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At the Roots of Causality: Ontology and Aetiology in Avicenna and his Islamic Interpreters (XI – XIII c.)

Relatore
Prof. Amos BERTOLACCI

Candidato
Francesco Omar ZAMBONI

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«My knowledge is like a mirage, my ruin is left in ruin by fear, problems are as numerous as the grains of sand. Despite all this, I hope to be among the loved ones. Please to not frustrate my hope, oh magnanimous Giver. You know that everything I said and wrote was meant only to attain truth and correctness, and to abandon ignorance and doubt. If I was correct, grant me Your favour. If I erred, skip over my shortcomings with Your mercy and Your patience»

Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, IV, 426-427

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This work is dedicated to my parents.

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INTRODUCTION

Section I –The Subject and the Aim of This Study

The present study investigates the Avicennian doctrine of efficient causality, integrating two specific perspectives. The first is foundational: the work focuses on the premises of efficient causality, namely those notions and propositions that make it possible to conceive Avicennian efficient causes and establish their actual existence. The second perspective is progressive or forward-looking: the work considers Avicenna inasmuch as he represents the point of reference for subsequent Islamic authors and, conversely, on those authors inasmuch as they embody different receptions and interpretations of Avicenna's heritage. The scope of the historical analysis is restricted to the early phase of post-Avicennian philosophy, namely the period which extends from the mid-eleventh to the mid-thirteenth century: from Bahmanyār ibn Marzubān (d.1066) to Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d.1274).

The aim of the study is to present a detailed account of the debates concerning the doctrinal background of efficient causality, outlining the positions held by Avicenna and his interpreters, as well as the reasons behind those positions and the arguments that support them. This will highlight the thread that connects Avicenna's general ontology to his aetiology, while at the same time presenting the challenges his positions face. Additionally, the work will provide insights into the relation between Avicenna and his interpreters, assessing both continuities and discontinuities.

Section II – The Authors

This section aims to provide a concise account of the main authors that will be taken into account in the present study. It is not feasible to consider all thinkers between Avicenna (d.1037) and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d.1274): some kind of selection is necessary. Besides Avicenna, the work focuses on eight authors, chosen on account of their historical importance but also because they offer a wide variety of perspectives towards Avicenna's heritage in the fields of ontology and aetiology, refining, transforming or criticising Avicenna's positions in various significant ways. They are Bahmanyār ibn Marzūbān (d.1066), Abū Ḥamid al-Ġazālī (d.1111), Ibn al-Malāḥimī al-Ḥwārazmī (d.1141), Abū al-Faḥ al-Šahrastānī (d.1153), Abū al-Barakāt al-Baġdādī (d.1165), Šihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d.1191), Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210), and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d.1274). Among these, Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī deserves particular consideration on account of his analytic talent and relentless attitude towards investigation that enable him to tackle previous discussions in an organic and exhaustive fashion.

II.1 – Avicenna

Abū 'Alī Ḥusayn ibn Sīnā was born in a village near Buḥāra in 980 or perhaps some years before¹. From a young age he studied Quranic and Greek sciences, standing out for his intellectual acumen. During his life he served several rulers of different dynasties as physician and administrator, travelling from city to city: Buḥāra, Gorgānġ (in Ḥwārazm), Ġorgān (in Ḥorasān), Rey, Hamadān and finally Isfahān. He died in 1037, while travelling from Isfahān to Hamadān².

Avicenna authored a huge number of works on philosophy and medicine, some of which are not extant³. This study will mainly focus on his Arabic philosophical *summae* – namely the *Šifā'*, the *Naġāt* and the *Išārāt* –, but will also consider the school discussions and notes recorded in the *Mubāḥaṭāt* and the *Ta'liqāt*⁴.

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- 1 The transmitted date (980) has been challenged by Rudolph Seelheim and Dimitri Gutas. See R. Seelheim 'Ibni Sina Bibliografyasi by Osman Ergin (review),' *Oriens*, 11/1-2 (1958), p.238 and D. Gutas 'Avicenna: Biography,' in D. Gutas, *Oriens of Avicenna's Philosophy* (Surrey/Burlington: Ashgate, 2014).
 - 2 The available information on Avicenna's life comes from a biography authored partially by Avicenna himself and partially by his disciple Abū 'Ubayd al-Ġuzġānī (d.1070). A modern edition of the work is presented in *The Life of Ibn Sina. A critical edition and annotated translation*, ed. W.E. Gohlman (New York: State University of New York Press 1974).
 - 3 For more information on Avicenna's bibliography see D.Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition. Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works. Second, Revised and Enlarged Edition*, (Leiden: Brill, 2014) pp.3-165; D.C. Reisman, 'The Life and Times of Avicenna. Patronage and Learning in Medieval Islam,' in P. Adamson (ed.), *Interpreting Avicenna. Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.7-27.
 - 4 My translations of Avicenna's *Šifā'* are based on the Cairo edition, in particular on *al-Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, eds. Ġ.Š. Qanawātī, S. Zāyid, M.Y. Mūsā, S. Dunyā, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'Āmma li-Šu'un al-Maṭābi' al-Amīriyya, 1960); *al-Šifā' – al-Manṭiq, al-Madḥal*, eds. Ġ.Š. Qanawātī, M. al-Ḥudayrī, A.F. al-Ahwānī (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Amīriyya, 1952); *al-Šifā' – al-Manṭiq, al-Maqūlāt*, eds. Ġ.Š. Qanawātī, M. al-Ḥudayrī, A.F. al-Ahwānī (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'Āmma li-Šu'un al-Maṭābi' al-Amīriyya, 1959); *al-Šifā' – al-Manṭiq, al-Qiyās*, eds. S. Zāyid (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'Āmma li-Šu'un al-Maṭābi' al-Amīriyya, 1964). As for the editions of the other Avicennian works see *al-Naġāt min al-ġarq fī baḥr al-dalālāt*, ed. M.T. Dānešpajūh (Tehran: Intišārāt Dānešgāh Tehrān, 1985); *al-Išārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt*, ed. J. Forget

Avicenna is a watershed for Islamic philosophy as a whole: all of the main subsequent authors felt the need to discuss the views of he who came to be called «the Head of Masters» (*al-šayḥ al-ra'īs*), rejecting, defending or revising them. That holds true for efficient causality in particular. Sometimes the Avicennian doctrine of causality was discussed in order to be rejected, as in Ġazālī's *Tahāfut* and Ibn al-Malāḥimī's *Tuhfa*. However, authors like Rāzī defended the Avicennian position and its premises, even revising the classical *kalām* proof for the existence of God in order to integrate within Avicenna's ontology and aetiology⁵.

Several modern scholars analysed Avicenna's thought from a variety of perspectives. A comprehensive account of all the relevant studies would exceed the scope of this brief outline⁶. However, I need to mention the authors whose work had the most influence on my understanding of Avicenna's metaphysical thought, namely Bertolacci⁷, Gutas⁸, Marmura⁹, and Wisnovsky¹⁰.

(Leiden: Brill, 1892); *al-Mubāḥaṭāt*, ed. M. Bīdārfar (Qom: Intiṣārāt Bīdār, 1992); *al-Ta'liqāt*, ed. A. Badawī (Cairo: Markaz 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī li-al-Ibdā', 2009). For an English translation of the metaphysics (*Ilāhiyyāt*) of the *Šifā* see M.E. Marmura, *The Metaphysics of The Healing: a parallel English-Arabic Text* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005). Italian translations of the same section can be found in A. Bertolacci, *Libro della Guarigione. Le Cose Divine* (Turin: UTET, 2007) and O. Lizzini, P. Porro, *Metafisica. La Scienza delle Cose Divine (al-Ilāhiyyāt) dal Libro della Guarigione (Kitāb al-Šifā')* (Milan: Bompiani, 2002). An English translation of the logic section of the *Naḡāt* has been published in A.Q. Ahmed, *Avicenna's Deliverance: Logic*, (Karachi-New York: Oxford University press, 2011). A full French translation of the *Iṣārāt* is to be found in A.M. Goichon, *Livre des directives et remarques* (Beyrouth: Commission Internationale pour la Traduction des chefs-d'oeuvre, 1951). For an English translation of the *Iṣārāt* see S.C. Inati, *Remarks and Admonitions. Part 1 – Logic* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984); Id., *Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions Pt.4* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996); Id., *Ibn Sina's Remarks and admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics. An analysis and Annotated Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

5 See *Infra*, III.8.

6 For more information on the modern scholarship on Avicenna see D. Gutas, 'Ibn Sina [Avicenna],' in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2016 Edition)*, available online at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/ibn-sina/>>.

7 See A. Bertolacci, 'The Structure of Metaphysical Science in the *Ilāhiyyāt* (Divine Science) of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Šifā'* (Book of the Cure),' *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 13 (2002), pp. 1-69; Id., 'The Doctrine of Material and Formal Causality in the *Ilāhiyyāt* of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Šifā'*,' *Quaestio* 2 (2002), pp. 125-154; Id., *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifā': A Milestone of Western Metaphysical Thought* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006); Id., 'Avicenna and Averroes on the Proof of God's Existence and the Subject-Matter of Metaphysics,' *Medioevo* 32 (2007), pp. 61-97; Id., '«Necessary» as Primary Concept in Avicenna's Metaphysics,' in G. Fioravanti, S. Perfetti (eds.), *Conoscenza e contingenza nella tradizione aristotelica medievale*, (Pisa: ETS, 2008), pp. 31-50; Id., 'The 'Ontologization' of Logic. Metaphysical Themes in Avicenna's Reworking of the Organon,' in M. Cameron, J. Marenbon (eds.), *Methods and Methodologies. Aristotelian Logic East and West 500-1500* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 27-51; Id., 'The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna's Metaphysics: The Text and Its Context,' in F. Opwis, D.C. Reisman (eds.), *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 257-288.

8 See D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London-New York: Routledge, 1998); Id., *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* cit.

9 See M.E. Marmura, 'Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory of God's Knowledge of Particulars,' *JAOS* 82/3 (1962), pp. 299-312; Id., 'Avicenna's Chapter on Universals in the *Isagoge* of his *Shifā'*,' in A.T. Welch, P. Cachia (eds.), *Islam, Past Influence and Present Challenge* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), pp. 34-56; Id., 'Avicenna's Proof from Contingency for God's Existence in the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'*,' *Mediaeval Studies* 42 (1980), pp. 337-52; Id., 'Avicenna on the Division of the Sciences in the *Isagoge* of his *Shifā'*,' *Journal of the History of Arabic Science* 4 (1980), pp. 241-51.

10 See R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

Furthermore, it is necessary to mention the authors who devoted specific attention to Avicenna's doctrine of efficient causality. The very notion of the efficient causation is the subject of studies published by Gilson, Marmura and Richardson¹¹. Marmura also wrote on causal priority, and Richardson on Avicenna's account of the principle of sufficient reason¹². Davidson considered efficient causality inasmuch as it is the fundamental premise of Avicenna's arguments for the God's existence and for the eternity of the world¹³. Wisnowsky discussed the distinction between final and efficient causality in Avicenna, as well as that between immanent and transcendent causality¹⁴. Belo published a monograph on the question of chance and determinism in Avicenna and Averroes, arguing that the Avicennian doctrine of causality entails necessitarianism¹⁵.

II.2 – Bahmanyār

Little is known on the life of Bahmanyār ibn Marzubān 'Ağamī Ađarbāyğānī. He came from Azerbaijan, as his name suggests. He was born a Zoroastrian but converted to Islam, and became Avicenna's pupil during the last two decades of the master's life. He died in 1066¹⁶.

The most important of Bahmanyār's extant writings is the *Tahşīl*, a philosophical *summa* that draws from Avicenna's *Şifā'* and will be the focus of this study¹⁷. Minor writings are also extant: two epistles on metaphysics (one on the subject-matter of metaphysics, the other on the degrees of the existents) and a treatise on the faculties of the human soul¹⁸. It is also worth noting that Avicenna's *Mubāḥaṭāt* contains traces of Bahmanyār's ideas, since it consists of reports of discussions between Avicenna and his circle¹⁹.

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- 11 See E. Gilson, 'Avicenne et les Origines de la Notion de Cause Efficiente,' in *Atti Del XII Congresso Internazionale di Filosofia*, 9 (1958) pp.121-130; Id., 'Notes pour l'histoire de la cause efficiente,' *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*, 37 (1962) 7-31; M. Marmura, 'The Metaphysics of Efficient Causality in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā),' in M. Marmura (ed.) *Islamic Theology and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York press, 1984) pp.172-187; K. Richardson, 'Avicenna's Conception of the Efficient Cause,' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21 (2013) 220-239.
- 12 M.E. Marmura, 'Avicenna on Causal Priority,' in P. Morewedge (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* (New York: Delmar, 1981); K. Richardson, 'Avicenna and the Principle of Sufficient Reason,' *Review of Metaphysics* 67 (2014), pp.743-768.
- 13 H. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 14 R. Wisnowsky, 'Final and Efficient Causality in Avicenna's Cosmology and Theology,' *Quaestio* 2 (2002), 97-124; Id. 'Towards a History of Avicenna's Distinction between Immanent and Transcendent Causes,' in D.Reisman (ed.) *Before and After Avicenna* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp.49-68.
- 15 C. Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes* (Leiden: Brill 2007).
- 16 Information on Bahmanyār's life comes from Ṣāḥib al-Dīn al-Bayḥāqī's *Tatimmat şiwān al-ḥikma* – see, *Ta'rīḥ ḥukamā' al-islām* (= *Tatimmat şiwān al-ḥikma*), ed. M. K. 'Alī (Damascus: al-Mağma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī, 1990), pp.97-99.
- 17 For the edition of the Arabic text see *al-Taḥşīl*, ed. M. Moṭahharī (Tehran: Intiṣārāt Dāneşğāh Tehrān, 1996).
- 18 An edition and a German translation of the two metaphysical epistles (*Risāla fī marātib al-mawğūdāt*, *Risāla fī mawḏū' ilm mā ba'da al-ṭabī'a*) are presented in S. Poper, *Behmenjār Ben El-Marzubān, der persische Aristoteliker aus Avicenna's Schule: Zwei metaphysische Abhandlungen von ihm Arabisch und Deutsch mit Anmerkungen* (Leipzig: L. Voss, 1851).
- 19 On this point see D.C. Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennian Tradition: The Transmission, Contents, and Structure of Ibn Sīnā's al-Mubāḥaṭāt (The Discussions)* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

As the omnipresent quotations from the *Šifā'* in the *Tahṣīl* suggest, on many occasions Bahmanyār draws near to his teacher in many aspects. That holds true in the case of efficient causality as well: he upholds the standard Avicennian account I outlined in the previous section. Such doctrinal proximity led Daiber to conclude that Bahmanyār stood «in the shadow of his master», and did not have great influence over subsequent authors²⁰. More recently, however, Janssens challenged this kind of view, arguing that there are elements of structural discontinuity between the *Šifā'* and the *Tahṣīl*, and that some of those elements give the impression of an attempt to re-aristotelianize Avicenna²¹. While I do not believe that any re-aristotelianization was in Bahmanyār's intentions, Janssens is right in suggesting a certain circumspection when considering Bahmanyār's thought. The sheer number of quotations from the *Šifā'* should not lead us into thinking that there is nothing new in the *Tahṣīl*: the fact that Bahmanyār agreed with Avicenna on many (or even most) issues does not entail that he agreed with him on all issues, or that he was unoriginal in all respects.

Indeed, the *Tahṣīl* presents both structural and doctrinal elements that are original and had a discernible influence over subsequent authors. As for the structural elements, we see an organization of the subjects of science (general metaphysics → theology → physics) that is not to be found in the *Šifā'* and appears in works by subsequent authors (for example in Rāzī's *Mabāḥiṭ* and *Mulaḥḥaṣ*). As for the doctrinal aspect, two elements need to be mentioned. The first is the rejection of the entitative semantization of existence (*i.e.*, the claim that existence is a thing that makes another thing existent), which is not explicit in Avicenna but is mentioned in many later interpreters (*e.g.*, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Rāzī)²². The second element is a peculiar understanding of the modulation of existence which entails that all specific instances of existence are essentially different from one another, thus implying the distinction between existence *qua* existence (common existence) and the peculiar instances of existence that are proper to each existent. On this issue authors like Ṭūsī draw from Bahmanyār and not from Avicenna, whose account of modulation shows no commitment to the idea that the instances of existence are essentially or qualitatively different from one another²³. In sum, Bahmanyār's originality and his influence on later authors may be subtle, but they remain significant.

II.3 – Ġazālī

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ġazālī was born in Ṭūs (present-day Iran) in 1058-1059 or in 1055-1056²⁴. He studied *fiqh* and *kalām* with the Aš'arite Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Ġuwaynī (d.1085), as well as ṣūfī

20 See 'Bahmanyār, Kīā,' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol.III/5 (1988), pp.501-503; also available online at <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahmanyar-kia-rai-abul-hasan-b>> (accessed 30 January 2020).

21 See 'Bahmanyār ibn Marzubān: A Faithful Disciple of Ibn Sīnā?,' in D.C. Reisman and A. H. al-Rahim (eds.), *Before and After Avicenna: Proceedings of the First Conference of the Avicenna Study Group* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003) pp.178-197; 'Bahmanyār, and his Revision of Ibn Sīnā's Metaphysical Project,' *Medioevo* 32 (2007), 99-117.

22 For a discussion of the entitative semantization of existence and its rejection see *Infra*, Part 1, §1.3.1.

23 On the possible accounts of modulation see *Infra*, Part 1, §4.

24 The transmitted date of birth is 1058-1059, but Griffel claims that evidence from Ġazālī's autobiography and his letters shows that he was born in 1055-1056 – see *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.23-25.

doctrine with Abū ‘Alī Fārmaḍī (d.1085). He probably learned philosophy by himself. In 1091 he was appointed professor at the Nizāmiyya of Nišāpūr by the Seljuk vizier Nizām al-Mulk (d.1092). As a consequence of an epistemological crisis he left the position in 1095, devoting himself to spiritual and ascetic practices for eleven years. He then returned to teaching at the Nizāmiyya, and died in 1111²⁵.

Ġazālī authored a great number of works on jurisprudence, mysticism, theology, logic and philosophy. This study will focus on two writings in particular: the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, Ġazālī’s well-known refutation of the Avicennian system, and the *Iqtisād fī al-i’tiqād*, his most important compendium of *kalām*²⁶.

Ġazālī’s general attitude towards Avicenna’s system is one of rejection. As for efficient causality in particular, he attacks two of the core premises the Avicennian account rests on. Firstly, he argues that the affirmation of the contingency of all composite existents is groundless²⁷. Secondly, he challenges the universal applicability of the principle of sufficient reason, arguing that it is possible for a voluntary agent to choose between equivalent alternatives²⁸. In both the *Tahāfut* and the *Iqtisād*, Ġazālī defends the classical *kalām* account of efficient causality: everything that comes-to-be depends on an efficient cause²⁹. This notwithstanding, Avicenna’s position on causality does have an influence on Ġazālī, since the latter validates the claim that what comes-to-be is causally dependent by appealing to the principle of sufficient reason (whereas most previous *kalām* authors do not appeal to the principle)³⁰.

As in the case of Avicenna, the sheer amount of modern studies on Ġazālī makes it improper to enumerate all of them in this context. As for those studies that specifically consider Ġazālī’s take on efficient causality, it is worth noting that they almost invariably focus on the question of occasionalism, *i.e.*, is the rejection of secondary or natural causality³¹. That is not the question at stake here: the present work takes into account efficient causality *qua* efficient causality, not a specific kind of efficient causality (natural or secondary causality) as opposed to another kind (primary or divine causality).

25 Information on Ġazālī’s life comes from a huge variety of sources. The earliest of those include Ġazālī’s own autobiography, the *Munqid*, as well as Abū Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Awāšim* and Ibn ‘Asākir’s *Tabyīn*. See *al-Munqid min al-ḍalāl*, eds. J.Saliba, K. Ayyad (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1988); *Awāšim al-qawāšim*, ed. A. Ṭalabī (Cairo: Maktaba Dār al-Turāt, 1997); *Tabyīn kaḍib al-muftarī*, eds. A. Hijazi, A.Saqqa (Beirut: Dār al-Ġīl, 1995).

26 For the editions of the Arabic texts see *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. M.E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000); *al-Iqtisād fī al-i’tiqād*, eds. I.A. Cubukcu, H. Ātāy (Ankara: Nur Matbaasi, 1962). For a detailed list of Ġazālī’s most important writings see G.F. Hourani, ‘A Chronology of al-Ghazālī’s Works,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104/2 (1984), 289-302.

27 See *Infra*, Part 2, §1.2.2, §1.4.1.

28 See *Infra*, Part 2, §2.2.2, §2.3.4.

29 See *Tahāfut*, p.78.2-7; *Iqtisād*, p.24.5-7.

30 See *Iqtisād*, pp.25.6 – 26.5.

31 See E.L. Goodman, ‘Did al-Ghazālī Deny Causality?’ *Studia Islamica*, 47 (1978), 83-120; M.E. Marmura, ‘al-Ghazālī’s Second Causal Theory of 17 Discussion of His *Tahāfut*,’ in P. Morewedge (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1981), pp.85-112; Id., ‘Ghazālīan Causes and Intermediaries,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115 (1995) 89-100; U. Rudolf, ‘A Study of the 17th Discussion (on Causality) of the *Tahāfut*.’ in D. Perler, U.Rudolf (eds.), *Occasionalismus. Theorie der Kausalität im arabisch-islamischen und im europäischen Denken* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2000), pp.57-105; O.E. Moad, ‘al-Ghazālī’s Occasionalism and the Natures of Creatures,’ *Philosophy of Religion* 00 (2005) 1-8; M. Fakhry, *Islamic Occasionalism and its Critique by Averroes and Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2008).

II.4 – Ibn al-Malāḥimī

Rukn al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn al-Malāḥimī al-Ḥwārazmī was born before 1090 in Khwarezm. We was initially a member of the Bahšāmiyya, the Mu‘tazili school of Abū Hāšim al-Ġubbā‘ī (d.933), but he later adopted the teaching of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d.1044), a student and critic of the Bahšāmi ‘Abd al-Ġabbār al-Hamadānī (d.1025). He died in 1141³².

Among Ibn al-Malāḥimī’s extant works it is necessary to mention the *Mu‘tamad fī uṣūl al-dīn*, a theological compendium, the *Fā‘iq fī al-uṣūl*, an abridgement of the *Mu‘tamad*, and the *Tuḥfat al-mutakallimīn fī al-radd ‘alā al-falāsifa*, a detailed refutation of the Avicennian system³³. This study will mainly focus on the *Tuḥfa*, which is a sort of Mu‘tazili counterpart of Ġazālī’s *Tahāfut*. Just like Ġazālī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī rejects Avicenna’s position on efficient causality, upholding the *kalām* thesis that what comes-to-be requires an efficient cause. Unlike Ġazālī, however, he does not claim that a voluntary agent can choose between indifferent alternatives: a voluntary agent can perform an action only if that action is preferable over its contrary; the freedom of the agent consists in his possibility not to act even when action is preferable. Ibn al-Malāḥimī also rejects Avicenna’s claim that composite existents are contingent, arguing that composites do not exist, being nothing but sums of simples³⁴.

Scholarship on Ibn al-Malāḥimī is still in its infancy, as modern editions of his works have been published only recently. Griffel offered a preliminary overview of the contents and the goals of the *Tuḥfa*, comparing it to Ġazālī’s *Tahāfut*³⁵. Madelung analysed Ibn al-Malāḥimī’s refutation of Avicenna’s doctrine of the soul³⁶.

II.5 – Šahrastānī

Abū al-Faṭḥ Muḥammad al-Šahrastānī was born probably in 1086 on 1087, in the town of Šahristān, near Nasā (Khorasan). He studied religious sciences at Nišāpūr. His master in *kalām* was the Aš‘arite Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, a disciple of Ġuwaynī (d.1086). Around 1120 he returned to Khorasan and was assigned a position at the court of the Seljuk ruler Sanġar (d.1158). He probably had contacts with the Nizāri Ismā‘īlis, as it emerges from external sources and from the analysis of the doctrines presented in his works. At an unknown time he left the Seljuk court and returned to his home town, where he died in 1153³⁷.

32 See W. Madelung, ‘Ibn al-Malāḥimī,’ in D. Thomas, A. Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011), pp.440-443.

33 For the editions of the Arabic texts see *Kitāb al-mu‘tamad fī uṣūl al-dīn*, eds. M. McDermott, W. Madelung (London: al-Huda, 1991); *Kitāb al-fā‘iq fī uṣūl al-dīn*, eds. M. McDermott, W. Madelung (Tehran: Mo‘assase-ye Pažūhišī-e Ḥekmat va Falsafe-ye Īrān, 2007); *Tuḥfat al-mutakallimīn fī al-radd ‘alā al-falāsifa*, eds H. Ansari, W. Madelung (Tehran: Iranian Institute of Philosophy & Institute of Islamic Studies Free University of Berlin, 2008).

34 See *Infra*, Part 2, §1.2.3, §1.4.2.

35 See F. Griffel, ‘Theology Engages with Avicennian Philosophy: al-Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* and Ibn al-Malāḥimī’s *Tuḥfat al-mutakallimīn fī al-radd ‘alā al-falāsifa*’ in S. Schmidke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 435-456.

36 See W. Madelung, ‘Ibn al-Malāḥimī on the Human Soul’, *The Muslim World* 102/3-4 (2012), pp.426-432.

Five of Šahrastānī's major works are extant: the *Kitāb al-milal wal-al-nihal*, a religious-philosophical doxography, the *Nihāyat al-aqdām fī 'ilm al-kalām*, a *summa* of Aš'ari theology that shows Ismā'īli and Avicennian influences; the Persian *Mağlis fī al-ḥalq wal-al-amr*, a sermon on cosmology; the *Mafātīḥ al-asrār wa-mašābīḥ al-abrār*, an esoteric commentary of the Quran; and the *Muṣāra 'at al-falāsifa*, a refutation of Avicenna that betrays Ismā'īli influences. The present study will focus on the *Nihāya* and the *Muṣāra 'a*³⁸.

Šahrastānī shares with Ġazālī and Ibn al-Malāḥimī an oppositional attitude towards Avicenna. However, Šahrastānī's point of view is peculiar to him and shows the traces of Ismā'īli influences. For example, in the *Muṣāra 'a* he criticises the *mutakallimun*'s division of the existents for denying the possibility of immaterial substances other than God³⁹. As for the premises of causality in particular, Šahrastānī accepts the Avicennian doctrine of the contingency of composites, even though he makes use of it against Avicenna himself, arguing that the Avicennian Necessary Existent must be composite, and thus contingent⁴⁰.

Modern scholars addressed Šahrastānī's thought from a variety of perspectives. Wilferd Madelung and Jean Jolivet presented summary accounts of the content of the *Muṣāra 'a*⁴¹. Diana Steigerwald focused on Šahrastānī's cosmology and sectarian allegiance⁴². Recently, Fedor Benevich approached Šahrastānī's ontology, considering his assessment of the question of the universals⁴³.

The present study delves in some aspects of Šahrastānī's metaphysics that are relevant for the issue of efficient causality, like his discussion of the modulation of existence and his assertion of equivocity with respect to God's existence.

II.6 – Abū al-Barakāt al-Bağdādī

Awḥad al-Zamān Abū al-Barakāt ibn 'Alī al-Baladī al-Bağdādī was born in the town of Balad, near Mosul, probably in the eight decade of the eleventh century. He was of Jewish origin but at some point

37 On Šahrastānī's life see Bayhāqī, *Tatimma*, pp.141-144 and Ibn Ḥallikān, *Wafayat al-a'yān*, ed. H. 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1978) pp.273-275.

38 For the editions of the two works see *The Summa Philosophiae of al-Shahrastānī. Kitāb Nihāyatu 'l-iqdām [sic] fī 'ilmi 'l-kalām*, ed. A. Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1934); *Muṣāra 'at al-falāsifa*, ed. H.M. Muḥtār (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-ğabalāwī, 1976). For an English translation of the *Muṣāra 'a* see W. Madelung, T.Mayer, *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).

39 See *Muṣāra 'a*, pp.20-21.

40 See *Ibid.*, pp.44.10 – 45.6.

41 See W. Madelung, 'Ash-Shahrastānī's Streitschrift gegen Avicenna und ihre Widerlegung durch Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi,' in A. Dietrich (ed.), *Akten des VII. Kongresses für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1976); J. Jolivet, 'Al-Shahrastānī critique d'Avicenne dans la Lutte contre les Philosophes (quelques aspects),' *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10 (2000), 275-292.

42 See D. Steigerwald, 'L'ordre (Amr) et la création (khalq) chez Sharastānī,' *Folia Orientalia* 31 (1995), 163-175; Id., 'The Divine Word (*Kalima*) in Sharastānī's *Majlis*,' *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 25/3 (1996), 335-353; Id., *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Shahrastānī (m.548/1153)* (Sainte-Foy: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1997); Id., 'La dissimulation (*taqiyya*) de la foi dans le schi'isme ismaélien,' *Studies In Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 27/1 (1998), 39-59.

43 F. Benevich, 'The Metaphysics of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Šahrastānī (d.1153): Aḥwāl and Universals,' in A. al-Ghous (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th century* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2018), pp.327-356.

converted to Islam. He served Seljuk rulers as well as the Abbasid caliph Muqtafi (1136-60), mainly as a physician. There is disagreement between the sources concerning the date of his death: Bayhāqī indicates the 1152, whereas Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a implies that he lived up to the seventh decade of the twelfth century⁴⁴.

Abū al-Barakāt wrote on pharmacology, astronomy and philosophy, and commented the *Ecclesiastes*. The most important of his philosophical works is the *Kitāb al-mu‘tabar*, which will be the focus of the present study⁴⁵.

Abū al-Barakāt’s attitude towards Avicenna is not as explicitly hostile as that of Ġazālī or Ibn al-Malāhimī. He rather displays a revisionist attitude, assuming some elements of the Avicennian system while rejecting others. Overall, his philosophy shows a notable originality that comes with a certain roughness or clumsiness. His account of the quiddity of time is a paradigmatic example of this: he rejects the well-known Peripatetic theory that time is an accident of movement, and formulates the original idea that time is «the measure of existence» (*miqdār al-wuġūd*); however, such an account is deemed obscure and ultimately unsound by Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī⁴⁶. As for causality in particular, Abū al-Barakāt accepts the basic elements of Avicenna’s account of efficient causes, but connects them to the entitative semantization of existence (*i.e.*, the idea that existence is an existent thing that qualifies some other thing as existent). He thus reaches the conclusion that the existence of a thing is its efficient cause, and that God is the existence of all things⁴⁷.

Shlomo Pines’ seminal studies paved the way of modern scholarship on Abū al-Barakāt, outlining several physical and metaphysical issues where the latter diverges from the Avicennian position (*e.g.*, the quiddity of space, the quiddity of time, God’s knowledge of the particulars, etc.)⁴⁸. More recent scholars discussed the relation between Avicenna and Abū al-Barakāt’s position in psychology and logic⁴⁹.

II.7 – Suhrawardī

Šihab al-Dīn Yaḥyà al-Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl was born in Suhraward (northern Iran) around 1154. He received his philosophical and theological education in Marāġa, studying with Maġd al-Dīn al-Ġīlī (who was also Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s teacher). He then travelled between Iran, Anatolia and the Levant.

44 On this point and on Abū al-Barakāt’s life in general see Bayhāqī, *Tatimma*, pp.150-155; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, ‘*Uyūn al-anbā fī ṭabaqāt al-a‘ibbā*’ (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, 1965) pp.374-376,

45 For the edition of the text see *Kitāb al-mu‘tabar*, ed. S. Yalṭkaya, 3 vols. (Isfahan: Intiṣārāt Dānešgāh Esfahān, 1995).

46 See *al-Maṭālib al-‘Āliya*, vol.5, p.75.7-15.

47 Bahmanyār and Rāzī explicitly reject the entitative semantization of existence. On the whole issue see *Infra*, Part 1, §1.3.1.

48 See *Studies in Abu ‘l Barakāt al-Baghdādī’s Physics and Metaphysics* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979).

49 See W.S.W. Abdullah, ‘Ibn Sīnā and Abū al-Barakāt al-Baġdādī on the Origination of the Soul (*ḥudūt al-naḥs*) and the Invalidation of its Transmigration (*ibṭāl al-tanāsuḥ*)’, *Islam&Science* 5/2 (2007), 151-164; J. Kaukua, ‘Self, Agent, Soul: Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī’s Critical Reception of Avicennian Psychology,’ in J. Kaukua, T. Ekenberg (eds.), *Subjectivity and Selfhood in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy* (Cham: Springer, 2016) pp.75-89; J. Janssens, ‘Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī and His Use of Ibn Sīnā’s *al-Ḥikma al-‘Arūḍiyya* (or another work closely related to it) in the Logical Part of His *Kitāb al-Mu‘tabar*,’ *Nazariyat Journal for the History of Islamic Philosophy and Sciences* 3/1 (2016) 1-22.

In 1183 he arrived in Aleppo and was welcomed at the Ayybid court of prince Zāhir, the third son of Salāh al-Dīn. During his stay in Aleppo he attracted the ire of powerful people, and in 1191 was accused of heresy and executed, for reasons that are not completely clear⁵⁰.

Despite his brief life, Suhrawardī authored a variety of writings on philosophy and mysticism⁵¹. This study will focus mainly on his most original speculative work, the *Ḥikmat al-iṣrāq*, while also considering a more classically Avicennian writing like the *Partow-nāme*⁵².

Suhrawardī had a lasting impact on subsequent Islamic thought, to the point that most modern scholars refer to his posterity as new school of philosophy, clearly distinct from Avicennism: the Illuminationist (Iṣrāqī) school of philosophy⁵³. The evaluation of this claim does not concern this study, whose aim is to discuss Suhrawardī as an interpreter of Avicenna, not as a point of reference for subsequent authors. However, it is true that Suhrawardī himself consciously remarks the difference between his thought and that of Avicenna. He designates Avicenna's followers as «Peripatetics» (*maššā' iyyūn*), not simply as «philosophers» (*falāsifa*) or «sages» (*ḥukamā'*) as many coeval authors do. That reveals the intention to differentiate between philosophy *tout court* and Avicennian philosophy, implying the existence of other relevant kinds of philosophy. The originality of Suhrawardī's thought emerges in a wide variety of topics: e.g., the criticism of the Peripatetic theory of definition; the rejection of hylemorphism in favour of the idea of matter as self-subsistent magnitude; the defence of the possibility of the Platonic exemplars (*muṭul*); the conceptualist account of existence and modalities; the introduction of light as a key metaphysical and epistemic principle.

Several elements of Avicenna's theology and cosmology are present in Suhrawardī, even though their terminological (and in part conceptual) background is somewhat different: the world is eternal and eternally moving; there is one entity, the «light of lights» (*nūr al-anwār*), which is unique and absolutely simple, absolutely necessary, cause of all other lights through mediation; there is a chain of separate intellects that proceed from the first cause, and eventually emanate light over lesser entities. All of this indicates that Suhrawardī's account of efficient causality is in some ways near to Avicenna's.

