical agendas and objectives differed drastically. But the later tradition is also studied for its own sake and for the fascinating insight it provides into the reception and transformation of Avicenna's doctrines. In that sense, I enthusiastically embrace Wisnovsky's distinction between "Avicenna's philosophy" and (the later) "Avicennian philosophy." As I shall argue, when taken in its details, Avicenna's position was idiosyncratic, but some of its main features appear to have been endorsed by many later exegetes, who subjected them to close scrutiny and elaborated on them considerably. With regard to mental existence specifically, there is an ambiguity running through the later exegetical tradition on the Avicennian texts: it is often unclear whether these authors are talking about quiddity in the mind *qua* universal existent or *qua* quiddity in itself. These two aspects of quiddity, which Avicenna goes through great pains to distinguish, are not clearly differentiated in their exposition; this is the case, for instance, of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Qushjī. It is often difficult to grasp how exactly they envisaged quiddity in itself in relation to universal quiddity or whether they even followed Avicenna's theory of pure quiddity. For insight into another post-Avicennian interpretation of this issue, see Ibrahim's analysis of Rāzī (Ibrahim, *Freeing Philosophy*). As Ibrahim shows, Rāzī's works display salient departures from Avicenna's doctrines. Hence, every subsequent reading of Avicenna's theory of quiddity was tantamount to a transformation of his views.

quiddity, on the one hand—this includes how we can know quiddity, what we can say about it, what logical qualifications or conditions attach to it in the mind—and the ontological dimension of the problem, on the other, which concerns how, and in what mode, quiddity can be said to exist in the mind and in the concrete world, regardless of the human intentionality that is often attached to it. Fundamentally, these are two distinct problems that should receive two distinct answers. I have accordingly attempted to separate them as much as possible. For example, and for argument's sake, one could argue that Avicenna recognized the epistemic distinctness and abstractedness of pure quiddity as an object in the mind, while at the same time denying that it could actually exist in this very intellectual state. This view represents the majority opinion on the mental status of pure quiddity.¹⁰⁹

With that being said, the epistemological and ontological planes are also intimately connected in Avicenna's philosophy, and the interface between them is more slippery than might first appear. For one thing, Avicenna performs a highly ontological reading of Aristotle's logical treatises and of Porphyry's *Eisagoge*, a fact which he himself freely admits to in *Introduction* and *Categories*, and which modern scholars have been increasingly keen to emphasize.¹¹⁰ This point is further compounded by the importance Avicenna places on mental existence and the centrality of this notion in his philosophy. In this context, one cannot convincingly raise the question of the epistemological status of quiddity in itself in the mind while at the same time entirely ignoring the corollary question of its ontological status. This is because the concepts that convey true scientific knowledge in Avicenna's epistemology also happen to be mental existents proper. Just because we can envisage pure quiddity as a concept in abstraction from existence—a claim that seems to be purely epistemic in nature—need not entail that pure quiddity *qua* this same concept is actually devoid of, or unconnected with, intelligible existence. In fact, in the context of Avicenna's philosophy, the epistemic aspect could be said to presuppose and even depend on the ontological one. For if pure quiddity did not exist in any way, it would presumably not be possible for us to conceive it in the first place. In this regard, one needs to examine how conceivability is linked to mental existence in Avicenna's noetics. What is more: it would seem that for Avicenna we can know pure quiddity in an intellectual way. But if the consideration (*i'tibār*) of pure quiddity turns out to be an intellectual kind of consideration, does this not imply an *intellectual object* and *intellectual existence* of some kind? These questions suggest that the tendency to summarily pit 'the epistemic' against 'the ontological' is an oversimplistic and ultimately unproductive way to proceed, for it fails to provide a nuanced account of how these planes interface in Avicenna's philosophy. This is especially true of the various

109 The approaches endorsed by de Libera, *La querelle*, 223–262, and *L'art*, 499–607, as well as Pini, *Absoluta*, are articulated along the lines of a distinction between 'the ontological' and 'the epistemological' in Avicenna. See also Porro, *Immateriality*, especially 299–303, where this author distinguishes between the "eidetic" and the "ontological" or "metaphysical."

