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ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE IN IBN SÍNÁ

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Introduction

Perhaps the most important and certainly famous philosophical doctrine of Ibn Síná (in Latin, Avicenna) is his teaching on essence (*dhāt*) or, better, quiddity (*māhiyya*) and existence (*wujūd*). When considered metaphysically, each and every being (*mawjūd*) in the universe is one of two kinds:

- 1 Everything other than God, from the lowest type of material thing to the highest angel, is a being composed of two ontological principles: quiddity and existence. In such composed beings, their existence is ontologically “other” than their quiddity. Consequently, such a being must be made to exist by some external efficient cause giving it existence.
- 2 By contrast, God is “entirely one” and is not in any way composed of diverse ontological principles, such as quiddity and existence. His “existence is not shared by any other” being. Consequently, there can be no cause of God’s existence. Rather, God is the ultimate cause of the existence of every other being (Avicenna 2005: 38; all translations in this article are mine).

By explaining the difference between God and all other things in this way, Ibn Síná was able to devise a philosophical explanation of creation, one that in no way involved a beginning of the created world at a first moment in time, which is how most earlier Muslims and Christians had thought of creation.

In order to understand Ibn Síná’s doctrine of quiddity and existence, we first will look at the structure of metaphysical “science,” then turn to how Ibn Síná explains quiddity and existence as scientific principles of metaphysics. After that, we will turn to how Ibn Síná used these principles to prove important conclusions about substances and accidents, the causes, and angels. (Applying the principles to God is the topic for another chapter of this book; see J. Janssens.)

Metaphysics and “Science”

Aristotle explained his theory of demonstrative “science” (we might say “discipline”) in his *Posterior Analytics*. Every “science” has three components: the “subject” studied; the “conclusions” proven; and the “principles” by which they are proven. Aristotle also distinguished three kinds of principles: axioms “common” to all the disciplines; and two kinds of “proper” principles limited to a particular science, its “definitions” and “suppositions” (or “postulates”) (Aristotle 1989: 72a15–24; Houser 1999: 110–14; Bertolacci 2006: 170–72). How this scheme works in the books he wrote was not always clear, but Ibn Síná knew a memorable example in Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry*.

For Euclid, the *subject* of plane geometry is two dimensional geometrical figures. Its *principles*, laid out at the beginning of *Elements*, include: Common axiom 5, “the whole is greater than the part”; Definition 19 of triangle, “*trilateral* figures are those contained by three lines”; and Postulate 4, “all right angles are equal to one another.” Definitions are attained through the first act of the mind—apprehending concepts—while postulates are grasped through the second act of the mind—making assertions. The project of a “science” is to use the third act of the mind—reasoning—in order to demonstrate conclusions, such as Book 1, Theorem 32, “triangles have three interior angles equal to two right angles.”

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle had described its *subject* as “being as being,” which is studied “universally,” covering all reality; but perplexingly he also called metaphysics “theological science” (Aristotle 1958: 1003a20–5, 1026a18–22). This so confused Ibn Síná that he tells us “I had read the work forty times” but he still did not understand its contents, its “organizational design” (*ghārad*), or its “end” (*maqṣūd*) (Avicenna 1974: 32). But a little book by al-Fārābī showed him that metaphysics studies being because “it is *common* to all things,” so he said that “the *primary subject* of this science, then, is *being as being*; and its *objects of inquiry* are the consequences of being as being, without condition” (Avicenna 2005: 9–10). This description made metaphysics an ontology, a study of “common” being presented in Books 2–7; but since God is its “perfection” (*kamāl*) metaphysics culminates in a rational theology found in Books 8–10 of Ibn Síná’s own *Metaphysics*.

If we look backward, then, we can see that “the *usefulness* of this science [metaphysics], ... is in attaining *certitude* about the *principles of the particular sciences*. ... Therefore, this is like the usefulness of the *ruler* in relation to the ruled” (Avicenna 2005: 14). And looking forward, we can also see why setting out quiddity and existence as its proper principles was so important. What were principles of the physical sciences, like the categories and the causes, become “objects of enquiry” in Ibn Síná’s metaphysics. This means they cannot be its principles, for no “science” can assume what it tries to prove; that would be arguing in a circle.