50 One of the most important sources on Suhrawardī's life is Šams al-Dīn al-Šahrazūrī (d. after 1288) – see *Ta'rīḥ al-ḥukamā'*. *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa-rawḍat al-afrāḥ*, ed.A. Abu Shuwaryrb (Tripoli: Ġam'iyat al-Da'wa al-Islāmiyya al-Ālamiyya, 1988) pp.375-392.

51 Suhrawardī's writings can be subdivided into philosophical treatises (*al-Talwīḥāt*, *al-Muqāqamāt*, *al-Muṭārahāt*, *Ḥikmat al-Iṣrāq*, a commentary on a chapter of Avicenna's *Iṣārāt*, etc.); mystical-philosophical treatises (*Risālat al-ṭayr*, *Risāla fī ḥaqīqat al-iṣq*, *Partow-nāme*), and symbolic narratives (*'Aql-e surḥ*, *Āwāz-e par-e Ġibrā'il*, *Luḡat-e mūrān*, etc.). For more detailed information on Suhrawardī's works see M. Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (New York: Routledge, 2013) pp.7-30; R. Marcotte, 'Suhrawardi,' in E.N Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), available online at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/suhrawardi/>> (accessed 30 January 2020).

52 For the edition of the texts see *The Philosophy of Illumination. A New Critical Edition of the Text of Hikmat al-Ishraq*, eds. J. Walbridge, H. Ziai (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1999); *The Book of Radiance*, ed. H. Ziai (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1998).

53 In order to speak of a proper school of philosophy, we need to individuate not only several authors that share a certain number of specific principles and theses, but also a concrete practice of teaching and learning that revolve around certain texts as its primary points of reference. It would seem that, in the case at stake, these two conditions did not obtain immediately after Suhrawardī's death, but rather from the second half of the thirteenth century, when authors like Ibn Kammūna (d.1284), Šams al-Dīn al-Šahrazūrī (d. after 1288) and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Širāzī (d.1316) began writing commentaries on Suhrawardī's works.

Suhrawardī explicitly accepts the principle of sufficient reason, one of the crucial premises of Avicennian causality, and does not connect causal efficiency to movement or coming-to-be. On the other hand, however, he does not seem to thematize the principle that all and only compositional existents are contingent (and thus causally dependent): he does not explicate what is the basic character on account of which we can say that a thing is causally dependent. Furthermore, Suhrawardī implies that absolutely simple things can be causally dependent: he argues that the separate intellects (*i.e.*, «the pure lights», *anwār muğarrada*) are effects of the Necessary Existent (*i.e.*, «the light of lights», *nūr al-anwār*) even though they are simple, the particular degree of intensity of light which constitutes them being something simple, not something composed of a basic nature (*aṣl*) and an additional superadded perfection (*kamāl*)⁵⁴. All of this is at odds with Avicenna's doctrine, which indicates simplicity and composition as the criteria of discrimination between contingent and necessary existents⁵⁵.

Suhrawardī's originality has attracted the attention of several modern scholars. This resulted in a huge number of studies on both the philosophical and the mystical aspect of his thought⁵⁶. However, an organic analysis of the nature of causality in Suhrawardī is still lacking. Smirnov fleetingly noticed that, according to Suhrawardī, sub-lunar effects cannot cease to be while their eternal causes persist (for that would contradict the principle of sufficient reason): it is necessary to assume that a simple thing may have causes which are composed of eternal and temporal parts, and that sub-lunar effects cease when some temporal part of their cause ceases⁵⁷. Rizvi and Benevich examined Suhrawardī's conceptualist understanding of the distinction between quiddity and existence, which is a fundamental premise for the background of Avicennian causality⁵⁸.

II.8 – Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī

Abū 'Abdullah Muḥammad ibn 'Umar Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, also known as Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb, was born in the town of Rey in 1149 or 1150. He began his studies in Islamic theology and jurisprudence with his father Diyā' al-Dīn (d.1164). His education continued in Nišapūr with Kamāl al-Dīn al-Simnānī (d.1179-80) and then in Marāğa with Mağd al-Dīn al-Ġīlī (d.?), who also taught theology and philosophy to Suhrawardī. Rāzī travelled extensively in Iran, Central Asia and northern India, debating with several scholars of a variety of schools. During the last two period of his life, Rāzī worked for both the rulers of Ġazna and those of Ḥwārizm. He died in Herat in 1210⁵⁹.

54 See *Ḥikma*, pp.85.9 – 86.15; 91.1 – 92.15.

55 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.47.16-19.

56 For a detailed survey of secondary literature on Suhrawardī see R. Marcotte, 'Suhrawardī' cit.

57 See 'Causality and Islamic Thought,' in E. Deutch, R. Bontekoe (eds:), *A Companion to World Philosophies* (Malden: Blackwell publishers, 1997), pp.493-503.

58 See S. Rizvi, 'An Islamic Subversion of the Existence-Essence Distinction? Suhrawardī's Visionary Hierarchy of Lights,' *Asian Philosophy* 9/3 (1999) 219–27; Id., 'Roots of an Aporia in Later Islamic Philosophy: the Existence-Essence Distinction in the Philosophies of Avicenna and Suhrawardī,' *Studia Iranica* 29/1 (2000), 61-108; F. Benevich, 'The Essence-Existence Distinction: Four Elements of the Post-Avicennian Metaphysical Dispute (11-13th centuries),' *Oriens* 45 (2017), 203-258.

59 For more detailed accounts on Rāzī's life see A. Shihadeh, *The Theleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006) pp.4-5; F. Griffel, 'On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī Life and the Patronage He Received,' *Journal of*

Rāzī authored a huge number of writings on a wide variety of topics: philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, *tafsīr*, doxography, medicine and even magic⁶⁰. This study will take into account his main works on *falsafa* and *kalām*, namely *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl fī dirāyat al-uṣūl* (an early theological *summa*), *al-Mabāḥiṭ al-mašriqiyya* (early philosophical *summa* on physics and metaphysics); *al-Mulaḥḥaṣ fī al-ḥikma wa-al-mantiq* (a philosophical *summa*, more concise than the *Mabāḥiṭ* but containing a section on logic); *Šarḥ al-Išārāt* (a commentary on Avicenna’s *Išārāt*), *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa-al-muta‘aḥḥirīn min al-‘ulamā’ wa-al-ḥukamā’ wa-al-mutakallimīn* (a theological-philosophical compendium with doxographical elements); *al-Arba‘īn fī uṣūl al-dīn* (a late theological *summa*); *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī* (Rāzī’s last and eclectic work on philosophy and theology)⁶¹.

Rāzī’s image in modern scholarship has changed significantly in the last few decades. For the most part of the twentieth century he was regarded as a defender of orthodox Sunnism and a critic of the *falāsifa*, like Ġazālī⁶². More recently, however, scholars like Shihadeh and Jaffer highlighted Rāzī’s importance in both the field of philosophy and that of theology, contributing to trace a complex and evolutive picture of his thought, from an early adherence to classical Aš‘arism to a later mature perspective that gathers *kalām* and *falsafa* elements in an original synthesis⁶³. The notion of evolution is crucial for understanding Rāzī’s philosophical thought, as he changed opinion on variety of subjects throughout his life, first accepting and then rejecting a significant number of theses: among those, the inconceivability of absolute non-existence, mental existence, the theory of impression, the conceptualist account of the universals, hylemorphism, the impossibility of the void, the accidentality of time, the accidentality of space. It is noteworthy that all these are Avicennian doctrines, which means that Rāzī’s philosophical positions evolved from a more Avicennian period (represented by the *Mabāḥiṭ*) to a less Avicennian one (represented by the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, the *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, the *Maṭālib*).

In sum, Rāzī is an eclectic author whose importance for post-Avicennian Islamic philosophy rivals that of Suhrawardī. The defining trait of Rāzī’s production is dialectical exhaustiveness and analytical clarity. On any given issue, Rāzī’s approach consists in the painstaking examination of every possible

Islamic Studies 18/3 (2007), 315-332.

60 For an exhaustive list of Rāzī’s works, both extant and not, see M. S. al-Zarkan, *Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wa-ārā’u-hu al-kalāmiyya wa-al-falsafīyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1963).

61 For the editions of the texts see *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl fī dirāyat al-uṣūl*, ed. S.A. Fūda, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ḍaḥā’ir, 2015); *al-Mabāḥiṭ al-mašriqiyya fī ‘ilm al-ilāhiyyāt wa-al-ṭabī‘iyyāt*, 2 vols. (Hyderabad, 1924); *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, ed. A. R. Nağafzāde, 2 vols. (Tehran, Anğuman-e Āṣār va Mafākhir-e Farhangī, 2005); *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn* [...], ed. Ṭ.A. Sa’d (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyya al-Azhariyya, 1978); *al-Arba‘īn fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. A.H. al-Saqqā, 9 vols. (Beirut: Maktabat al-Kulliyya al-Azhariyya, 1986); *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. A.H. al-Saqqā, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987). Only the logic part of the *Mulaḥḥaṣ* has been edited so far – see *Mantiq al-Mulaḥḥaṣ*, eds. A.F. Qarāmalikī, Ā. Āṣğarinijād (Tehran: Dānešgāh Imām Šādiq, 2002). For the whole work see the Berlin MS (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. or. oct. 623). For a chronology of Rāzī’s writings on philosophy and theology see A. Shihadeh, *The Theological Ethics*, pp.7-11; F. Griffel, ‘On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī Life [...]’, p.344.

62 See S.H. Nasr, ‘Fakḥ al-Dīn al-Rāzī,’ in M.M. Sharif (ed.), *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol.1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963) pp.642-656.

63 See A. Shihadeh, ‘From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī.’ *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005) 141-179; Id., *The Theological Ethics*; T. Jaffer, *Rāzī. Master of Qur’ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

argument for or against every possible thesis. This results in systematic and formalized argumentations that build on ideas coming from a variety of authors, and first of all Avicenna. In other words, Rāzī presents a polished, critical and comprehensive synthesis of the previous tradition. That is the reason why he is so important for the present study.

When it comes to general ontology and aetiology, Rāzī's main point of reference is Avicenna. In all his mature works he accepts the Avicennian proof that infers the existence of the Necessary Existent from the existence of contingent existents. He also presents a revision of the classical *kalām* proof from coming-to-be that introduces Avicenna's account of causality based on contingency: the material world came-to-be, what comes-to-be is contingent, and what is contingent is causally dependent⁶⁴. In sum, coming-to-be is the reason for causal dependence in an accidental sense, since it is a sign of essential contingency, and essential contingency is the real reason for causal dependence. Rāzī explicitly criticises those *mutakallimūn* that individuate the sole reason for causal dependence in coming-to-be, rejecting both the idea that the implication between coming-to-be as such and causal dependence is known by intuition (held by Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka'abī and the early Aš'arites) and the claim that such implication is known by inference (held by the Bahšamis)⁶⁵.

Rāzī does take into account the *kalām* proof from the essential equivalence of all bodies with respect to their differentiating accidents (and consequently the account of causality as arbitrary allocation of features). However, he presents several caveats and doubts concerning that proof. As for the caveats, he notices that the proof is far less powerful than Avicenna's: it establishes neither that the essences of bodies are contingent, nor that the agent which differentiates those essences is a necessary existent⁶⁶. As for the doubts, he mentions several objections, the most important of them being that the essential indifference of bodies leads to the rejection of the principle of sufficient reason⁶⁷. In sum, Rāzī deems Avicenna's account of causality better than its *kalām* counterparts, and takes pains to defend the fundamental element of that account (*i.e.*, the principle of sufficient reason). The main point where Rāzī's understanding of causality deviates from Avicenna's is the question of self-causation: Rāzī maintains that a quiddity may cause its own existence, whereas Avicenna rejects that⁶⁸.

To the best of my knowledge, no modern scholar presented a comprehensive account specifically devoted to the issue of efficient causality in Rāzī's thought. However, authors like Kafrawi and Ibrahim considered elements that have some connection to causality, like Rāzī's positions on theology and natural philosophy⁶⁹.

II.9 – Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī

64 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.200-206. Ġazālī does something similar in *Iqtisād*, pp.25.6 – 26.5.

65 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.207-214.

66 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.186.15 – 187.10.

67 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.182.13-183.4.

68 See *Infra*, Part 2, §3.

69 See S. Kafrawi, S.G. Djati, 'The Notion of Necessary Being in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Philosophical Theology,' *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15 (2004) 125-133; B. Ibrahim, 'Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī, Ibn al-Ḥayṭam and Aristotelian Science: Essentialism versus Phenomenalism in Post-Classical Islamic Thought,' *Oriens* 41 (2013), 379-431.

Abū Ğa‘far Muḥammad Ḥwāḡa Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī was born in Ṭūs (near Mašhad) in 1201. His father Wāḡih al-Dīn was an Imāmi cleric and granted Naṣīr al-Dīn an early education in the religious sciences. Ṭūsī perfected his education in Nišāpūr, studying mathematics, natural sciences (especially astronomy) and philosophy. From 1233 to 1256 Ṭūsī was at the service of the Ismā‘īli ruler of Sarkaḥt (in Khorasan), Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥtašim (d.1257). Ismā‘īlism exerted some influence over him, but the authenticity of his sectarian allegiance has been put into question⁷⁰. In consequence of the Mongol conquest of Khorasan in 1256, Ṭūsī began to serve Hülagü Khan (d.1265) as court astronomer, and accompanied him during the campaign that led to the fall of Baḡdād (1258). Thanks to the patronage of the Mongol ruler, Ṭūsī was able to commission the construction of a great observatory in Marāḡa, which began in 1259 and was completed in 1272. Ṭūsī died in Baḡdād two years later⁷¹.

Ṭūsī was a true polymath and an extremely prolific author: he is credited with more than one hundred fifty writing on astronomy, mathematics, biology, theology, logic, ethics and philosophy⁷². This study will mainly focus on his major philosophical and theological works: *Taghrīd al-i ‘tiqād* (a concise compendium of metaphysics and philosophical theology), *Maṣārī‘ al-maṣārī‘* (a refutation of Šahrastānī’s *Muṣāra‘at al-falāsifa*), *Šarḥ al-Išārāt* (also known as *Hall muškilāt al-Išārāt*, a commentary on Avicenna’s *Išārāt* and a super-commentary on Rāzī’s own *Šarḥ*), *Talḥiṣ al-Muḥaṣṣal* (a critical commentary on Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal*)⁷³. I will also consider the brief Persian treatise *Resāle dar ḡabr va qadar*, concerning the issue of free will and God’s determination of human acts⁷⁴.

At first glance one might be inclined to see Ṭūsī as a defender of pure Avicennism. Indeed, he presents a harsh attack on Šahrastānī’s refutation of Avicenna, and his commentary on the *Išārāt* is an explication of Avicenna’s text as much as a refutation of Rāzī’s own *Šarḥ*. However, the mere fact that Ṭūsī attacks Avicenna’s critics does not mean that he is always faithful to *al-Šayḥ al-Ra‘īs*. In some cases he presents elements that are not to be found in the Avicennian texts, and sometimes are even at odds with Avicenna’s actual doctrines. Let us consider two examples that are particularly relevant for

70 On the relation between Ṭūsī and the Ismā‘īlis see H. Dabashi, ‘Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī: The Philosopher/Vizier and the Intellectual Climate of His Times,’ in S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, vol.1 (London-New York: Routledge, 1996) pp.527-584; Id., ‘The Philosopher/Vizier Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī and the Isma‘īlis,’ in F. Daftary (ed.), *Medieval Isma‘īli History and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp.231-245; F. Daftary, ‘Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and the Ismailis of the Alamut Period,’ in N. Pourjavady, Z. Vesel (eds.), *Nasir al-Din Tusi: Philosophe et savant du XIIIe siècle* (Tehran: Presses Universitaires d’Iran, 2000), pp.59-67.

71 Among the sources on Ṭūsī’s life it is necessary to mention his Persian autobiography, the *Sayr va sulūk* – see *Contemplation and Action: The Spiritual Autobiography of a Muslim Scholar*, ed. S.J. Badakhshani (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998). For more information on other biographical sources and Ṭūsī’s life in general, see G. E. Lane, ‘Ṭūsī, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī i. Biography,’ *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition (2018) available online at <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/tusi-nasir-al-din-bio>> (accessed 30 January 2020).

72 For more detailed information on Ṭūsī’s bibliography see C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 2nd edition, vol.1, (Leiden: Brill, 1943), pp.670-676; Id., *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 1st edition, sup. 1 (Leiden-Brill 1937), pp.924-933; Id., *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 1st ed., sup. 3 (Leiden-Brill, 1932), pp. 1245-47.

73 For the editions of the texts see *Taghrīd al-‘aqā‘id* [= *Taghrīd al-i ‘tiqād*], ed. A. Sulaymān (Alexandria: Dār al-Ma‘rifā al-Ġāmi‘a, 1996); *Maṣārī‘ al-muṣārī‘*, ed. Ḥ. Mu‘izzī (Qom: Maṭba‘at al-Ḥayyām, 1984); *Šarḥ al-Išārāt* [= *Hall muškilāt al-Išārāt*, from now on *Hall*], ed. H.H. al-Āmolī, 2 vols. (Qom: Bustān-e Ketāb, 2007); *Talḥiṣ al-Muḥaṣṣal*, ed. A. Nūrānī (Beirut: Dār al-Aḡwā‘, 1985).

74 For the edition of the text see *The Metaphysics of Tusi*, ed. P. Morewedge, M.T. Mudarris-Raḡawi (New York: SSIPS, 1992), pp.1-43.

this study. The first is the account of modulation. Ṭūsī argues that every modulated predicate (e.g., existence) consists in a collection of essentially different instances which share a common external concomitant: this position can be traced back to Bahmanyār, but not to Avicenna, whose assertions on the nature of existence and modulation appear to imply the contrary (i.e., the essential unity of the instances of modulated predicates)⁷⁵. The second example is the ontological status of existence. Ṭūsī implies that existence is additional to quiddity only conceptually: in concrete reality the two are not distinct. Conceptualism about the quiddity-existence distinction is a Suhrawardian thesis, not an Avicennian one. None of the interpreters before Ṭūsī states that Avicenna's understanding of existence entails conceptualism. On the contrary, all other authors who explicitly consider the issue (Bahmanyār, Ġazālī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Suḥrawardī, Rāzī) agree that for Avicenna existence is extra-mentally additional to quiddity. The case of Suḥrawardī is particularly interesting, since he explicitly states that the Peripatetics (i.e., Avicenna's followers) defend realism about the quiddity-existence distinction: he even presents the proof which backs that thesis, namely the argument from doubt, and rejects it. Nothing like that is explicitly mentioned in Ṭūsī's works: the *Hall* merely describes the argument from doubt, mentioning none of the previous debates on the issue, whereas the appeal to conceptualism appears only when Ṭūsī needs to reject one of Rāzī's argumentation. If Ṭūsī's conceptualism comes from Suḥrawardī, as it seems probable, then in the *Hall* he is intentionally concealing a significant difference between his position and Avicenna's position, a difference his source (Suḥrawardī) explicitly underlines. In sum, the relation between Avicenna and Ṭūsī is more complicated than it appears: Ṭūsī presents a form of neo-Avicennism that actually draws from later sources on some important metaphysical issues (Bahmanyār, Suḥrawardī), appearing more anti-Rāzian than truly Avicennian.

As for the account of causality in particular, Ṭūsī appears to agree with Avicenna on both the premises that establish the actual existence of efficient causes (the contingency of composites, the principle of sufficient reason) and the consequences that follow from that (necessitarianism, the unicity and simplicity of the Necessary Existent, etc.). For example, in the *Resāle dar ḡabr va qadar* Ṭūsī explicitly rejects the hypothesis that a voluntary agent might choose between two absolutely equivalent alternatives for no reason (since that would contradict the principle of sufficient reason). He also rejects Rāzī's arguments in favour of self-causation.

However, it is important to notice that the metaphysical background of Ṭūsī's doctrine of causality is different from that of Avicenna's doctrine in at least one respect: conceptualism. This has important consequences, since Avicenna asserts the existence of things that have simple quiddities but depend on efficient causes in order to exist (the separate intellects): if there were no extra-mental distinction between quiddity and existence, as Ṭūsī claims, then it would be hard to justify why those things should be causally dependent, since they would not be extra-mentally composite. According to Avicenna, composition is what entails contingency, which in turn is what entails causal dependence.

As in the case of several other authors I previously discussed, modern scholar have produced a great number of studies on Ṭūsī, considering his thought from a variety of perspectives. Here I will only mention the works that have some direct connection to the issue of causality. Heer confronted Rāzī's

⁷⁵ See *Infra*, Part 1, §4.2.2, 4.3.1.

and Ṭūsī's position on the doctrine of emanation⁷⁶. Mayer discussed the controversy between Rāzī and Ṭūsī concerning Avicenna's proof for the unity of the Necessary Existent, noticing that Ṭūsī appeals to a specific account of modulation in order to answer Rāzī's objections against Avicenna⁷⁷. Fattahi analysed Ṭūsī's arguments for the simplicity of the Necessary Existent in comparison with those of Averroes⁷⁸.

76 See N. Heer, 'al-Rāzī and Ṭūsī on Ibn Sīnā's Theory of Emanation,' in P. Morewedge (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 111-25.

77 See T. Mayer, 'Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī's Critique of Ibn Sīnā's Argument for the Unity of God in the Iṣārāt, and Naṣīr ad-Dīn aṭ-Ṭūsī Defence' in D.C. Reisman, A.H. al-Rahim (eds.), *Before and After Avicenna. Proceeding of First Conference of the Avicenna Study Group* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003), pp.199-218.

78 See I.A. Fattahi, 'A Comparison Between Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī's and Ibn Rushd's Defence of Philosophy (The Issue of the Indivisibility of Necessary Being),' *Islamic Philosophy & Theology (Islamic Studies – Kalam)* 83/2 (2009-2010), 87-120.

Section III – Avicenna’s Doctrine of Efficient Causality: an Abridged Account

Before delving into the analysis of the debates concerning the premises of efficient causality, it is necessary to explicate what efficient causality exactly is, according to Avicenna. That is the aim of the present section, which encompasses six parts. The first part concerns the distinction between efficient causes and other kinds of causes (II.1). The second part concerns the distinction between causes of movement, causes of coming-to-be and causes of existence (II.2). The third part concerns the distinction between emanative causation and causation as the arbitrary allocation of features (II.3). The fourth part is a recapitulation of the nature of efficient causality according to Avicenna (II.4). The fifth part considers the properties of efficient causality (II.5). The sixth part takes into account the status of efficient causality within Avicenna’s system (II.6).

III.1 – Efficient Causes and Other Kinds of Causes

In order to grasp the specificities of the Avicennian account of efficient causality, it is useful to compare it with other kinds of causality, as well as with other accounts of efficient causality.

Following Aristotle, Avicenna subdivides causes into four categories: formal, material, efficient or active, and final. In *Ilahiyyāt*, VI.1, Avicenna defines the formal cause as «a part of the constitution of a thing». The expression «constitution» (*qiwām*) refers to the quiddity or essence of the thing, as the parallel passage in the *Iṣārāt* testifies⁷⁹. As for the material cause, it also a part of the quiddity, the difference between the formal cause and the material being that the former accounts for the actuality of the thing it is part of, whereas the latter accounts for its potentiality.

When it comes to the efficient or active cause, Avicenna states the following.

«By ‘agent’, [we mean] that cause which provides existence to something that is separate from the essence [of the cause itself], meaning that its essence is not, by primary intention, subject of inherence for what acquires the form that exists by means of that cause, so that the existence of that form is not in potentiality in the essence of the cause, except *per accidens*.»⁸⁰

Avicenna underlines two elements. The first is that the active cause gives its effect existence, whereas it does not constitute its very quiddity (unlike the material and the formal cause). The second element is that the active cause is not the subject of inherence (the substrate) of its effect. He adds that this is true «by primary intention» (*bi-l-qaṣḍi l-awwali*), meaning that the efficient cause is not the substrate of the effect inasmuch as it is an efficient cause. Avicenna appears to suggest that, even in case the efficient cause of a thing happened to be also the substrate of that thing, it would still be true that the fact of being efficient cause and the fact of being substrate (*i.e.*, material cause) would not imply one another.

79 See *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.257-258; *Iṣārāt*, pp.139.14 – 140.9.

80 *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.257.10-11. See also *Ibid.*, II, p.259.11-18.

The two above-mentioned characteristics (connection to existence, separation from the effect) are shared by the final cause, which is defined as «that cause in consideration of which the existence of something separate obtains» (*al-‘illata llatī li-ağli-hā yaḥsilu wuğūdu šay’in mubāyinin la-hā*).

At this point, we need to clarify what sets efficient and final causality apart. Avicenna says that the final cause is what actualizes the causality of the efficient cause, namely what prompts the efficient cause to act⁸¹. However, he also says that what most of the people call «agent» or «active cause» (*fā‘il*) is not an efficient cause in the true sense. That is because they understand the agent as something that may act and may not act, and comes to act on account of some factor that is additional to his essence, be it will, constriction or something else: in other words, what they call «agent» is the efficient cause inasmuch as its causality is potential and then becomes actual⁸². From this we can deduce that, for Avicenna, the real efficient cause is not reducible to the pure essence of the agent, understood as what may and may not act: rather, it is that essence inasmuch as it is considered together with all the conditions that actualize its causality. Among those conditions there is the presence of the final cause which motivates the agent’s action.

In sum, when Avicenna speaks of the efficient cause, he means one of two things: either the pure essence of the efficient cause, considered without the conditions that actualize its causality, or the essence of the cause together with the conditions that actualize its causality. It is evident that the final cause is something external to the former, whereas it needs to be included in the latter, being a condition of the actualization of efficient causality. That being said, not all efficient causes require a final cause (or generally a condition) that actualizes their causality: God, for example, does not act on account of a final cause or any condition, for that would make his essence defective⁸³.

81 *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.292.6-10. See also *Išārāt*, pp.139.18-20, 140.6-9. If the final cause is something that comes-to-be, its actualization of the efficient cause occurs on account of its (= the final cause’s) quiddity, inasmuch as that quiddity exists as a concept in the cognition of the efficient cause, and not on account of its external existence, which is an effect of the efficient cause itself. If the final cause is an eternal thing, then neither its thing-ness nor its eternal existence are produced by the efficient cause – see *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.292.15 – 293.3.

82 «The agent – namely what is called ‘agent’ by the mass – is not really a cause inasmuch they posit him as agent. In fact, they posit him as agent in such a way that it is necessary to consider that he does not act. So, he is not agent inasmuch as he is cause, but rather inasmuch as he is cause together with something concomitant. In fact, he is agent on account of the consideration of what he has effect over, with connection to the consideration of what he does not have effect over. It is as if the cause were called ‘agent’ when it is considered inasmuch as it has efficiency and inasmuch as it does not have efficiency. Because of that, everything they call ‘agent’ includes among its necessary conditions what follows: first he does not act, and then he wants, or is forced, or some other previously non-existent state befalls him, and when that thing connects to him, his essence together with that connected element becomes cause in actuality, while previously he was not like that. According to them, something is an agent inasmuch as it is cause in actuality after having been cause in potentiality, not inasmuch as it is only cause in actuality.» – *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.263.3-11. All passages mentioned in this study are translated by me, unless specified otherwise.

83 Avicenna argues that only those things whose essence is defective act on account of goals and objectives – see *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.297.7 – 298.12; *Išārāt*, pp.158.3 – 160.3. It is noteworthy that he also speaks of a «divine goal» (*ğāya ilāhiyya*), which consists in giving existence to every contingent existent, in adherence to a sort of principle of plenitude – see *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.289.10-15. However, it appears that this is a figure of speech, for Avicenna equates the divine goal with the divine «generosity» (*ğūd*), and divine generosity is defined as giving without wanting anything in return, giving with no additional goal other than giving itself.

In this study, the term «efficient cause» or «active cause» generally refers to the complete efficient cause, namely the cause that requires no additional condition for the actualisation of its efficiency, regardless of whether that completion is entailed the pure essence of the agent (as in the case of God) or whether it requires external factors (like the presence of final causes).

III.2 – The Subject of Causal Dependence and the Reason for Causal Dependence

Now that the difference between the efficient cause and the other kinds of causes has been clarified, it is necessary to focus on what sets Avicenna's peculiar account of efficient causality apart from other accounts. Two issues need to be considered. The first concerns the subject of causal dependence: what is the thing causal dependence is predicated of or, in other words, what is the thing effects acquire from their causes. The second concerns the reason that entails causal dependence, namely the characteristic shared by all effects that accounts for their dependence on efficient causes.

As for what depends on the efficient cause, Avicenna notices that some believe it to be coming-to-be (*ḥudūt*), and not existence *qua* existence. He is referring to the *mutakallimūn*, and more precisely to the Baṣran Mu'tazilites, for he adds that, according to those who believe that causal dependence concerns only coming-to-be, the effect may persist by itself after the annihilation of the cause⁸⁴: that is not the case for the Aš'arites and the Baḡdādian Mu'tazilites, who believe that the persistence of a thing is an accident that comes-to-be, and so things need an efficient cause in order to persist (since their persistence is something that comes-to-be)⁸⁵. Avicenna decisively rejects the claim that what depends on the efficient cause is coming-to-be, arguing that the very existence of the effect depends on its efficient cause: coming-to-be is merely an external concomitant of those instances of existence whose essence requires the temporal precedence of non-existence⁸⁶.

As for the reason behind causal dependence, there are three accounts that can be ordered according to increasing generality. The first is the Aristotelian account: what moves requires an efficient cause, movement being the passage of a certain substrate from the privation to the possession of a certain accident or a certain form⁸⁷. The second is the *kalām* account: what comes-to-be from non-existence requires an efficient cause, and coming-to-be does not necessarily entail a substrate. The third is Avicenna's own account: all and only contingent things depend on causes, contingency being the

84 «Some may opine that a thing needs the agent and the cause only to acquire existence after not having been. In case the thing already exists and the cause disappears, the thing would remain existent, being independent in itself. The opinion is that a thing needs a cause for its coming-to-be only, and when it comes-to-be and exists it is independent from the cause. For them the causes would be causes of coming-to-be only.» – *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.261.5-8.

85 Rāzī notices that most of the *mutakallimūn* do not accept the thesis that a thing may persist *per se*, not on account of an efficient cause: many believe that persistence itself is an accident that comes-to-be on account of the efficient cause; others believe that persistence is not an accident additional to the essence of the persistent thing, but accept that a thing may persist only if it acquires some other accident that comes-to-be on account of the efficient cause. He also challenges Avicenna's reconstruction of the thesis of the Baṣran Mu'tazilites, claiming that all rational people accept that existence, and not coming-to-be, is what the cause gives the effect: the disagreement concerns what is the reason behind causal dependence (see *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, pp.387.1 – 388.3).

86 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.261.8 – 263.2.

87 Avicenna presents this as the position of «the natural philosophers» (*al-ṭabī'īyyūn*) – see *Ibid.*, II, pp.258.13-16.

equivalent possibility of existence and non-existence on account of a thing's own quiddity⁸⁸. The implication between contingency and causal dependence is based on the principle of sufficient reason: the contingent is equivalent with respect to both its existence and its non-existence, and so both its existence and its non-existence require a cause that is external to the essence of the contingent. One of the crucial consequences of this position is that some eternal things can be said to be causally dependent⁸⁹. According to Avicenna, the criterion of discrimination between necessary and contingent existents is composition: all and only compositional existents are contingent⁹⁰. The expression 'compositional existents' refers to the existents that are involved in some form of composition, either as wholes or as parts.

In principle, Avicenna's account may include the other two as particular cases. However, according to Avicenna, everything that is in motion or comes-to-be is also essentially contingent (whereas the contrary is not true). In contrast with the *mutakallimūn*, however, Avicenna generally rejects the idea that a thing may come-to-be without a pre-existent substrate (with the notable exception of the human rational soul).

Paraphrasing Avicenna's own words, there are two 'levels' of causality: causality according to natural philosophy, which is related to movement and coming-to-be, and causality according to metaphysics, which is related to existence *qua* existence⁹¹. The two are not mutually exclusive kinds. The relation between 'natural' causality and 'metaphysical' causality is that between species and genus, for movement (*i.e.*, existence inasmuch as it moves or comes-to-be) is a subset of existence *qua* existence. From the perspective of general metaphysics, the act of giving existence is primarily considered in an unqualified sense, just like existence itself is primarily considered in an unqualified sense. The cause according to metaphysics is what gives existence to the effect, regardless of any additional qualification that may attach to that existence. The cause according to natural philosophy is what gives existence to the effect inasmuch as that existence entail moving or coming-to-be. In sum, the genus is causality related to existence *qua* existence, and one of its species is causality related to movement or coming-to-be. The other species is causality related to stability or persistence. In the

88 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.38.11 – 39.16. According to Avicenna, this is the position of «the divine philosophers» (*al-ilāhiyyūn*) – see *Ibid.*, II, pp.258.13-16.

89 See *Iṣārāt*, pp.149.6 – 150.3.

90 «As for that whose existence is contingent, its peculiar characteristic has already been clarified: it necessarily needs something else which makes it existent in actuality. Everything which is contingently existent is perpetually contingent in consideration of its essence. However, it may happen that its existence is necessary by means of another. That befalls it either perpetually or not perpetually, but rather in a certain moment and not in another. Something like that must have a matter whose existence is prior in time, as we will clarify. That thing whose existence is perpetually necessary by means of another is not simple either, because what belongs to it in consideration of its essence is not what belongs to it from the other thing: its ipseity (*huwiyya*) obtains in existence from the two together. Because of that, nothing except the Necessary Existent can be divested of the intimate connection with potentiality and contingency in consideration of itself. [The Necessary Existent] is the singular and anything else is a compositional pair.» – *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.47.10-19.

91 «By 'agent', the divine philosophers do not mean merely the principle of motion, like the natural philosophers. They rather mean the principle of existence, what provides it: like the Creator with respect to the world. As for the natural active cause, it does not provide an existence that is not motion, according to one of the respects of motion. In natural philosophy, the giver of existence is the principle of movement.» – *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.257.13-16.

Nağāt, Avicenna explicitly distinguishes between causes of coming-to-be (*ḥudūt*) and causes of stability or persistence (*tibāt*)⁹². Eternal contingent existents have causes of stability, not causes of coming-to-be. As for the contingent existents that come-to-be, they are of two kinds: those that do not persist after their coming-to-be, and those that persist after their coming-to-be. The latter have both causes of coming-to-be and causes of persistence. In some cases, the cause of coming-to-be is the same as the cause of persistence (e.g., the mold is both cause of coming-to-be and cause of persistence for the shaping of the water contained in the mold). In other cases, the cause of coming-to-be is different from the cause of persistence (e.g., the cause of the coming-to-be of a statue is the artisan, whereas the cause of its persistence is the dryness of the elements that compose the statue).