110 Bertolacci, *The 'Ontologization,'* notes the "ontologization of logic" in Avicenna's philosophy.

conditions (*shurūt*) Avicenna applies to quiddity, which are particularly problematic, precisely because they carry both epistemological and ontological implications.¹¹¹

Hence, notwithstanding the fact that I myself have adopted the distinction between ‘the epistemic’ or ‘epistemological’ and ‘the ontological’ as part of my basic framework, I believe that scholars have sometimes gone too far in their advocacy of this distinction as a tool to interpret the master’s philosophy. Avicenna himself seems to have been frequently engaged in negotiating and clarifying the boundary between these two spheres. But his position regarding mental existence and the fact that he defines intelligible entities as full-fledged existents should stand as caveats for those advocating a sharp or robust distinction between the two domains. The mental sphere for Avicenna is not some second hand or sub-ontological domain. It is a legitimate and fundamental sphere of existence, which applies to all intellectual beings. Avicenna regards intelligible forms in the mind as existents on a par with, albeit existing in a different mode from, the concrete individual existents. In fact, mental existence is arguably the *primary* and *real* sphere of existence, given that the higher principles of Avicenna’s metaphysics enjoy exclusively this kind of intellectual, immaterial existence and are themselves constantly engaged in the act of apprehending concepts. Hence, intellectual or intelligible existence essentially precedes material existence. Or, as Avicenna puts it in *Metaphysics* I.2, “the existent inasmuch as it is existent [*al-mawjūd bi-mā huwa mawjūd*], as well as its principles and accidents ... are all prior in existence to matter [*mutaqaddim al-wujūd ‘alā l-māddah*].”¹¹² As we shall see in this book, this holds true not only for the separate intellects, but also for the objects or intelligibles contemplated by these intellects and especially by the Agent Intellect before the emanation of the species-forms from the latter onto the world of nature.

These points are particularly important for the present inquiry, given that one of the main issues revolves around whether—and if so, how—pure quiddity can be granted the status of a mental existent when it is considered in the human intellect as a distinct epistemic object. As Marmura aptly perceived, one interpretive priority when it comes to pure quiddity is to solve the issue of its status *in the human mind*, since it is in this context that essence is most frequently discussed in the Avicennian works. In this case, maintaining a sharp distinction between the purely epistemolog-

¹¹¹ It is perhaps similar considerations that led Benevise, Die ‘göttliche Existenz,’ to describe pure quiddity in the mind as possessing a kind of “epistemological existence.” Here Benevise proposes to merge the two notions. In this connection, he construes the statement about the “divine existence” of quiddity in *Metaphysics* V.1 chiefly in an epistemic—not an ontological or metaphysical—way, and he contrasts metaphysical existence with epistemic or epistemological existence. However, these two spheres are not precisely defined in his paper, nor is the distinction between epistemic existence and intellectual existence. This is problematic, because for Avicenna intellectual existence is a valid and real mode of existence, and not some derivative mode that is opposed to ‘metaphysical existence.’

¹¹² Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, I.2, 15.14–15.

ical and the ontological is not helpful, since these two planes are inextricably meshed in Avicenna's writings. It is more precise to say that the issue of how pure quiddity relates to the human mind is simultaneously an epistemological *and* an ontological question, and that these aspects should be tackled side by side. Finally, it is important to point out that the interface of ontology and epistemology is an issue that applies not only to quiddity in the mind—where, given Avicenna's elaborate doctrine of mental existence, it is raised in a stark manner—but also with regard to how it can be said to exist in the concrete world. In this case, the question of the relation between what we can know about quiddity in the concrete world and how it actually exists in the concrete world comes to the fore and constitutes a thorny problem. There has been a marked tendency in the modern scholarship to regard Avicenna's position as being thoroughly conceptualist and opposed to a realist stance, according to which quiddities would exist in the exterior concrete world independently of our cognition of them. The trend hitherto has been to emphasize the logical and epistemological elements in Avicenna's doctrine of quiddity, with the result that his position has been implicitly or explicitly described as conceptualist or nominalist in nature.¹¹³ Yet, this aspect of Avicenna's doctrine of quiddity, and more specifically the questions of how it intersects with his mereological and hylomorphic theories, as well as his theory of the universals and their relation to the physical world, have received relatively little attention from scholars and have been the object of a rather partial examination. This is regrettable, because this topic has decisive implications concerning Avicenna's theology, theory of causality, and psychology (notably his theory of abstraction). It was also the focus of a rich and sustained discussion in the post-Avicennian tradition, whose main interpretive trajectories are philosophically significant and deserve to be outlined. Hence, one central objective of the present book is to explore the ontological and epistemological scope of Avicenna's theory of quiddity as it applies to the concrete world, as well as its relation to the mental aspects of quiddity. This issue is tackled in chapter III of this book.