Metaphysical “Definitions”: “Thing” and “Quiddity”

Ibn Síná begins his treatment of principles abruptly: “We say: the *being* and the *thing* and the *necessary* are those *notions* which are impressed on the soul in a *first* impression, which are not acquired from others more known than they are” (Avicenna 2005: 22).

These three notions are concepts of concrete wholes, so Ibn Sīnā's dialectical way of arguing moves from a whole to its intrinsic principles, much as Aristotle had done (Aristotle 1936: 184a9–22). The way we define things is by proceeding from more specific to more general terms (as in Porphyry's Tree, which moves from Socrates to his species "human" to his proximate genus "animal" and all the way up to the category "substance"). This shows there must be some most universal notions, for "if every notion required a higher notion, there would be an infinite regress or circularity," which would undermine knowledge by basing it on unknown terms. But why did Ibn Sīnā choose these particular trans-categorical terms—being, thing, and necessary?

His explanation points to the common axioms governing all knowledge. Just as everyone recognizes the truth of the axioms concerning contradiction and the excluded middle, so we should also recognize that the terms making up these propositions are equally fundamental. A clear statement of the axioms reveals those terms. The principle of contradiction means that "it is *impossible* that a *thing* both *be* and *not be*," while its correlative, the law of the excluded middle, says that "it is *necessary* that a *thing* either *be* or *not be*." "Thing" is the subject of both propositions, "being" is in their predicates, and their subjects and predicates are related through the modal concepts "necessary" and "impossible." So the concepts included in the common axioms are the very terms which lead to the "definitions" of metaphysics (Avicenna 2005: 22).

To explain the meaning of these notions Ibn Sīnā integrated the Islamic and philosophical traditions (Jolivet 1984: 19–28). Let us first consider "thing." This term is the most universal Qur'ānic term for a creature. When God is called "knowing" or "creating," the object of God's activity is often called a "thing" (*shay'*). The distance between God and creatures is emphasized this way: "The Originator of the heavens and the earth. ... No *thing* is like a likeness of Him" (Qur'ān 42:10). But there are a few verses which seem to call God a thing, so the early Arabic grammarians said God is "a thing not like things"; and they understood "thing" to be the most universal of all *subjects* of predication (Wisnovsky 2003: 146–8).

"Those learned in *kalām*" (*Mutakallimūn*), the early Muslim theologians, also noted another Qur'ānic text: "What we [God] say to a thing, when we wish it, is just to say to it 'Be!' and then it is" (Qur'ān 16:40), which introduced the concept of "being." The Mu'tazilite school understood "thing" to be "divisible into the subcategories" of being (*mawjūd*) and non-being (*ma'dūm*). This view, however, seems to imply that "thing" is equally as primordial as God and seems to give a non-existing thing some shadowy ontological status, which undercut God being absolute creator of all things. So the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools said that "thing" and "being" are co-extensive and mutually imply each other (Wisnovsky 2005: 105–6).

But how should "thing" be understood? The theologians crafted their own version of a Greek philosophical doctrine that would highlight God's role as cause of creatures: atomism. "Ash'arite thinkers defended the view of the world as constituted of atoms and accidents, and so entirely dependent on God's grace for its continuing existence" (Leaman 2008: 84). This "atomic arrangement best displays the agency proper to the creator, which must be immediate and so cannot be identified with the causal chains which operate in the created world" (Burrell 2008: 144), so that secondary causes are but "occasions" for the action of the only true cause, God. Ibn Sīnā, however, recognized that atomism and occasionalism are inadequate.