At first glance, Avicenna's assertions in *Ilāhiyyāt*, VI.3 may seem to contradict what has been said so far, namely that efficient causality concerns primarily existence *qua* existence, and secondarily either coming-to-be or persistence. Avicenna argues that the cause either provides the effect with a certain thing or quality (*ma'nā*) that is different from existence (e.g., fire that gives heat to water), or provides it with nothing but existence itself (e.g., God that gives existence to the world)⁹³. However, this does not contradict the principle that, from a general metaphysical perspective, the efficient cause is first of all cause of existence in an unqualified sense. In the first case, Avicenna calls 'effect' the receptive substrate of the effect (e.g., water), but the real effect of the cause is the existence of the above-mentioned thing or quality (e.g., heat), which is something that can only exist in a substrate (heat exist as an accident of water). In the second case, on the other hand, the effect of the cause is the existence of a self-subsistent thing. In both cases the cause gives existence to its effect, even though existence is considered according to two different qualifications (subsistence in a substrate and self-subsistence). This points to another subdivision of causality, namely that between causes of existence self-subsistent things and causes of things that subsist in a substrate.

In sum, every efficient cause is cause of existence in an unqualified sense, and so the study of causality in a general sense is proper to metaphysics, not to natural philosophy or theology. Then, causes can be subdivided according to the kind of existence the effects acquire. There are two main subdivisions. The first is between causes of coming-to-be and causes of persistence. The second is that between causes of self-subsistent existents (substances) and causes of existents that subsist in a substrate (accidents, forms). These two subdivisions are not at odds with one another, but rather intersect one another: there can be causes of the coming-to-be of self-subsistent existents as well as causes of the persistence of self-subsistent existents, causes of the coming-to-be existents that subsist in a substrate, causes of the persistence of existents that subsist in a substrate.

In *Ilāhiyyāt*, VI.3, Avicenna presents several secondary distinctions that classify causes in relation to their effects, with particular attention to the comparison between the causes of non-self-subsistent

92 See *Nağāt*, pp.570.10 – 572.9.

93 See *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.269.15 – 270.10, 276.8-12.

things (accidents, forms) and their receptive substrates⁹⁴. I will not delve more into the minutiae of Avicenna's discussion, for that would exceed the scope of this study.

III.3 – Necessitating Causality, Causality as Arbitrary Differentiation, and the Principle of Plenitude

According to Avicenna, the reason of causal dependence is essential contingency: what requires an efficient cause because is essentially contingent (*i.e.*, its existence is equivalent to its non-existence, inasmuch as its essence is concerned). Contingency entails causal dependence on account of the principle of sufficient reason: that whose existence and non-existence are equivalent requires an external cause in order to exist. At this point, an additional clarification is needed in order to avoid a possible confusion, namely that between Avicenna's understanding of efficient causation and the conception of efficient causation as arbitrary differentiation, defended by several *mutakallimūn*.

Not all *kalām* arguments for God's existence are based on the coming-to-be of the material world, and consequently on an account of causation where the reason behind causal dependence is coming-to-be. One peculiar argument is based on the essential equivalence of all bodies: all bodies share the same essence, namely corporeality (*i.e.*, non-void three-dimensionality) as such. Consequently, each specific body acquires its differentiating features (*e.g.*, its specific dimensions, colours, etc.) not on account of its own essence, which is identical to the essence of every other body, but rather on account of the arbitrary choice of an incorporeal agent (*i.e.*, God) that allocates the those differentiating features by sheer will. Rāzī calls this argument «the inference from the contingency of attributes» (*al-istidlāl bi-imbkān al-ṣifāt*)⁹⁵. The account of causation that emerges from this kind of proof is based on contingency understood as equivalence or indifference: the equivalence of bodies with respect to their differentiating accidents, which entails the need for the allocating action of an external agent. Causality as arbitrary differentiation share this characteristic with Avicenna's own understanding of efficient causality.

94 The first distinction is that between causes that produce the same quality they themselves possess (*e.g.*, fire and heat) and causes that produce some other quality they do not possess (*e.g.*, heat and rarefaction) – *Ṣifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.268.16-18. The second distinction is that between cause of species of things (*e.g.*, the soul causes its voluntary action), which cannot belong to the species of their effects, and causes of the individuals (*e.g.*, this fire causes that fire, this father causes that son), which may belong to the same species as their effects – *Ṣifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.280.11 – 281.8. The third distinction concerns the causes of individuals in particular, and discriminates on account of the comparison between the preparation (*isti'dād*) that is present in the cause and the preparation that is present in the receptive substrate. The cause and the receptive substrate either share the same preparation (*e.g.*, fire ignites fire) or do not share the same preparation (*e.g.*, the light of the sun makes the moon passively shiny but not actively so, unlike the sun itself). When the two share the same preparation, the preparation of the receptive substrate may be complete (*e.g.*, heated water is completely prepared to become something that cools down other things, for it is its cold nature to do so) or deficient. When the preparation of the receptive substrate is deficient, that is either because there is some obstacle that persists even when the substrate acquires the quality at stake (*e.g.*, heated water gives off heat but that is hindered by the cold nature of the water), or because the substrate possesses some contrary quality that ceases to be when the quality at stake comes to be (*e.g.*, the substrate of water may become fire and the form of water ceases to be when the form of fire comes-to-be), or because the substrate lacks both the quality and the preparation to receiving that quality (*e.g.*, he who lacks the sense of taste when it comes to feeling a taste) – see *Ṣifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.281.10 – 282.10.

95 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.184.4 – 186.15.

The two accounts, however, differ in three fundamental respects. First of all, the arbitrary cause that allocates the differentiating features has a restricted influence: it exerts causal efficiency over the accidents of corporeal existents, but not over the essence of corporeality, or over other (hypothetical) incorporeal existents. On the other hand, Avicenna's account of causation has an unrestricted reach: every contingent existent can be traced back to an efficient cause, regardless of whether that contingent existent is a substantial or accidental, corporeal or incorporeal.

Secondly, causation as the arbitrary allocation of features is less powerful than Avicenna's understanding of causation, inasmuch as their implications are concerned. Avicenna's doctrine of causality entails the existence of a First Cause that exists necessarily (once infinite regress and circularity have been ruled out). That is not the case for causation as the arbitrary allocation of features: the First Cause that allocates the differentiating features of corporeal existents must be incorporeal, but nothing prevents it from being essentially contingent⁹⁶.

Thirdly, even though both accounts of causation appeal to the principle of sufficient reason in order to establish the necessity of efficient causes, they differ with respect to the extension of the applicability of the principle. In fact, both theories maintain that a situation of indifference or equivalence (between existence and non-existence, or between the distinguishing features of corporeal existents) requires an external efficient cause that makes one of the alternative prevail over the other. According to the majority of the *mutakallimūn*, however, the principle of sufficient reason cannot apply to God's arbitrary act of will, which remains fundamentally unexplainable. According to Avicenna, on the other hand, the principle of sufficient reason is universally applicable, and thus God's causal action must be explained by a sufficient reason (which is God's own essence). This fundamental disagreement leads to two radically different ways of conceiving God's causal action. For those who defend Avicenna's doctrine of emanative causality, God is a necessitating cause that acts by essence (*mūğib bil-dāt*). For those who maintain that causality may encompass arbitrary differentiation, God is a voluntary agent endowed with freedom of indifference (*qādir muğtār*).

The idea that God's causal action is not subject to the principle of sufficient reason is not necessarily restricted to the account of causation as the arbitrary allocation of the differentiating features of bodies. Indeed, several *mutakallimūn* maintain that God has freedom of indifference even when they adopt some element of Avicenna's causal theory. Ġazālī and Šahrastānī are noteworthy examples of this attitude. On the one hand, they accept that the ultimate reason of causal dependence is neither coming-to-be nor the indifference of corporeality with respect to its differentiating features, but rather essential contingency⁹⁷. On the other hand, they maintain that the divine essence is not the sufficient reason why God acts in a certain way instead of another. Ġazālī explicitly states that God may arbitrarily choose between equivalent alternatives without needing any sufficient reason⁹⁸. Šahrastānī criticizes the Avicennian doctrine of essential necessitation by claiming that, if God were a necessitating cause that

96 Rāzī underlines this problem – see *Ibid.*, I, pp.182.13-183.4.

97 Unlike Avicenna, Ġazālī deduces contingency from coming-to-be and not from composition – see *Iqtisād*, pp.24.6 – 26.5. On the other hand, Šahrastānī deduces contingency from coming-to-be as well as from composition, just like Avicenna – see *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.15.2-17.

98 See *Tahāfut*, pp.86.20 – 87.10.

acts by essence, then He could not distinguish between a certain subset of contingent existents and any other subset, since all contingent existents are equivalent in their essential contingency. The consequence is that God would create all contingent existents, that are infinite⁹⁹.

Šahrastānī's critique highlights a possible corollary of Avicenna's understanding of causation, namely the so-called principle of plenitude: everything that is contingent must be brought into existence, since all contingents are equivalent in their essential contingency and there is no sufficient reason that justifies why an essentially necessitating cause should discriminate between a specific subset of contingents and the others. Avicenna does not explicitly thematize the issue in these terms. However, his treatment of theodicy suggests that he does accept the principle of plenitude. In *Ilāhiyyāt*, VI.5, Avicenna explicitly states that the creation of evil in the world is a necessary consequence that follows from the achievement of the «divine goal» (*al-ġāya al-ilāhiyya*), namely the emanation of existence over all contingent existents, even those whose existence may produce harm to other existents by secondary intention (*e.g.*, fire)¹⁰⁰. This assertion suggests that all contingent things must come to exist. In *Ilāhiyyāt*, IX.6, Avicenna's justification of the presence of evil in the sub-lunar world comes down to two ideas: first, it is impossible for the sub-lunar world not to contain evil, since the level of existence that does not contain evil (*i.e.*, the celestial world) is already completely instantiated; second, the sub-lunar world must exist, because it contains more good than evil and because its non-existence would entail the non-existence of its necessitating cause, which are purely good¹⁰¹. This reasoning points to the idea of a gradual exhaustion of possibilities that must be brought to completion, which is in line with the principle of plenitude.

III.4 – The Nature of Avicennian Causality: a Recapitulation

Let us recollect what has been said so far. First of all, the efficient cause is separate from its effect and gives existence to it, unlike the formal and the material cause, that are parts of the very quiddity of their effect.

The term «efficient cause» can designate a defective cause (or cause in potentiality) as well as a complete cause (or cause in actuality). The final cause is one of the conditions that actualize the causality of certain defective causes. For Avicenna, the true efficient cause is that whose causal efficiency is actualized, and thus includes all the conditions that actualize its causality, not the mere essence of a thing that may and may not cause. Not all efficient causes require the presence of conditions actualizing their causal potentiality.

The efficient cause causes the existence of its effect, not merely its coming-to-be from non-existence. The condition for causal dependence is not movement or coming-to-be, but rather essential contingency (*i.e.*, the possibility to exist and not to exist indifferently). The necessity of efficient causality is based on the principle of sufficient reason: every contingent existent requires a cause in order to exist, because contingency entails equivalence between existence and non-existence, and

99 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.15.17 – 16.10.

100 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.289.10-15.

101 See *Ibid.*, II, pp.418.18 – 419.4.

equivalence requires a cause in order for one of the alternatives to obtain. The criterion of discrimination between contingent and necessary existents is composition: all and only compositional existents (composites, parts of composites) are contingent.

For Avicenna, the applicability of the principle of sufficient reason is unrestricted: every contingent thing or state of affairs requires an efficient cause, not only the differentiating accidents of bodies, as in the *kalām* argument from the arbitrary differentiation of the accidents of bodies. More in general, Avicenna's doctrine of emanative causation differs from the voluntarist account of causation defended by the *mutakallimūn* in that the former rejects the possibility of a voluntary agent that acts arbitrarily (*i.e.*, not on account of any sufficient reason), whereas the latter accept that possibility.

Efficient causality as the act of giving existence in an unqualified sense is common to all kinds of causes, regardless of whether their effects come-to-be or endure eternally, or whether they self-subsistent or something that inheres in a substrate.

The aim of my work is precisely to tackle causality from the perspective of general metaphysics, considering the efficient causes of existence *qua* causes of existence. This will obviously require to consider the different species of causality under such genus, especially God's causality, but that is not the primary focus of the work. The primary focus of the work is to discuss the premises that make it possible to conceive efficient causality as such, as well as those that establish the actual existence of efficient causes in the most general sense.

III.5 – The Properties of Efficient Causality

The picture of efficient causality that emerges from the Avicennian account possesses a specific sum of properties, namely a set of elements that is proper to it and not to other accounts of causation.

The first property is the universality of causality: every existent is either an effect, or a cause, or both an effect and a cause (even though according to different respects). Avicenna argues that this is a syllogistic truth, not a primitive one¹⁰². He is probably referring to the fact that, in order to establish the universality of causality, it is necessary to assume the principle of sufficient reason (*i.e.*, every contingent existent needs a cause) and the unicity of a necessary existent which is both causeless and first cause of all existents.

The second property is necessitarianism: everything that exists is either necessary *per se* or necessary with relation to its cause. What is not necessary does not exist. This is a consequence of the principle of sufficient reason: if the connection between the cause and the effect were contingent, that very connection would need an additional cause in order to exist (since essential contingency entails causal dependence)¹⁰³.

102 «Some say that the essence of 'existent' is to be active or passive. This is among the divisions of 'existent', even though it is [true] and necessarily so. 'Existent' is more known than 'active' or 'passive': the mass of the people conceive the essence of 'existent' and not know that it must be active or passive. As for me, to this day that fact has manifested to me only via syllogism.» – *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.30.6-10.

103 See *Ibid.*, I, p.39.6-16.

The third property is the existential priority of the existence of the cause over that of the effect: the cause is prior to the effect since the existence of the former entails the existence of the latter, whereas the contrary is not true (the same goes for non-existence). This kind of priority does not entail any temporal priority. Avicenna presents the example of the hand and the key: we judge that the movement of the hand is prior to the movement of the key even though they occur at the same moment¹⁰⁴.

The fourth property is the temporal simultaneity between cause and effect: the cause (inasmuch as it is cause in actuality) and the effect must exist at the same time¹⁰⁵. This entails two things, namely the rejection of causal indifference and the rejection of causal pastness. First of all, it is impossible for the cause to exist both when the effect does not exist and when the effect exists: that would contradict the principle of sufficient reason, for there would be no necessary connection between cause and effect¹⁰⁶. Secondly, it is impossible for a non-existent cause to entail the existence of the effect: something non-existent cannot be the cause of the existence of a thing, even though it can be the cause of its non-existence¹⁰⁷.

III.6 – The Place of Efficient Causality in Avicenna’s System

Efficient causality plays a crucial role in at least three areas of Avicenna’s system.

The first is physics. Efficient causality provides the foundational framework for interpreting all perceptible phenomena, from alternation to generation and corruption, from accretion to locomotion.

The second area is cosmology at large. Efficient causality makes it possible to address a series of issues concerning the material universe (*e.g.*, its eternity), as well as the immaterial beings that are placed between the material universe and God (*e.g.*, the existence of separate intellects and celestial souls, their relative degrees, their action over material beings).

The third area is theology. First of all, efficient causality enables Avicenna to deduce the existence of the Necessary Existent from the existence of contingent existents, once infinite regress and circularity have been ruled out¹⁰⁸. Furthermore, Avicenna’s account of causality is a fundamental premise of his theses concerning the simplicity and the unicity of the Necessary Existent, as well as His very nature. He argues that the Necessary Existent must be simple because every composite existent is contingent (unicity derives from simplicity)¹⁰⁹. This point is connected to the account of causality because the contingency of composite existents is to be counted among the premises that establish the actual

104 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.164.18 – 165.9.

105 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.165.9-11, 167.1-5.

106 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.165.11 – 166.17.

107 See *Ibid.*, I, p.39.5-6. This second point is generally left implicit in Avicenna’s works, with the exception of the *Nağāt*, where he says that it is impossible for an infinite chain of contingent causes to exist together at the same moment – see *Nağāt*, pp.566.15 – 568.13. Rāzī notices that the Avicennian demonstration of the Necessary Existent requires the exclusion of the possibility of an infinite chain of contingent causes that do not exist together in time, each one of them existing before its effect and ceasing to exist when the effect comes to be: such exclusion is necessary since for Avicenna time is eternal *ex parte ante*, and thus there could be an infinite regress of temporally separated contingent causes that does not lead to a necessary cause – see *Maṭālib*, I, pp.130-133.

108 See *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.327-342.

109 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.43-47, VIII.4, pp.343-344, 348-349.

existence of efficient causes: it establishes that there are contingent existents and, according to the principle of sufficient reason, contingency is the reason for causal dependence. As for the essential nature of God, Avicenna argues that it must be an instance of self-subsistent existence devoid of any additional quiddity, since we know that the Necessary is simple and is existent, and it is impossible for a quiddity to cause its own existence¹¹⁰. The impossibility of self-causation is connected to one of the peculiar properties of causality according to Avicenna's account, namely the existential priority of the cause over the effect.

110 See *Ibid.*, II, pp.344-347.

Section IV – Overview of the Study

The present work aims to highlight the fundamental premises of Avicenna's conception of causality and present the controversies that revolve around them. There are nine doctrinal elements that play some role as premises of causality. The study is structured in a modular way, each individual chapter focusing on one of those nine elements. Every chapter is organized in the same fashion. First of all, it explicates the specific premise it focuses on, as well as its importance for the Avicennian doctrine of causality. Secondly, it outlines Avicenna's position on the issue, as well as that of his interpreters. Then, it analyses the debates on the issue, presenting the main arguments and counter-arguments in a concise form. Finally, it presents a summary recap underlining the elements of Avicenna's doctrine that persist in his interpreters and those that are revised or rejected by them, as well as the most notable implications of the different positions at stake.

Overall, the study is organized in two main parts. The first part encompasses the premises that constitute the background of causality. The second part encompasses the premises that establish Avicenna's causal theory.

IV.1 – First Part: General Ontology

Avicenna's general ontology is a complex system made of a multiplicity of assertions. Six of them are crucial for causality, not because they entail the actual existence of efficient causes, but rather because they constitute the necessary conditions for the conceivability of the essence of causality and for the possibility of its existence: they are the ontological background of causality.

The first premise is the notion of existence as such, which is necessary in order to conceive the essence of causality. In fact, efficient causality has been defined as the act of giving existence to something separate from the cause: existence is a part of this definition¹¹¹.

The second premise is the universality of existence, namely its being a maximally extensive predicate. Avicenna says that causality is universally applicable: everything is either a cause, or an effect, or both a cause and an effect (according to different respects). Since causality is the act of giving existence, its universality requires the universality of existence as a necessary condition¹¹².

The third premise is the commonality of existence, namely its non-equivocity. If existence were equivocal, assuming different meanings when predicated of different things, efficient causality would be equivocal as well, and there would be no single notion of cause¹¹³.

The fourth premise is the modulation of existence: unlike a genus, existence is predicated according to priority and posteriority, and according to greater and lesser worthiness. This kind of modulation is a necessary condition for conceiving the fundamental asymmetry between cause and effect: the cause is existentially prior to the effect, and more worthy of existence than it. If existence were a univocal

111 See *Infra*, Part 1, §1.

112 See *Infra*, Part 1, §2.

113 See *Infra*, Part 1, §3.

predicate, with no differentiation whatsoever between its instances (like a genus), that asymmetry would not be possible, and thus it would not be possible to discriminate between the cause and the effect¹¹⁴.

The fifth premise is the additionality or externality of existence: the existence of a thing is neither the same as its quiddity nor one of the constitutive parts of that quiddity, being rather an external addition to it. This is a necessary condition for causality, since according to Avicenna the cause cannot give the effect what the latter already possesses *per se* (i.e., its quiddity): if the existence of the effect were the same as its quiddity, or one of the parts of its quiddity, existence could not be causally dependent¹¹⁵.

The sixth premise is essential contingency: what is essentially contingent may exist and may not exist, inasmuch as its essence is concerned. Contingency is necessary for causality since what is essentially contingent can be causally dependent, whereas what is essentially necessary cannot. It follows that contingency must be possible in order for causality to be possible. Avicenna understands essential contingency as absolute equivalence with respect to existence and non-existence. This understanding of contingency is necessary for one of the premises that lead to the assertion of the actual existence of efficient causes, namely the principle of sufficient reason¹¹⁶.

IV.2 – Second Part: Aetiology

In the context of this study, the term «aetiology» refers to the system of premises that specifically concern causality in its actuality, meaning that they lead to the assertion of the real existence of efficient causes and to the discrimination between the existents that are causally dependent and those that are not.

The first premise is the actual existence of contingent existents, which is grounded in composition: there are composite existents, and everything that is composite is contingent. This premise is necessary for establishing the actual existence of causes, since the actual existence of causes is based on the principle of sufficient reason, and the principle of sufficient reason requires the existence of contingent existents: if there were no contingent existents, there would be no causes¹¹⁷.

The second premise is the principle of sufficient reason, which states that everything that is equivalent with respect to both existence and non-existence needs a reason which accounts for its existence (and for its non-existence): that reason is the existence of the cause (or its non-existence)¹¹⁸.

The third premise is the impossibility of self-causation: a quiddity cannot be the efficient cause of its own existence. It follows that a necessary existent cannot consist in a quiddity that causes its own existence. Together with the contingency of composites and the additionality of existence, this premise constitutes a criterion of perfect discrimination between contingent and necessary existents: everything

114 See *Infra*, Part 1, §4.

115 See *Infra*, Part 1, §5.

116 See *Infra*, Part 1, §6.

117 See *Infra*, Part 2, §1.

118 See *Infra*, Part 1, §2.

whose existence is additional to its quiddity is contingent, and everything necessary is such that its existence is not additional to its quiddity¹¹⁹.

119 See *Infra*, Part 2, §3.

FIRST PART
—
ONTOLOGY

Foreword

The first part of this work aims to investigate the debates around six core theses of Avicenna's general ontology. All of them concern existence as such. The first is the semantization of existence: the expression «existence» designates a definite meaning which is intuitively known and undefinable. The second is the universality of existence and mental existence: existence is a maximally extensive predicate, and can be qualified as either concrete or mental. The third is the notional commonality of existence: «existence» is not an equivocal term, in the sense that its essential meaning is contextually invariant. The fourth is the modulation of existence: different kind of things possess existence in different degrees. The fifth is the accidentality of existence: existence is extra-mentally distinct from quiddity, and is external to it. The sixth is the contingency of existence: it is possible for existence to be contingent, and contingency entails equivalence with respect to existence and non-existence. These theses represent the necessary background of Avicenna's aetiology. As I will show, the rejection of even one of them entails the rejection of the Avicennian take on efficient causality.

CHAPTER 1 – The Notion of Existence

§1.1 – The Meaning of this Premise, and the Need for It

§1.1.1 – The Meaning of the Premise

An ontology is a structure of propositions that describe what exists inasmuch as it exists. In order to understand and validate (or invalidate) those propositions, one needs to understand the meaning of «existence», namely the semantic content that is signified by this expression.

The meaning of «existence» is particularly elusive, since other terms do not express it more clearly than «existence» itself. One could define it as «positivity», or «reality», but these expressions are mere synonyms of «existence». On the other hand, composite definitions such as «being present outside the mind» are fallacious in two ways: first of all, they include the very notion they should define, for «being present» is nothing but existence, and the mind itself must be something existent; secondly, they distort the notion of «existence» by composing a wide notion that is actually identical to «existence» itself («being present») with a restriction («outside the mind»).

The impossibility to conduct a proper semantic analysis of «existence» is crucial for the Avicennian conceptualisation of that notion: according to Avicenna, if one tried to explain the nature of existence, he would immediately come to a halt, for every possible definition or description would include the very thing it should define or describe. In other words, existence is a primitive notion which is known *per se*, not by means of another notion.

Another feature which needs to be considered is the simplicity of existence, or its intrinsic unity: existence as such does not include parts, and thus is not divisible in any sense.

It is noteworthy that the impossibility to properly explain the meaning of «existence» in terms of other notions is in itself some sort of elucidation, albeit a negative one, in that it is a sign of two interconnected essential features of existence. Existence is primitive in the sense that its notion cannot be inferred from other notions in any way. Additionally, existence is simple in the sense that it is unanalysable, lacking parts in any sense. In sum, existence is both a «semantic first» and a «semantic minimum»: these two attributes point out the notion of existence according to relation and negation.

Another indirect way to clarify the notion of existence is to reject inadequate semantizations. This is what Bahmanyār and Rāzī do when they argue that existence is the very fact that a quiddity exists, not some other thing by means of which that quiddity is existent. In other words, existence is the existence of a thing, not an existent thing.

§1.1.2 – The Need for the Premise

The notion of existence is necessary for the conceptualization of efficient causality. The latter has been defined as the fact that a thing gives existence to another thing: it is evident that existence is a part of this definition.

§1.2 – The Notion of Existence in Avicenna and his Interpreters

§1.2.1 – The Notion of Existence in Avicenna

It is common knowledge that the notions of «existent» (*mawǧūd*) and «existence» (*wuǧūd*) are placed at the very core of the metaphysics of Avicenna, who famously defines the object of that science as «the existent inasmuch as it is existent» (*al-mawǧūdu bi-mā huwa mawǧūdun*)¹²⁰.

Modern scholars produced a multiplicity of studies on this topic, approaching it from different points of view. Bertolacci analysed the role of existence as the fundamental subject-matter of metaphysics, discussing the roots of Avicenna's conception of the metaphysical science in Greek and Arabic Peripateticism¹²¹. He also addressed the notion of existence in its distinction from that of quiddity or thing-ness, stressing the inseparability of the two as well as the relative primacy of existence with respect to quiddity, against previous essentialist understandings¹²². The notion of existence inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity is the subject of studies by De Haan, Druart, Lizzini, Wisnovsky, and others: among these, particular attention needs to be directed to De Haan's proposal of a mereological interpretation of the distinction (*i.e.*, quiddity and existence are the most fundamental parts of existent things), as well as to Wisnovsky's reconstruction of its historical background in the discussions between Mu'tazilites and Aš'arites¹²³.

In light of this variety, it is necessary to restate that the aim of the present inquiry is only to highlight the Avicennian semantization of «existence», as well as those qualifications which help clarify that semantization. In particular, I am going to highlight its transcendence of the mental-concrete divide, its primitivity, and its internal unity (*i.e.*, simplicity).

Avicenna's most detailed discussion of the notion of existence as such is to be found in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5. I will break the text down according to the ordering of the topics that we mentioned beforehand.

As for the very meaning of term in question, no proper definition or description of the concept of existence can be provided, according to Avicenna: I will delve into this point while considering the primitivity of existence. However, there is a difference between the claim that the notion signified by the expression «existence» is undefinable, and the claim that «existence» as an expression has no equivalent, in the sense that it is the only expression which may signify that undefinable notion. As a matter of fact, Avicenna lists three synonyms of «existent»: «occurring» or «realised» (*hāṣil*), «obtained» (*muḥaṣṣal*), and «established» or «affirmed» (*muṭbat*)¹²⁴. From this we can deduce that

120 See *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.13.8-13.

121 See A. Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifā'*, cit., pp.111-211.

122 See A. Bertolacci, 'The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna's Metaphysics. The Text and Its Context,' cit., pp.257-188.

123 See D. De Haan, 'A mereological construal of the primary notions Being and Thing in Avicenna and Aquinas,' *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 88/2 (2014), 335-360; Th.A. Druart, 'Shay' or Res as Concomitant of Being in Avicenna,' *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione filosofica medievale*, 12 (2001), 125-142; O. Lizzini, 'Wuǧūd-Mawǧūd/Existence-Existent in Avicenna. A Key Ontological Notion of Arabic Philosophy,' *Quaestio*, 3 (2003), 111-138; R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*, pp.145-180.

124 See *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, p.31.3. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp.31.5-12; 32.18.

«existence» is synonymous of «occurrence» or «realisation» (*huṣūl*), «obtaining» (*taḥṣīl*), and «positivity» or «affirmation» (*iṭbāt*).

Moreover, Avicenna further qualifies existence as «the affirmative existence» (*al-wuḡūd al-iṭbātī*), in order to distinguish it from what he calls «the peculiar existence» (*al-wuḡūd al-ḥaṣṣ*) of a thing, namely the quiddity by means of which that thing is what it is. There is no need to hypothesise that this is a hint at a notion even more general than existence («the positive existence») and quiddity («the proper existence»): in this case, the expression «existence» which is common to both is simply equivocal. The important point to notice is that Avicenna semantizes existence, or «affirmative existence», as something distinct from «thing» (*ṣay*), «essence» (*ḥaqīqa*), and «peculiar existence»: the semantization of existence emerges in explicit opposition to the semantization of quiddity.

Another important point to consider is that Avicenna's semantization of existence does not equate existence with presence outside of the mind, as for example Fārābī does¹²⁵. I will provide a detailed analysis of this issue in the chapter devoted to mental existence and to the extension of existence¹²⁶. For now, it is necessary to keep in mind that the Avicennian notion of existence transcends the mental-concrete divide, and this is intrinsically related to the universal extension of existence itself (there is no subject existence cannot be predicated of).

Let us consider the epistemological status of the notion signified by «existence». First of all, Avicenna states that existence is such that its notion is impressed in the soul in a primary way¹²⁷. Then, he says that existence is among the things most adequate to being object of conceptualisation *per se*. The reason behind this claim lies in the fact that existence is comprehensive of all things. As a consequence, there can be no real «notification» (*ta'rif*)¹²⁸ of existence by means of other notions, for this would entail that there is something essentially «more known» (*a'raf*) than existence. However, Avicenna does not deny that, in some contexts, certain expressions may be helpful for clarifying the meaning of existence: there can be situations in which, on account of reasons external to the meaning of the notions involved, a certain term becomes more known than «existence» and so may help recall something that is somehow already present. Avicenna calls this operation «reminding» (*tanbīh*) and «making present to the mind» (*iḥṭār bi-l-bāl*).

125 See *Ibid.*, pp.31.5- 32.2. On Fārābī's position see *Kitāb al-ḥurūf*, ed. Š. Ibrahīm (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2006), pp.61.24-25, 62.11-12.

126 See *Infra*, §2.

127 The information presented in this paragraph comes from *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.29.5- 31.2. Studies on Avicenna's take on primitive notions can be found in J.A. Aertsen, 'Avicenna's Doctrine of the Primary Notions and its Impact on Medieval Philosophy,' in A. Akasoy and W. Raven (eds.), *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages: Studies in Text, Transmission and Translation in Honour of Hans Daiber*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), pp.21-42; A. Bertolacci, 'Necessary as Primary Concept in Avicenna's Metaphysics,' in S. Perfetti (ed.), *Conoscenza e contingenza* (Pisa: ETS, 2008), pp.31-50; M.E. Marmura, 'Avicenna on Primary Concepts in the *Metaphysics* of his *al-Shifa*,' in R. Savory and D. Agius (eds.) *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), pp.219-39.

128 «Notification» (*ta'rif*) designates the act of signifying a certain notion by means of other notions, in a general way. It includes both definitions, which are composed of genus and differentia, and descriptions, which employ peculiar properties (*propria*), namely non-essential features that are true of the notion in question and no other thing.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the internal unity of existence: the notion of existence does not possess parts. Avicenna does not explicitly tackle the issue, but the simplicity of existence may be deduced from two other doctrines. The first is the primitivity of existence: if existence had parts, those parts would be conceptually prior to it, and that would contradict primitivity. The second doctrine involves Avicenna's theology. Avicenna states that the Necessary Existent is simple, and that He is pure existence, with no additional quiddity: were existence composite in itself, these two assertions would contradict each other.

Let us summarise then the results of the analysis on the semantics of existence: the term «existence» is semantically equivalent to «realisation», «occurrence», «obtaining», and «affirmation»; existence transcends the mental-concrete divide (this issue is related to that of the extension of existence); existence is conceptually primitive, in that it is impressed in the soul in a primary way and is conceptualised by itself; existence accepts no real «notification», but it may be possible to «remind» someone of it; existence is simple, meaning that it does not have parts.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Avicennian conceptualization of existence is fundamental for subsequent Islamic thought. With a few notable exceptions, Avicenna's interpreters accepted it. In particular, Rāzī's *Mabāḥiṭ* presents an in-depth discussion of the Avicennian semantization, defending some of its key features: simplicity, knowability, and primitivity¹²⁹.

§1.2.2 – The Notion of Existence in Abū al-Barakāt: the Entitative Semantization

What I call «the entitative semantization» of existence is a peculiar take on the nature of existence which claims that existence as such is a thing or entity and that such entity is what provides quiddities with the qualification «existent» (*mawḡūd*). This idea is defended by Abū al-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī but its formulation predates him, for we find it in Bahmanyār's *Taḥṣīl* (albeit Bahmanyār rejects it)¹³⁰.

An adequate understanding of the entitative semantization of existence requires a preliminary explication of Abū Hāšim's (d.933) theory of «states» (*aḥwāl*). It is common knowledge that the theory of «states» was introduced by the Baṣran Mu'tazilite Abū Hāšim al-Ġubbā'ī and became an important issue of controversy among the *mutakallimūn*, crossing the classical divide between Aš'arites and Mu'tazilites¹³¹. According to the theory, it is necessary to distinguish between «things» (*ašyā'*), or

129 See *Infra*, §2.

130 See *Infra*, §1.3.1.

131 Apart from the Bahšamis (Abū Hāšim's followers), the Aš'arite Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d.1013) is credited with supporting this theory, while Abū Ḥasan al-Aš'arī (d.936) rejects it, together the majority of the early Aš'arites and the non-Bahšami Mu'tazilites. The Aš'arite Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Ġuwaynī (d.1085) supported the theory of states in the first part of his life, but later rejected it. For more information on the theory of states and its history see A. Alami, *L'ontologie modale. Étude de la théorie des modes d'Abū Hāšim al-Ġubbā'ī* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2001); F. Benevich, 'The classical Ash'ari theory of *aḥwāl*. Juwaynī and his opponents,' *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27/2 (2016), 136-175; R.M. Frank, *Beings and their attributes. The teaching of the Basrian school of the Mu'tazila in the classical period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978); J. Tiele, 'Abū Hāšim al-Jubbā'ī's (d.321/933) Theory of 'States' (*aḥwāl*) and its Adaption by Ash'arite Theologians,' in S. Schmidke (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.364-383.

«entities» (*dawāt*), and «states» (*aḥwāl*), or «attributions» (*aḥkām*), or «qualifications» (*awṣāf*) of things. These two classes differ in several respects.

Entities are concrete, substantive things in their own right: they can be known in isolation, they are either existent or non-existent, and they are designated by primitive names like «whiteness» (*bayād*) and «movement» (*ḥaraka*). The class of entities comprises substances, God, and entitative accidents (*ma'ānī*) such as perceptible qualities (e.g., colours, smells, etc.), internal sensations (joy, pain, etc.), and imperceptible qualities (life, knowledge, etc.), as well as accidents of location and motion.