3.5 Modes, contexts, and senses of existence

The previous considerations about mental existence point to a more general problem in studies on Avicenna, namely, the uncertainty regarding the number of modes of existence in his philosophy. On the 'standard' interpretation of his metaphysics, Avicenna posits only two modes of existence: concrete individual existence and universal mental existence. But are these two modes really exhaustive of the Avicennian conception of existence? Can they really accommodate all the entities of his ontolo-

¹¹³ See, for instance, Counet, *Avicenne*, 243–246; these aspects are also emphasized in the approaches of Benevise, *Die 'göttliche Existenz,'* and De Haan, *A Mereological Construal*.

gy? And to what extent are they really different? What is more, how do these modes relate to the senses (*ma'āni*) of existence Avicenna mentions at *Metaphysics* I.5?

Avicenna in his works frequently distinguishes between existence in the mind or in the intellect (*wujūd fī l-dhihn* or *fī l-'aql*) and existence in concrete reality (*wujūd fī l-a'yān*). Scholars have traditionally taken this to mean that some existents exist in an immaterial and universal state in the human mind, while others exist in a concrete, extramental state in the world around us. Accordingly, they have described these notions in terms of ontological modes, each requiring different criteria. This view seems to cohere with Avicenna's parallel use of the expression 'the two modes of existence' (*al-wujūdāyn*)—literally, 'the two existences'—which overlaps with the former distinction. Although this approach seems warranted, it is not clear, on the other hand, that all existents within these two realms share the exact same mode of existence; that is to say, it is not clear that all entities in the mind share a single mode of existence, and that all entities in the concrete world share another single mode of existence. In light of this, it remains an open question whether these expressions are best construed as referring to 'modes' of existence or to 'contexts' of existence. The point is that the notion of an ontological mode in Avicenna is more directly conveyed by the terms *naḥw al-wujūd* and *kayfiyyat al-wujūd*. In this regard, Avicenna never explicitly states that there are only two modes of existence that would be exhaustive of all things. Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes quite obvious that the categories *fī l-a'yān* and *fī l-'aql* do not encompass all the modes of existence and that they are more helpfully understood as pointing to general 'contexts' or 'domains' of existence. Among the extramental existents, or existents that are found 'in the concrete world,' one finds perishable, material entities (rocks, trees), eternal and unchanging celestial bodies (the moon), immaterial separate intellects, and even, on one construal of the expression, God Himself. But these various beings evidently do not share an identical mode of existence, however it may be conceived of. Rather, if they can all be said to exist *fī l-a'yān* or in the concrete, extramental world, defined here as a general domain or context of existence, each class of these entities possesses its own mode of existence. Even if God and the separate intellects are excluded from this picture and removed from the realm of things that are *fī l-a'yān*, the fact remains that distinct modes of existence have to be posited to account for these special ontological cases, and that these modes would not coincide with the general ontological mode of the beings that are *fī l-a'yān*.

A similar point applies to entities in the mind or in the intellect. Are we to assume that the intelligibles in the human mind and those in the supernal intellects and in God's mind have exactly the same mode of existence? There are several reasons to think otherwise: Avicenna's distinction between universals 'before multiplicity' (*qabl al-kathrah*) and those 'after multiplicity' (*ba'd al-kathrah*) in *Introduction* I.12; his distinction between simple, nondiscursive knowledge and complex, discursive knowledge; and the composite or synthetic nature of the universal forms in the human mind, which, *qua* compounds of pure quiddity and its various mental and accidents and concomitants, seem proper to it, and may not be the very same objects

contemplated by the separate intellects. An inverse argument to the above can be made that leads broadly to the same conclusion. If existents in the mind and concrete beings share obvious differences—the former are immaterial and universal, the latter material and particular—they also share numerous commonalities. Mental and concrete existents are caused, contingent, and composite or complex in some way. They are all, on Avicenna's view, 'possible in themselves' and 'necessary with respect to another,' which means that they require a cause. Approached from this angle, the mode of existence of these various concrete and mental entities would be the same; and this ontological mode would stand in contrast to another, special mode that would coincide with God's essential existence, His being Necessary of Existence in Itself. Thus, if the metaphysical and causal commonalities, rather than the differences, between mental and concrete beings are stressed, one could argue that they share an identical mode of existence marked by causedness, contingency, and complexity, even though they exist in different ontological realms or domains viz., mentally and extramentally. On this interpretation, then, what would differentiate mental from concrete beings would be not so much a different 'mode' of existence as a different 'context' or 'domain' of existence. Ultimately, *all* existing things apart from God are, according to Avicenna, possible of existence in themselves and necessary of existence through their cause. Yet, they can exist in different context or domains of existence.