For a better explanation of “thing,” Ibn Síná turned to better philosophers. Socrates had concentrated on finding definitions as answers to the question “What is it?” So he introduced into philosophy the idea that individual actions and things of the same sort share a common *essence*, though this term would only be invented by Aristotle (Plato 1963: 1: 15c9–e2). Plato then took up the search for essences and uncovered a world separate from our changing world, inhabited by things he called “exemplars” (*paradeigma*) in order to emphasize their causal role on our everyday world, “forms” (*eidōs*) and “ideas” (*idea*) to emphasize that they are the objects of true knowledge, and “substances” (*ousia*) to emphasize that they are permanent, unchanging, and the most perfect of beings (Plato 1963: 5: 500e3, 511a3, 511c2, 507b10; 534a3).

Aristotle then “brought the Platonic forms down to earth.” From his studies of the physical world he learned to distinguish within an individual being (*on*) of our everyday experience its intrinsic nature or substance (*ousia*) from “accidents” like color and size, actions and relations. And he distinguished three kinds of substances: the whole or “composite” substance, and two senses of substance which are intrinsic principles of the whole, the “form” present in an individual thing that causes its actual nature, and the “matter” which gives it the potentiality for many kinds of change (Aristotle 1958: 1017b22–27; 1035a1).

Aristotle likened the subject of metaphysics—“being”—to “healthy,” which, though attributable to food and urine, is properly said only of an animal’s body. Likewise, “being” is properly and primarily attributable only to “substance,” so that metaphysics studies all being by concentrating only on the highest beings: substances (Aristotle 1958: 1003a33–b23). And among the three senses of substance, form takes pride of place: “Therefore, if the form is prior to the matter and more the being, it also will be prior to the composite of both, and for the same reason” (Aristotle 1958: 1029a5–7). To expedite philosophy’s search for universal definitions, he invented the technical term “essence” (*to tí ên einai*) to isolate that feature within an individual thing that is the basis for the nature it has in common with other members of its species and is the basis for universal knowledge of it (Owens 1978: 180–8).

For Aristotle, the “essence” of a being had to be substance rather than accident; but which of the three senses of substance? It could not be the composite substance, because composites come into and go out of being. And it could not be substance in the sense of matter, because that is the principle of potency and change, whereas the essence of something, say, a human or a triangle, is permanent. So the essence of a “being” had to be identical with its *substantial form*, which is permanent and unchanging in kind. Since definitions are formulae uncovering essences, in the physical sciences definitions include the substantial form, but sensible matter has to be “added” to complete the definition. And definitions in mathematics are of accidental forms, but only with the addition of “intelligible matter.” In metaphysics, however, definitions are confined to the substantial form alone, for that is the essence. In metaphysics, then, “there is no definition of it [the composite substance] with its matter, for this is indefinite, but there is a definition of it with reference to its primary substance, for example, of the human the definition of the soul, for the substance is the indwelling form, from which and the matter the composite is called a substance” (Aristotle 1958: 1037a27–30; Maurer 1990: 12; Owens 1978: 335, 361–2).

So Ibn Sīnā took from the Islamic tradition the conception of “thing” as one of the most universal of terms, but for his *understanding* of “thing” he turned to Aristotelian philosophers. He did not, however, simply copy Aristotle.

Though “thing” cannot be defined by appealing to a broader genus, it can be described using two dialectical techniques: finding synonyms and dividing a concept. The synonyms Ibn Sīnā presents “indicate that each is either a ‘thing’ (*shay*) or a ‘matter’ (*amr*) or a ‘what’ (*mā*) or a ‘that which [is]’ (*alladhī*)” (Avicenna 2005: 23). The three synonyms of “thing” seem carefully chosen to correspond to Aristotle’s three senses of substance: matter, form, and composite respectively. But rather than choosing just one of these at the expense of the other two, Ibn Sīnā focuses on what they all have in common. Each signifies essence, though with a different connotation. Ibn Sīnā then divides “thing” by offering examples. “Thing” or its equivalent in every language can be used to indicate some other concept, and for each matter there is a *truth by which* it is what it is. So the triangle has a truth by which it is a triangle, and the white thing has a truth by which it is white. The term “thing,” then, points to a truth (*ḥaqīqah*)—an objective truth found in the thing, not a truth in a mind—“by which” the triangle is a triangle and the white thing is white. “By which” indicates that this “truth” functions as an intrinsic *principle* making the thing “what” it is, which is why the name Ibn Sīnā chooses for this principle is the abstract term “whatness” or “quiddity” (*māhiyya*), a term broad enough to cover accidents as well as substances, matter and form and the composite thing, and both physical composites and ontologically simple things like spirits (Avicenna 2005: 24). The *concept* of quiddity is a principle of metaphysical knowledge, but the quiddity itself is a real ontological principle found in each “thing.”