On the other hand, «states» are not entitative things in their own right, being merely the qualifications of entitative things: they cannot be known in isolation from the things they are predicated of, they cannot be said to be existent or non-existent, and they are often designated by derivative names like «white» (*abyaḍ*) and «moving» (*mutaḥarrik*). Besides the cases that are similar to these examples, the class of «states» also comprises a wide variety of qualifications: among those there are existence and non-existence themselves, as well as genera (e.g., the genus «colour» is understood as a state or qualification of the colour «whiteness»).

A crucial point to consider is that a qualification needs to be accounted for or explained by the action or the presence of an entity that may be called «qualifier». The qualifier is either the very essence of the subject of the qualification (e.g., the qualification «heavy» is said of the subject «atom» on account of the essence of the atom), or an entitative accident that inheres in the subject (e.g., the qualification «red» is said of the subject «wall» on account of the inherence of the entitative accident «redness» in the wall), or an external efficient cause that acts on the subject (e.g., the qualification «existent» is said of the subject «material world» on account of God's causal action). It is possible for the same qualification to apply to different subjects on account of different qualifiers: for example, the qualification «knowing» is said of the subject «human being» on account of the inherence of the entitative accident «knowledge» in the human being, whereas it is said of the subject «God» on account of God's own essence.

In sum, Abū Hāsim's theory of states posits a difference between the qualifications of things and the qualifying factors which account for those qualification. It is possible to better conceptualize the entitative semantization of existence by borrowing the conceptual framework of the doctrine of states: «existence» (*wuḡūd*) is an entity accounting for the qualification «existent» (*mawḡūd*) which is ascribed to the quiddities.

My claim is that this position is defended by Abū al-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī. My interpretation is supported by three key assertions that appear in his *Mu'tabar*: that existence itself is existent; that the existence of existence is known, whereas its essence is unknown; and that existence is «that thing by means of which the existent exists» (*alladī bi-hi yūḡadu l-mawḡūd*)¹³². All of this indicates that existence is an entity whose presence explicates the quiddities' being existent.

The entitative semantization of existence does not explicitly contradict Avicenna's assertions, even though it clearly drifts away from them and is rejected by the majority of the interpreters, most notably by Bahmanyār and Rāzī.

132 See *Mu'tabar*, III, p.63.1-20.

§1.2.3 – The Notion of Existence in Ibn al-Malāḥimī: De-Semantization

An explicit and complete rejection of Avicenna's conceptualization of existence appears in Ibn al-Malāḥimī, whose rejection of the quiddity-existence distinction entails that the term «existence» does not correspond to a unitary, distinct notion. The existence of a thing comes down to the specific quiddity or essence of that thing: the existence of an atom is its being an atom, the existence of blackness is its being blackness. This position will be analysed in the chapter devoted to the debate on the notional commonality of existence¹³³.

¹³³ See *Infra*, §3.2.3.

§1.3 – The Debates on the Notion of Existence

This subchapter aims to present the main elements of the debates revolving around the very concept of existence. The most comprehensive discussion appears in Rāzī, who tackles four issues.

The first concerns the rejection of what I called the «entitative semantization of existence». Abū al-Barakāt al-Bağdādī envisages existence as an actual entity which exerts some sort of influence over a quiddities, making them existent. Bahmayār and Rāzī explicitly reject this semantization, arguing that existence is the very reality of a quiddity, not some additional entity which makes the quiddity real (§1.3.1).

The second issue is the simplicity of existence: Rāzī presents an argument for deducing simplicity for the very notion of existence (§1.3.2).

The third issue concerns the epistemic status of existence. It is evident that, in the Avicennian perspective, existence is knowable. However, Avicenna does not thematize the issue of the knowability of existence. Rāzī refutes several arguments against the possibility to know existence *qua* existence (§1.3.3).

The fourth issue concerns the primitivity of existence. Avicenna fleetingly mentions the noetic characteristics of existence inasmuch as it is a primitive notion. Rāzī clearly discriminates between them, considering arguments for and against each one of them separately (§1.3.4).

§1.3.1 – The Case against the Entitative Semantization of Existence

Bahmanyār and Rāzī explicitly reject the entitative semantization, stating that existence is nothing but the very reality of a thing (*i.e.*, nothing but its very qualification as «existent»), not an entitative accident that inheres in that thing and qualifies it as existent¹³⁴. Rāzī, in particular, argues that the entitative semantization is based on a linguistic equivocation: by the term «existence», the adversary designates something which is not the Avicennian notion of existence. Furthermore, Rāzī deploys two arguments against the idea that there could be an entitative accident (called «existence») which exerts some form of efficiency on quiddities, making them existent.

The first is the argument from inherence: what is subject of inherence must exist before the inherent thing, and so the quiddity would exist in itself before the causal action of what makes it existent.

The second is the argument from infinite regress: the accident called «existence» itself would be existent, and so it would need the inherence of yet another entitative accident in order to be existent: that would go on to infinity.

Both of these arguments are presented by those who reject Rāzī's (and Avicenna's) doctrine of the accidentality of existence, like Suhrawardī and Ibn al-Malāḥimī¹³⁵. It is evident that Rāzī believes the Avicennian semantization to be substantially different from the entitative semantization, for otherwise he would not have rejected the latter by using those very arguments that can be used to reject the

134 See *Tahṣīl*, p.281.1-5; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.43.1-22.

135 See *Infra*, §5.

former. I believe that the difference at stake revolves around the meaning ascribed to the accidentality of existence: the entitative semantization of existence requires existence to be an accident like any other, an existent thing which existence must be predicated of (thick notion of existence). Bahmanyār and Rāzī's interpretation of the Avicennian doctrine does assert that existence is accidental, but does not say that existence is an entitative accident, in the sense of an actual existent thing existence must be predicated of (thin notion of existence).

In sum it appears that, according to Bahmanyār and Rāzī, existence is accidental, but is not an accident in the sense of an existent thing that inheres in another existent thing. This topic is intrinsically related to the discussion concerning the quiddity-existence distinction, because the main argument for the claim that such distinction is merely conceptual assumes the thick (entitative) notion of existence: if existence were really distinct from quiddity, it would be an existent thing. The realist answer to this argument consists precisely in arguing that existence as such must be thin (non-entitative): existence is nothing but the existence of a thing, and it cannot be an existent thing on its own, because existence cannot be predicated of existence¹³⁶.

§1.3.2 – The Case for the Simplicity of Existence

Rāzī presents an argument which deduces the simplicity of existence from the very notion of existence. He argues that, if existence had parts, its parts would either possess the very nature of existence or not. In the former case, existence would be present in its very parts, and that is absurd. In the latter case, the nature of existence would be either an external addition to its parts, which contradicts the hypothesis that they are parts (real parts must be internal to what they constitute), or would consist in a sum of non-existential things, which is intrinsically absurd¹³⁷.

§1.3.3 – The Case for the Knowability of Existence

Rāzī discusses four possible proofs against the possibility to know existence as such, in order to refute them: the argument from the identification between God's self and existence, the argument from the need for impression, the argument from the impossibility of knowing the simples, and the argument from the need for distinction¹³⁸.

The first argument is actually a reduction to absurdity of Avicenna's doctrine that the Necessary Existent is pure existence devoid of any additional quiddity. Avicenna states that God's self is both equivalent to pure existence and at least presently unknown: the conjunction of these two premises entails that existence as such is presently unknown.

136 See *Infra*, §5.

137 See *Mabāhīt*, I, 12.1-7.

138 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.14.3–16.18.

Rāzī accepts the soundness of the argument, claiming that there is no way for Avicenna to refute it. Indeed, the argument from the unknowability of God's essence is one of the main elements of Rāzī's case against the Avicennian doctrine that God is pure existence¹³⁹.

The second argument states that, if existence were known, its quiddity would be impressed in the soul of the knower. Consequently, existence would inhere in the knower two times: the first time because the knower exists, the second time because the knower knows existence. Thus, the knower would exist two times, which is absurd. The rationale behind this argument is to be found in the rejection of the entitative semantization of existence: existence is the fact that a thing exists, nothing more than that. It is impossible to separate existence as a quiddity that can be known from existence as the fact that the subject existence inheres in exists: the two are one and the same.

Rāzī answers that the impression of the quiddity of the known object in the soul of the knower is not a necessary condition for knowing existence: existence as such can be known directly. In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, Rāzī considers the knowledge of existence (together with self-knowledge) as one of the exceptions to an otherwise sound account of knowledge. In the *Šarḥ al-Išārāt* and in the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, however, he decisively rejects the theory of impression as a whole¹⁴⁰.

The third argument against knowability merely states that existence is simple, and simples cannot be known.

The argument entails an absurdity, according to Rāzī: the impossibility of knowing the simples would entail the impossibility of knowing the composites, for composites consists of simples, and that in turn would entail the impossibility of knowing anything at all.

The fourth argument against knowability presents the following reasoning: the knowledge of existence requires the knowledge of its distinction from other things; the knowledge of distinction requires the knowledge of negation; the knowledge of negation requires the knowledge of non-existence; the knowledge of non-existence requires the knowledge of existence. All of this entails a circularity.

Rāzī rejects this argument by stating that distinction consists in a composition of things: the thing which is distinct, another thing the former thing is distinct from, and the peculiar kind of negation which sets the two apart. Since the knowledge of the parts is prior to the knowledge of the whole, it follows that the knowledge of the thing distinction is predicated of (in this case, existence) is prior to the knowledge of distinction itself, and does not require it. The pure noetical content «existence» comes before any negative or positive propositional addition to that noetical content.

§1.3.4 – The Case for the Primitivity of Existence

139 See *Infra*, Part 2, §3.

140 See *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fols 78v.21 – 79r.2; *Manṭiq al-Mulaḥḥaṣ*, pp.29.1-2, 30.7-8; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.220.6-13. See also *Infra*, §2.3.3.

Avicenna list three epistemic features of existence as a primitive notion: intuitiveness, primacy in conceptualisation (the fact of being principle of the conceptualisation of other things), and impossibility of notification by means of anything else¹⁴¹.

He precisely qualifies impossibility of notification, highlighting that existence is impossible to explain only in a certain sense. A proper notification (*ta'rif*) of existence is impossible: it is impossible to explain the notion of existence by means of other notions that are essentially more clear than it. However, a reminder (*tanbīh*) of existence is not impossible: we can «explain» existence in the sense that we can use some sign which is contextually (and not essentially) more clear than the sign which generally signifies that concept, being more clear in its signification (*dalāla*) of that concept, namely its action of pointing to it (*e.g.*, the word «existence» may become incapable to properly signify the concept of existence, for some psychological or linguistic reason, and in that case some other sign may become more adequate to signify that concept).

Avicenna does not discuss each one of the features of primitive knowledge separately. Rather, he simply argues that the impossibility to notify existence is established on account of the universal extension of existence, and on account of the fact that it is impossible for existence to be notified by means of one of these attributes, for an attribute needs to exist in order to be applied to any subject.

Rāzī, on the other hand, clearly discriminates between the three features, and provides separate arguments defending each one of them¹⁴².

He argues that the intuitiveness of existence is validated by the fact that intuitive propositions (*e.g.*, that which expresses the principle of excluded middle, or that which expresses the existence of the self) include existence as one of their elements: since the conceptualisation of the notional elements of a proposition precedes the propositional assertion which connects them, existence must be intuitive.

The conceptual primacy of existence is established by assuming the universal extension of existence: according to Rāzī, the most extensive notions are such that their conceptualisation requires the least conditions and encounters the least obstacles, and so the occurrence of that conceptualisation must be most frequent in the mind. Since the conceptualisation of existence is most frequent, it follows that it precedes less extensive notions.

The impossibility to notify existence by means of any other concept follows from the fact that it is impossible for such concept to be internal or external to the quiddity of existence. The former alternative is absurd because existence is simple. The latter alternative is also absurd, because the attribution of something external to existence rests on the conceptualisation of existence itself (the attribution of a thing to another is the fact that the former exists as something which belongs to the latter).

Rāzī lists five arguments against the primitivity of existence.

The first and most important of them is the argument from the impossibility to know existence apart from quiddity: existence must always be conceived as the attribute of some quiddity (*i.e.*, as the

141 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.29.5 – 30.5. Avicenna's perspective is shared by most interpreters – see Abū al-Barakāt, *Mu'tabar*, III, p.21.7-9; Bahmanyār, *Tahṣīl*, p.280.2-4; Šahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.150.4-10; Rāzī, *Mabāhīt*, I, p.10.6-20.

142 See *Mabāhīt*, I, p.11.4 – 18.5.

existence of some thing), and so it cannot be primitive, because attributes are epistemically posterior to the things they are ascribed to, and there are non-primitive quiddities: something that is epistemically posterior to what is non-primitive must be non-primitive as well.

Rāzī's best answer is that it is possible to abandon the conceptual primacy of existence while maintaining its intuitiveness and the impossibility of its notification. He asserts that existence remains intuitive because it is known as an attribute of certain quiddities which are also intuitively known.

The second argument against the primitivity of existence revolves around the necessity to know the necessary concomitants of existence: if existence were known by intuition, then its concomitants (*e.g.*, its commonality and its additionality with respect to all quiddities) would be also known by intuition, because the knowledge of the concomitant follows from the knowledge of the essence they are concomitant of. This, however, is contradicted by the fact that the commonality and the additionality of existence are inferred via several arguments.

Rāzī presents two possible answers: either we say that commonality and additionality are not concomitants of existence as such, being rather attributes which describe the relation between existence and something else, or we say that the arguments for commonality and additionality are not real demonstrations, but rather pseudo-demonstrations (*i.e.*, reminders of intuitive truths).

The third argument is the argument from the presence of tentative notifications of existence: some try to notify existence, and this means that existence is not primitive for them.

Rāzī answers that those who try to notify existence uphold the entitative semantization of existence, which is basically an instance of linguistic confusion: they believe existence to be an existent thing that inheres in the quiddity and makes it existent.

The fourth argument is based on the correspondence between knowledge and concrete reality: knowledge must correspond to the way things are in concrete reality; particulars are prior to universals in concrete reality; existence, being the most universal thing there is, must be posterior in knowledge. This reasoning is based on a sort of empiristic account of knowledge: first we grasp particulars, and then acquire the knowledge of universals via abstraction.

According to Rāzī, nothing establishes that there must be the kind of correspondence mentioned by the adversary between the way things are in knowledge and the way things are in concrete existence. The posteriority of universals in concrete existence does not entail that their posteriority in knowledge.

The fifth argument against the primitivity of existence is the argument from the disagreement on the primitivity of existence itself. Since there is disagreement on whether existence is primitive or not, existence is not primitive. In fact, there can be no disagreement on what is known by intuition.

Rāzī answers that there is a difference between irreflexive knowledge, namely the knowledge of existence as such, and reflexive knowledge, namely the knowledge of the way in which we know existence. The presence of a disagreement on the latter does not entail that existence is not known by intuition. Our irreflexive knowledge of the simple conceptual content «existence» may be intuitive, while at the same time our reflexive knowledge of the complex conceptual content «existence is known by intuition» may be not intuitive.

§1.4 – Concluding Remarks

Avicenna's semantization of existence is a crucial moment for Islamic philosophy. It is also an irreversible event, since it consists in the emergence of a single, simple concept as something definite.

In his discussion of the semantization of existence, Avicenna presents another extremely influential idea, namely the concept of «reminder» (*tanbīh*). A reminder is not a proper notification (*ta'rīf*), namely a constructive explication that produces a new cognition from what is essentially more known than it, but rather an act that makes the mind focus on what it already knows, but is not under current consideration for some contextual reason (*i.e.*, a reason that is external to the essence of the thing at stake). The concept of reminder enables us to conceive something that may seem absurd (or futile) at first glance: to provide some kind of explanation or clarification of a primitive notion. In other words, it is not completely absurd (or completely futile) to argue discursively about those things whose cognition is non-discursive, like intuitive notions, since it is always possible to explain them in a weak sense, namely by presenting a reminder.

Rāzī expands on Avicenna's reasoning, extending the use of reminders from the context of notional conceptualization (*taṣawwūr*) to the context of propositional assertion (*taṣdīq*). As a matter of fact, he explicitly affirms that the arguments for the commonality and the additionality of existence could be considered as reminders, and not as proper demonstrations. More generally, Rāzī appears to understand that any discursive argument which aims to establish something primitive (*e.g.*, some arguments for free will, or arguments for the principle of sufficient reason) must be considered a reminder¹⁴³.

The discussions around the conceptualization of existence in Rāzī's *Mabāḥiṭ* present other important developments that are absent in Avicenna's discourse. Hereunder I summarize the most relevant of them.

The first element is the rejection of the entitative semantization of existence, which conceives existence as an entitative accident that inheres in the quiddity of a thing, qualifying it as existent. On the contrary, existence is the simple fact of existing.

The second element is the understanding that the application of Avicenna's theory of impression (*i.e.*, knowledge requires the impression of the form of the known in the knower) to existence would entail that existence inheres in the knower two times, and thus the knower would exist two times. In fact, existence as the intelligible form cannot be different from existence as the pure fact of existing: existence is not a thing whose quiddity can be separated from its existence. Rāzī solves the problem by rejecting the unrestricted applicability of the theory of impression: existence does not require the impression of its form in the knower in order to be known.

The third element is the discussion of the apparent contradiction between the disagreement on the primitivity of existence and the assertion of its primitivity. These two facts appear in contradiction because, if existence were really primitive and intuitive, no one would challenge its primitivity. Rāzī asserts that the difference between the content of knowledge (the thing that is known) and the modality of knowledge (the way in which we know a thing) solves the problem: primitivity is the modality of the

¹⁴³ For the discussion on the primitivity of free will and sufficient reason see *Infra*, Part 2, §2.

knowledge of existence, and as such is not necessarily included in that knowledge. This solution requires the discrimination between irreflexive knowledge and reflexive knowledge (*i.e.*, between knowledge of a certain content and knowledge of the way in which we know that content): if two are distinct, the occurrence of disagreement on the latter does not invalidate the primitivity of the former.

The fourth element is the comprehension that the absolute epistemic primacy of existence asserted by Avicenna is incompatible with the rejection of the entitative semantization of existence: if existence is nothing but the fact that a quiddity exists, the knowledge of existence must be posterior to the knowledge of the quiddities it is predicated of. Rāzī's best solution to the problem consists in maintaining that the concept of existence is primitive and impossible to notify, while conceding that it is not absolutely first, being necessarily connected to the conceptualization of some specific quiddities that are also primitive.

CHAPTER 2 – The Universality of Existence and Mental Existence

§2.1 – The Meaning of this Premise, and the Need for it

§2.1.1 – The Meaning of the Premise

According to Avicenna, existence is a universal predicate. By this I mean that no subject of predication is such that existence cannot be predicated of it: any time we apply any predicate whatsoever to any subject whatsoever, we are implicitly qualifying that subject with existence.

This kind of universality, however, comes with an important caveat, since the pure notion of existence tells us nothing about how the status of the subject with respect to the human mind: the predicate «existent» transcends the divide between the mental and the concrete, in the sense that its very meaning identifies with neither of those two qualifications. This does not mean that «existence» exceeds the two with respect to its extension. Everything which exists exists either mentally, or concretely, or in both conditions. There is no third way in which a thing can be said to be existent.

The introduction of mental existence is crucial for the universality of existence, for many objects of knowledge cannot be said to exist in concrete reality: *e.g.*, the past, the future, impossibilities, and so on. It follows that «existent» can be said to be maximally extensive only inasmuch as existence *qua* existence is not extensionally identical to extra-mental existence. The assertion of mental existence is precisely what prevents that identification: some things exist as mental contents, and not as concrete realities.

Consequently, the assertion of mental existence appears to be a necessary entailment of the universality of existence, as well as a condition for its consistency.

§2.1.2 – The Need for the Premise

A fundamental character of efficient causality according to Avicenna is universality. Everything has a place in the causal chain: anything we can consider is a cause or an effect. This is an inclusive disjunction, for many entities are actually both causes and effects, with respect to different things.

It is evident that the universality of existence is necessary for the possibility to conceive the universal applicability of causality. In fact, causality is nothing but the act of giving existence to a quiddity which is different from that of the cause, and this definition includes existence: it follows that the extension of causality cannot exceed the extension of existence.

§2.2 – The Universality of Existence and Mental Existence in Avicenna and his Interpreters

This subchapter consists of three sections. The first addresses the Avicennian position concerning the universality of existence and mental existence, and the fundamental connection between these two tenets (§2.2.1). The second concerns Rāzī's position on those tenets (§2.2.2). The third discusses the two main positions on the distinction between mental and concrete existence (§2.2.3).

§2.2.1 – Avicenna on the Universality of Existence and Mental Existence

The absolute universality of existence is a well-known principle of Avicenna's ontology, so much so that it is a commonplace in modern literature. As for mental existence, a handful of studies are specifically devoted to it¹⁴⁴. However, the majority of these do not focus enough on the connection between the two tenets (*i.e.*, between the universality of existence and mental existence), and on the reason why mental existence is to be affirmed in the first place. A remarkable exception is to be found in Benevich's reconstruction of the post-Avicennian debates on the ontological status of non-existent objects of thought, which presents an analysis of the deduction of mental existence¹⁴⁵. My specific concern in this subchapter is to explicate how this deduction is formulated by Avicenna.

For Avicenna the universality of existence is arguably as fundamental as the semantization of the very notion of existence, for the assertion of the epistemic primitivity of that notion is grounded in its universality: existence is primitive because it has maximal extension¹⁴⁶. The great majority of Avicenna's interpreters accepts the idea that existence is a maximally extensive predicate. Rāzī is not completely consistent on this point throughout his works: the next section will present a detailed analysis of his position¹⁴⁷.

The main alternative to the Avicennian position is the Mu'tazilite doctrine that in some cases the non-existent is a «thing» (*šay'*), namely an extra-mentally real object that can be known and can be subject of predication. The introduction of mental existence is what enables Avicenna to overcome the challenge posed by this doctrine. Avicenna explicitly states that existence encompasses both the fact of being present inside the mind and the fact of being present outside of it.

«[The notion of 'thing'] does not separate in any way from the necessary consequentiality of the notion of 'existence'. Rather, the notion of 'existence' always follows it, because [a thing] is either

144 See D. Black, 'Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings,' *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 8 (1997), 425–453; Id, 'Mental Existence in Thomas Aquinas and Avicenna,' *Mediaeval Studies* 61 (1999), 45–79; M. Marmura, 'Avicenna's Chapter on Universals in the *Isagoge* of his *Šifā'*,' in M. Marmura (ed.), *Probing in Islamic Philosophy: Studies in the Philosophies of Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali and Other Major Thinkers* (New York: Global Academic Publishers, 2005), pp.33-61.

145 See F. Benevich, 'The Reality of the Non-Existent Object of Thought. The Possible, the Impossible, and Mental Existence in Islamic Philosophy (eleventh-thirteenth centuries),' in R. Pasnau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy. Volume 6*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.31-62.

146 «[The notions] which are most worthy of being conceived *per se* are those which are common to all things, like 'existent', 'thing', 'one', and others» – *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.30.3-4.

147 See *Infra*, §2.2.2

existent among concrete realities (*fī l-a'yāni*) or existent in the estimation (*fī l-wahm*) and in the intellect (*fī l-'aqli*): were it not so, it would not be a thing.»¹⁴⁸

This means that, on a semantic level, existence as such must not be identified with concrete or extra-mental existence. The meaning of «existence» is not identical to the meaning of «concrete» as opposed to «mental»: there is a notion common to both, and that notion is pure unqualified existence¹⁴⁹. Avicenna's assertion of mental existence comes with a strong connotation, in that it does not restrict itself to the (rather modest) claim that mental realities are existent, but rather states that every thing (*i.e.*, every quiddity) must be existent, either in concrete reality or in the mind. Nothing can be said to be absolutely non-existent.

Even though Avicenna does not mention any author or school, he is evidently attacking those Mu'tazilites who claim that in some cases the non-existent can be said to be a real thing, being an object of knowledge and a subject of predication¹⁵⁰. In fact, he states the following.

«It is said that 'thing' is what is subject of predication (*yuhbaru 'an-hu*): this is true. However, what is said together with this – namely, that a thing may be non-existent in an absolute way – is something we need to speculate on. If, by 'non-existent', they mean what is non-existent among concrete realities, that is admitted: it is admitted for a thing to be positive in the mind and non-existent among external things. If they mean something else, that is unsound, since [the non-existent] is such that, besides its being conceptualised in the soul, there is absolutely no predication (*ḥabar*) about it, and it is not object of knowledge: it is not conceptualised in the soul as a form which gives indication of something external. As for the predication, this is [absurd] because the report is always about a thing that is ascertained in the mind. The absolute non-existent is not object of predication according to affirmation. When it is subject of predication according to negation, some mental existence is posited for it in some way, since saying 'it' includes an indication, and the indication of that non-existent which has no form in the mind in any way whatsoever is absurd.»¹⁵¹

Let us delve into the argumentation.

First of all, Avicenna accepts the Mu'tazilite claim that every subject of predication is a thing. Then he presents a disjunction: the non-existent thing is either non-existent among concrete things, and existent in the mind, or absolutely non-existent. He claims that the former disjunct is admissible, whereas the latter is not. The reason is that there can be no predication concerning what is not present in any way in the mind: in Avicenna's words, «predication is always about a thing that is ascertained in the mind». We cannot say that what exists neither in the mind nor outside of it is «such-and-such», because the very subject of that proposition would be absent. Even when we assume the absolute non-existent as a subject of predication, in order to deny it some predicates, the absolute non-existent

148 *Ibid.*, I, p. 30.3-5. See also *Ibid.*, I, pp.203.15 – 204.10.

149 Lizzini incidentally notices this point – see '*Wuğūd-Mawğūd/Existence-Existent in Avicenna [...]*', pp.118, 129.

150 Among those we find al-Šaḥḥām (see Šahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.151.2-5), and al-Ḥayyāt (Šahrastānī, *Milal*, I, p.73.3-4, 7), as well as Abū 'Alī al-Ġubbā'ī and his disciples (Aš'arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn wa-iḥtilāf al-muṣallīn*, ed. M.M. 'Abd al-Rahīm, vol.II (Cairo:Maktabat al-Naḥḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1954), pp.180.16 – 181.11).

151 *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt.*, I.5, p.32.6-11. Almost identical in Bahmanyār (*Taḥṣīl*, p.288.6-10) and Lawkāri (*Bayān*, pp.29.6 – 30.1).

acquires some form of existence in the mind¹⁵². The same line of argumentation is behind the rejection of the possibility of knowledge (*‘ilm*) and indication (*išāra*) with respect to what is absolutely non-existent.

Avicenna’s argumentation assumes a fundamental premise that may be called «the existential implication of predication»: everything which is subject of predication of an existent predicate must be existent in itself. This premise is arguably equivalent to the universality of existence.

Let us consider what all of this means for Avicenna’s ontology. The assertion of mental existence can be divided into two simpler propositions: that everything which is present in the mind possesses existence, just like concrete realities possess existence (this is assumed to be self-evident), and that everything which is object of predication (or knowledge, or indication) is present in the mind (this is the crucial issue at stake). In other words, Avicenna states both that mental contents are existent, and that everything which is subject of predication and object of knowledge is a mental content. The conjunction of the two assertions entails that every subject of predication must possess mental existence. This holds true regardless of whether the object in question has also concrete existence or not. It is evident, then, that not only do the assertion of mental existence grant existential status to mental contents, but it also corroborates the claim that existence is a maximally extensive notion: if something is not existent in concrete reality, then it *must* be existent in the mind. In light of this, it is evident that the assertion of mental existence is related to the assertion of the universality of existence. The universality of existence, in turn, is the premise of Avicenna’s argument for the primitivity of existence, and so these three issues emerge as fundamentally connected¹⁵³.

At the end of his discussion on mental existence, Avicenna presents two additional remarks.

The first is a brief and scornful rejection of the claim that some non-existents can be object of knowledge and predication while having no «thingness» (*šay’iyya*) at all¹⁵⁴. Avicenna does not specify who he is referring to, but the thesis can be ascribed to Abū al-Huḍayl al-‘Allāf (d.850), Ibn al-Rawāndī (d.910 ca.), and probably to Abū Ḥasan al-Aš‘arī (d.936) himself¹⁵⁵. I also claim that something which resembles this position is presented by Rāzī in the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*¹⁵⁶.

152 «We say that we have some knowledge of the non-existent because, when the notion is obtained in the soul only, and does not indicate anything outside of it, the object of knowledge is only what is in the soul.» – *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.33.12-13.

153 See *Supra*, §1.

154 «Some of those who have this opinion [believe] that, among what is subject of predication and object of knowledge, there are things that have no thingness in non-existence. He who wants to consider this should refer to their delusional assertions: they do not deserve the grace of taking them into account.» – *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, p.33.16-18.

155 On Abū al-Huḍayl see *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.151.7-8 and cf. *Milal*, I, p.54.5-7. On Aš‘arī see Ibn Fūrak, *Muğarrad maqālāt Abī al-Ḥasan al-Aš‘arī*, ed. A.‘A. Al-Sāyih (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ṭaqāfiyya al-Dīniyya), p.262.4-6. On Ibn al-Rawāndī see *Maqālāt*, p.169.9-13. On the Aš‘arites in general see Ġuwaynī, *al-Šāmīl fī uṣūl al-dīn*, eds. ‘A.S. al-Naššār, F.B. ‘Awn, S.M. Muḥtār (Iskandariya: Manša’t al-Ma‘ārif, 1969), p.137.15.

156 See *Infra*, §2.2.2.

The second remark is yet another refutation. Avicenna presents two theses he deems absurd¹⁵⁷: that the attributes of things are not things; and that the attributes of things cannot be qualified with existence and non-existence. He is hinting at Abū Hāšim al-Ġubbā'ī's (d.933) theory of «states», or «features» (*aḥwāl*), which are precisely described as non-entities, as well as neither existent nor non-existent, since only entities (*i.e.*, substances and entitative accidents) can be said to be existent or non-existent.

The Avicennian take on mental existence exerts a crucial influence over the subsequent authors. Bahmanyār and Lawkarī (d.1123) follow Avicenna to the letter, quoting the *Šifā* almost *verbatim*¹⁵⁸. Abū al-Barakāt accepts Avicenna's overall idea, but reduces mental existence to a subset of concrete existence¹⁵⁹. Šahrastānī makes use of mental existence in order to solve two old *kalām* debates: that on the ontological status of the «states», and that on whether the non-existent is a thing¹⁶⁰. Suhrawardī conceptualist account of existence and modalities requires the assumption of mental existence. On the other hand, Rāzī's perspective on mental existence is complex, and needs to be considered in a separate section. As for Tūsī, he explicitly endorses an Avicennian position, rejecting Rāzī's anti-Avicennian arguments.

§2.2.2 – Rāzī on the Universality of the Existence and Mental Existence

Among modern studies, the best analysis of some of the questions I am going to consider here is to be found in a paper by Benevich on the ontological status of non-existent objects of thought in post-Avicennian philosophy. Benevich rightly notices that Rāzī abandons the standard Avicennian position which ascribes mental existence to all objects of thought (both existent and non-existent in concrete reality, both possible and impossible)¹⁶¹. My analysis intersects Benevich's in some respects, while being more generic: my main focus concerns the universality of existence and mental existence from a general point of view. I will briefly outline the evolution of Rāzī's thought on these two issues, as well as its aporetic conclusions concerning the status of impossibilities and that of absolute non-existence.

Rāzī's attitude towards mental existence and the universality of existence shows a significant development over his works. First of all I will consider mental existence, the issue where the evolution of Rāzī's thought is more evident.

157 «A group says that what obtains (*al-ḥāsil*) obtains and is not existent (*mawġūd*). [They also say that] it is possible for the attribute of a thing to be no thing, and to be neither existent nor non-existent: 'that which' (*allaḡī*) and 'what' (*mā*) would signify something other than what is signified by 'thing' (*šay'*). These people are not among those who have discernment.» – *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt.*, I.5, p.34.11-14.

158 See *Taḥṣīl*, pp.288-290; *Bayān*, pp.29-31.

159 See *Infra*, §2.2.2.

160 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, pp.147-149, 161-163.

161 See 'The Reality of the Non-Existent,' pp.31-62. On related issues see also M. Kaş, 'Mental Existence Debates in the Post-Classical Period of Islamic Philosophy: Problems of the Category and Essence of Knowledge,' *Nazariyat* 4/3 (2018), 49-84; Ö. Türker, 'Being and Meaning. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and His Followers on Identity of Knowledge and Known,' *Nazariyat* 1/1 (2014), 41-60.

In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, Rāzī explicitly endorses mental existence, rejecting various objections against it and against the fundamental premise behind it (the existential implication of predication)¹⁶². However, he also expresses scepticism on a closely related issue, namely Avicenna's theory of impression, which states that knowledge occurs only when the form of the known object exists in the mind of the knower. Rāzī notices that there is a compelling proof against the theory of impression, namely the argument from the concrete properties of quiddities: the concrete property of a quiddity (e.g., the action of heating which is the concrete property of the quiddity of fire) can be known, but it cannot exist in the mind of the knower, for otherwise the mind of the knower would possess that concrete property¹⁶³.

In the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, Rāzī decisively rejects mental existence as such on account of the above-mentioned refutation, which he now considers a «destructive argument» (*ḥuḡḡa muḥarriba*). The same reasoning appears in the *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*. The rejection of mental existence reopens the problem of the ontological status of those things that are object of knowledge but do not exist in extra-mental reality. This, however, does not mean that Rāzī accepts the Mu'tazili doctrine of the thingness of the non-existent: just like Avicenna, he maintains that the non-existent is unreal.

The rejection of both mental existence and the thingness of the non-existent leaves three options for the ontological status of those non-existent things which are objects of knowledge: either they are absolutely unreal, being a non-thing and having no existence whatsoever, or they exist in concrete reality, and are present to our immediate perception, or they exist in concrete reality, but are absent from our immediate perception¹⁶⁴.

Rāzī rejects the first option because it would imply that an absolutely unreal non-existent becomes something essentially definite, an object of knowledge distinct from other objects, and so there would be no discrimination between existence and non-existence (however, this reasoning is at odds with another Rāzian thesis, as Rāzī himself recognizes)¹⁶⁵. The second option is intuitively absurd. This leaves the third option, which entails that every non-existent thing that can be known is only apparently non-existent, while actually being a concrete existent that is not immediately perceptible.

«We do not accept that we can conceptualize things that have no reality outside the mind. Yes, it can be that they are not present to us. However, why is it impossible to say that everything that can be conceptualized and imagined has an existent form, be it self-subsistent or subsistent in some body that is absent [from immediate perception]? When the soul turns to that form, it perceives it. These are the exemplars (*muṭul*) that the Great Plato affirmed.»¹⁶⁶

Despite the explicit mention of Plato, I would be careful in ascribing a full-fledged Platonic theory of universals to Rāzī, since the latter seems to accept the possibility that the (apparently) non-existent object of knowledge may subsist in some corporeal substance: this entails that some form of immanent

162 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.41.6 – 43.5.