These considerations show how slippery the notion of an ontological mode is in Avicenna's philosophy. They also highlight the need to precisely define what constitutes a valid mode of existence and how many such modes the master recognizes in his metaphysics. To limit the modes of existence to merely two seems schematic and oversimplistic. Rather, it would seem that beings exist in different ways in the intellect and in the concrete world, and that whenever Avicenna is referring in general terms to mental and concrete existence, he has in mind broad 'domains' or 'contexts' of existence, rather than an exhaustive list of ontological modes proper. If one hypothesizes—be it only for argument's sake—that Avicenna's metaphysics allows for more than the two ontological modes that are routinely recognized by scholars—and this, in line with the idea that existence is modulated (*mushakkik*)—then this would call for a reassessment of the issues of the co-extensionality of essence and existence and of whether there is a distinct mode of existence that could be said to belong to essence alone. Interestingly, there are a few precedents for this approach in the modern literature, although they diverge widely in scope and intent. One thought-provoking attempt was made by Marwan Rashed, who ascribes a threefold scheme of existence to Avicenna (the third one corresponding to the ontological state of the quiddities in the divine mind) and who argues that this feature of Avicenna's doctrine was modeled on Ibn 'Adi's metaphysics.¹¹⁴ Pasquale Porro, for his part, appears to distinguish between human intellectual existence and divine intellectual

114 Rashed, Ibn 'Adi.

existence, identifying only the latter with a kind of *esse essentiae*.¹¹⁵ As for Pini, Benevich, and De Haan, they have advocated a mereological interpretation of quiddity and suggested that pure quiddity *qua* part of substantial composites could possess its own ontological status. It is this mereological aspect that would seem to characterize the special ontological mode of pure quiddity.¹¹⁶ Likewise, the interpretation tentatively proffered by Marmura, which grants a special mental and entitative status to quiddity in itself in the mind that is distinct from that of the universal, also respects the basic dictate of the co-extensionality thesis, but at the same time goes beyond the traditional dual ontological scheme of mental vs. concrete existence recognized by most scholars.

As one can see, these interpretations do not bluntly deny existence to quiddity, but entertain the possibility that a special mode or aspect of existence can be attributed to it. According to some of these interpretations, pure quiddity would be characterized by a third mode of existence, one, however, which is not recognized by the 'standard' approach. By implication, however, quiddity would never be found without existence, so that the co-extensionality thesis would in the end be preserved, even if through a different route.¹¹⁷ In sum, we notice that the problem of co-exten-

115 Porro, *Universaux*.

116 Pini, *Absoluta*; Benevich, Die 'göttliche Existenz'; and De Haan, A Mereological Construal. Benevich raises this issue and ascribes a kind of 'epistemological existence' to quiddity in the mind. But in the final analysis, this author appears to abide by the traditional dual mode of existence in Avicenna's philosophy (concrete and mental), since he does not conceive of the divine existence of quiddity as a full-fledged and distinct ontological mode in itself. In fact, the more general question of how additional ontological modes (to particular concrete and universal mental existence) could be posited on the basis of the Avicennian texts has been rarely discussed in detail; Rashed, Ibn 'Adi, comes closest to introducing a third ontological mode in Avicenna. In contrast, Menn and Wisnovsky, Yaḥyā ibn 'Adi *On the Four Scientific Questions*, who also discuss Avicenna's position in connection with Yaḥyā's treatise, maintain the twofold scheme of existents and claim that Avicenna rejected the threefold scheme he found in Ibn 'Adi. It is true that Avicenna nowhere explicitly outlines in his works a threefold scheme of existents in the manner achieved by Yaḥyā and advocated by Rashed, and this notwithstanding the fact that he presumably knew about the 'Adian treatises dealing with this subject. The fact that Avicenna is otherwise remarkably consistent in *The Cure* (see, among other passages, *Metaphysics*, III.8; *Introduction*, I.2, 15.1–7; I.6, 34.5–35.5; *Categories*, II.1, 62.3–4) and in his other works (*Pointers*, vol. 1, 202.4–5) in maintaining a twofold scheme of existents, and not a threefold one, would seem to undermine the attempt to ascribe such a theory to him. The only element that could, at first glance, be used to support a threefold distinction of existents is the scheme *before, in, and after multiplicity* that is described (but not, at first sight, explicitly endorsed) by Avicenna in *Introduction* I.12, where he explains that this manner of conceiving essence was a trope in the (ancient?) philosophical schools. Nevertheless, this scheme seems to pertain primarily to the relation between the universals and multiplicity or matter, and it is not at any rate a statement on the ontological status of quiddities. So this distinction may not entail different *kinds of existents*, but rather different *ways of looking at the universals*. In spite of this, and as we will see, I believe Rashed is correct in maintaining the view that quiddity amounts to a third ontological mode in Avicenna.