Metaphysical “Definitions”: “Being” and “Existence”

The reason why Ibn Sīnā reversed directions from Aristotle and espoused a broad sense of “quiddity” can be seen by turning to its twin metaphysical principle, “existence.” Ibn Sīnā uncovers the notion of “existence” (*wujūd*) by analyzing the universal notion of “the being” (*mawjūd*) (sometimes translated “the existent”). “The being” is among the terms that “have the highest claim to be conceived in themselves” because, like “thing,” it is “common to all matters” (Avicenna 2005: 23). This concept, as well, Ibn Sīnā divides and offers synonyms.

Dividing “being” into the ten categories, as Aristotle had done, does not produce a proper definition of it, but a more limited division into the categories of *action* and *passion* proves helpful (Avicenna 2005: 23). For if we compare two beings related to each other, the one will be active in comparison with the other, like cobbler and shoe, or light and dark. Now what is true between two full beings also should be true when we look *within* a being; for example, form is active in comparison with prime matter which is passive.

This relation then sets the stage for Ibn Sīnā’s synonyms. “The meaning of ‘existence’ (*wujūd*) and the meaning of ‘the thing’ (*shay*) are conceived in the soul and are two meanings,” he notes, “but ‘the being’ and ‘the established’ (*al-muthbat*) and ‘the realized’ (*al-muhaṣṣal*) are synonyms” (Avicenna 2005: 24). What is “established” or “realized”

is actual or active in comparison with what is not realized. The term “being,” then, conveys a note of actuality, an actuality coming from the principle Ibn Síná has just called “existence.” Existence, then, is *actual* in comparison with “quiddity.” In what does this actuality or realization consist? Aristotle had said that form is actual in comparison with matter, making something to be “what” it is. Ibn Síná has now added a second kind of actuality or realization, contributed by “existence” in relation to “quiddity.” This must be the actuality of existence or being, in comparison with which the quiddity of the thing is passive or potential.

While Ibn Síná by no means abandons the actuality of “form” in relation to matter in the *quidditative* order, here he is pointing out that within the individual “thing” or “being” there is a second kind of actuality, one in the existential order, that is even more fundamental than form. If Aristotle had said that “form” is the basis for answering the question “what is it?” Ibn Síná has seen that “existence” is the basis for answering the prior question, “is it?”

Ibn Síná then summarizes his results: “The concept of ‘existence’ and the concept of ‘thing’ are conceived by the soul and are two concepts.” But a distinction among concepts does not necessarily imply distinct realities. So he adds: “It is evident that each thing has a truth proper to it, namely, its quiddity. And it is known that the truth proper to each thing is something *other* than the *existence* that corresponds to what is affirmed” (Avicenna 2005: 24). So this “otherness” is a real, ontological otherness. This truth has not and cannot be demonstrated; but Ibn Síná’s dialectical argument is designed to open our minds to insight into quiddity and existence, both as fundamental *notions* of metaphysics and as *real principles* in real things.