163 See *Ibid.*, p.321.10-19.

164 See *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fols.78v.17 – 79r.21. On the rejection of the thingness/reality of the non-existent, see *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fol.80r.10-16; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.45.5 – 47.17.

165 Rāzī claims that absolute non-existence as such must be knowable despite being an absolutely unreal non-thing, even though he recognizes that such a claim is problematic because it entails that an absolutely unreal non-thing becomes a distinct object of knowledge. On this point see the end of this section.

166 *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fol.79r.12-16.

realism of the universals may be an acceptable alternative to Platonic transcendent realism. Furthermore, I would not restrict this position to those universal objects of knowledge that are (apparently) non-existent: any (apparently) non-existent object of knowledge, be it universal or particular, requires to be concretely existent and absent from immediate perception, either as a self-subsistent form or as something that subsists in a corporeal substance. This has a counter-intuitive implication, like the fact that that past particulars continue to exist outside the mind in some remote condition (either as self-subsistent forms or as accidents that inhere in corporeal substances), and future particulars already exist in that same condition. There is also the problem of the ontological status of the impossibilities: as Tūsī notices, even if we grant that a possible non-existent object of knowledge subsists extra-mentally, it is far fetched to claim that an impossible object of knowledge does too¹⁶⁷. At the end of the present section I will consider this problem from a different perspective.

The evolution of Rāzī's perspective towards the issue of the universality of existence is certainly less evident than the evolution of his position on mental existence, but remains significant.

In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, he asserts that there is no distinction between reality and existence, and that the non-existent is not a thing. In addition, he accepts the Avicennian thesis that existence is a maximally extensive predicate, in the sense that everything which is said to possess a real predicate must also possess existence. It is important to notice that his defence of this position relies on the appeal to mental existence.

In the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, Rāzī continues to reject the reality and the thingness of the non-existent. In other words, existence appears to remain co-extensive with the predicates «real» and «thing». However, Rāzī expresses strong doubts on the Avicennian proof for the absolute universality (maximal extension) of existence, arguing that at least some of the objections against it are compelling¹⁶⁸. One of the two most relevant objections notices that, if existence were a maximally extensive predicate, then absolute non-existence could not be subject of predication: that is a self-contradiction, for absolute non-existence would be the subject of the predicate «cannot be subject of predication». The other objection concerns the impossible: predicates such as «distinct from the possible» can be predicated of the impossible even though the impossible must be absolutely non-existent and unreal. In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, the solution to these problems requires the adoption of mental existence, a premise which is rejected in the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*. Rāzī explicitly admits that he finds himself in an aporetic situation concerning whether absolute non-existence can be object of knowledge and predication, even though he ultimately argues that it can. Indeed, both alternatives are problematic: the unknowability of absolute non-existence entails the above mentioned self-contradiction, whereas its knowability entails that absolute non-existence is a definite and distinct object of knowledge, which is at odds with the intuition that only what exists is

167 See *Hall*, pp.407.2-408.2. Benevise argues that Rāzī's account concerns only possible objects of knowledge, and that it divests impossibilities of all thingness by understanding them as relations between possible objects of knowledge (see 'The Reality of the Non-Existent,' pp.61-62). However, this is hardly a solution to the problem, for one could ask what is the ontological status of those relations, which are themselves objects of knowledge: are they absolutely non-existent, or existent in the mind, or existent in concrete reality (in some way or another)?

168 «The impartial judgement is that the proof for this premise is weak, whereas the problems raised against it are very strong.» – *Ibid.*, fol.78v.15-16.

definite and distinct¹⁶⁹. I claim that the same aporia applies to the knowability of the impossible, even though Rāzī does not explicitly mention it.

Rāzī's problematic stance on the possibility to know what is absolutely non-existent and unreal reverberates on the issue of the universality of existence, since it becomes unclear whether existence as a predicate is maximally extensive (and so absolute non-existence as such cannot be subject of predication and object of knowledge) or not (and so absolute non-existence as such can be subject of predication and object of knowledge).

§2.2.3 – Avicenna, Abū al-Barakāt, and Rāzī on the Distinction between Mental and Concrete Existence

Avicenna asserts that mental contents have existence, and that everything which is not existent in the external world must be a mental content. This implies that the extension of existence as such – *i.e.*, the conjunction of the extension of mental existence together with the extension of concrete existence – is universal: existence is predicated of every subject whatsoever. However, it is unclear how mental and concrete existence relate to one another. More precisely, it is unclear how their respective extensions relate to one another. From a purely logical perspective, it is possible to list three alternatives.

The first is the extensional separation between mental and concrete existence, meaning that the two constitute separate sets: no mental existent is not a concrete existent, no concrete existent is a mental existent. Such an option states that mental and concrete existence are mutually exclusive: they refer to sets that share no element. This has an important implication, in that requires existence to be different in meaning to both existence «in the mind» and existence «in concrete reality»: it is a third notion which must transcend the two in order to be predicated of both of them in a non-equivocal way.

The second alternative is the extensional inclusion of concrete existence within mental existence, meaning that the concrete is a subset of the mental: not all mental existents are concrete existents, but all concrete existents are mental existents. This option is immediately out of the picture, for it requires concrete existence to be a kind of mental existence. It is evident that Avicenna and his interpreters are no idealists: they believe concrete reality to exceed the content of the mind.

The third alternative is the extensional inclusion of mental existence within concrete existence, meaning that the mental is a subset of the concrete: all mental existents are also concrete existents, but not all concrete existents are also mental existents. This option subordinates mental existence to concrete existence: the fundamental instance of existence would be concrete existence, mental existence being a peculiar modality or instance of concrete existence itself.

Avicenna's assertions seems to support the first alternative (extensional separation), albeit with some caveat. Abū al-Barakāt and Rāzī, on the other hand, offer a compelling argument for the third option (extensional inclusion of mental existence within concrete existence).

Let us consider Avicenna's position. The first clue we need to consider comes from *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5.

169 See *Ibid.*, 81r.10-11.

«When you say ‘that essence is existent’ – in concrete reality, or in the souls, or in an absolute sense which comprehends them all –, this [assertion] has a realised and comprehensible meaning.»¹⁷⁰

We need to focus on the parenthetical element: «in concrete realities, or in the souls, or in an absolute sense which which comprehends them all» (*immā fī l-a’yāni aw fī l-anfusi aw muṭlaqan ya ‘ummu-hā ḡamī’an*). The passage entails there is an absolute, unqualified meaning of existence which includes both mental and concrete existence in extension. It must follow that neither of the two includes the other.

The second clue comes from a more general consideration of Avicenna’s stance towards universals and particulars. He says that universality (*i.e.*, the capacity of being said of many subjects) can be applied to a certain quiddity only inasmuch as the latter exists in the mind: no universal at all can be found among concrete existents¹⁷¹. This means that some mental existents have a property (universality) that is incompatible with the fact of being a concrete existent. In view of this, concrete existence cannot encompass all the elements which belong to the set of mental existents: if we said that every mental existent is also a concrete existent, then every mental existent should share all the properties of concrete existents, including the fact of being particular and not universal. As a consequence, there could not be universals at all. In sum, it seems that Avicenna’s doctrine of the universals requires mental and concrete existence to be mutually exclusive in extension.

However, Avicenna’s own assertions provides the elements for constructing an argument for the extensional inclusion of mental existence in concrete existence. The core of such an argument is presented the thesis that knowledge consists in the existence of the form of the known in the soul of the knower. In *Ilāhiyyāt*, V.1 Avicenna argues as follows.

«Even though this form is universal in relation to the individuals, it is individual in relation to the particular soul in which it is impressed, because it is one of the forms that are in the intellect. Since the individual souls are many in number, it is possible for these universal forms to be many in number inasmuch as they are individual.»¹⁷²

Mental forms are individual inasmuch as they are considered in relation to the mind they inhere in, whereas they are universal inasmuch they are considered in relation to the concrete extra-mental individuals. This passage seems to imply that mental forms are in themselves particular (because their relation with the mind is what grounds their very existence), whereas their universality is a relative qualification that attaches to them inasmuch as they are considered in relation to the concrete extra-mental individuals.

Abū al-Barakāt goes one step further in this direction. Not only are mental forms individual or particular: they also possess actual concrete existence, since they exist in the mind, and the mind is a concrete existent.

170 *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.31.13-14.

171 «That notion [*i.e.*, the universal] has no singular existence among concrete realities in any way. In fact, the universal inasmuch as it is universal is not a singular existent in itself.» – *Ibid.*, I, p.207.6-7. «This universality has existence only in the soul.» – *Ibid.*, I, p.207.12.

172 *Ibid.*, I, pp.205.14-17.

«Among the instances of knowledge, the most adequate to being knowledge, the most worthy of the notion of ‘knowledge’ is the knowledge of the existential concrete things. It is followed in this by the knowledge of the mental forms related to knowledge because, even though these are not among the primary existents which are known primarily, they are attributes that exist in the minds and in the souls, which in turn are existential concrete things: the existent attributes of an existent are existent as well, even though their relation with the primary existents is like that of the accidents with substance, and that of the caused attachments to the causes.»¹⁷³

The argumentation is straightforward: mental contents can be said to be existent because they inhere in a concrete existent, namely the mind, which is like their subject of inherence and their cause. This implies that, inasmuch as existence is concerned, there is no difference between a mental form and any other accident.

In another passage, Abū al-Barakāt argues that the term «existence» is said of what is in the mind and what is in concrete reality according to distinct two distinct semantizations¹⁷⁴. According to the first semantization, existence is an «equivocal noun» (*ism muštarak*) which signifies two different concepts, namely the possibility of being perceived by one perceiver only (in the case of mental existents), and the possibility of being perceived by more than one perceiver (in the case of concrete existents). According to the second semantization, existence is a «univocal noun» (*ism mutawāfi*) which signifies a single concept which is «more worthy» (*awlā*) and «prior» (*asbaq*) in concrete existents than it is in mental existents.

I focus on the second semantisation. In substance, Abū al-Barakāt applies the Avicennian doctrine of modulated predication (*taškīk*) to the distinction between mental and concrete existence: concrete existents are more worthy to existence than mental existents precisely because mental existents inhere in a particular kind of concrete existents (minds, souls) as a particular kind of accidents¹⁷⁵. This implies that mental existence is extensionally included in concrete existence, being one of its modalities¹⁷⁶. All of this entails the acceptance of the third alternative: the extensional inclusion of mental existence into concrete existence.

The same position is explicitly endorsed by Rāzī in the *Mulahḥaṣ*, which presents Abū al-Barakāt’s argument from the inherence in a concrete existent¹⁷⁷. In the *Mulahḥaṣ* Rāzī rejects both the theory of

173 *Mu‘tabar*, III, pp.2.18 – 3.3.

174 *Ibid.*, III, pp.21.18 – 22.9.

175 On modulation see *Infra*, §4.

176 «In fact, mental existents are concrete existents because of the fact that they exist in concrete things, which are the mind and the soul in which they are conceived.» – *Mu‘tabar*, III, p.22.4-5.

177 «If the mind were established to be among the external existents, then everything that exist in it, inasmuch as it is existent, would be something existent which obtains in a determined soul. So, it would be among the external existents. The mental existent too is among the external existents. According to this, existence would not subdivide into external and mental: indeed, every existence would be a concrete and external existence. However, some quiddities – e.g., a wall, a stone, the sky, the earth – sometimes would exist as self-subsistent things and sometimes would exist in the soul, just like an accident exists in the subject of inherence. The former subdivision would be called ‘concrete existent’. The second would be called ‘mental existent’, even though in reality both of them are concrete existents. From this assumption the unsoundness of the assertion of mental existence becomes evident, since we know by intuition that the accident inhering in the soul cannot be totally equivalent to the concrete existents – like the sky and the earth – in its quiddity. If that equivalence is invalidated, it is impossible to say that, when we conceive the sky, a form totally

the impression of mental forms and mental existence as such. However, the rejection of the extensional separation between concrete and mental existence remains sound in a hypothetical sense: even if mental existence were established, it would still need to be included within concrete existence, because mental existents inhere in a concrete existent.

Rāzī also present the same line of reasoning as an objection against the Avicennian doctrine that universality belongs to quiddities inasmuch as they are forms existent in the mind: mental quiddities must be particular, because they are particular accidents which subsist in a particular thing. It is worth noting that Rāzī does consider a possible answer that relates to the above mentioned passage from *Ilāhiyyāt*, V.1: the mental form is universal in the sense that each extra-mental individual of the same species we consider must produce the same effect or leave the same trace in the soul¹⁷⁸. He rejects this solution by arguing that the identity of the effect in the soul means that the latter conceives something common to all individuals, and that common conceived notion must correspond to something extra-mental: that extra-mental common thing is the true universal (immanent realism of universals), whereas the mental form is universal in a metaphorical sense only, namely because it connects to the real universal¹⁷⁹.

equivalent to the sky in its quiddity obtains in the mind.» – *Mulāḥḥaṣ*, fol.79v.1-12.

178 «As for the intellectual universal, the well-known thesis is that it consists in the mental form. They say that this is because what is subject of attribution of universality is existence, since pure non-existence cannot be common to many things and every existent is either an external existent or a mental existent. The first is absurd because every external existent is a determined individual, distinct from other [individuals], and everything that is like that is not common to many things, and so it cannot be universal: since the universal cannot be an external existent, it has been established that it is a mental existent. Then they pose a question to themselves, saying that a mental form is an individual form in an individual soul, and so the [above mentioned impossibility of commonality] obtains also in the case of the mental form. They answer that the mental form is said to be universal not in the sense that the mental form itself is common to the external individuals, but rather in the sense that each one of the externally existent individuals of a single species is such that, when such individual comes to the soul in substitution of another [individual], and the soul takes that quiddity inasmuch as it is abstracted from all its attachments, what obtains in the soul is only that effect or what is equivalent to it.» – *Manṭiq al-Mulāḥḥaṣ*, p.28.3-14.

179 «What is meant by the assertion ‘the effect the soul receives from every individual is one’ is that we conceptualize an element that is common to those individuals. If the conceptualization of the common element did not rest on the ascertainment of a common element [in concrete reality], mental conceptualization would not correspond to the external thing and so it would be ignorance. If it did correspond, the common element would need to obtain in the thing itself: that common thing is the true universal, whereas the mental form is called ‘universal’ in a metaphoric sense only because it is an instance of knowledge that connects to what is the universal thing. Then we say: why is it impossible to posit every extra-mental individual as universal, on condition of the elimination of the individualizing factors from it?» – *Manṭiq al-Mulāḥḥaṣ*, p.29.6 – 30.1.

§2.3 – The Debates on the Universality of Existence and on Mental Existence

This subchapter consists of four sections. The first analyses the discussion on the universality of existence (§2.3.1). The second delves into the case for mental existence (§2.3.2). The third concerns the case against mental existence (§2.3.3). The fourth presents the debate on the distinction between mental and concrete existence (§2.3.4).

§2.3.1 – The Case for the Universality of Existence

Avicenna asserts that existence is an absolutely universal predicate. Moreover, he appears to believe that such universality is something primitive, for he affirms the primitivity of the very notion of existence on the basis of its universality¹⁸⁰. Furthermore, the universality of existence as a predicate is substantially equivalent to Avicenna's fundamental premise for the assertion of mental existence: the existential implication of predication (what is subject of any predication whatsoever must possess existence).

In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, Rāzī accepts this premise without reservation. In the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, however, he notices that there are strong objections against it. First of all, the absolute universality of existence entails that absolute non-existence cannot be subject of predication: that is a self-contradiction, since «cannot be subject of predication» is a predicate of absolute non-existence. Rāzī stresses that this contradiction follows regardless of whether we accept mental existence or not. The second objection against the absolute universality of existence argues that we must know absolute non-existence since we certainly know relative non-existence, and the absolute is a notional part of the relative. For example, we certainly know the non-existence of a certain individual (relative non-existence), but that requires us to know what the parts of the concept «non-existence of this individual» mean: these parts are «this individual» and «non-existence» as such (namely absolute non-existence). However, Rāzī also recognizes that there are good reasons backing Avicenna's position (*i.e.*, absolute non-existence cannot be object of knowledge and subject of predication), because knowledge grasps only what is distinct and definite and so, if knowledge grasped absolute non-existence, the latter would become something distinct and definite: this contradicts the intuition that only what exists is distinct and definite.

This unsolved problem notwithstanding, Rāzī accepts Avicenna's claim that existence is co-extensive with thingness and reality. He takes pains to refute the Mu'tazilite thesis that some non-existents are real things, and to invalidate the two arguments which validate that thesis. The thingness (or reality) of the non-existent relates to the issue at stake here because it explicitly negates the universality of existence: it entails that there can be real extra-mental objects existence is not predicated of¹⁸¹.

180 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.30.3-5.

181 On the whole discussion see *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.45.6 – 47.17, 52; *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, 81v.17 – 82r.7. Cf. *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.34.1-10. The arguments discussed by Rāzī are reformulations of previous *kalām* discussions – see for example Šahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, pp.151.11 – 158.17.

Rāzī's refutation of the reality of the non-existent consists of two parts. First, he considers the Mu'tazilites' proofs and rejects them. Then, he presents three arguments which demonstrate that the thingness of the non-existent is absurd.

There are two proofs for the reality of the non-existent: the argument from distinction, and the argument from the necessity of self-identity.

The former states that the non-existent must be a real thing because what is distinct is a real thing, what is object of knowledge (or volition, or power) is distinct, and the non-existent is object of knowledge (or volition, or power).

In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, Rāzī rejects the argument by asserting that knowledge, will and power do not relate to something that is both non-existent and extra-mentally real, but rather to something that is existent in the mind: the Mu'tazilites are wrong precisely because they do not take mental existence into account. He also adds that the Mu'tazilites need to accept mental existence on account of their own theory, since they recognize that there are extra-mentally unreal things (*e.g.*, impossibilities). It is noteworthy that a similar objection is incompatible with Rāzī's perspective in the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, where he decisively rejects mental existence.

The argument from the necessity of self-identity states that, if a quiddity were not itself before and regardless of its existence, its self-identity would depend on something different from itself (the cause of its existence), and it is impossible for a thing to need something other than itself in order to be itself: a thing is itself essentially and necessarily.

This argument is particularly hard to tackle from an Avicennian perspective, since Avicenna explicitly states that the quiddity of a thing does not require an efficient cause in order to be itself: only its existence does¹⁸². In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, Rāzī's solution consists in admitting that the self-identity of quiddities is «made» (*mağ'ūla*) by their efficient causes: they are themselves on account of the causes that make them existent. He argues that Avicenna's claim that quiddities do not depend on efficient causes is to be understood in the sense that «the fact of being made» (*mağ'ūliyya*) is not internal to their essence, but rather befalls them from outside, just like unity and multiplicity or any other concomitant¹⁸³. The *Mulaḥḥaṣ* shows a significantly different attitude: Rāzī does not show any commitment to the claim that quiddities are made, merely listing the arguments for and against such an assertion.

Rāzī considers three arguments against the reality of the non-existent.

The first is the argument from the impossibility for non-existence to be more extensive than unreality (*i.e.*, the negation of extra-mental thingness and reality). The Mu'tazilites assert that some non-existents are real extra-mental things (*e.g.*, the past, the future, possibilities) while others are not (*e.g.*, impossibilities). It follows that non-existence must be predicated of both real non-existents (possibilities) and unreal non-existents (impossibilities). Thus they assume that non-existence is more

182 See *Šifā' – Maqūlāt*, 61.17 – 62.4.

183 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.52-53. This position is problematic for the Avicennian take on the modalities, because it entails that simples inasmuch as they are simples can be contingent with respect to their self-identity (since they may need efficient causes in order to be themselves): the contingency of simples, in turn, is at odds with the assertion that what discriminates between necessary and contingent existents is compositionality – see *Infra*, Part 2, §1.

extensive than unreality. Let us consider the proposition where non-existence is predicated of the unreal non-existent: «the unreal is non-existent». We have that «non-existent» entails either reality or unreality. If it entailed reality, reality would be predicated of the subject «the unreal»: this would force the Mu‘tazilite to claim that every non-existent is real, even the impossibilities. If «non-existent» entailed unreality, on the other hand, the extensional difference between the subject (the unreal) and the predicate (non-existent) would cease: that also contradicts the hypothesis of the Mu‘tazilites because it would force them to accept that every non-existent is unreal. In sum, either they state that every non-existent is real, or they state that every non-existent is unreal: none of the two alternatives is acceptable for them. It is worth noting that the argument requires to assume that «non-existent» is not an equivocal predicate, namely that it is not possible for it to acquire a certain meaning when predicated of the real non-existent and a different meaning when predicated of the unreal non-existent. The non-equivocity of non-existence, in turn, can be deduced from the non-equivocity of existence.

The second argument against the reality of the non-existent revolves around the impossibility of multiplication: a non-existent quiddity pertaining to a single species can be neither one nor many, because a single non-existent thing that is essentially one cannot multiply when it comes into existence, and the multiplication of a single species can happen only by means of inherence in an existent substrate.

The third argument is based on the semantic indiscernibility of reality from existence: the Mu‘tazilites states that those non-existents which are things possess extra-mental reality (*tubūt*), but reality is intensionally identical to existence itself.

§2.3.2 – The Case for Mental Existence

Mental existence is established on the basis of a fundamental premise: the existential implication of predication (what possesses any predicate whatsoever must also possess existence). Once such premise is accepted, it is sufficient to notice that some things cannot exist outside the mind (*e.g.*, the future, the past, the impossibilities, non-existence itself) to conclude that they must exist as mental contents.

Avicenna’s argument for the existential implication of predication notices that any predication is either affirmative or negative. If it is affirmative, then the predicate that is affirmed with relation to the subject must be existent in itself, for something that does not exist in itself cannot be affirmed with relation to something else. It follows that the predicate of an affirmative proposition must be existent, and what is existent cannot be predicated of a non-existent subject: we know by intuition an existent thing cannot inhere in a non-existent thing. As for negative predications, Avicenna implies that their subjects must also be existent, for he argues that even the absolute non-existence (which is only subject of negative predications) possesses mental existence. However, the reason behind this claim is unclear¹⁸⁴.

Bahmanyār and Abū ‘Abbās al-Lawkarī (d.1123) tackle the issue of negative predications, claiming that negative predicates implicitly assume the attribution of existence to their subject. First of all, the

184 See *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.32.12-14; 32.17 – 33.11.

predication as such is something existent (and so its elements must be existent). Secondly, it would seem that any negative predication implies a positive predication: e.g., «this thing is non-existent» means «this thing is existent in the state of non-existence». Rāzī's formulation of the existential implication of predication, on the other hand, does not take into account negative predications, for it considers a specific positive predicate that can be affirmed of every subject whatsoever: the fact of being distinct from what is not the subject itself¹⁸⁵.

Rāzī discusses four arguments that aim to invalidate the existential implication of predication by presenting counter-examples, namely situations where a certain thing is subject of predication while not being existent in itself¹⁸⁶.

The first counter-example is the attribution of existence to quiddities. Pure quiddities are subject of the predicate «existent» not on condition of their being existent in themselves, for otherwise they would exist before having existence. Rāzī answers that existence is an attribute unlike any other: it is merely the existence of its subject, nothing additional to that, and thus it does not require its subject to possess another instance of existence.

The second counter-example concerns the predicate «opposite to». What is absolutely unreal (or non-existent) in every respect is subject of the predicate «opposite to what is real (or existent)». The subject of that predicate cannot be something existent or real, for that would contradict its opposition to what is real (or existent).

The third counter-example concerns the attribution of impossibility to the impossible. The impossible is subject of the predicate «cannot exist». That contradicts the attribution of existence to the impossible inasmuch as it is subject of predication.

The fourth counter-example concern the attribution of impossibility of predication to absolute non-existence. The existential implication of predication implies that absolute non-existence cannot be subject of predication (for everything that is subject of predication must at least exist in the mind): that is a self-contradiction, for absolute non-existence would be subject of the predicate «cannot be subject of predication».

The last three arguments are structurally similar to one another. They assert that predicating existence of some kinds of things contradicts another predicate that is true of them, be it the opposition to reality, the impossibility of existence, or the impossibility to be subject of predication.

In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, Rāzī claims that we must consider predication in two different respects: existence is said of those things with respect to their status in the mind, whereas the above-mentioned predicates are said of them with respect to their status in extra-mental reality. Against the counter-example from the opposition the real, he says that what is unreal possesses mental existence, and in that respect it is not opposite to the real: the opposition between the real and the unreal comes down to their correspondence with extra-mental reality, for the unreal does not correspond to anything that is present outside the mind, whereas the real does correspond to something extra-mental. Against the counter-example from

185 See Bahmanyār, *Tahṣīl*, pp.288.15 – 289.3; Lawkarī, *Bayān al-ḥaq bi-ḍaman al-ṣidq*, ed. I. Dībāḡī (Tehran: al-Ma'had al-‘Ālī al-‘Ālamī li-al-Fikr wa-al-Ḥadāra al-Islāmiyya, 1994), p.30.6-10; Rāzī, *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.41.7-10.

186 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, 41.7 – 42.13; *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fols. 78r.18 – 78v.16.

impossibility, he says that the impossible does possess mental existence: impossibility concerns its external existence, not its mental existence. The same goes for the counter-example from non-existence: absolute non-existence possesses mental existence, and as such can be subject of predication; the predicate «cannot be subject of predication» means that the extra-mental existence of non-existence (not its mental existence) cannot be subject of predication.

In the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, on the other hand, Rāzī states that similar answers are inadequate. First of all, all of them require mental existence, which needs to be rejected for separate reasons¹⁸⁷. Secondly, even if mental existence were accepted, all mental quiddities would still need to refer to something extra-mental, for otherwise things like unreality, absolute non-existence, and impossibility – that are assumed to have no extra-mental corresponding object – would be indistinguishable from inadequate concepts, which are precisely defined as mental forms that have no corresponding object. However, it is clear that unreality and non-existence are not inadequate concepts.

§2.3.3 – The Case against Mental Existence

To the best of my knowledge, Rāzī is the only main interpreter of Avicenna who attempts to reject mental existence (in the *Mulaḥḥaṣ* and the *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, at least)¹⁸⁸.

The main proof against mental existence consists in the argument from the existential status of mental quiddities, which elaborates on the remark that mental quiddities must be concrete existents because they inhere in a concrete existent. From this assumption, the argument deduces that the mental existence of mental quiddities is either additional to their concrete existence (*i.e.*, the concrete existence they possess inasmuch as they inhere in a concrete existent), or identical to it. In the former case, the same thing would be existent two times, and that is absurd. In the latter case, the mental form would have the same properties it has when it exists outside the mind (*e.g.*, the mental form of fire would give off heat, just like the enmattered form of fire does): that is also absurd.

As Rāzī himself underlines, it could be objected that the same quiddity may have certain concomitants when existing in concrete reality, and other concomitants when existing in the mind. In other words, it could be said that concrete existence is qualitatively different from mental existence, because the two entail different concomitant properties.

However, he also notices that a similar objection is helpless against the remark that the extra-mental concomitant properties of quiddity can be known as well: *e.g.*, the action of heating can be known, just like the quiddity of fire. If those concomitants were known by means of the impression of their quiddities in the mind, there would be no way to avoid the above-mentioned implication: the mental form of the action of heating would give off heat. The appeal to a second-level concomitant property of the concrete existence of the first-level concomitant is unsound, because it would entail an infinite regress.

187 See *Infra*, §2.3.3.

188 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, 42.20 – 43.4; 320.1 – 322.17; *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, 78v.17 – 79r21; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.220.6-13.

The rejection of mental existence reopens the question of the ontological status of those non-existent things that are known. Rāzī tentative solution is to reject that the objects of knowledge are non-existent in concrete existence: they may be not immediately present to us, but they still have concrete existence, either as things that subsist in concrete corporeal substances or as self-subsistent realities, akin to Platonic forms.

This kind of answer is hardly adequate for things like absolute impossibilities, or absolute non-existence. Ṭūsī harshly criticizes Rāzī precisely on this point, arguing that no one can believe in the extra-mental existence of impossibilities. However, it is unclear whether Ṭūsī himself is able to solve the problem of the concomitants of quiddities while preserving Avicenna's conception of mental existence. He suggests that, at least in some cases, there must be an essential difference between the quiddity of the extra-mental object and the quiddity of its mental image or form (*ṣabah*, *ṣūra*): real heat is essentially different from the mental form of heat, and this explains why the former performs the action of heating while the latter does not. This implies that not every quiddity can possess both mental and concrete existence while remaining one and the same thing in its essence: the quiddity of heat is different from the quiddity of the mental image of heat¹⁸⁹.

§2.3.4 – The Debate on the Distinction between Mental and Concrete Existence

Avicenna's assertions entail that mental and concrete existence are mutually exclusive in extension, and different in their concomitant properties: certain mental existents can possess a property like universality, whereas no concrete existent can. This issue is connected to the Avicennian theory of knowledge, which states that knowledge requires the impression of the quiddity of the known in the mind of the knower: quiddities inhere in the mind of the knower in a way similar to how forms inhere in matter¹⁹⁰.

Abū al-Barakāt and Rāzī challenge the extensional separation between mental and concrete existence, arguing that that the former is a subset of the latter: a mental existent inheres in a concrete existent (the mind itself), and what inheres in a concrete existent must be a concrete existent¹⁹¹. Abū al-Barakāt says that there is a single meaning of existence which is predicated of concrete and mental existence according to greater and lesser worthiness. It follows that mental existence is reduced to a subset of concrete existence predicated of things that inhere in the mind.

Rāzī notices that the rejection of the separation between concrete and mental existence implies the rejection of the Avicennian doctrine of the universals (*i.e.*, the thesis that universality is predicated of quiddities inasmuch as they exist in the mind). Mental forms cannot be universal, since they inhere in a particular substrate (the soul), and what inheres in a particular substrate is also particular. On Avicennian grounds, it may be possible to answer that the universality of the mental form consists in an identity of relation between that form and each one of the concrete individuals: in other words, the mental form relates to a given individual that possesses a certain quiddity in the same way it relates to

189 See *Hall*, p.408.1-2, 410.6-11. On this issue see also *infra*, §2.3.4.

190 See *Supra*, §2.2.3.

191 See Abū al-Barakāt, *Mu'tabar*, III, p.22.4-5; Rāzī, *Mantiq al-Mulāḥḥaṣ*, pp.28.3 – 30.1; *Mulāḥḥaṣ*, fol. 79v.4-12.

any other individual that possesses the same quiddity. Rāzī rebuts that the answer abandons a conceptualist understanding of universality and draws near to immanent realism. Something common to all concrete individuals needs to be present in the individuals themselves in order for that identity of relation to occur: if that is the case, then that concretely existent common trait is the real universal, whereas the mental form is only metaphorically universal (*i.e.*, it is universal inasmuch as it has a relation to the real universal).

Rāzī adds that the rejection of the extensional distinction between mental and concrete existence invalidates Avicenna's conception of mental existence. In fact, Avicenna believes that the same quiddity can have two distinct forms of existence: it can exist both as a concrete entity and as a mental content. Rāzī highlights that, if there is only one kind of existence, namely concrete existence (mental existence being included in it), then the exact same quiddity cannot be said to exist both in the mind and in concrete reality: *e.g.*, the quiddity of the earth cannot exist both as a self-subsistent concrete substance placed at the centre of the cosmos and as a form inhering in the mind. There is a clear difference between a self-subsistent concrete substance and a mental accident: that difference cannot be traced back to a difference in the kind of existence the two have (since there is only one kind of existence), and so it must be traced back to a difference in their very quiddities. It follows that the exact same quiddity cannot exist both in concrete reality and in the mind.

§2.4 – Concluding Remarks

Avicenna's assertion of the universal predicability of existence is accepted by all his interpreters except Rāzī, who is doubtful on whether absolute non-existence as such can be subject of predication and object of knowledge or not (Avicenna's doctrine implies that it cannot be). Rāzī's final assessment of the issue leans towards the claim that absolute non-existence can be known, and thus existence is not absolutely universal as a predicate. He presents two main reasons for this claim: first of all, the assertion that absolute non-existence cannot be subject of predication is self-contradictory; secondly, the knowledge of relative non-existence requires the knowledge of absolute non-existence, because the absolute is part of the relative and the knowledge of the composite requires the knowledge of its simple parts. However, Rāzī recognizes that his own position is problematic, for a thing needs to be definite and distinct in order to be object of knowledge and subject of predication, and absolute non-existence cannot be something definite and distinct. The issue appears aporetic, even though Rāzī seems to prefer the doctrine of the knowability of absolute non-existence.

This fundamental disagreement notwithstanding, Rāzī agrees with Avicenna on the thesis that the non-existent is not an extra-mentally real thing.

Rāzī's discussion of the thingness of the non-existent reveals a possible difficulty for the overall consistency of Avicenna's doctrine. In fact, one of the arguments for the thingness of the non-existent states that quiddities *qua* quiddities must be themselves before and regardless of the action of their efficient causes, because the self-identity of a thing cannot come from something external to that thing. A possible solution presented by Rāzī consists in asserting that quiddities *qua* quiddities are made to be themselves by their efficient causes. This position, however, contradicts Avicenna's explicit assertion that efficient causes have influence over the existence of their effects, but not over their quiddities. Moreover, the assumption that the self-identity of a thing may be caused by another thing is at odds with Avicenna's doctrine that utter simplicity is sufficient condition for necessity, and thus for causal independence.

The universality of existence is fundamentally related to the assertion of mental existence. If existence is a maximally extensive predicate, then what does not exist in a certain existential condition (concrete existence) must exist in another existential condition (mental existence). In Avicenna's argumentation, the universality of existence takes the form of the existential implication of predication (anything that possesses any predicate must possess existence as well). Rāzī presents some counter-examples to this premise, like absolute non-existence and the impossible (they are objects of knowledge and subjects of predication even though they are absolutely non-existent): in this respect, Rāzī's discussion of mental existence connects to his discussion of the universality of existence. However, Rāzī's decisive rejection of mental existence is not based on the rejection of the universality of existence. Indeed, it rests upon an epistemological concern, being a consequence of Rāzī's rejection of the theory of impression: the theory of impression implies the impossibility to know the properties that are related to the extra-mental existence of quiddities. Moreover, the theory of impression implies that existence as such cannot be known, for otherwise the knower would exist two times: the quiddity

of existence that is object of knowledge does not differ from existence as the very fact of being existent¹⁹². In sum, the theory of impression would entail that knowledge cannot grasp what is external to the mind inasmuch as it is external to the mind, to say nothing of the very fact of existing outside the mind (namely existence itself).