117 Marmura's, Rashed's, and Porro's interpretations are equally consistent with regard to the thesis of the overlap of essence and existence in Avicenna, since ultimately even the pure quiddities would

sionality hinges on one's definition of the number and nature of the ontological modes in Avicenna's philosophy. Denying that there are only two modes of existence, as per the 'standard' interpretation, does not necessarily entail rejecting the thesis of co-extensionality, but rather consists in articulating an alternative account of the relation of essence and existence that takes into consideration additional ontological aspects or new ways of conceiving of Avicenna's ontology.¹¹⁸

Building on these studies, I intend to reconstruct a model of Avicenna's metaphysics that can specifically accommodate what one could call *an ontology of quiddity*. I argue in the present book that analyzing the modes of existence in Avicenna's philosophy eventually necessitates a reformulation of the relationship between essence and existence in a quite drastic way. For if a certain, distinct mode of existence can be identified that would belong to the pure essence alone, then this finding would call for a re-evaluation of how existence relates to essence. The co-extensionality thesis and the theory of essential being would both turn out to be correct. This hypothesis, according to my analysis, needs to be approached in connection with the notions of modes, contexts, and conditions that are applied to quiddity. As this study will endeavor to explain in detail, the various conditions (*shart/shurūt*) posited by Avicenna in relation to quiddity represent one of the keys to a proper understanding of the problem. Far from being limited to a logical scope, they possess ontological implications that specify the mode or context of existence of quiddity. So that whenever Avicenna appears to affirm or negate something about the existence of quiddity by means of these conditions, these individual statements should not be taken absolutely (as has sometimes been the case in the modern literature), but rather as reflecting one ontological aspect of quiddity that the master wishes to highlight in a particular passage, context, or discipline. This is why he can (coherently) claim, as he in fact does in various places, that pure quiddity exists neither in the concrete world nor in the human mind; that it exists in concrete beings and in universal concepts; and that it exists distinctly in the human mind and in the divine intellects. If construed absolutely or exhaustively, each one of these statements would be false,

not be devoid of existence, although they would exist according to a special mode. In that sense their views do not differ from the 'standard' approach and the co-extensionality thesis. Yet, these scholars construe the essence/existence relationship and Avicenna's ontology in divergent ways, which necessitates a reframing of the 'standard' approach.

118 In other words, if quiddity in itself is shown to possess its own, special kind of existence, then one could argue that the co-extensionality thesis is preserved on the grounds that even quiddity in itself would not be found in total abstraction from existence. In light of this, even the *esse essentiae* thesis found in the Latin tradition would respect this basic dictate of the co-extensionality thesis, even though it rests on a redefinition of existence and its various modes in Avicenna. It should be pointed out also that previous studies on Avicenna's theory of essence have not discussed it in relation to *tashkik al-wujūd*; this is a desideratum that is tackled in the present book.

because it would make an exclusivist claim that Avicenna never intended and would therefore obscure other equally important facets of his ontology of quiddity.¹¹⁹