Metaphysical “Definitions”: “Necessary,” “Possible,” “Impossible”

The third universal term Ibn Síná introduces is “necessary.” We normally understand “necessary” in relation to its opposites, “possible” and “impossible,” which is why definitions of these terms are normally circular, say, defining “necessary” using “possible” and then defining “possible” using “necessary.” But comparing them with the other two most universal terms shows “necessary” to be primary. “But of these three, the one with most right to be first known is the necessary. This is because the necessary signifies the assuredness of existence, since existence is known in itself, while non-existence is known through existence” (Avicenna 2005: 28). The importance of these three terms rests not so much in themselves, but, since they are modal terms, how they can be combined with other terms, as Ibn Síná does at the beginning of his presentation of the “suppositions” of metaphysics, to which we now turn.

Metaphysical “Suppositions”: “Necessary Existence” and “Possible Existence”

In the beginning of *Metaphysics* 1.6, Ibn Síná combines the three modal notions with “existence” in order to set out a grid of reality within which to place his “suppositions.” These combinations yield three options: necessary existence, possible existence, and

impossible existence. Impossible existence is a null class, made impossible by the contradictory nature of its quiddity, such as “square circle.” Possible existence, when considered in itself, is possible because its quiddity is not self-contradictory; but on the other hand its quiddity does not require that it exist. So existence possible in itself, when realized, must also become necessary, but in a way, as “necessary through another,” because a pure possible in no way really exists. The third option, “necessary existence” in itself, is intrinsically necessary. Its quiddity is such that it must exist; it would be self-contradictory for it not to exist. Now “there are certain properties that belong respectively to necessary existence and to possible existence.” Ibn Sīnā lays down five such properties, of which the first two are the most important: “Necessary existence in itself has no cause; but possible existence has a cause” (Avicenna 2005: 29–30). The rest of c. 6–7 consists in five dialectical arguments designed to support such claims as these. The five theses for which Ibn Sīnā argues are not themselves the “suppositions” of metaphysics; but the dialectical arguments supporting them are designed to reveal those “suppositions,” to show them to be plausible, and to open the mind of the reader to insight into the two suppositions of metaphysics.

Ibn Sīnā sets out these suppositions at the end of c. 7:

– *Necessary existence is one entirely*, though not as a species under a genus, and *one in number*, though not as an individual under a species. But it is a notion whose name signifies only that whose *being is common with nothing else*. We shall add an explanation later. Therefore, it is *not multiple*. These are the properties of necessary existence.

– *Of possible existence its property is clear from what has been said*, namely, that it necessarily *requires another which makes it exist in act*. For whatever is possible existence *in itself* is always possible existence. But there may *accrue* to it existence necessary through another. Now this *accrues* to it always or its necessary existence through another may not be permanent, but at some particular time. And that to which this *accrues* at some time must have matter whose being precedes it in time. That whose existence must be from another always, its truth is *not simple*, because what it has *in itself* [= its quiddity] is *other* than what it has from another [= its existence]. And from both of these [principles] it acquires its individuality in existence. Therefore, nothing is completely freed from potency and possibility in itself, except necessary existence. *It is single, all else is composite*.

(Avicenna 2005: 38)

The fundamental contrast between necessary and possible existence determines the two suppositions of Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics. The *first* principle is that “necessary existence is one entirely,” not composed of quiddity and existence. Ibn Sīnā does *not* here assume there really is some being that is necessary existence (or God), because he will argue for God’s existence in his rational theology. What this principle means is that, should God be demonstrated to exist (as Ibn Sīnā will do later in his *Metaphysics*), he must be ontologically simple. By contrast, existence possible in itself must be ontologically composite.