The rejection of mental existence reopens the question of the ontological status of those objects of knowledge that are apparently non-existent in concrete reality. Rāzī attempts to solve the problem by claiming that every object of knowledge possesses concrete existence, either as something self-subsistent (transcendent realism) or as something that inheres in some corporeal substance (immanent realism). Those objects of knowledge that appear to be non-existent are simply remote and absent for our immediate sense perception. Here we see a fundamental shift in the understanding of the basic subdivisions of existence. Avicenna's division of existence into mental and extra-mental is abandoned and a new division takes its place: that between present (*ḥāḍir*) and absent (*ḡa'ib*) existence. This new categorization, however, does not seem capable to account for the ontological status of absolute non-existence and the impossible.

Another issue where some of Avicenna's interpreters disagree with the *Šayḥ* is the differentiation between mental and concrete existence. Avicenna appears to conceive mental existence as its own kind of existence, extensionally separated from extra-mental existence and endowed with peculiar features. Abū al-Barakāt challenges this view, arguing that mental existence is reducible to concrete existence, and that mental existents must be concrete existents inasmuch as they inhere in a concrete existent (*i.e.*, the mind). Rāzī accepts this position and elaborates on it, arguing that it implies the rejection of the universality of mental quiddities inasmuch as they are mental quiddities, as well as the rejection of mental existence inasmuch as Avicenna understands it: if mental existence is reducible to concrete existence, the exact same quiddity cannot exist both as a concrete thing and a mental form (the difference between the concrete thing and the mental form needs to be traced back to the quiddity itself, since existence as such is identical in the two cases).

192 On this see *Supra*, §1.3.1.

CHAPTER 3 – The Notional Commonality of Existence

§3.1 – The Meaning of this Premise, and the Need for It

§3.1.1 – The Meaning of the Premise

Existence is notionally common to all existent things. In order to explicate such assertion, we need to focus on the semantics of the two key elements involved in its formulation, namely the predicate («common») and its restriction, or qualification («notionally»).

Commonality simply expresses the contextual invariance of existence. This means that, if we considered different instances of the predicate «existence» with relation to different subjects existence is predicated of, we would find them identical to each other in their core meaning. In other words, «existence» is not an equivocal term, for it designates things which share a single fundamental notion.

As for the restriction, we need to consider that existence is common (invariant, unique) in a qualified or restricted sense, namely as an object of conceptual understanding: existence is notionally common, in the sense that its commonality is apprehended by the intellect inasmuch as the latter directs itself at existence as the object of its apprehension. This is an epistemic qualification that has no immediate implication for the ontological status of existence: it entails neither realism (existence is extra-mentally distinct from and additional to quiddity) nor conceptualism (existence is only mentally distinct from and additional to quiddity). It is necessary to add this remark because the debate on the conceptual commonality of existence needs to be detached from the debate on the reality of the distinction between quiddity and existence. The two issues can and must be uncoupled, for both conceptualists (Suhrawardī, Ṭūsī) and realists (Bahmanyār, Rāzī) agree on the claim that the term «existence» corresponds to a single non-equivocal notion that is predicated of all existents.

§3.1.2 – The Need for the Premise

Causality has been defined as the act of giving existence to an essence which is different from that of the cause. It is clear that «existence» is a part of this definition. If «existence» referred to a variety of different notions which share no unitary meaning, then the term «efficient causality» would have no unitary meaning as well, precisely because one of the parts of its definition (*i.e.*, existence) would be contextually variable (equivocal). This would imply the impossibility to talk of efficient causality as such, for there would be no singular unitary meaning to take into account: there would be as many different meanings of «efficient causality» as meanings of «existence».

§3.2 – The Notional Commonality of Existence in Avicenna and his Interpreters

This subchapter will consider the three main positions concerning the notional commonality of existence. The first is the standard Avicennian position, *i.e.*, the commonality of existence: existence has a unique definite notion which is predicated of all existents, existence is not equivocal (§3.2.1). The second is the nominalist position, which holds the unrestricted equivocality of existence: existence is purely equivocal in meaning, meaning that it is semantically identical to the very quiddity of each existent it is predicated of; there is no distinct concept of existence, because «existence» is merely a maximally extensive term which designates individual quiddities in a generic way (§3.2.2). The third is the Ismāʿīli position, namely the restricted equivocality of existence: in all cases except one existence is not equivocal. In the case of God, however, existence must be equivocal, because nothing can be common to both God and the creatures (§3.2.3).

§3.2.1 – The Avicennian position: the Commonality of Existence

In Avicenna, the notional commonality of existence is related to the question concerning the basic subject-matter of the metaphysical science: what does metaphysics study, and which kind of unity does the subject of metaphysics possess? Several modern scholars examined the issue¹⁹³. The reader should refer in particular to Bertolacci's studies, which frames Avicenna's claim that existence is the subject-matter of metaphysics in the overall epistemic structure of science outlined in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, discussing Avicenna's Greek and Arabic antecedents¹⁹⁴. I will not delve into the epistemology of the metaphysical science according to Avicenna and his sources: my aim is to present a brief overview of Avicenna position on existence as the subject-matter of metaphysics in order to establish that for Avicenna existence must be notionally common.

As I mentioned, according to Avicenna the subject of metaphysics is existence *qua* existence, or the existent *qua* existent. This requires existence to be notionally common and invariant (*i.e.*, non-equivocal), because there can be no singular science of a conceptually equivocal subject¹⁹⁵. Let us consider a passage from *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.2, which clearly summarises Avicenna's position on the existent *qua* existent as the subject of metaphysics.

193 See M. Fakhry, 'The Subject-Matter of Metaphysics: Aristotle and Ibn Sina (Avicenna),' in M.E. Marmura (ed.), *Islamic Theology and Philosophy: Studies in Honor of G. F. Hourani*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), pp. 137–147; A. Hasnavi 'Aspects de la synthèse avicennienne,' in M.A. Sinaceur (ed.), *Penser avec Aristote* (Toulouse: Éres, 1991), pp. 227-244; N. Poage, 'The subject and principles of Metaphysics in Avicenna and Aquinas,' *Proceedings of the ACPA*, 86 (2013), 231-243; R. Ramon Guerrero, 'Sobre el objeto de la metafísica según Avicena,' *Cuadernos de Pensamiento* 10 (1996), 59-75; G. Roccaro, 'Il soggetto della scienza prima. Ibn Sina, *Al-Šifāʿ*. *Al-ilāhiyyat*, I, 1–2,' *Giornale di Metafisica* 16 (1994), 69-82.

194 See A. Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifāʿ* [...], cit., pp.111-211; Id., 'The Structure of Metaphysical Science in the *Ilāhiyyat* (Divine Science) of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Šifāʿ* (Book of the Cure),' cit., 1-69.

195 The equivocality of the subject would nullify the scientific value of every proposition concerning that subject, for the subject would not have a definite meaning. A proposition such as «A is B» may have a definite truth-value only if A is assumed to designate some definite thing. If A designated several essentially different things, we could not ascribe any definite truth-value to that proposition.

«From this sum [of considerations], it is evident to you that the existent inasmuch as it is existent is something common to all of those things [*i.e.*, the categories], and that it is necessary to place it as the subject of this discipline. This is because of what we have said [previously], and because there is no need to learn its quiddity and establish its existence. This would require a different science to validate the clarification of the state which concerns it, since it is impossible to establish the existence and ascertain the quiddity of the subject [of a science] within the science it is subject of. On the contrary, there is only assent to the ‘that-ness’ (*anniyya*) of the subject [of metaphysics] and to its quiddity (*māhiyya*).»¹⁹⁶

The meaning of Avicenna’s discourse is clear: since «existent» is a primitive notion which needs neither definition nor demonstration, there can be no science higher than metaphysics whose task is to ascertain the quiddity and establish the existence of the subject of metaphysics itself. However, the focus of this analysis is something else, namely the commonality of existence. Avicenna clearly states that the existent inasmuch as it is existent is common (*muštarak*) to all things and has a definite essence or quiddity (*māhiyya*), albeit an undefinable one¹⁹⁷. This is an explicit rejection of equivocity: existence is a single essence which is predicated of all existent things.

In addition to this, Avicenna states that the existent inasmuch as it is existent possesses [a] peculiar subdivisions that are like its species (like substance, quantity, quality) and [b] peculiar accidents (like necessity and contingency, unity and multiplicity, potency and actuality, and so on)¹⁹⁸. The existent inasmuch as it is existent is such that nothing but its very quiddity entails its subdivision into the ten categories, and its reception of some peculiar accidents. This corroborates the claim that existence has a single, definite essence, which is what those subdivisions subdivide, and what those accidents inhere in. As a side note, we need to keep in mind that Avicenna discriminates between [a] the pseudo-species of existence and [b] the peculiar accidents of existence in order to preserve the difference between categorical and trans-categorical notions: he does not entail that existence is an actual genus.

In sum, it is clear that Avicenna explicitly rejects the equivocity of existence. With the notable exceptions of Ibn al-Malāḥimī and Šahrastānī, the interpreters agree with the *Šayḥ* on this point. However, the rejection of the equivocity of existence does not imply that existence is univocal, for existence belongs to a third class: that of «modulated» (*mušakkak*) notions¹⁹⁹.

§3.2.3 – Ibn al-Malāḥimī’s Position: Existence is Univocal in an Unrestricted Sense

196 *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p. 13.7-12.

197 The assertion that existence is common to all categories appears also in *Šifā’ – Madḥal*, p.64.6-9.

198 «So, the first subject of this science is the existent inasmuch as it is existent, and its objects of inquiry (*maṭālib*) are the things which adhere to it inasmuch as it is existent with no condition. Some of those things belong to it like species: substance, quantity, quality, and so on]. In fact, the existent does not require subdivisions prior to them in order to be subdivided into them, in the way substance requires some subdivisions so that the subdivision into man and not-man follows it necessarily. Some other things are like the proper accidents [of the existent], like one and many, potency and act, universal and particular, possible and contingent: in its reception of these accidents, and in its preparation for them, the existent does not need to be specified as natural, or mathematical, or ethical, or as something else»– *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.13.12-19.

199 On the modulation of existence see *Infra*, §4.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī consistently defends an unrestricted understanding of the equivocality of existence. By «unrestricted», I mean that the differentiation of the referents of the term «existence» is not restricted to some peculiar cases or instances. On the contrary, it extends to any instance whatsoever. In other words, given any two essentially different subjects existence is predicated of, the referent of the term «existence» inasmuch as it is assumed in one of the two predications is essentially different from the referent of «existence» inasmuch as it is assumed in the other predication. That is because, according to Ibn al-Malāḥimī, the existence of each thing is identical to its quiddity.

«Existence is the essence (*ḥaqīqa*) of every thing. Thus, the existence of the body is the fact that it is body, and the existence of the Creator is His self.»²⁰⁰

This position is not peculiar to Ibn al-Malāḥimī, for it dates back to the early *kalām*. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Aš‘arī (d.936) is credited with this thesis, like the early Aš‘arites in general²⁰¹. However, Ibn al-Malāḥimī’s most obvious source is to be found in Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d.1044), the founder of the branch of Mu‘tazilism Ibn al-Malāḥimī adheres to²⁰². Rāzī relates that, just like Aš‘arī, Baṣrī is among those who assert that existence is predicated of the various existents according to mere «commonality in expression» (*ištirāk lafẓī*), being just a name that designates essentially different thing that share nothing at all²⁰³.

Let us return to the content of the doctrine. Since the existence of each thing is its very essence, the expression «existence» refers to a multiplicity of essentially different referents, just like the expressions «essence», «quiddity», and «thing» do. The existence of a corporeal substance is completely different from the existence of God, just like the essence of a corporeal substance is different from the essence of God, and so on. Ibn al-Malāḥimī explicitly states that this is a case of pure equivocality, namely a situation where two different things share a common name without sharing any common feature or characteristic.

«The essence of blackness is its existence, just like the essence of body is its existence: the two are associated in a common name, and then each one of them is specified by a restricted name. It is not [true] that the two are associated in something additional to their selves, and then they are separated in their essences.»²⁰⁴

Ibn al-Malāḥimī’s claim that existence is equivocal connects to his rejection of the distinction between quiddity and existence. Such a rejection it is not limited to the level of concrete reality, as opposed to the level of mental conceptualisation: Ibn al-Malāḥimī is no conceptualist. Indeed, he even

200 *Tuhfa*, p.61.19-20.

201 See for example Šahrastānī’s report: «The Aš‘arites do not discriminate between existence, reality, thingness, ‘essence’ and ‘concrete instance’.» – *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.151.1-2. This point is noticed R.M. Frank, who quotes Abū al-Ma‘ālī al-Ġuwaynī (d.1085) and Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d.1118) – see ‘The Aš‘arite Ontology: I. Primary Entities,’ *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 9 (1999), 164-165. The reader who wants to grasp to grasp the basic elements of early Aš‘arite ontology should refer to Frank’s study.

202 On Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī’s biography and bibliography see W. Madelung, ‘Abū ‘l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī,’ in *The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition. Supplement. Fascicules 1-2* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), pp.25-26.

203 See for example *Maṭālib*, I, p.291.7-8.

204 *Tuhfa*, p.62.17-19.

deduces the absence of a real distinction between quiddity and existence from the absence of a conceptual distinction between them²⁰⁵.

A noteworthy consequence of this position is what may be called the «extensionalisation of existence». Since «existence» is stripped of any intension peculiar to it, it persists as something purely extensional, devoid of any definite semantic content. In other words, «existent» is a predicate that applies to a class of things, but those things share no (extra-mentally or conceptually) distinguishable feature which can be called «existence». As Ibn al-Malāḥimī states, the existence of something consists in nothing but «the fact that it is a concrete thing among concrete things» (*anna huwa ‘aynun mina l-a’yāni*)²⁰⁶. The extensionalization of existence becomes even more evident when we consider that, according to Ibn al-Malāḥimī, the only reason why propositions such as «substance is existent» are meaningful, whereas proposition such as «substance is substance» are not, is to be found in the fact that «existent» is more extensive a term than «substance»²⁰⁷.

§3.2.4 – Šahrastānī’s Position: Existence is Equivocal in a Restricted Sense

Šahrastānī’s stance on the predication of existence is peculiar and requires to be considered on its own. It should be preliminarily noticed that, on the issue of the universals, Šahrastānī rejects the radical nominalism of the early Aš‘arites in favour of a form of conceptualism: universals exist as notions in the mind²⁰⁸. Such a conceptualism is somewhat ambiguous, for Šahrastānī also presents something similar to Avicenna’s doctrine of the indifference of quiddity *qua* quiddity, and this in turn suggests a possible commitment to a moderate form of immanent realism²⁰⁹. What concerns us here is that he explicitly mentions «existent» among the universal notions which are present in the mind and, consequently, there are good reasons to argue that he conceives existence as something at least conceptually distinct from quiddity. This, in turn, entails that Šahrastānī rejects the equivocity of

205 *Ibid.*, p.62.12-15.

206 *Ibid.*, p.63.4.

207 *Ibid.*, p.64.4-13.

208 «Man finds in himself the conceptualisation of purely universal, common things, without considering the side of the expression or the side of the concrete things. He also finds in himself intellectual considerations which pertains to a single thing: these refer either to the defining expressions, and we have already invalidated this [claim], or to the concrete, ostensible existent things, and we have already falsified this. Thus, it remains nothing but the [claim] that they are notions existent and ascertained in the mind of man, in the human intellect, which is what perceives them. Inasmuch as they are universal and common, they have no existence among concrete things: there is no ‘existent’ in an absolute sense among concrete things, nor an ‘accident’ in an absolute sense, nor a ‘colour’ in an absolute sense; rather, they are the concrete things inasmuch as the intellect conceptualise, out of them, a universal and common notion» – *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, pp.147.14 – 148.4.

209 «Essences and notions possess three considerations: their consideration in their own selves, their consideration in relation to concrete things, and their consideration in relation to the minds. Inasmuch as they are among concrete things, it befalls them the fact of being individuated and restricted. Inasmuch as they are in the mind, it befalls them the fact of being common and inclusive. As for the consideration of their selves in themselves, they are pure essences, with neither commonality nor restriction. He who knows the three considerations ceases to pose problems on the question of the ‘state’ (*ḥāl*). Moreover, the truth concerning the question of whether the non-existent is a thing becomes clear to him» – *Ibid.*, pp.148.16 – 149.4.

existence. As a matter of fact, in the *Muṣāra‘a* *‘at al-falāsifa* he explicitly considers existence a univocal notion, even when he presents his own positions, and not just when interpreting Avicenna’s doctrines²¹⁰.

The peculiarity of Šahrastānī’s position is that existence as a univocal predicate extends to all subjects except one, namely God. «Existent» inasmuch as it is predicated of God has a completely different meaning from that of «existent» inasmuch as it is predicated of everything else. This is a particular case of a more general rule: all predicates are applied to God equivocally.

In the *Muṣāra‘a*, Šahrastānī argues that Avicenna’s doctrine – existence is common, namely it applies to all existents (including God) in a non-equivocal way – implies some form composition within the Necessary Existent, and presents this restricted form of equivocal predication as the only way to avoid such composition²¹¹. The *Nihāyat al-aqdām* offers a condensed version of the discussion presented in the *Muṣāra‘a*, while also crediting a group of Shias – undoubtedly the Nizari Ismā‘īlis – with such a theory, which is said to be the way to reconcile the rejection of *ta‘tīl* (the «act of divesting» God of His attributes) with the rejection of *tašbīh* (the «assimilation» of God to created beings)²¹². Šahrastānī qualifies what he means by saying that predicates are applied to God equivocally, in the sense that God is the source or the cause on account of which those predicates are found in what is different from God Himself: this is a factive understanding of predication, as modern scholars like Jolivet pointed out²¹³.

«We apply [those] names in the sense of the act of giving (*i‘tā‘*). He is ‘existent’ in the sense that He gives existence, and ‘powerful’ and ‘knowing’ in the sense that He is he who donates knowledge to those who know and power to those who are powerful. He is ‘living’ in the sense that He gives life to what is dead. He is ‘subsistent’ (*qayyūm*) in the sense that He gives subsistence to the world. He is ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’, namely ‘creator of hearing’ and ‘creator of sight’.»²¹⁴

The *Muṣāra‘a* states that even the predicate «necessary existent» (*wāğib al-wuğūd*) is to be understood in this way: God «necessitates the existence of what is other than Him» (*yūğibu wuğūda gayri-hi*). Šahrastānī corroborates this position by arguing that each of the attributes we may apply to God’s essence (including existence) has a contrary, and God is above contraries²¹⁵. Transcending even existence and non-existence, God’s nature becomes utterly unlike any other thing.

Rāzī’s *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl* presents Šahrastānī’s position in a slightly different way: God is neither existent nor non-existent, because it is necessary to deny all «assimilation» (*mušābaha*) to existent and

210 After having criticised Avicenna’s subdivisions of beings, Šahrastānī presents his own subdivision. He begins as follows «That existence which has a notion impressed in the intellect, and embraces the quiddity of things according to equivalence, receives intellectual division. In fact, what is not among the univocal names does not receive division according to meaning» – *Muṣāra‘a*, pp.22.15 – 23.2.

211 See *Ibid.*, pp.56.1 – 57.6.

212 See *Nihāya al-aqdām*, pp. 127.1 – 130.18.

213 See J. Jolivet, ‘Al-Šahrastānī Critique d’Avicenne dans *La lutte contre le philosophes*,’ cit., 282-289.

214 *Ibid.*, p.130.2-5. Cf. *Muṣāra‘a*, p.56.12-14.

215 «Existence and non-existence, necessity and contingency, unity and multiplicity, knowledge and ignorance, life and death, true and false, good and evil, power and powerlessness: [all of these] are contraries, and God is exalted above contraries and peers» – *Muṣāra‘a*, p.57.1-3.

non-existent things. The text does not mention Šahrastānī and ascribes the doctrine to «the heretics» (*al-malāḥida*), namely the Nizāri Ismā‘īlis²¹⁶.

216 See *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl*, I, p.414.12-13.

§3.3 – The Debates on the Notional Commonality of Existence

This subchapter consists of four parts, each one of which analyses a distinct set of arguments related to the issue of the notional commonality of existence. The first addresses the case for the primitivity of the notional commonality of existence (§3.3.1). The second tackles the arguments that aim to deduce the commonality of existence (§3.3.2). The third addresses the case for the unrestricted equivocality of existence (§3.3.3). The fourth considers the case for the restricted equivocality of existence (§3.3.4).

§3.3.1 – The Case for the Primitivity of the Commonality of Existence

In *Maqūlāt*, II.1, Avicenna explicitly states that the notional unity of existence is among those things which are primarily and intuitively known.

«He who refuses to conceive that ‘existent’ has a single meaning in all those ten [categories] has departed from the original nature (*fiṭra*).»²¹⁷

«The truth is that things are associated in positivity and existence according to a notion which is obtained in the mind. This is clear by itself, and it is not possible to clarify it. He who rejects this misleads himself because he ceases to think about the objective[, and thinks] about something else.»²¹⁸

The conceptual framework is that of intuitive knowledge. The notional unity of existence is «clear by itself» (*bayyin bi-nafsi-hi*), related to «the original nature» (*fiṭra*) of the human intellect, and cannot be demonstrated. It follows that he who rejects the notional commonality of existence is contradicting what his own intuition asserts. How could that be possible? How could one both deny and affirm the same thing? Avicenna has a straightforward answer: he who denies the notional commonality of existence is merely failing to focus his thoughts on existence as such, thus confusing it with something else. In other words, he fails to give assent to the proposition «existence is common in notion» because the true meaning of the subject of that proposition («existence») is temporarily absent from his thinking.

Rāzī fundamentally agrees with Avicenna and elaborates an argument from comparison in order to corroborate the claim that the commonality of existence is known by intuition: when we compare what exists with what does not exist, we find by intuition that all existents share a characteristic non-existents do not share, and that is nothing but existence itself²¹⁹.

Rāzī considers two objections against the argument from comparison. On the one hand, the adversary could insist that there is no unifying characteristic shared by all existents. On the other hand, he could say that such unifying characteristic is the fact that existents are called «existents», while remaining essentially different from one another: existents might simply share the word that designates them. Rāzī rejects the hypothesis of the absolute lack of a unifying characteristic by noticing that, on that condition, the same dissimilarity that obtains between existents and non-existents would obtain

²¹⁷ See *Šifā’ – Maqūlāt*, II.1, p.59.12

²¹⁸ See *Ibid.*, II.1, p.60.7-10.

²¹⁹ See *Mabāhīt*, I, p.18.7-13.

between existents and other existents: existents would be as different from one another as existents and non-existents are, and that is intuitively absurd. As for the hypothesis of a nominalistic unification, Rāzī argues that the similarity on account of which the existents are called «existents» cannot be grounded in language alone, for language is arbitrary and contingent: we could imagine a situation where no single word designates all existents inasmuch as they are opposed to what does not exist. In a similar situation, the existents would lack any unifying characteristic that sets them apart from non-existent things, and that is absurd²²⁰.

Rāzī adds several minor arguments that aim to corroborate the primitivity of the notional commonality of existence. The basic reasoning behind them is as follows. When we consider two instances of the notion «existence», we can discriminate between the two only if we consider some additional discriminating qualification: *e.g.*, «necessary existence» and «contingent existence» can be distinguished because necessity is different from contingency, not because existence is different from existence²²¹.

§3.3.2 – The Arguments for the Commonality of Existence

His preliminary appeal to intuition notwithstanding, Avicenna presents two arguments for the notional unity of existence. One is based on the principle of excluded middle (there is no middle between affirmation and negation), the other on the division of the existent into substance and accident. It is important to consider the epistemological status of the two arguments, and how status that relates to Avicenna's preliminary appeal to intuition. I assume that appeal to mean that there can be no proper demonstration of the proposition «existence is common in concept», just like there can be no proper definition of «existence» as such. As a consequence, the two arguments presented by Avicenna should be considered either dialectical refutations, which assume the very position of the adversary in order to deduce its internal inconsistency, or reminders, designed to call the mind's attention to something it already knows, just like the pseudo-definitions of existence. It seems to me that the argument based on the division of existence is a dialectical refutation, whereas the argument based on the exclusion of a middle between affirmation and negation is a reminder.

As I mentioned, the first Avicennian argument is based on the principle of excluded middle, the assertion that there is no intermediate condition between affirmation and negation. If existence were not something unique in notion, then the principle of excluded middle would be violated, since one of the two opposites (affirmation) would have no unity whatsoever, consisting in a pure multiplicity of different notions²²².

A possible objection against the argument (mentioned by Ibn al-Malāḥimī and Rāzī) states that, if existence were assumed to be identical to the very quiddity of each thing it is predicated of, the

220 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.18.13 – 19.2.

221 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.292.1 – 294.7; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, pp.357.15 – 358.1.

222 See *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, p.60.10-11.

principle of excluded middle would not be violated. In fact, there is no middle between a specific quiddity and its specific negation (e.g., between whiteness and the negation of whiteness)²²³.

Rāzī answers the objection in two ways. First of all, he rejects the idea that specific negations are distinct from one another: the negation of a thing is not essentially different from the negation of another thing, for negations are instances of non-existence, and the instances of non-existence cannot be specific or distinct from one another. Secondly, he notices that to frame the principle of excluded middle as an opposition between specific affirmation and specific negation twists the meaning of excluded middle itself. The latter, in fact, states that any exclusive disjunction between affirmation and negation is true as a whole, but states nothing about the truth-value of the elements of the disjunction in isolation. For example, «blackness is either existent or non-existent» is true, but we cannot deduce which of the disjuncts is true from the truth of the disjunction as a whole. On the contrary, the opposition between specific affirmation and specific negation asserts an exclusive disjunction between a tautology and a contradiction, which is true because one of the elements is always true and the other is always false: e.g., «blackness is either blackness or non-blackness» is true because «blackness is blackness» is true (whereas «blackness is non-blackness» is false)²²⁴.

The second Avicennian argument for the notional commonality of existence is a dialectical refutation based on the notional divisibility of existence. The adversary might argue in favour of equivocity by claiming that existence can be divided into substantial existence and accidental existence, and these two instances of existence must be different from one another. Avicenna remarks that this is actually a proof against equivocity: if existence as such consisted of two essentially different notions, it would be impossible to discriminate between substances and accidents inasmuch as their modality of existence is concerned. That is because the two essentially different notions of existence – let us call them existence-1 and existence-2 – could be predicated of the same thing according to different modalities, namely *per se* and *per aliud*. The same thing could possess existence-1 *per se* (substantially) and existence-2 *per aliud* (accidentally), or vice-versa. In other words, the same thing could exist as a substance according to one of the meanings of existence and as an accident according to the other meaning, or vice-versa²²⁵.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Šahrastānī and Rāzī present a reformulation of the argument that does not consider the example of substance and accident, but rather that of the necessary and the contingent: if «existence» had more than one meaning, it would be possible for a thing to be both a necessary existent and a contingent existent according to two different meanings of «existent»²²⁶.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī objects that the argument from notional divisibility begs the question, in that it needs to assume that existence is additional to quiddity. If existence were not additional to quiddity, but rather identical to it, it would be impossible to argue that a single thing can be existent multiple times according to different notions of existence, because a thing cannot have more than one quiddity²²⁷.

223 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.19.5-10; *Tuḥfa*, p.64.18-22.

224 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.21.2-19.

225 See *Šifā' – Maqūlāt*, pp.59.13 – 60.3.

226 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.19.20 – 20.4; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.291.19-20; *Muṣāra'a*, pp.22.15 – 23.2, 44.10 – 45.3; *Tuḥfa*, p.63.15-16.

227 See *Tuḥfa*, pp.63.22 – 64.2. Cf. *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.20.11-15, 22.10-14.

Rāzī concedes this point: Avicenna's reasoning requires existence to be something additional to quiddity. However, he argues that the argument from notional divisibility retains some value, for the claim that existence is equivocal is wider than the claim that existence is identical to quiddity. In other words, one could claim that existence is equivocal while also claiming that it is different from quiddity. As a consequence, the argument from notional divisibility would refute a particular formulation of equivocality which states that existence is equivocal in itself but also additional to quiddity²²⁸. This formulation is different from Ibn al-Malāḥimī's doctrine, which states both that existence is equivocal and that it is identical to quiddity.

Rāzī mentions several additional arguments for the notional commonality of existence. Hereunder I list the most relevant of them.

The first is the argument from the primitivity of existence. If existence consisted of different notions, those notions would require definition and notifications in order to be known, and that contradicts the fact that existence is intuitively known²²⁹.

The second is the argument from the possibility to demonstrate existence. The existence of a thing is an object of demonstration as such, apart from any other consideration (e.g., it is possible to demonstrate that the creator of the world exists before and regardless of the inquiry concerning the quiddity and the attributes of the creator itself). This means that existence is something definite and unique, common to all existents.

The third is the argument from the self-refutation of the assertion of equivocality. If existence were equivocal, then it would possess different meanings, and we should consider each one of its meanings in order to assert that it is not shared by all existents. This is not what happens in the case of existence: those who assert the equivocality of existence assume a single notion of existence as the subject equivocality is predicated of. In other words, the assertion «existence is equivocal» entails its own negation, because the adversary assumes the subject of that assertion to be a single concept.

The fourth is the argument from the unrestricted application of equivocality. If existence were equivocal, then every other universal notion would be equivocal as well, since the argument for the equivocality of existence may be applied to any other universal notion.

§3.3.3 – The Case for Unrestricted Equivocality

Unrestricted equivocality is the thesis that the existence of each thing is intensionally identical to its specific quiddity, and that the difference between existence and that specific quiddity is merely verbal and extensional. Ibn al-Malāḥimī's case for unrestricted equivocality is based on the identification between quiddity and existence, which in turn is based on the argument from conceptual indiscernibility: since the existence of a thing and the concretely existent thing cannot be known apart from one another, it follows that they are one and the same²³⁰.

228 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.22.14-17.

229 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.22.18 – 23.2; *Maṭālib*, I, pp. 292.14 – 293.2, 294.8-15; *Šarḥ*, II, p.356.11-13, 357.6-10.

230 See *Tuḥfa*, p.62.12-15.

Rāzī's main objection against this argument notices that the latter assumes what it needs to prove, in the sense that it conflates the quiddity of a thing with its concrete, extra-mentally existent instantiation. He contends that it is actually possible to know the quiddity of a thing apart from its extra-mentally existent instantiation²³¹.

§3.3.4 – The Case for Restricted Equivocity

Restricted equivocity is the thesis that existence has an unequivocal meaning in all cases except one, namely that of God. According to Šahrastānī, the predicate «existent» applies to God in a causal or factive sense, meaning «giver of existence». The reason behind the assertion of restricted equivocity is Šahrastānī's conviction that, if existence were predicated of God in a non-equivocal way, then it would be necessary for God to be composed of two elements: existence itself, which He shares with other things), and the specific characteristics which sets Him apart from those things. Composition, in turn, would entail contingency, and the dependence on an external cause.

This position is based on several tenets which are discussed in other chapters of my work: that predication according to modulation is metaphysically equivalent to univocal predication; that existence is additional to quiddity; that the factor which distinguishes God from other existents cannot be a negation, namely the absence of something; that self-causation is impossible²³².

Rāzī rejects restricted equivocity because it would entail that God is neither existent nor non-existent, according to the notion of existence which is common to all other existents, and that contradicts the principle of excluded middle. He also presents and refutes two arguments that aim to establish the possibility for a thing to be neither existent nor non-existent. The first appeals to the fact that contingent quiddities must entail their own contingency inasmuch as they are neither existent nor non-existent: if they entailed contingency inasmuch as they are existent, they could not become non-existence (and vice-versa). The second argument appeals to Rāzī's own thesis that God's quiddity is the cause of its own existence: God's quiddity must entail its own existence inasmuch as it is neither existent (otherwise there would be a regress) nor non-existent (otherwise existence would be predicated of a non-existent thing). Rāzī answers that, in both cases (*i.e.*, that of contingent quiddities and that of God's quiddity), the quiddities *qua* quiddities are sufficient for the causation of their own concomitants (respectively, contingency of existence and necessary existence): it is not necessary to posit a third ontological state different from both existence and non-existence in order to explain why those quiddities entail those concomitants²³³.

231 For a detailed discussion of this argument and Rāzī's objections see *Infra*, §5.3.2.

232 See *Muṣāra'a*, pp.44.6 – 52.1. On modulation see *Infra*, §4. On the additionality of existence see *Infra*, §5. On Rāzī's defence of self-causation see *Infra*, Part 2, §3.

233 See *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, pp.414.9-13, 422.11 – 423.7.

§3.4 – Concluding Remarks

Avicenna's overall take on the notional commonality of existence has a decisive influence over the way in which the subsequent discussions on these issues are conducted. On the one hand, Avicenna maintains that the notional commonality of existence is something primitive, a position Rāzī himself defends. On the other hand, he presents the two main arguments which defend the commonality of existence.

The first is the argument from the excluded middle, which should be considered a reminder (*tanbīh*) of a primitive truth: if existence were not a unique and invariant notion common to all existents, non-existence and negation would not have a single opposite, but rather multiple opposites.

The second argument is based on notional division of existence into substantial existence and accidental existence, and is a dialectical refutation of those who reject the commonality of existence on account of the difference between the existence of substances and the existence of accidents. If the existence that substances possess *per se* were different from the existence that accidents possess *per aliud*, it would be impossible to discriminate between substances and accidents, because it is possible for the same thing to possess two distinct attributes according to two distinct respects.

The defenders of equivocity, such as Ibn al-Malāḥimī, present challenging objections against both of Avicenna's arguments. They repel the argument from the excluded middle by asserting that such principle would be safe even if we accepted the equivocity of existence, for the specific affirmation of every quiddity (which is identical to that quiddity itself) is opposite to its specific negation, with no middle between affirmation and negation. As for the argument from the notional division, they notice that such proof begs the conclusion, since it requires us to assume that existence is something additional to the very quiddity of things: if we said that existence is identical to the very quiddity of the things it is predicated of, the argument would be null, since a thing cannot have more than one quiddity.

In light of the strength of these objections, Rāzī's case for the notional commonality of existence acquires particular importance. Rāzī's defence of Avicenna operates on three different levels. First of all, he presents several arguments which corroborate the claim that the notional commonality of existence is intuitive, the most relevant of them being the argument from comparison: if we compare the existents with the non-existent things, we find that the former share something the latter lack, and that something is existence.

Secondly, Rāzī answers the attacks against Avicenna's arguments. The objection against the argument from the excluded middle is repelled in two ways. On the one hand, the objection implies that there are different instances of negation (non-existence, absence), and this is absurd because every instance of negation (non-existence, absence) is merely negation. On the other hand, the objection misunderstands the nature of the principle of excluded middle, for it entails that disjunctions such as «this thing either exists or does not exist», which are true but do not imply that one of the two disjuncts is determinately true, are reduced to disjunctions such as «this thing is either this thing or not this thing», which imply that one disjunct is determinately true and the other is determinately false. As for the objection against the argument from notional division, Rāzī recognizes that the adversary is

partially right: the argument from notional division requires to assume the additionality of existence. However, he also argues that the additionality of existence is something different from the commonality (*i.e.*, non-equivocity) of existence, and thus the argument from notional division might be used in the case that someone rejected the commonality of existence while maintaining its additionality.