In light of the foregoing, I shall deploy in the course of the analysis a set of distinctions whose purpose is to highlight the differences between ‘modes,’ ‘contexts,’ ‘aspects,’ and ‘senses’ of existence in Avicenna’s works. These terms are intended to introduce some order in my analysis of the master’s discussion of existence *in specific relation to quiddity*. Let us start by disambiguating the first three notions. A ‘context’ of existence relates to the question of *where* quiddity may be said to exist. In other words, it concerns the issue of the *localization* of pure quiddity, without, however, tending to the issue of exactly how, or in what mode, quiddity can be said to exist. In his works, Avicenna mentions several ‘contexts’ of existence in connection with quiddity: the extramental concrete world; the sphere of human thought and intellectuality; the divine intellects; and God’s knowledge and essence. In contrast, an ‘aspect’ introduces a qualification concerning the context in which quiddity is discussed. It therefore provides additional information on the context, without, again, conveying information about the ontology of quiddity *per se*. It seems important to implement the notion of ‘aspect’ especially in the context of human thought and noetics, where the analysis requires more subtle distinctions that are not conveyed by the notion of ‘context.’ An example concerns Avicenna’s distinctions of various ‘aspects’ or ‘considerations’ of quiddity in *Introduction* I.2. In that passage, the master refers only to two ‘contexts’ of quiddity (in the mind and in the concrete world). But with regard to quiddity in the mind, he specifies that it can be considered either ‘in itself’ or as a universal, which are two different ‘aspects’ of how quiddity can be envisaged mentally. Yet, in this very passage, Avicenna does not proceed to explain what ‘modes’ of existence, if any, characterizes these various aspects of quiddity in the mind (this, of course, raises the question of their relation to mental existence and what ontological mode should be ascribed to them). On the basis of this example, it is easy to perceive the difference between a context, an aspect, and a mode.

The notion of a ‘mode’ of existence is by far the most delicate to define. It should be noted from the outset that it does not correspond strictly to the Avicennian ‘modalities’ (*jihāt*) of ‘the possible,’ ‘the necessary,’ and ‘the impossible.’ As it turns out, the modalities taken as a whole are only one of the various aspects of ontological modulation (*tashkik al-wujūd*) that Avicenna theorizes in his works: others include priority and posteriority, autonomy and need, and relevance and priority (see chapter IV). And although they form a central feature of his metaphysics and have justifiably been the focus of extensive scholarship, they are somewhat inadequate to study

¹¹⁹ This has made my assessment of, and response to, the previous scholarly interpretations of quiddity in Avicenna a particularly painstaking and difficult process. Many of the arguments that have been advanced by scholars are correct and insightful when taken individually, but they are often accompanied by an exclusivist claim regarding the place of quiddity in Avicenna that leaves out equally important aspects of the problem or prevents a comprehensive picture to emerge.

quiddity.¹²⁰ One reason for this is that the modalities do not qualify quiddity taken ‘in itself,’ but rather its relation to an external cause and to realized existence and, hence, to the composite thing as it comes to exist in actuality. Much more useful for my purpose is the ontological mode of ‘priority and posteriority’ (*al-taqaddum wa-l-ta’akhhur*), which Avicenna narrowly connects with ontological modulation, and which seems to be its foremost marker. At any rate, these aspects of modulation determine the basic structure and divisions of Avicenna’s ontology, of which the modalities are only one facet. Hence, a mode (*naḥw*) of existence is really the manner (*kayfiyyah*) according to which something exists, which is defined by the sum of the aspects constituting ontological modulation, of which the modalities (*jihāt*) are only one among many. All of this, as we saw, is to be differentiated from the general context (human and divine, mental or extramental) in which something exists.

Naturally, there is some overlap between the notions of ‘contexts,’ ‘aspects,’ and ‘modes’ of existence, which suggests that this framework should not be used rigidly, but rather flexibly and heuristically. For instance, the extramental and concrete world is an ‘ontological context’ that also happens to correspond generally to a ‘mode’ of existence that involves concrete and material substances—both can be connected with the expression *wujūd fī l-a’yān*. Likewise, a universal concept is located in and exists in the context of human thought and intellectuality—or simply ‘in the intellect’ (*fī l-‘aql*)—and it also possesses an intellectual mode of existence (*wujūd ‘aqlī* or *dhihnī*), which is defined as immaterial, universal, and abstract. At the same time, however, there need not be any symmetry between these various notions, particularly when it comes to essence. For example, on any straightforward reading of *Introduction* I.2, pure quiddity is an ‘aspect’ and a ‘consideration’ located in the ‘context’ of the human mind, but it is not attributed any ‘mode’ of existence by Avicenna, at least in this very passage. What is more, it is as yet unclear whether, in Avicenna’s psychology, all mental and intentional objects (*ma‘ānī*)—that is, all notions and intentions located in the ‘context’ or ‘domain’ of the human soul and human thought—are characterized by the same mode of mental existence.¹²¹ Finally, God and the separate intellects can be regarded as existing extramentally and individually (*fī l-a’yān*), but they obviously do not share the same mode of existence as the material beings located in this context. As mentioned above, one can even make the case—quite convincingly on my view—that God’s existence represents a distinct mode of existence *sui generis*. This seems substantiated not only from the

¹²⁰ Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics*, provides a rich and detailed discussion of the modalities.