So Ibn Síná's *second* principle is that all possible beings are ontologically composite, made up of the metaphysical principles of existence and quiddity. To emphasize that this composition of quiddity and existence is real, Ibn Síná uses the term '*arada*,' which we have translated as "accrues to," but is also the term he uses for "accident" and was so translated into Latin. Ibn Síná does not mean that "existence" is a predicamental accident like "white," for that would require that the quiddity in itself already exist, a critique Ibn Rushd would level at Ibn Síná. Nor does it mean that "existence" is a predicable accident flowing from the quiddity, because that would make the quiddity the cause of existence and would take us back to Aristotle. Rather, "accident" here simply means that there is no intrinsic connection between quiddity and existence, which is why existence must be caused by something extrinsic to a created "being." Perhaps the best way of understanding Ibn Síná's "accident" language is to think of existence as like a predicable accident in being ontologically "other" than the quiddity, but different because a predicable accident is an effect of its cause, as "risibility" is an effect of already being human, whereas "existence" is a cause, since it is an act that makes the "being" to exist in the first place.

Since these two "suppositions" are *principles*, they cannot be *demonstrated*; but Ibn Síná does argue for them dialectically. Among those arguments, three are especially important.

- 1 To support his supposition concerning possible existence, Ibn Síná uses what can be called his "sufficiency argument," namely, that the quiddity of a possible being, what makes it a certain "kind" of thing, is not sufficient to ensure the thing exists (Avicenna 2005: 31–2).
- 2 He also supports this supposition using an "infinite regress argument," namely, that there cannot be an infinite regress in causes of existence (Avicenna 2005: 30).
- 3 Finally, to support his supposition concerning necessary existence, he uses what may be called his "predicables argument." For necessary existence, its quiddity must be identical with its existence. The reason is simply because the existence of any thing is either distinct from its quiddity or it is the same as its quiddity. If quiddity and existence are distinct, then its existence is either a property flowing from its quiddity or a predicable accident caused by an external cause. Now no thing whose quiddity is different from its existence causes that existence, because a quiddity must first exist in order to cause anything. In this reasoning it is important to note that nothing, not even God, causes itself to exist. On the other hand, if a thing's existence is caused by something else, it must be something possible in itself, not necessary. The quiddity of necessary existence, therefore, can neither cause itself nor be caused by something else, precisely because it is necessary existence. Consequently, quiddity and existence must be *one* and the same in necessary existence (Avicenna 2005: 34–7).

That Ibn Síná accepted these doctrines *as principles* is clear on every page of his ontology, to which we now turn.

Metaphysical Conclusions: Substances and Accidents

Aristotle had defined "substance" in opposition to the nine predicamental accidents: logically a substance, say, "Socrates," is what "is not *in* a subject," whereas an

accident, like “five feet tall,” is only “in a subject”; and metaphysically a substance is a “being through itself,” whereas an accident is a “being through another” (Aristotle 1980: 2a11–19, 1958: 1029a7–8, 1028a29–30).

Ibn Sīnā interprets Aristotle’s categories using his own metaphysical principles: “We say: *existence* belongs to a *thing* in itself, such as the existence of the human as human, or [it belongs to a thing] accidentally, as the existence of Zayd as white” (Avicenna 2005: 45). For Ibn Sīnā, existence “belongs to” a thing that is a substance differently from the way it belongs to an accident. This means that “*a being* is of two divisions.” One of them, namely, accident, “is a being in another *thing*, that thing realizing the whole essence and species in itself. ... And the second is a being in this manner: that in no way is it in some other thing. And so it is, not in a subject at all. This is substance” (Avicenna 2005: 45).

By introducing his principles of quiddity and existence, Ibn Sīnā subtly re-defines both substance and accident. An accident has the kind of quiddity which requires that it exists in another—its subject. A substance has the kind of quiddity that is not present “in some other *thing*.” Rather, it exists “through itself.” Most importantly, the quiddity of neither accident nor substance requires that it exist in the first place. The whole being—made up of substance and accidents—must be given its existence by some other cause.