The third way in which Rāzī defends Avicenna's position on the commonality of existence is to present several new arguments against the equivocity of existence. The most outstanding are: the argument from the possibility to demonstrate the existence of a thing apart from the consideration of its quiddity; the argument from the nominalistic implications of the equivocity of existence; the argument from the self-refutation that is implicitly present in the act of predicating equivocity of existence *qua* existence (thus assuming that the notion of existence is something unique).

Another important element of Rāzī's argumentation that is absent in Avicenna is the discussion concerning nominalism, and in particular the value of names as tools to account for the similarities between things. Such discussion consists of a few scattered elements, but it is still possible to reconstruct an overall position. According to Rāzī, pure names cannot account for similarity or identity or commonality, for language is fundamentally arbitrary and contingent: it is possible to imagine situations where no single name corresponds to a class of similar things, and that means that language is not the reason why we deem them similar. A similar consideration is presented by Šahrastānī against the nominalism of the early Aš'arites: nominalism endangers the very stability of knowledge²³⁴.

234 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, pp.143-144.

CHAPTER 4 – The Modulation of Existence

§4.1 – The Meaning of this Premise, and the Need for It

§4.1.1 – The Meaning of the Premise

«Modulation» is a tentative translation of the Arabic word *taškīk* (lit. «ambiguity», or «ambiguation»). It denotes a peculiar form of predication which is distinct from both univocity and equivocity. Unlike equivocal predicates, modulated predicates convey a single notion which corresponds to a single essence, and not several notions which are essentially different from one another. Unlike univocal predicates, however, modulated predicates accept some form of differentiation between their various occurrences, in the sense that the single essence they refer to is graduated, in some aspect or another.

Avicenna and most of his interpreters state that existence is a modulated predicate, meaning that things can be said to be prior and posterior, and well as more and less worthy, with respect to existence. Existence is at the same time what they share, because all of them are existent, and what sets them apart, because some are prior with respect to it and more worthy of it, whereas others are posterior and less worthy. Some interpreters, like Ṭūsī, add that existence is modulated in a third sense, namely intensity: existence can be said to be more and less intense, like a colour.

§4.1.2 – The Need for the Premise

Causal action requires some form of asymmetry between the active term and the passive term: the cause must be prior to its effect, in some respect, for otherwise there would be no way to discriminate between the two. According to Avicenna, that respect is existence itself: the cause is prior to the effect in existence, and not in time or in some other consideration. Consequently, modulation is necessary in order to conceptualize efficient causality as such. If existence did not accept modulation in any sense, efficient causality would be impossible to conceive, for it would be impossible to assert that a thing is prior to another in existence. In other words, if we had a perfectly flat ontology where «existence» is a completely univocal predicate, we could not conceive ontological asymmetries, and consequently we could not conceive efficient causality, which is one the most prominent form of ontological asymmetry.

§4.2 – Modulation in Avicenna and his Interpreters

First of all, this subchapter will tackle Avicenna's take on modulation, analysing the different forms of modulation and determining which of those apply to existence (priority, worthiness) and which do not (intensity). I will also determine whether Avicenna understands the unity of modulated predicates as something essential or accidental (§4.2.1). Then, I will present the position of those interpreters who accept intensification and subscribe to the accidental unity of modulated predicates (§4.2.2). Finally, I will outline the position of those interpreters who do not accept intensification and maintain that the instances of modulated predicates have an essential unity (4.2.3.)

§4.2.1 – Avicenna on Modulation

Several scholars analysed Avicenna's doctrine of modulation with respect to existence. Treiger presented the historical development of that doctrine from Avicenna's sources to Avicenna himself²³⁵. Bertolacci addressed modulation as one of the issues where Avicenna's logic complements his metaphysics in a significant way²³⁶. Druart and De Haan also thematized modulation²³⁷. In particular, the latter discussed an issue that is fundamental for my own inquiry, namely how we should understand the differentiation between the instances of modulated predicates and those of existence in particular. In this section I aim to reconstruct Avicenna's position on modulation in relation to existence, assessing which forms of modulation may apply to existence. I also intend to show that Avicenna has an essentialist understanding of the unity of modulated predicates (and, consequently, of existence).

As I showed in the previous chapter, Avicenna rejects the equivocality of existence. However, that rejection does not entail that he asserts the univocity of existence. The reason for this is to be found in the doctrine of predication according to «modulation» (*taškīk*). The main *locus* to consider is *Maqūlāt*, I.2, where Avicenna distinguishes the ways in which a single name can be predicated of many things²³⁸.

First comes [1] univocity, «the way of correspondence» (*tarīq al-tawāṭu*). Avicenna states that many things are associated according to univocity when they share their name and the «account of the substance» (*qawl al-ḡawhar*), namely the definition or the description of their essence. An additional condition for univocity is that the notion in question must not come in degrees: it should not be predicated asymmetrically, in any way.

«The expression is ampler than each one of [things it is predicated of], and its definition is one in them in all respects: namely, it is one in meaning and one in worthiness, with no difference

235 See A. Treiger, 'Avicenna's Notion of Transcendental Modulation of Existence and Its Greek and Arabic Sources,' *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 21 (2010), 165-198; Id. 'Avicenna's Notion of Transcendental Modulation of Existence (*taškīk al-wuḡūd*) and its Greek and Arabic sources,' in F. Opwis, D.C. Reisman (eds.), *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*, Brill, Leiden 2012, pp.327-363.

236 See A. Bertolacci, 'The 'Ontologization' of Logic [...]', cit., pp.27-51.

237 See D. De Haan, 'The Doctrine of the Analogy of Being in Avicenna's "Metaphysics of the Healing,"' *The Review of Metaphysics* 69/2 (2014), 261-286; Th. A. Druart, 'Ibn Sina and the Ambiguity of Being's Univocity,' in M.A. Mensia (ed.) *Views on the Philosophy of Ibn Sina & Mulla Sadra Shirazi*, The Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts *Beit al-Hikma*, Carthage 2014, pp.15-24. Additional bibliography on the issue can be found in the studies I mentioned.

238 On this passage see A. Bertolacci, 'The 'Ontologization' of Logic', cit.

according to greater [or lesser] worth and greater [or lesser] appropriateness, according to priority and posteriority, and according to intensity and weakness»²³⁹

Then comes [2] homonymy, «coinciding in name» (*ittifāq al-ism*). That is a generic expression comprising three distinct classes of predication which share the fact of differing from univocity, in some respect or another. The first class is [2a] modulation (*taškīk*): the various occurrences of the term share a notion which is in itself unique (like in univocal predication), but at the same time differ from one another in some other respect.

«The case where the notion is one but differs after that is like existence. In fact, existence is one in many things, but it differs in them: it is not found in them according to a form which is one in every aspect.»²⁴⁰

The second class is [2b] analogical equivocity: the various occurrences of the term do not share a single notion, but there is a certain similarity (*mušābaha*) between them. That similarity may be real (e.g., «animal» inasmuch as it applies to a real horse and to a painting of a horse) or metaphorical (e.g., «dog» inasmuch as it applies to the barking animal and a certain star). When the similarity is real, there must be an identity between some accidents of the things under consideration (like the shape of the real horse and that the painted horse). The third class of homonymy is [2c] pure equivocity: the various occurrences of the term do not share a single notion, and there is no similarity between them (e.g., the Arabic term *'ayn*, inasmuch as it refers to the organ of sight and to money).

Let us focus on [2a] modulation. Avicenna qualifies his statement by arguing that modulation occurs when there is a certain gradation in the different occurrences of a single notion. Such gradation occurs in three ways: according to priority and posteriority (*al-taqaddum wa-al-ta'ahhur*); according to greater worthiness and appropriateness (*al-awlā wa-al-aḥrā*), and lack thereof; and according to intensity and weakness (*al-šadda wa-al-duf*)²⁴¹.

Each of the above-mentioned cases needs to be discussed in its own right. First of all, we have modulation according to priority and posteriority. Conveniently enough, the examples brought by Avicenna revolve around existence²⁴²: the existence of substances is prior to the existence of accidents

239 *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, p.9.11-12.

240 *Ibid.*, p. 10.9-10.

241 «In fact, the existence which belongs to substance is before the existence which belongs to the things that follow substance. Moreover, the existence which belongs to some substances is before the existence which belongs to other substances and, likewise, the existence which belongs to some accidents is before the existence which belongs to other accidents. This is [i] the way of priority and posteriority. Existence may also differ according to [ii] the way of greater worth and appropriateness. In fact, existence belongs to some things by themselves, and to other things by means of something else. What is existent by itself is more apt to existence than what is existent by means of another. Everything which is prior in a notion is also more apt to it, with no inversion. In fact, it can be that two things share in a certain notion, and [this notion] does not belong to one of the two before [belonging to the other], the two being simultaneous with respect to it, while one of the two is more apt to it because it is more complete in it, and more stable (*aḡbatu*). As for what differs according to [iii] intensity and weakness, this is [present] only in notions that accept intensity and weakness, like whiteness. Because of this, 'whiteness' is not said of what is in the snow and of what is in the ivory according to absolute univocity. [Likewise,] philosophy is not said of what is in the Peripatetics and what is in the Stoics according to absolute univocity» – *Ibid.*, p. 10.9 – 11.1.

242 Avicenna applies modulation according to priority and posteriority to other concepts as well, like unity. See *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p. 97.4-6.

(this example is presented also in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5); the existence of some substances is prior to the existence of other substances; the existence of some accidents is prior to the existence of other accidents²⁴³. In the first and the third example, the asymmetry seems to be justified on account of the criterion of inherence: accidents inhere in substances, and some accidents inhere in other accidents, and the subject of inherence must have priority over what inheres in it. The second example, on the other hand, is implicitly referring to efficient causality: some substances are efficient causes of other substances and, as we have seen, this requires the causes to possess some kind of existential priority over their effects. In light of this, modulated predication according to priority and posteriority is necessary for causality: if one denied that existence is predicated according to priority and posteriority, it could not be possible for him to assert efficient causality.

Let us consider modulation according to greater worthiness (and lack thereof). Avicenna's example focuses on existence once again: what is existent by itself (*al-mawǧūd bi-dāti-hi*) is more apt to existence than what is existent by means of another (*al-mawǧūd bi-ǧayri-hi*). As Bertolacci suggests, the referents of those expressions are to be identified either with substance and accident, or with the Necessary Existent and the contingent existent²⁴⁴. Avicenna adds two remarks that need to be taken into account. First of all, priority implies greater worthiness, whereas greater worthiness does not always imply priority (we can deduce that modulation according to greater worthiness is also necessary for causality, because priority is necessary for causality and implies greater worthiness)²⁴⁵. Furthermore, what is more complete (*atamm*) and more stable (*aṭbat*) with respect to a notion is also worthier of it, even when priority is out of the picture²⁴⁶. In other words, the category of worthiness is more extensive than the category of priority, because everything that is prior in a notion is also more worthy of it, whereas not everything which is more worthy of a notion is also prior in it. Consequently, it is possible to distinguish between two kinds of worthiness: worthiness with priority, and worthiness without priority. In the case of existence, it is difficult to find an example that fits the latter. All the asymmetries mentioned so far – cause and effect, substance and accident, necessary and contingent – are out of the picture, for they entail priority. In *Maqūlāt*, II.1, however, Avicenna argues that existence is «more solid» (*aḥkam*) in those accidents that can persist, like quality, and less so in those that cannot persist, like time²⁴⁷. That could be a good example of greater and lesser worthiness that does not relate to priority.

Finally, it is necessary to consider modulation according to strength and weakness. It must be preliminarily noticed that existence is not given as an example for this category of modulation.

243 See *Ibid.*, I.5, pp.34.15 – 35.2.

244 He provides a case for the latter hypothesis by remarking that such an association is common in Avicenna's metaphysics, and by drawing a parallelism with a passage from the *Ilāhiyyāt* which states that contingent existents do not deserve existence, in and of themselves – see 'The 'Ontologization' of Logic,' cit., pp.44-45. According to Ṭūsī, however, modulation according to greater and lesser worthiness is exemplified by the case of substance and accident – see *Hall*, I, p.572.8

245 «Everything which is prior in a notion is also more worthy of it, with no inversion» – *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, p. 10.14-15.

246 «It can be that two things share in a certain notion, and [that notion] does not belong to one of the two before [belonging to the other], the two being simultaneous with respect to it, while one of the two is worthier of it because it is more complete in it, and more stable» – *Ibid.*, p. 10.8 – 11.1.

247 See *Ibid.*, pp.60.14 – 61.1

Avicenna's own initial remark that this kind of modulation «is present only in notions that are receptive of intensity and weakness, like whiteness» (*innamā fī l-ma'ānī llatī taqbalu l-šaddata wa-l-du'fa ka-l-bayād*) reinforces the idea that this case is somewhat different from the other two. We should not assume that, since existence is modulated according to priority and worthiness, then it must also be modulated according to intensification. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that Avicenna does not accept strength and weakness with respect to existence. In particular, a passage from *Ilāhiyyāt*, VI.3 explicitly states that existence inasmuch as it is existence does not vary in intensity and weakness²⁴⁸. In that section, Avicenna asserts that existence varies only in three aspects, all related to efficient causality: priority and posteriority, because the cause possesses existence before the effect (corresponds to priority); independence and need, because the existence of the effect depends on that of the cause (may correspond to both priority and worthiness); necessity and contingency, because the cause is the source of the necessity of the effect, whereas the effect in itself is merely contingent (may also correspond to both priority and worthiness).

Mayer argued that there may be an inconsistency between Avicenna's assertions in the *Šifā'* and in the *Mubāḥaṭāt* (as well as within the *Mubāḥaṭāt* themselves)²⁴⁹. In order to substantiate his claim, he quoted the following passage from the *Mubāḥaṭāt*.

«Every existent such that its existence is by means of fewer intermediaries is stronger (*aqwā*) in existence. What is stronger in existence is the substance, since according to its way [of existence] (*min ḡihati-hi*) it exists by means of fewer intermediaries. What is weaker in existence is the accident, since it is in the reverse way.»²⁵⁰

I believe that the resolution of the apparent contradiction may lie in another *locus* of the *Mubāḥaṭāt* also mentioned by Mayer. There, Avicenna discusses a critique by Abū al-Qāsim al-Kirmānī, who attacked him for having said that the existence of what does not depend on another is «firmer» (*ākad*), whereas the existence of what depends on another is «baser» (*aḥass*) and «more deficient» (*anqaṣ*)²⁵¹. Avicenna contends that this subdivision of existence does not exceed the three kinds of differentiation mentioned in *Ilāhiyyāt*, VI.3 (priority and posteriority, independence and need, necessity and

248 «Existence inasmuch as it is existence does not differ in intensity and weakness, and does not accept [the fact of being] lesser (*aqall*) or less perfect (*anqaṣ*). It only differs in a number of considerations, which are: priority and posteriority, independence and need, and necessity and contingency. As for priority and posteriority, existence – as you know – belongs to the cause in a primary way, and to the effect in a secondary way. As for independence and need, you already know that the cause does not depend on the effect for its existence: rather, it is existent by itself or by means of another cause. This notion is proximate to the first one, even if it differs from it in consideration. As for necessity and contingency, we know that, if there is a cause which is cause of everything that is caused, that cause is necessary in existence in relation to the whole of all effects, and in an absolute way. If, on the other hand, the cause is cause of a certain effect, that cause is necessary in existence in relation to that effect: [in fact,] how could that effect be, since it is contingent in existence according to itself?» – *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.276.13 – 277.3.

The passage goes on arguing about the properties of necessity and contingency in relation to causality (pp.277.4 – 278.3). Finally, Avicenna states that «according to those three reasons, the cause is more worthy of existence than the effect (p.278.3-4). An abridged version of the whole passage passage is presented in *Mubāḥaṭāt*, pp.284.14 – 285.2.

249 See 'Faḥr ad-Dīn al-Rāzī's Critique of Ibn Sīnā Argument [...]', pp.215-216.

250 *Mubāḥaṭāt*, p.305.5-6. The rejection of degrees of intensity within existence is presented in *Ibid.*, pp.284.14 – 285.2

251 For biographical information about Kirmānī see D.C. Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennian Tradition: The Transmission, Contents, and Structure of Ibn Sīnā's al-Mubāḥaṭāt (The Discussions)* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.173.

contingency): indeed, it is to be identified with the differentiation according to independence and need²⁵². Such an answer implies that Avicenna is sensitive to Kirmānī's own concern: existence does not accept degrees of intensity.

In light of this, it seems that Avicenna's apparent inconsistency can be resolved by arguing that sometimes he makes a sloppy use of terminology: he speaks of existence as «stronger» (*aqwā*) or «firmer» (*ākad*) within contexts where such expressions may assume a generic meaning, as substitutes for «prior» or «worthier». There is another passage to consider concerning this issue, which comes from *Maqūlāt*, II.1.

«The state of existence in those ten [categories] is not a single state. On the contrary, existence is prior in one of them, and posterior in the others – for you know that substance is before the accident –, and existence is worthier for one of them and less worthy for the others. Moreover, you know that what exists by itself is worthier to existence than what exists by means of another. Existence is also more solid (*aḥkam*) in some things, and weaker in others: the existence of what is stable, like quantity and quality, is more solid than the existence of what has no persistence, like time or passivity»²⁵³

Avicenna asserts that the existence of stable (*qārr*) accidents is «more solid» (*aḥkam*) than the existence of unstable accidents, which is «weaker» (*aḍ'af*). This, however, does not imply that existence has degrees of intensity as colours do, for the distinction appears to refer to a difference in temporal extension, as the example suggests: quality and quantity can persist for more than one instant, whereas the existence of time is in constant flux, and so none of its parts can persist for more than one instant. Moreover, I claim that the passage at stake is to be understood in connection with the one mentioned in *Maqūlāt*, I.2, which states that there is a kind of modulation according to worthiness which does not imply priority: the case of persistent and non-persistent things is probably an exemplification of that kind of modulation, not an exemplification of modulation according to intensification.

In sum, Avicenna's assertions that may justify the acceptance of the intensification of existence are unclear and may be understood in different ways (as those in the *Mubāḥaṭāt* and in *Maqūlāt* II.1). On the other hand, the assertions that entail the exclusion of intensification are clear (as in *Maqūlāt*, I.2 and in *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.3). I believe that the weight of the evidence corroborates the claim that Avicenna rejects intensification, with some significant inconsistency which probably comes from a sloppy use of terminology.

252 «He [*i.e.*, Kirmānī] heard me say: 'The existence that is independent from something in which and by means of which it subsists is firmer than the existence that depends on something in which and by means of which it subsists. It is not possible for the baser and more deficient existence to be cause of the more stable existence.' He then said: 'We assent to the intensification of the firmness (*ta'akkud*) of existence, and to its precedence, with respect to three things only: necessity and contingency, priority and posteriority, and need and independence. What exceed this, that is the fourth [category of intensification], is not among the subdivision of the differentiation of existence with respect to intensification of firmness and its contrary'. He[, however,] did not think that this [category I was talking about] is a fourth [category], but rather the third of them, which is need and independence» – *Mubāḥaṭāt*, p.69.7-13.

253 *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, pp.60.14 – 61.1

Let me summarise what has been said so far. Avicenna rejects equivocity with respect to existence. That rejection, however, does not require existence to be a univocal notion, since existence is actually modulated, namely a unique notion which accepts some degree of differentiation that uniqueness notwithstanding. Modulation is said to be different from both analogical equivocity (both real and metaphorical) and absolute equivocity. Modulation is said to apply to existence according to two respects: priority and posteriority (cause and effect, substance and accident), and greater and lesser worthiness (substance and accident, necessary and contingent). Modulation according to greater and lesser worthiness must be further subdivided into worthiness together with priority (all the above-mentioned examples) and worthiness without priority (stable and unstable). There is also a third form of differentiation, namely intensification, which is rejected by Avicenna in the case of existence.

At this point, it is necessary to address the question of whether Avicenna believes the unity of modulated predicates to be something essential or accidental. First of all, it is necessary to understand why that question arises. Let us recall Avicenna's explication of what a modulated expression is.

«[...] the notion is one in itself, but differs according to another aspect.»²⁵⁴

«The case where the notion is one, but differs after that, is like the notion of existence. In fact, existence is one in multiple things, but differs in them: it is not present in them in a form which is the same in every respect.»²⁵⁵

«What is such that the concept of the expression concerning it is one when abstracted (*idā ġurrida*), but is not one in every aspect, and not [completely] identical, in the things which are united in that expression: that is called 'modulated name'.»²⁵⁶

These passages entail that the instances of modulated predicates share in something and differ in something else: they are one in «notion» (*ma'nā*), but different in some «aspect» or «respect» (*waġh, ġiha*). Since what accounts for difference cannot be the same as what accounts for unity, any modulated predicate requires us to consider two distinct elements: what is common to all its different occurrences and unifies them, and what is peculiar to each one of them and differentiates it from the others. In light of this, it is necessary to consider the question of whether the element that unifies the instances of a modulated predicate is something essential or accidental for those very instances²⁵⁷. In fact, there are only two possible alternatives: either the unitary element is essential, the differentiations being accidental additions to it, or the differentiations themselves are essential, their unification being accidental. When we apply this schema to existence, we have that the instances of existence are either essentially unitary, or essentially different.

There are reasons to believe that the former hypothesis (essential unity, accidental differentiation) is true, in the case of Avicenna. First of all, one of Avicenna's explications of modulation states that the

254 *Šifā' – Maqūlāt*, p.10.5

255 *Ibid.*, p.10.8-10.

256 *Ibid.*, p.11.3-4.

257 By 'essential' I mean what is internal to the essence of a thing, and by 'accidental' what is external to it. This meaning of «accidental» is inconsequential for the question of whether it is possible to separate the accidental feature from the thing it is accidental for. In other words, accidental (*i.e.*, non-essential) features can be both necessary and non-necessary.

unity of the notion comes before its differentiation according to subsequent «aspects»: this wording suggest that there is a primary and unitary essential nature which becomes differentiated by external accidents. Secondly, Avicenna also says that the notion is one «when abstracted» (*idā ġurrida*): generally speaking, abstraction (*tağrīd*) is the process that obtains the essence of a thing by removing its accidents. Thirdly, the whole passage of *Maqūlāt*, I.2 devoted to the kinds of predication employs the word *ma'nà* («notion», but also «thing» and «semantic content») in an essentialist way. For example, when Avicenna speaks of univocity, he says that «the account of the substance» (*qawl al-ğawhar*) is «the detailed expression which signifies the *ma'nà* of the essence» (*al-laḫḫu l-mufaṣṣalu d-dāllu 'alà ma'nà d-dāt*)²⁵⁸. Finally, the case of the unification of essentially different instances on account of a single common accident is accounted for by a different category of predication: [2b] analogical equivocity, or equivocity of resemblance (*mušābaha*). In case that resemblance is real and not metaphorical, Avicenna argues, some of the accidents (lit. «states», *aḥwāl*) of the things under consideration are identical: e.g., when «horse» is predicated of the actual animal and the painted animal, those two essentially different things share that accidental feature which is their shape.

§4.2.2 – Intensification and the Accidental Unity of Modulation in Bahmanyar and Ṭūsī

Avicenna's explicit rejection of the intensification of existence and his implicit rejection of the accidental unity of modulated predicates do not hold back some of his most important interpreters from subscribing to these ideas.

One passage of Bahmanyār's *Tahṣīl* denies the intensification of existence, in blatant contradiction with another passage which explicitly affirms it²⁵⁹. Since the former passage is simply a *verbatim* quotation of *Ilāhiyyāt*, VI.3, whereas the latter is an original elaboration by Bahmanyār himself, I am inclined to credit him as a defender of intensification. Furthermore, Bahmanyār's general take on the issue of modulation suggests that his theoretical framework allows, or perhaps even necessitates, the affirmation of degrees of intensity within existence. That is because he deems the instances of modulated predicates to be essentially different from one another: I will return on this point at the end of section.

«You should know that existence is predicated of what is below it according to modulation, not according to univocity. The meaning is that the existence which has no cause is naturally prior to the existence which has a cause. Similarly, the existence of the substance is prior to the existence of the accident. Moreover, some instances of existence are stronger and others are weaker. So it is clear that it is not correct to say: «Existence is something ample which is predicated of, for example, the existence of a man and that of a donkey and that of the celestial sphere according to equivalence, like yellowness and redness.» [...] Priority and posteriority, and stronger and weaker, are like the constituents of the instances of existence, namely the existents.»²⁶⁰

258 *Ibid.*, p.9.9-12.

259 See respectively *Tahṣīl*, pp.529.12 – 530.11, and *Ibid.*, p 281.10-20.

260 *Ibid.*, 281.10-14, 19-20.

Ṭūsī clearly and consistently adheres to the idea that existence accepts intensity and weakness. As in the case of Bahmanyār, Ṭūsī's general take on the essential disunity of modulated predicates prompts him to uphold the intensification of existence. He also attacks both Šahrastānī and Rāzī on this issue: in his opinion, they fail to comprehend the nature of modulation altogether²⁶¹.

«Modulation is according to priority and posteriority, like the application of 'continuous' to the measure and to the body which possesses that measure, according to greater worthiness and lack thereof, like the application of 'one' to what is absolutely indivisible and what is divisible is some respect which is not that in which it is one, and according to intensity and weakness, like the application of 'white' to the snow and the ivory. Existence gathers all these differences. In fact, it applies to cause and effect according to priority and posteriority, to substance and accident according to greater worthiness and lack thereof, and what is stable and what is not stable – like blackness and movement – according to intensity and weakness. Furthermore, it applies to the necessary and the contingent according to the three respects.»²⁶²

We see the three categories of modulation mentioned by Avicenna: priority, worthiness, and intensification. However, Ṭūsī explicitly applies intensification to existence, mentioning the example of stable and unstable accidents, as well as that of the necessary and the contingent.

It is noteworthy that Ṭūsī derives both elements of his reconstruction concerning intensification from Avicenna: the general example of modulation according to intensity and weakness (whiteness in snow and ivory) comes from *Maqūlāt*, I.2, whereas the specific example which concerns existence (what is stable like blackness, and what is not stable like movement) comes from *Maqūlāt*, II.1. Ṭūsī's original contribution consists precisely in the juxtaposition of the two elements, which aims to justify the claim that one mirrors the other. Avicenna never asserts anything like that.

Ṭūsī's understanding is questionable in four respects. First of all, there is a terminological difference between the two passages of the *Maqūlāt*: in the first case Avicenna speaks of «intensity and weakness» (*al-šadda wa-al-ḍu'f*), whereas in the other he speaks of «more solid and weaker» (*aḥkam wa-aḍ'af*). Secondly, the example of blackness and movement does not harmonize with the example of colours. The most evident difference between the existence of blackness and that of movement concerns duration: blackness can persist more than one instant, whereas movement cannot persist. It is not clear why such difference in duration should imply different degrees of intensity, like those of colours. Thirdly, Avicenna explicitly rejects intensification. The case of greater and lesser solidity should be considered a sub-category of modulation according to greater and lesser worthiness: indeed, Avicenna explicitly mentions that there can be greater worthiness without priority, in case one of the two instances of a notion is «more stable» (*aṭbat*) and «more complete» (*atamm*) than the other. Finally, Avicenna restricts modulation according to greater and lesser solidity to the difference between stable and unstable accidents. On the other hand, Ṭūsī generalizes this kind of modulation and applies it to the very difference between the necessary and the contingent.

261 See *Ibid.*, I, p.572; *Mašāri' al-mušāri'*, pp.60-62.

262 *Ḥall.*, I, p.572.7-10.

We need to notice that, for Ṭūsī, the structural correlation between colours and existence is crucial, since he goes as far as using the analogy with colours in order to prove a point about existence: the very fact that the latter is not a species-like nature (i.e., that it is not essentially unitary). At this point we can appreciate the reason why the acceptance of intensification in existence is important for Ṭūsī's claim. It is relatively easy for him to argue that a notion like whiteness is such that its instances have different essences (i.e. snow-whiteness, ivory-whiteness, and so on), which share an inessential or accidental unqualified whiteness. Then, this judgement can be transposed on existence, on account of the fact that both whiteness and existence are subject to intensification.

As I showed, the question of whether existence has multiple instances which differ in intensity and weakness is particularly important. In fact, the assertion of intensification is the sign a more general stance concerning the basic structure which underlines the modulation of existence as such, namely the nature of the unity of modulated predicates. Those who affirm intensification (Bahmanyār, Ṭūsī) believe that modulated notions are not species-like: they do not share a single essential nature which accounts for their unity, for their instances are essentially different, sharing a merely accidental unity. On the other hand, those who do not accept or do not consider intensification (Šahrastānī, Ibn al-Malāhimī, Rāzī) uphold that modulated notions are species-like: their instances share a single nature, and differ from one another on account of external accidents.

As for Bahmanyār, he states that prior and posterior, as well as stronger and weaker, are the essential constituents (*muqawwimāt*) of the instances of existence: this entails that the instances of existence are essentially different from one another, because things that have different essential constituents are essentially different. Furthermore, Bahmanyār equates the relation between existence *qua* existence and its instances to that between «thing» and its instances: this entails that existence *qua* existence is not an essential constituent for its different instances, for «thing» is not an essential constituent of the instances of the things it is predicated of (there is no genus that is common to both substance and accidents)²⁶³. He also states that existence *qua* existence is predicated of the different instances of existence as an inessential necessary concomitant (*lāzim*), not as an essential constituent (*muqawwim*)²⁶⁴.

Ṭūsī is even more explicit than Bahmanyār, arguing that existence is something accidental for its specific instances, and distinguishing the specific instances of existence from the quiddities that connect to those instances.

«I do not say [that existence applies] to the quiddities of the contingents [as an external concomitant]. I say that [it applies] to the instances of existence of quiddities as an external concomitant and not as an essential constituent.»²⁶⁵

263 «The existents [*i.e.*, the instances of existence] are notions whose names are unknown. The explication of their names is 'such an existent' or 'that existent which has no cause'. Subsequently, all of them have that existence that is common as a necessary concomitant in the mind. It is as if we did not know the names and the descriptions of quantity, quality and the other accidents, and we said that quantity, for example, is a certain accident or a certain thing that exists in a subject. The relation of existence to its divisions is like the relation of 'thing' to what is below it. However, the divisions of 'thing' are known in their names and in their peculiar accidents, unlike the divisions of existence.» – *Tahṣīl*, 283.7-12.

264 *Ibid.*, p.282.1-6.

265 *Hall*, 573.4-5.

In sum, both Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī assert the same basic schema: there are various instances of existence which are essentially different from one another (the existence of a substance is essentially different from the existence of an accident, the existence of a cause is essentially different from the existence of an effect, and so on), and all of these are associated in a common necessary concomitant called «existence».

§4.2.3 – The Absence of Intensification and the Essential Unity of Modulation in Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Šarhastānī, and Rāzī

Šarhastānī and Rāzī do not claim that existence accept modulation according to intensity, even though they consistently mention priority and worthiness when discussing the modulation of existence. Ibn al-Malāḥimī speaks of «stronger» (*aqwà*) and «preponderant» (*arġaḥ*) when describing the doctrine of the philosophers, but he understands these terms in a generic sense, as interchangeable with «prior» (*awwal*) and «worthier» (*awlà*)²⁶⁶.

All the above-mentioned authors agree that existence is essentially unitary, namely that all instances of existence share the same fundamental nature. Ibn al-Malāḥimī presents a reasoning that assumes the additionality of existence as a counter-factual hypothesis: if existence were something additional to the quiddities it is predicated of, then the same essential nature would occur, modulation notwithstanding. In fact, he argues, two things must share the «basic nature» (*aṣl*) of a quality in order for one of the two to be preponderant over the other in that quality²⁶⁷.

Šarhastānī's position is similar, but his argumentation revolves around the division of existence *qua* existence into necessary and contingent existence. Even if it were conceded that necessary existence is prior to and worthier than contingent existence, the two would need to share the same «existentiality» (*wuġūdiyya*), namely the very nature of existence. Indeed, existence *qua* existence is «something essential» (*amr dātī*) for both necessary existence and contingent existence²⁶⁸.

Rāzī presents perhaps the most clear-cut formulation of the essential unity of existence: existence is «a single species-like nature» (*ṭabī'a naw'iyya wāḥida*) whose differentiations are accidental.

«Existence inasmuch as it is existence, divested of the accidents, is a single species-like nature.»²⁶⁹

Many of Rāzī's arguments against Avicenna's thesis that God is pure existence are based on the assumption that existence is a single essence whose various differentiations supervene on it. Being self-

266 The case of Ġazālī is *sui generis*, for he does not take modulation into account at all and thus does not thematize the issue of the unity of modulated predicates.

267 «The fact that an attribute is less worthy and posterior in some things, while it is worthier and prior in other things, implies that all those things share that attribute. Then, in some of them the attribute is established as stronger and preponderant, whereas in others that is not the case. This is because preponderance in an attribute requires to share the basic nature of that attribute.» – *Tuhfa*, pp.65.22 – 66.1.

268 «The subdivision of existence into the Necessary *per se* and the contingent *per se* is the same as its subdivision into what is worthier and prior and what is less worthy and posterior. Existence embraces the two according to equivalence, inasmuch as existentiality is concerned. Existence is something essential for the divisions that are most proper to it, even though it is accidental in relation to substance, accidents, and the rest of the quiddities.» – *Muṣāra'*, pp.45-14 – 46.4.

269 *Šarḥ al-Iṣārāt*, II, p.360.16-17.

subsistent, being necessary, being cause: all of those are accidental qualifications of a single thing (existence), and as such need to be implied by something that is not the very essence of existence²⁷⁰.

Furthermore, Rāzī's discussions contain the elements to answer a possible objection against the doctrine of the essential unity of existence. One could contend that, if existence as such were a single nature, it could not imply different qualifications, for existence is a single invariant essence, and a single invariant essence cannot imply different concomitants. In other words: if existence were a species-like nature, modulation would be inconceivable. Rāzī is aware of similar objections, because he recognizes that the different concomitants of existence are to be accounted for by appealing to the presence of something different from existence itself: *i.e.*, quiddity. In other words, the reason why this occurrence of existence is a cause and that occurrence is an effect (also, the reason why this occurrence is necessary and that is contingent) is the fact that the former is the existence of a certain quiddity, whereas the latter is the existence of a certain other quiddity²⁷¹.

In conclusion, we see two opposite schemas. The first, defended by Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī, states that modulated notions (and existence in particular) are such that their occurrences are essentially different from one another, and their association comes as an external concomitant which befalls their essentially different quiddities. The second schema – which is supported by Šahrastānī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, and Rāzī – asserts the very opposite: modulated notions are such that their occurrences are essentially identical to one another, and their differentiation comes as an external concomitant which befalls their essentially identical quiddities. For Ibn al-Malāḥimī this is true in a counter-factual sense: if existence were additional to quiddity, it would be a species-like nature.

270 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.295.6 – 300.4.