¹²¹ Briefly put, the issue is whether conceivability is necessarily synonymous with mental existence, or whether the latter category is restricted to the universal concepts. This would make, say, logical considerations a kind of mental ‘notions’ or ‘aspects’ that in themselves would not amount to mental existents proper. This issue also intersects with the distinction between the intellect and the internal senses in Avicenna; in what way can imaginative and estimative forms be said to exist, and how does their existence differ from the intelligible forms? These issues are picked up in chapter II in connection with the consideration of pure quiddity.

point of view of the modalities, since God is the only being in Avicenna's ontology that is Necessary of Existence in Itself (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*); but also by the fact that the sense of 'realized' or 'acquired existence' (*wujūd muḥaṣṣal*) Avicenna formulates in *Metaphysics* I.5 can only awkwardly be ascribed to God (I elaborate this point below).

This set of terms and distinctions will prove particularly valuable when exploring the issue of the ontological status of quiddity. This is because pure quiddity for Avicenna can be said to exist in different *contexts* (extramental and intramental, human and divine) and, within a single context (e.g., the intellectual), under different *aspects* (as 'a part of' and 'with other things,' and 'distinctly'), while also potentially maintaining its own distinct and unique ontological *mode* and status. In other words, this conceptual framework enables us to entertain the possibility that the ontological mode of pure quiddity could remain the same, even though the contexts and aspects related to it may change. This hypothesis finds traction in the dual notion of quidditative irreducibility and distinctness I adumbrated earlier, which suggests that quiddity can be regarded from different angles and in varying relations to things, while remaining strictly itself.¹²² The above distinctions between ontological contexts, aspects, and modes are helpful for the very reason that quiddity in itself disrupts the standard account of the relationship between contexts and modes of existence in Avicenna's philosophy. Together with God's existence, pure quiddity would seem to represent an exception to what would otherwise be a quite symmetrical ontological picture in Avicenna's philosophy between modes and contexts of existence (i.e., *fī l-a'yān* vs. *fī l-'aql*, particular vs. universal, etc.).

Intricately connected to the inquiry into the ontological modes and contexts is the one focusing on the various senses (*ma'ānī*) of existence that Avicenna outlines in his works, especially in *Metaphysics* I.5. In that passage, the master draws a distinction between "established existence" (*wujūd ithbātī*), which is also synonymous to "realized" or "acquired" existence (*wujūd muḥaṣṣal*), on the one hand, and "proper existence" (*wujūd khāṣṣ*), on the other. What is the relation, if any, between these senses and the modes and contexts of existence described above? Moreover, how do these senses relate to ontological modulation and the various aspects that constitute it? More fundamentally, how are we to construe these two senses of *wujūd*? These are difficult questions, the first two of which have to my knowledge not been tackled in the modern literature on Avicenna. As for the last one, it has given rise to conflicting views, and there is to this date no consensus regarding its proper interpretation. Suf-

¹²² One helpful analogy to illustrate this distinction focuses on the notion of the atom in ancient philosophical systems. The *mode* of existence of an atom is irreducible and remains the same regardless of its ontological *contexts* and the *aspects* under which it is considered, that is, either in itself or as part of a larger entity such as a body. Naturally, the analogy falls apart the second one contrasts the materiality of the atom with the conceptual nature of quiddity. But the analogy adequately illustrates, I believe, the point I am trying to make here between modes, aspects, and contexts, on the one hand, and between irreducibility and distinctness, on the other.

fice to say here that by far the most prevalent interpretation construes ‘established’ or ‘realized’ existence as encompassing all the existent things in the concrete world and in the mind. This means that this sense of existence could be applied to the two basic modes of existence traditionally identified by scholars: concrete, particular realized existence and mental, intellectual realized existence. These two modes would together constitute the realm of the existents (*al-mawjūdāt*) in Avicenna’s ontology. Yet, as we saw, this classification raises certain problems. The question of whether God’s existence represents a separate and distinct mode and whether the predicate *mawjūd* can be rightly applied to Him illustrate this difficulty. In a similar manner, it is unclear whether God’s existence can be defined by the sense of ‘established’ and ‘realized’ existence that is mentioned in that passage. Equally problematic is how these senses relate to quiddity. Recently, Stephen Menn has offered a thought-provoking interpretation of these two senses: ‘established existence’ would bear some connection to Fārābī’s (d. 950 CE) ‘being-as-truth,’ while ‘proper existence’ is the being of the categories outside the mind.¹²³ As we can see, various and often incompatible interpretations of the evidence have been proposed, which, moreover, focus only on a single aspect of the problem.¹²⁴