Later, when showing that knowledge is an accident, Ibn Sīnā adds to his new definition of *substance*. The claim that knowledge is an accident existing in the mind of the knower gives rise to this objection: If “knowledge is what is acquired from the forms of beings, when abstracted from their matter,” then “if the forms of accidents are accidents, how can the forms of substances be accidents,” which they must be if they are concepts existing in the mind? Ibn Sīnā answers that “the quiddity of a substance is substance in the sense that it is a being *in the concrete* that is *not in a subject*. ... But as for its existence *in the mind* under this description, this is not its definition in as much as it is a substance” (Avicenna 2005: 107–08). In short, the quiddity of *substance* can exist in two different ways, in reality as an independent substance in accord with its own nature, but also in the mind of a knower in accord with the mode of existence all mental concepts have, namely, as an accident. Such two-fold existence is possible only because in creatures quiddity is other than existence and is ontologically neutral in itself. And this two-fold existence of the quiddity is how Ibn Sīnā explains the identity between concept and real thing in human knowledge, a problem earlier Aristotelians had been unable to resolve fully.

Metaphysical Conclusions: The Causes

In order to explain causality, Ibn Sīnā again begins with Aristotle, who had recognized four kinds of causes: the intrinsic principles of matter and form; and the extrinsic principles of agent and end. Aristotle had said matter is the principle of potentiality; but when Ibn Sīnā defines matter, he again introduces his own principles: “By the elemental [cause, we mean] the cause that is part of the whole nature of the *thing*, through which the thing is what it is *in potency*, and in which the potentiality of *existence* resides” (Avicenna 2005: 194). By adding the terms *thing* and *existence*, Ibn

Síná makes it clear that matter in itself is *not* an internal source of the *actual* existence of a thing, but in itself it carries only a potentiality for existence. So if either of Aristotle's two intrinsic principles plays a role in causing the existence of a thing, it will be form.

Aristotle had thought of form and matter as principles only in relation to the whole, composite substance, but Ibn Síná also considers them directly in relation to each other. In relation to the whole, he follows Aristotle: "Form is only a *formal* cause for the *thing composed* of it and matter. Consequently, form is only a form *for* matter, not a formal cause *of* matter." Form gives the whole thing the *actual* quiddity it has; while matter gives the whole the *potency* for the quiddity it can have. Consequently, "if the form is a cause *for* matter which renders it subsistent, [this] is *not* in the manner in which form is a cause *for* the *composite*" (Avicenna 2005: 196).

How, then, is the form a cause of matter? When we look at the form in relation to the matter, we move away from the *quidditative* to the existential order. The form causes the *existence* of the matter. It only does so, however, "with a partner and a cause that brings into existence the cause, that is, the form." In relation to matter, then, the form acts, not as a *formal* cause, but as an *efficient* cause. "Form would be, as it were, an *efficient principle* for matter, if the existence of matter in act came about through the form alone. It seems, then, that form is a *part* of the efficient cause, as in the case of one of two movers of a boat" (Avicenna 2005: 196). So the form cannot function as the sole cause of the existence of the matter, it acts only as an *instrumental* cause, subordinate to another as yet to be named cause. The form is like an oar, subordinate to the rower of the boat.

Consideration of matter and form, then, leads inexorably to an *extrinsic* efficient cause. "The *agent* bestows from itself existence upon *another thing*, which this latter did not possess" (Avicenna 2005: 196). The agent cause of which Ibn Síná speaks here is not the kind of moving cause of which Aristotle spoke, a father who causes a son, a builder who causes a building, or fire which causes warmth (the examples are from Avicenna 2005: 201). For Aristotelian agents operated only in the *quidditative* order, say, the builder shaping its matter into the form of a building. But Ibn Síná is talking about a cause of existence: "What it [the effect] has essentially from the [external] agent is *existence*; the existence it possesses is due only to this, that the other thing [= the cause] is of a sort from which there must ensue existence for another, derived from its own existence, which belongs to it essentially" (Avicenna 2005: 197). For Ibn Síná, then, the form is the formal cause of the quiddity of the whole, composite substance, to be sure, but also an instrumental efficient cause of the *existence* of the matter, and thereby of the existence of the whole thing, including its accidents. (On final cause, see Druart 2005: 340–1.)