One novel assumption made in the present book is that the issues regarding (a) ontological modulation (*tashkik al-wujūd*), (b) the modes of existence (*naḥw al-wujūd*, *kayfiyyat al-wujūd*), and (c) senses of existence (*ma‘ānī l-wujūd*) are all interconnected in Avicenna’s philosophy and need to be analyzed in relation to one another. This methodological perspective has not been sufficiently emphasized—or even for that matter recognized—in the previous literature, partly because of the fact that Avicenna’s theory of ontological modulation remains poorly understood to this day, and partly due to the lasting—and mostly nefarious—assumption that there are only two modes of existence in Avicenna’s philosophy. In view of the foregoing, it appears that the crux of the debate regarding the ontological status of quiddity, as well as the relation between essence and existence, hinges directly on one’s construal of *wujūd*. For scholars to agree on the issue of co-extensionality, they would need first to explain precisely how they construe the various modes and senses of existence in Avicenna’s philosophy. If one, following the ‘standard’ interpretation of Avicenna’s ontology, recognizes only two modes of existence, i.e., those of concrete particulars and mental universals, or maintains a single sense of existence coinciding with ‘realized’ or ‘acquired’ existence (*wujūd muḥaṣṣal*), which necessarily entails such notions as complexity, causedness, and contingency,

¹²³ Menn, Fārābī; idem, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics*.

¹²⁴ Indeed, I say nothing here about scholars’ interpretations of ‘proper existence,’ which are equally divergent. For Black, *Mental Existence*, 26, “to the extent that the nature’s proper being has any truly existential force for Avicenna himself, it is to be identified with divine existence, that is, with the preexistence of the nature in the providential knowledge of the separate intellects.” This is exactly the interpretation of proper existence that other scholars, such as Menn and Benevise, reject. These points are discussed in detail in chapter IV.

and which pertains to all the particular composite beings in the concrete world and the complex entities in the mind, then it is clear that any supposition of quiddity that does not conform to these ontological criteria and that is not immediately subsumed within them would result in the greater extensionality of essence over existence. This is the kind of scenario that Wisnovsky exposes in his book, when he pinpoints the tension between Avicenna's description of *two modes of existence*, but of *three aspects of quiddity*.¹²⁵ On the basis of this evidence, there would be quiddities that lie outside and beyond existence, thereby suggesting that quiddity is indeed extensionally broader than existence. But reconfiguring this 'standard' ontological framework allows for alternative interpretations of the status of pure quiddity and its relation to existence.

3.6 Conclusion

The foregoing considerations have clarified some important conceptual issues involved in the modern study of Avicenna's theory of quiddity. It has also oriented the investigation towards two specific queries: first, the relationship between quiddity in itself and mental existence; and second, and more generally, the number and nature of the various modes of existence Avicenna outlines in his works and how they connect with the ontology of quiddity. One may also note from the foregoing that the debate regarding the ontological status of quiddity has centered to a large extent on the question of *whether* quiddity in itself exists—with most scholars reaching a negative conclusion. This is in spite of the fact that the more relevant and thought-provoking questions might very well be *how* and *in what mode* it could be said to exist. This of course implies that the Avicennian theory of existence is actually richer and more flexible than previously thought, a hypothesis that will be substantiated in the remaining chapters of this book. One could argue that this general shortcoming in our understanding of Avicenna's ontology, and more specifically of his categorization of the various modes or states in which something can be said to exist, has affected and even conditioned our understanding of the ontological status of pure quiddity. One priority in this regard is to explore Avicenna's doctrine of ontological modulation (*tashkik al-wujūd*) in order to better understand how it applies to quiddity. For, from the moment one argues that quiddity in itself is not 'nothing' or a mere mental or logical aspect devoid of an ontological status, then it becomes imperative to qualify what mode of existence could be ascribed to this pure quiddity; and modulation, it would seem, provides a way to do so.

125 Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Islamic Reception*, 202.

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