Metaphysical Conclusions: Angels or Intelligences

For Aristotle, there was no problem with the effect existing apart from its efficient cause, the son apart from the father or warmth in the water when it was taken off the fire and poured into the mixing bowl. The reason is because the Philosopher did not distinguish quiddity from existence; the human quiddity of the son—his human

form—ensures that he is an actually existing human, and the quiddity “warm” ensures that the water has this accident, at least for a while. Since Ibn Sīnā has distinguished quiddity from existence, he also must distinguish the efficient causes of quiddity and existence. He does so by distinguishing how efficient causality functions in different disciplines: “the *metaphysical* philosophers do not mean by *agent* only the principle of *motion*, as the *natural philosophers* mean, but the principle and giver of *existence*, as in the case of *God* in relation to the world” (Avicenna 2005: 195). In this passage Ibn Sīnā quite clearly shows his view differs from that of Aristotle and proceeds to make it obvious that God is the *ultimate* extrinsic efficient cause of existence; but in his theory of mediated creation, God is not the only such cause.

When initially introducing the external efficient cause of the existence of all sublunar things, Ibn Sīnā does not give it a specific name: “The connection of [form and] matter in its *existence* is owing to *that thing* and a form in whatever manner it proceeds from [that thing] into [matter]” (Avicenna 2005: 67). In explaining how effects require this kind of cause after they are separated from their immediate moving cause, Ibn Sīnā emphasizes that “the *true causes* [in the plural] co-exist with the effect. As for those that are prior [in time], these are causes either accidentally or instrumentally” (Avicenna 2005: 202). A secondary cause, like the builder, educes the new accidental forms of a building from the potency of its matter, as Aristotle had seen, but “the builder, the one called the maker, is *not* the cause of the *complete nature* of the aforementioned building, nor, moreover, of its *existence*” (Avicenna 2005: 201). Rather, “the cause of the building’s shape is a combination [of its form and matter], and the cause of [this combination] is the *natures* of the things being combined and their remaining in the way they are composed, and the cause of these is the *separate cause* that enacts the *natures*.” Ibn Sīnā then gives the separate cause yet another name: “The cause of the son is the combination of his form and matter, through the cause that is the *giver of forms*” (Avicenna 2005: 202).

But there is more than one of these cosmic causes of sublunar things. In Ibn Sīnā’s cosmology, there are ten such “intelligences”—his interpretation of Qu’rānic angels—as well as God, the one, ultimate cause:

The separate intelligences, or rather, the *last* of them, the one closest to us, is the one from which emanates, in participation with the celestial movements, something having the configuration of the forms of the lower world, through passive receptivity to action, just as there is in that intelligence or intelligences the configuration of the forms in actuality. The forms then emanate from it through their being specified [by other factors], not singly by its essence—for the one enacts in the one, as you know, only one thing—but in association with the heavenly bodies.

(Avicenna 2005: 335)

In this passage, we get a sense of the complex way Ibn Sīnā fills out his initial insight that the continued existence of creatures requires an external efficient cause. “This, then, is the meaning for the philosophers of what is called ‘creation.’ It is the giving of existence to a thing after absolute non-existence. For it belongs to the effect in itself,” that is, in its quiddity, “to be non-existent and [then], from its cause, to be existing”

(Avicenna 2005: 203). Ibn Síná's philosophical understanding of creation as ontological freed him to follow Aristotle's view that the world is eternal, even though it is created and sempiternal in Ibn Síná's metaphysical sense of the term, while only God is properly eternal.

Conclusion

Ibn Síná's views about reality do exhibit some important similarities with Aristotle's, but far more striking are the differences. By replacing Aristotle's *metaphysical* principles with his own well-reasoned dialectical argumentation, Ibn Síná re-conceived many metaphysical doctrines, only a few of which could we cover here. In sum, Ibn Síná's relation to Aristotle is much like Aristotle's to Plato. And this is what made Ibn Síná not just the premier philosopher in the Arabic tradition, but one of the very few philosophers of truly world-historical importance.

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