271 On the unsoundness of the objection, according to Rāzī, see *Maṭālib*, I, pp.298.6-9. On the claim that necessity must be implied by quiddity (or by the conjunction of quiddity and existence), see *Ibid.*, p.289.10-12. On the claim that causality must be implied by quiddity (or by the conjunction of quiddity and existence), see *Ibid.*, p.299.10 – 300.4.

Surprisingly enough, also Bahmayār states that, with the exception of the Necessary Existent, the differentiation of the occurrences of existence is by means of their «relation» (*iḍāfa*), to quiddity, because those occurrences are accidents, and an accident requires a subject – see *Taḥṣīl*, p.282.12-17.

§4.3 – The Debate over Modulation

This subchapter analyses the case for the essential disunity of existence (§4.3.1), and the case for the essential unity of existence (§4.3.2).

§4.3.1 – The Case for the Essential Disunity of Existence

It is necessary to explain why the doctrine of the essential disunity of existence appears in the first place. I claim that such doctrine is elaborated as an attempt to answer an objection against Avicenna's conception of God's essence (the objection appears for the first time in the *Mubāḥaṭāt*, but is significantly reformulated and expanded by Rāzī). According to Avicenna, the essence of the Necessary Existent is pure existence, devoid of any additional quiddity. That leads to the question of what is the factor that accounts for God's necessity. If that factor is the very nature of existence itself, then all instances of existence must be necessary. If, on the other hand, that factor is something additional to the nature of existence, then God's essence must be composite, and for Avicenna composition entails contingency²⁷². The *Mubāḥaṭāt* presents two possible answers which aim to show that God's instance of existence must be distinct from the other instances in its implications while being absolutely simple. The first argues that the discrimination occurs on account of a negation: God's instance of existence is distinct from the other instances simply because it is not attached to any quiddity. This corresponds to Avicenna's position in *Ilāhiyyāt*, VIII.4²⁷³. The second possible answer argues that the discrimination occurs on account of a positive factor which is the specificity of God's instance of existence: God's essence is a specific instance of existence which entails common existence (existence *qua* existence) as an external concomitant. This corresponds to Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī's position²⁷⁴. I claim that the doctrine of the essential disunity of existence stems from the necessity to generalize the content of this second solution: if God's essence is a specific instance of existence which entails existence *qua* existence as an external concomitant, then all other specific instances of existence must entail existence *qua* existence as an external concomitant.

Now let us analyse the arguments for the essential disunity of existence.

The main proof consists in Ṭūsī's argument from the externality of modulated predicates. Modulated predicates are external to the essence of the things they are predicated of, and existence *qua* existence is predicated of the peculiar occurrences of existence according to modulation. It follows that existence *qua* existence is an external concomitant of the peculiar occurrence of existence it is predicated of²⁷⁵. The argument is a transposition of one of Avicenna's proofs for the accidentality of existence, namely the proof from modulation: existence is external to quiddity because it is predicated according to modulation, and what is predicated according to modulation cannot be part of the essence of the thing it

272 See *Mubāḥaṭāt*, p.138.8-12. Rāzī presents more refined versions of this argument – see *Infra*, Part 2, §3.

273 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.348.6 – 349.6.

274 See *Tahṣīl*, p.280.17 – 281.9; *Hall*, I, pp.573.11 – 577.18.

275 See *Hall*, I, pp.572.11-13, 573.2-5.

is predicated of²⁷⁶. The soundness of such a transposition is uncertain, primarily because what Avicenna's argument aims to show (the accidentality of existence) entails that existence must be external to quiddity. It is unclear how one could transpose a similar judgement to the relation between the peculiar occurrences of existence and existence *qua* existence, for the conceptualization of the peculiar occurrences of existence appears necessarily related to (*i.e.*, conceptually inseparable from) the conceptualization of existence *qua* existence.

Ṭūsī corroborates the thesis of the essential disunity of existence by mentioning an analogy with colours, which in turn is based on the assumption that existence accepts modulation according to intensification (just like colours): snow-whiteness is essentially different from ivory-whiteness, but they share a single name that to a single meaning (*i.e.*, «white»). The same goes for the case of existence²⁷⁷.

§4.3.2 – The Case for the Essential Unity of Existence

The case for the essential unity of existence follows one of two strategies. The first is simply to reject modulation altogether, or to deflate its importance for the issue at stake. The second strategy is to concede that modulation is sound while presenting arguments for the essential unity of existence, modulation notwithstanding.

The first strategy is employed by Šahrastānī and Rāzī in different ways. The former challenges modulation by arguing that the latter is an *ad hoc* category of predication invented by Avicenna in order to solve a problem concerning the nature of God (*i.e.*, if existence were common to both the Necessary and the contingent, the Necessary would need to be composed of existence and something else)²⁷⁸. Ṭūsī presents quotations from several other philosophers (Aristotle, Alexander, Porphyry, Fārābī) in order to prove Šahrastānī's accusations wrong: Avicenna's introduction of modulation is not *ad hoc*, nor it is something unheard of in the philosophical tradition. While that is true for modulation in generale – as I noticed, Avicenna introduces modulation in order to account for causal and inherential asymmetries, not to solve a theological problem²⁷⁹ –, the accusation of being *ad hoc* may be directed against the Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī's claim that existence is essentially non-unitary, for that thesis actually emerges as an attempt to solve a problem concerning God's essence.

Rāzī appears to deflate the importance of modulation for the issue of the unity of existence. Instead of Avicenna's fourfold categorization of the kinds of predication (univocity, modulation, analogical equivocity, pure equivocity), he presents a twofold categorization that discriminates between commonality in expression (*ištirāk lafẓī*) and commonality in meaning or notion (*ištirāk ma'navī*)²⁸⁰. Ṭūsī equates these two kinds of predication to univocity and equivocity, and thus criticizes Rāzī for his disregard of modulation. However, Ṭūsī's equation is unconvincing. It seems more likely that Rāzī

276 See *Šifā' – Maqūlāt*, pp.60.17 – 61.4.

277 See *Hall*, I, pp.572.11 – 573.3.

278 See *Muṣāra'a*, pp.46.12 – 47.2.

279 See *Supra*, §4.2.1.

280 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.290.5-8; *Šarḥ*, II, p.356.5-7.

includes both univocity and modulation under the label of commonality in meaning or notion, deeming the difference between the two to be inconsequential for the issue of the essential unity of existence. This position may find support in Avicenna himself, for the latter states that the notion (*ma'nā*) is one both in univocal and in modulated predicates²⁸¹.

As for the second strategy (*i.e.*, to argue for the essential unity of existence while conceding the soundness of modulation and its importance for the issue at stake), there are two distinct arguments to consider, both mentioned by Šahrastānī. The first is the argument from the identification of modulated differentiation with modal differentiation: the difference between the degrees of existence is nothing but the difference between necessity and contingency, and existence *qua* existence is predicated of the two without any difference in its core meaning²⁸². In other words, the differentiation between an instance of existence which is necessary and an instance of existence which is contingent does not concern the nature of existence, but rather something additional to it (*i.e.*, necessity and contingency).

Ṭūsī objects that this argument reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of modulation, for the instances of a modulated notion are not equivalent in that notion: for example, snow-whiteness and ivory-whiteness are not equivalent in whiteness *qua* whiteness, since the former is more white than the latter. This objection needs to assume that existence accepts intensification²⁸³.

The second proof for essential unity is Šahrastānī's argument from the conditional necessity of the conceptualization of existence: it is impossible to conceive an occurrence of existence (*e.g.*, necessary existence or contingent existence) without having conceived existence *qua* existence beforehand, and this means that existence is an essential constituent of its occurrences. That is not the case for quiddities²⁸⁴.

Ṭūsī challenges the argument by noticing that Šahrastānī is incoherent in tracing a distinction between the subdivisions existence is essential for, like necessity and contingency, and those subdivisions existence is inessential for, like substantiality and accidentality, because the latter are described by taking existence into account (*e.g.*, «substance» is «what exists not in a subject»). He concludes that existence *qua* existence must be either essential for all those subdivisions (not just for necessity and contingency), or inessential for all of them (not just for substantiality and accidentality)²⁸⁵.

This answer is problematic if its aim is to defend Avicenna, for the latter does indeed discriminate between the occurrences of existence (*e.g.*, substantial existence, namely existence not in a subject) and the quiddities those occurrence are said of (*e.g.*, humanity, or horseness)²⁸⁶. This means that the root of the discrimination mentioned by Šahrastānī is accepted by Avicenna, even though the specific classification Šahrastānī mentions is incomplete. In particular, Šahrastānī's classification overlooks that substantial existence and accidental existence are also occurrences of existence, just like necessary and

281 See *Supra*, §4.2.1.

282 See *Muṣāra'a*, pp.45.14 – 46.2

283 See *Maṣāri'*, p.55.3-6.

284 See *Muṣāra'a*, p.46.3-11.

285 See *Maṣāri'*, pp.55.16 – 56.1, 56.8-15.

286 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.348.5 – 349.6

contingent existence, even though we should not identify substantial (or accidental) existence with the substantial (or accidental) quiddity that existence is predicated of: the quiddity of man has substantial existence, as opposed to the quiddity of blackness which has accidental existence, but substantial existence is not the same as the quiddity it is predicated of.

§4.4 – Concluding Remarks

Avicenna's claim that existence is a modulated predicate is accepted by nearly all the interpreters which accept the notional commonality of existence (*i.e.*, its non-equivocity). Šahrastānī's case is peculiar, for on the one hand he accepts that existence is at least partially common (he excludes God from the sum of things existence is predicated of in a non-equivocal way), while on the other hand he casts strong doubts on the soundness of modulation as a category of predication, arguing that the introduction of modulation is *ad hoc* and in contrast with the philosophical tradition: both accusations are unfair, at least in the case of Avicenna. The true controversial point among Avicenna's interpreters concerns the kind of unity shared by the instances of modulated predicates.

According to Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī, modulation entails that existence is not species-like. This is not the case for Šahrastānī and Rāzī, who maintain that modulated predicates are not different from univocal predicates in their essential unity: they all refer to species-like natures. Ibn al-Malāḥimī accepts the essential unity of existence in a hypothetical and counterfactual sense: if existence were something additional to quiddity, it would be species-like.

All things considered, Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī appear more distant than their adversaries from Avicenna's own understanding of the modulation of existence. Such distance emerges in three issues. First of all, there is a difference in the main objective behind the discussion of modulation. Avicenna presents it as a conceptual tool to justify ontological asymmetries related to causality (priority and posteriority), inherence (greater and lesser worthiness), and temporal duration (greater and lesser stability). The question of how God's existence relates to existence *qua* existence is not solved via the appeal to modulation. On the other hand, Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī's discussion of modulation has a clear theological goal: they aim to defend Avicenna's assertion that God is pure existence. For Ṭūsī this concern is even more crucial, because Rāzī presents a compelling refutation of the Avicennian theological doctrine which is at least partially based on the premise that existence is species-like²⁸⁷.

The second important difference concerns which kinds of modulation existence can accept. Avicenna rejects intensification, whereas Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī admit it, superimposing it on modulation according to stability and instability. This is no marginal issue, since Ṭūsī corroborates his case for the essential disunity of existence by appealing to the analogy with colours, which in turn is grounded in the claim that existence accepts intensification. Moreover, Ṭūsī moves away from Avicenna with respect to the subjects this kind of modulation applies to. The latter explicitly restricts modulation according to stability and instability to the difference between kinds of accidents (*e.g.*, quality, that is persistent, and time, that is not), Ṭūsī applies it to the difference between the necessary and the contingent.

The third and most important difference that separates Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī from Avicenna concerns the very question of whether existence is a species-like nature or not. As a matter of fact, Avicenna's assertions strongly imply that existence *qua* existence is indeed a nature, something essentially unitary. First of all, Avicenna's description of modulated predicates in *Maqūlāt*, I.2 implies an essentialist

287 See *Infra*, Part 2, §3.3.2.

understanding of their unity²⁸⁸. The same chapter adds a category of predication different from modulation in order to account for those things that share a merely accidental unity: analogical equivocity or equivocity according to similarity (*mušābaha*). If the instances of modulated predicates shared a merely accidental unity, Avicenna's clear discrimination between modulation and analogical equivocity would become unexplicable. Furthermore, in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.2 Avicenna explicitly states that existence has a «nature» (*tabī'a*)²⁸⁹, arguing that this nature has «pseudo-species» (*la-hu ka-l-anwā'*) – e.g., substance, quality, quantity, etc. – and «proper accidents» (*'awāriḍ ḥaṣṣa*) – e.g., unity and multiplicity, potency and actuality, universality and particularity, and even contingency and necessity²⁹⁰.

In sum, Avicenna's assertions constitute a strong case in favour of the claim that he assumes that existence *qua* existence is a species-like nature. In this respect, those who criticize Avicenna's position on God's essence (Šahrastānī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Rāzī) appear to be more faithful as interpreters of his general ontology than those who defend him (Bahmanyār, Ṭūsī).

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that both positions entail theoretical difficulties. The doctrine that existence is species-like is problematic when it comes to Avicenna's theology. It is no surprise, then, that all of the interpreters who uphold such doctrine end up rejecting the Avicennian thesis that God is pure existence. However, all possible alternatives are at least as problematic as Avicenna's own doctrine: either God's existence is equivocal (Šahrastānī), or all instances of existence are equivocal (Ibn al-Malāḥimī), or God's quiddity is the cause of its own existence (Rāzī).

For those who uphold that existence is not species-like the main problem is epistemic. They assert that there are several essentially different instances of existence which share common existence (existence *qua* existence) as an external necessary concomitant. However, common existence does not seem to satisfy the epistemic criteria that enable us to discriminate an external concomitant from an essential constituent. According to Avicenna, an external concomitant is conceptually posterior to, and separable from, the essence it is predicated of, in the sense that the conceptualization of that essence does not need the conceptualization of the concomitant. When Avicenna aims to demonstrate that existence is an external concomitant of quiddity, he does so by noticing that we can know the latter without knowing the former. It is hard to conceive such a conceptual separability in the case of the peculiar instances of existence and common existence. Indeed, how could we know a peculiar instance of existence before and without knowing common existence *qua* existence?

288 See *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, pp.10.5, 8. See *Supra*, §4.2.1.

289 «The fact that the existent is principle is not a constituent for it, nor is impossible for it: rather, it is something accidental in relation to the nature of 'existent'. It is among the accidents proper to it, since nothing is more ample than 'existent', and so [being-principle] attaches to it in a primary way. The existent does not need to become natural, or mathematical, or else, so that 'principle' befalls it» – *Ibid.*, I.2, p.14.4-8.

290 «Some of the things [which are proper to the existent as such] belong to it like the species, like substance, quantity, and quality. In fact, the existent does not need previous subdivisions in order to subdivide into them, unlike 'substance' that needs previous subdivisions in order to subdivide into 'man' and 'not-man'. Other things are like its proper accidents, like one and many, potency and actuality, universal and particular, contingent and necessary: [the existent] does not need to be specified as natural, or mathematical, or ethical, or else, with respect to its receptivity of these accidents and its preparation for them» – *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.13.14-19.

CHAPTER 5 – The Accidentality of Existence

§5.1 – The Meaning of this Premise, and the Need for It

§5.1.1 – The Meaning of the Accidentality of Existence

It is commonplace that, according to Avicenna, the existence of a thing is different from its quiddity (or essence). Modern scholarship tends to speak of a «distinction» between the two, and this study is no exception²⁹¹. However, we need to notice that the term «distinction» is rather generic and, while it conveys that quiddity and existence are different from one another, it fails to convey at least another essential characteristic of the Avicennian doctrine, namely that existence is external to quiddity, and not internal to it (it is not a part of quiddity, like matter and form).

If we disregarded the externality of existence, there would be no reason for us to discriminate the present issue from that of the notional uniqueness of existence: if «distinction» meant only «otherness», with no additional qualification concerning the ontological status and the structure of that otherness, then everyone who rejects the unrestricted equivocality of existence would assert that existence is «distinct» from the peculiar quiddity of a thing.

Such a generic comprehension of the distinction does not correspond to how the authors I am considering understand it. It is true that sometimes they speak of «distinction» (*mumāyaza*, *imtiyāz*) and «otherness» (*muğāyara*, *tagāyur*) between quiddity and existence, but they imply something more than that, namely that existence is «external» (*hāriğ*) and «additional» (*zā'id*) to quiddity. Thus, it is better to speak of the «additionality» (or «externality») of existence with respect to quiddity.

Assuming that existence is additional to quiddity, how are we to conceive their connection? Since they stand in some kind of predicational relation, it is reasonable to conceive that connection in terms of inherence: one of the two inheres in the other, just like form in matter, or an accident in a substance. However, the direction of that inherence still needs to be determined. So we need to consider yet another element, in order to fully understand Avicenna's doctrine on the issue: existence inheres in quiddity, and not the other way round. In view of this, I believe that «accidentality» is the most precise term to describe the kind of relation that connects existence to quiddity. In this context, the term «accidentality» signifies nothing but the conjunction of the three elements we mentioned (otherness, externality, inherence), and not the possibility for quiddity to be devoid of existence. In other words, existence can be said to be «accidental» with respect to quiddity only if «accidental» entails the opposite of «essential», and not the opposite of «necessary». Furthermore, the accidentality of existence implies that existence is not something substantial, namely self-subsistent, being rather something that inheres in the quiddities.

291 See as an example P. Morewedge, 'Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sīnā's 'Essence-Existence' Distinction,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92/3 (Jul-Sep 1972), 425-435; A. Bertolacci: 'Essence and Existence in Avicenna's Metaphysics [...],' cit., pp.257-288; S.Arefi, 'The Formation of the Philosophical Theory of Distinction between Existence and Essence in Islamic World,' *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research* 15/58 (2013), 23-35 (in Persian).

There is a relation of greater and lesser specificity between the three above-mentioned elements. Additionality or externality is more specific than distinctiveness or otherness, and includes it. The same goes for accidentality with relation to both distinctiveness and additionality. In light of this, the acceptance of accidentality implies the acceptance of the other two, just like the acceptance of additionality implies the acceptance of distinction. On the other hand, it is not true that the acceptance of distinctiveness implies the acceptance of the other two, just like it is not true that the acceptance of externality implies the acceptance of accidentality.

In sum, the Avicennian position about the relation between quiddity and existence states that the latter is distinct from the former, additional to it, and accidental to it. With one exception, all these positions are defended by one or more of Avicenna's interpreters.

The first rejects otherness: existence is not distinct from quiddity in its meaning (nominalism).

The second position accepts otherness but rejects externality: existence is distinct from quiddity but is internal to it, being one of its parts.

The third position accepts distinctiveness and externality, but rejects accidentality: existence is not something accidental that inheres in quiddities, being rather something substantial (i.e., self-subsistent).

The fourth position accepts otherness, externality, and accidentality, but understands these properties in a restricted sense: existence is distinct from quiddity and additional to it, but that additionality is something that obtains in the mind only, not in extra-mental reality (conceptualism).

§5.1.2 – The Need for the Accidentality of Existence

The accidentality of existence is a fundamental premise for the Avicennian conception of efficient causality.

First of all, it is a necessary condition for the possibility to assert that the existence of a thing requires an external cause. Avicenna explicitly states that an external efficient cause cannot give a thing its very quiddity, or what is an essential constituent of that quiddity²⁹². If existence were the same as quiddity, or one of its essential constituents, then it would not be possible to say that an external cause is needed in order for quiddity to acquire existence, since the two would be already essentially connected: it would be absurd to say that causality gives quiddity what the latter already possesses *per se*. In conclusion, existence must be an external and accidental addition to quiddity, in order for Avicennian causality to be possible.

The accidentality of existence is important also in a secondary sense, which is connected to the establishment of the actual existence of efficient causes. In fact, one of the necessary conditions for establishing the actual existence of causes is the existence of contingent existents. Avicenna asserts that composition is the criterion of discrimination between necessary and contingent existents: all

292 «What is essential for a thing does not belong to it by means of cause that is external from its essence. What is by means of an external cause is not an essential constituent, even though it may be that some accidental things do not obtain by means of a cause that is external from the quiddity, that quiddity being what necessitates and implies them. As for what is not necessitated by the quiddity, and can derive from an external thing that provides it, that is not a constituent for the quiddity.» – *Šifā' – Maqūlāt*, pp.61.17 – 62.2.

contingent existents are composite, and all composite existents are contingent. As a consequence, the existence of composite existents is a necessary premise for efficient causality. This is where the accidentality of existence comes in, for one of its implications is that there are composite existents: existents which are composed of quiddity and existence are composite. No other form of composition is required in order to conclude that there are composite (and thus contingent) existents. As Avicenna himself notices, the affirmation of the existence of efficient causes is grounded in nothing but the very analysis of the nature of existence itself²⁹³.

To summarize, the accidentality of existence is important for Avicennian causality in two respects. Primarily, it is a necessary condition for the very possibility of efficient causality. Secondly, it is the sufficient condition for asserting one of the necessary conditions for the establishment of the actual existence of efficient causes (*i.e.*, the existence of composite existents).

293 See *Iṣārāt*, pp.146.13 – 147.2.

§5.2 – The Accidentality of Existence in Avicenna and his Interpreters

The previous subchapter presented a preliminary overview of the five possible positions on the issue at hand. This subchapter aims to delve in the four doctrines that are actually defended by Avicenna or some of his interpreters. No author supports the doctrine that existence is distinct from quiddity and internal to it, being one of its essential constituents.

First of all, I will analyse the standard Avicennian position: existence is distinct from quiddity, is external (or additional) to it, and inheres in it (§5.2.1). Then, I will consider the position of nominalists such as Ibn al-Malāḥimī: existence is not distinguishable from quiddity in intension, the difference between the two being merely verbal (§5.2.2). Then, I will consider the position of conceptualists like Suhrawardī and Ṭūsī: existence is distinct from quiddity in intension and is additional to it in a restricted sense, meaning that such additionality is something merely conceptual. In other words, existence is not something extra-mentally superadded on quiddity (§5.2.3). Finally, I will present Abū al-Barakāt's position: existence is distinct from quiddity and external to it, but does not inhere in it, being rather something self-subsistent (§5.2.4).

§5.2.1 – The Avicennian Position: Existence is an Accidental Concomitant of Quiddity

Multiple modern scholars addressed the issue of the distinction between quiddity and existence in Avicenna. An exhaustive survey of all studies would exceed the scope of my analysis: here I will focus only on the most recent scholarship²⁹⁴. Particularly important contributions were presented by Wisnovsky, who reconstructed the sources of the Avicennian distinction, namely Fārābī and the *mutakallimūn*, as well as its reception among Avicenna's interpreters²⁹⁵. More recently, 'Arefī also presented a study concerning the genesis of the distinction, mentioning the religious doctrine of creation from nothing as key step in the evolution of the concept²⁹⁶. Druart and Lizzini specifically considered Avicenna's peculiar take on the distinction, even though their studies focus, respectively, on thingness (or essence) and existence²⁹⁷. Bertolacci addressed the Avicennian distinction by providing a detailed analysis of the relevant passages of the *Ilāhiyyāt*²⁹⁸. He argued that the distinction between quiddity and existence does not entail the possibility to separate the former from the latter, that existence has some kind of intensional priority over quiddity (since its conceptualization is absolutely

294 For more dated studies see for example A.M. Goichon, *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sina* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1937); P. Morewedge, 'Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sīnā's 'Essence-Existence' Distinction,' 425-435; F. Rahman, 'Essence and existence in Avicenna,' *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1958), 1-16.

295 See R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*, cit., pp.145-180; Id., 'Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic East (*Maṣriq*),' in D.N. Hasse, A. Bertolacci (eds.) *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2012) pp.27-50.

296 See S. 'Arefī, 'The Formation of the Philosophical Theory of Distinction between Existence and Essence in Islamic World,' cit., 24-36 (in Persian).

297 See T.A. Druart, ' 'Shay' or 'res' a Concomitant of 'Being in Avicenna,' 125-142; O. Lizzini, 'Wuḡūd-Mawḡūd/Existence-Existent in Avicenna [...],' cit., 111-138.

298 See A. Bertolacci, 'The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna's Metaphysics [...],' cit., pp.257-288.

primitive), and that existence might be said to be more extensive than quiddity (because God has no quiddity besides existence itself).

My analysis focuses on discriminating between the distinctiveness of existence as such, its externality, and its accidentality, highlighting where Avicenna discusses each one of these elements. I will also present an overview of the two authors whose position is closest to Avicenna's, namely Bahmanyār and Rāzī, mentioning some relevant points where they go beyond or contradict Avicenna.

The *Šifā'* contains two main passages devoted to the discussion of the nature of the distinction between quiddity and existence: one in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, the other in *Maqūlāt*, II.1. In presenting Avicenna's position on the matter, I will follow the above-mentioned distinction of the three doctrinal elements ordered according to increasing specificity: existence is other than quiddity, existence is external/additional to quiddity, and existence is accidental to quiddity.

As for distinction, Avicenna states what follows.

«The notion of 'existence' and the notion of 'thing' are conceptualised in the soul, and they are two notions. 'Existent', 'affirmed', and 'realised' are synonymous names [signifying] a single notion, and there is no doubt that their notion obtains in the soul of he who reads this book. 'Thing' – and [the expressions] which can take its place – may signify another notion, in all languages. In fact, everything has an essential reality by means of which it is what it is: the triangle has the essential reality of being-triangle, and whiteness has the essential reality of being-whiteness. This is what we might call 'restricted existence': we do not mean the affirmative existence. In fact, the expression «existence» signifies multiple notions. Among those, there is the essence according to which a thing is: it is as if that according to which [a thing is] were the existence which is restricted to it. Let us return [to the point at stake] and say: it is clear that every thing has an essence restricted [to it], which is its quiddity. It is known that the essence of every thing, which is restricted to it, is other than that existence which is synonym to 'affirmation'»²⁹⁹

Here Avicenna clearly distinguishes between quiddity and existence. The mention of «restricted existence» (*wuġūd ḥāṣṣ*) as a synonym of «essential reality» (*ḥaqīqa*) is of no consequence for the point at stake, since Avicenna explicitly discriminates between it and existence as such, or «affirmative existence» (*wuġūd iṭbātī*). Affirmative existence is the focus of this analysis.

As for the externality of existence, the most complete discussion concerning this point appears in *Maqūlāt*, II.1, right after the explication of the claim that existence is predicated according to modulation (*taškīk*). Avicenna remarks that externality (or additionality) can be demonstrated both by assuming modulation and by not assuming it³⁰⁰. I are not going to delve into the details of Avicenna's arguments: I will analyse them in the next subchapters. What matters here is the conclusion: existence is an inessential «concomitant» (*lāzim*) of quiddity, and not something «internal» (*dāḥil*) to it.

299 *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.31.10-11

300 «So, the application of existence to [its subjects] is not according to a single degree, unlike the application of the natures of the genera to their species, which is according to pure univocity: so, existence is not a genus. Even if it were univocal, it would still not be a genus, for it does not signify a notion internal to the quiddities of the things, but rather something that is necessarily concomitant for them.» – *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, p.61.1-4. Cf. *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.34.15 – 35.2.

The very fact that Avicenna qualifies existence as a «concomitant» of quiddity shows that, according to him, externality immediately implies accidentality. In his view, no additional argument or justification is required in order to establish accidentality.

«The genus is among the notions which are similar to shape, among the things by means of which the notion becomes notion and the quiddity becomes quiddity. As for existence, it attaches to quiddity, sometimes in concrete reality and sometimes in the mind.»³⁰¹

Existence attaches to quiddity: this is an explicit acknowledgement that the inherential connection between the two has a precise direction (existence inheres in quiddity, and not the other way round). It would seem that this conclusion is obvious, for Avicenna. However, the reader should keep in mind that, according to Avicenna, there is an instance of existence which does not inhere in any quiddity: that is the essence of the Necessary Existent³⁰². As a consequence, self-subsistence must be at least be conceivable for existence. The result is that, generally speaking, existence is accidental and connected to a quiddity, even though there is a specific case where it is self-subsistent and separated from any quiddity.

Among Avicenna's interpreters, Bahmayār and Rāzī agree on most of the picture I just outlined, with some noteworthy caveat. Information on Bahmanyār's and Rāzī's position on the quiddity-existence distinction can be found in recent studies by Wisnovsky and Benevich³⁰³. My aim is to delve a little more in Bahmayār's and Rāzī's perspectives, in order to highlight their specificities.

As for Bahmanyār, two elements need to be taken into account. First of all, he is more explicit than Avicenna in underlining the point I just mentioned: the possibility of the self-subsistence of existence. He argues that, even though all things (quiddities) possess existence as something accidental that inheres in them, there must be an instance of existence which is necessary and thus self-subsistent, being connected to no quiddity at all³⁰⁴. Secondly, Avicenna does not directly thematize the issue of the ontological status of existence as such (*i.e.*, he does not discuss whether existence as such is existent, and what that should mean), whereas Bahmayār presents a form of «incomplete» or «unspecific» conceptualism concerning existence which discriminates between common or universal existence and its particular instances (indeed, his theory of modulation requires the former to be an inessential concomitant of the latter)³⁰⁵. Common existence is only conceptually existent, since it is universal and universals exist in the mind only. On the other hand, the specific instances of existence exist extra-

301 *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, p.62.2-4.

302 See *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.345.3 – 347.16.

303 See R. Wisnovsky, 'Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic East [...],' cit., pp.27-50; F. Benevich, 'The Essence-Existence Distinction [...],' cit., 203-258.

304 «So, existence, which is the fact of being in concrete reality (*al-kawn fī al-a'yān*), is the existent-ness (*mawǧūdiyya*), and the existence which is necessary *per se* is His existent-ness. That does not show that the fact of being in concrete reality is the being of a thing. On the contrary, demonstration and sense perception affirm that some instances of being in concrete reality belong to a certain thing, whereas another instance does not connect to any thing. That is because, if that fact of being in concrete reality which has no cause were connected to a thing, that thing would be a certain cause of that being, and we supposed that the latter does not have a cause.» – *Tahṣīl*, p.281.4-9.

305 On Bahmanyār's position on the modulation of existence see *Supra*, §4.2.2.

mentally and inhere in quiddities just like accidents inhere in substrates (with the exception of God's specific instance of existence, which is self-subsistent).

«In the case when existence is something ample, it is necessary for its existence to be in the soul. In fact, existence exists in the soul by means of an existence since it is like the other conceptualized notions, whereas the existence which is in concrete reality is a certain [instance of] 'existent'. The restriction of each instance of 'existent' occurs by virtue of its relation to its subject, or rather [that instance] is made subsistent by its relation to its subject and to its cause. It is not that relation attaches to it from outside. In fact, the existence of what is caused is an accident, and every accident is made subsistent by its existence in its subject. The condition of existence is like that.»³⁰⁶

Unspecific conceptualism is different from the proper or specific conceptualism formulated by subsequent authors such as Suhrawardī and Ṭūsī, who argue that existence as such (regardless of whether it is common or specific) is only conceptually distinct from quiddity. Furthermore, the very reason behind Bahmanyār's conceptualism is different from the reason behind Suhrawardī and Ṭūsī's conceptualism: the former argues that common existence is conceptually existent on account of its universality, whereas the latter argue that existence as such is conceptually existent inasmuch as its being existence is concerned³⁰⁷.

As for Rāzī, he does not follow Bahmanyār on the two points I just outlined. Indeed, he upholds that existence is always something accidental that must inhere in some quiddity: the case of God is no exception. In this respect, Rāzī explicitly contradicts Avicenna's position. Furthermore, Rāzī does not separate common, universal existence from its particular instances – as Bahmanyār does –, nor does he uphold a conceptualist understanding of existence, be it unspecific or specific³⁰⁸. However, Rāzī does address the problem of the ontological status of existence, arguing that predicating existence of existence is a category mistake: existence is not something existence can be predicated of³⁰⁹. Rāzī's contribution is significant in other respects too. In the *Mabāḥiṭ*, for example, he clearly discriminates between the distinctiveness of existence, or its otherness with respect to quiddity, and the externality of existence, thus making explicit a point that is only implicitly present in previous authors (e.g., Avicenna, Bahmanyār, Ibn al-Malāhimī)³¹⁰.

§5.2.2 – Nominalism: Existence is not Distinct from Quiddity

By «nominalism», I mean a possible stance towards the quiddity-existence distinction. Nominalism consists in the complete rejection of any intensional distinction between quiddity and existence. According to nominalists, the distinction between the specific quiddity of a thing and its existence is nothing but a verbal discrimination between words that have different extension: that discrimination have no correspondence neither in concrete reality nor in concepts. This position entails the equivocity

306 *Tahṣīl*, p.282.10-15.

307 On specific conceptualism see *Infra*, §5.2.3. On the arguments for conceptualism see *Infra*, §5.3.5.

308 See *Mantiq al-Mulāḥḥaṣ*, pp.27-30.

309 See *Infra*, §5.3.4.

310 On Rāzī's position on these issues see for example *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.23-30.

of existence, since quiddities are essentially different. The above mentioned studies by Wisnovsky and Benevich provide some information on post-Avicennian nominalists³¹¹.

Early Aš'arites are nominalists about the distinction between quiddity and existence³¹². A post-Avicennian defence of nominalism is to be found in Ibn al-Malāhimī, who follows Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī on this. He presents his position while discussing the *falāsifa*'s doctrine that God is pure existence devoid of any additional quiddity, which is rejected on account of two reasons. First of all, it would require all things that are not God to possess existence as something additional to their quiddities, and that cannot be the case since existence is identical to quiddity. Secondly, if we assumed (as the *falāsifa* do) that existence is something distinct from quiddity, then God could not be an instance of existence devoid of any additional quiddity.

«First of all, we need to speak about the fact that the existence of a thing is not something additional to the essence of that thing, to its essential reality. We will mention their specious arguments in defence [of the claim that existence is additional], and answer them. Then we will speak against what is reported of them concerning the claim that the existence of God and his quiddity are a single thing.»³¹³

We need to focus on the first element. By arguing that the existence of a thing is nothing additional to its quiddity, Ibn al-Malāhimī identifies the former with the latter. His main argument for the identification is based on the assumption that it is impossible to separate quiddity and existence conceptually. In other words, it is impossible to know one of the two apart from the other³¹⁴.

As I mentioned before, this positions leads to the extensionalization of the difference between quiddity and existence, namely the claim that the only meaningful difference between the two concerns the extension of their signification inasmuch as they are names. That asymmetry in the extension of the signification makes it possible for one of the two to be said of the other, even though there is no actual intensional distinction between them. In other words, existence can be predicated of a specific quiddity (like «substance») simply because the term «existent» is more extensive than the term «substance» (it designates that specific quiddity as well as many others), not because existence is something intensionally distinct from that specific quiddity³¹⁵.

311 See R. Wisnovsky, 'Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century [...],' cit., pp.27-50; F. Benevich, 'The Essence-Existence Distinction [...],' cit., 203-258.

312 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.151.1-2.

313 *Tuhfa*, p.62.10-12.

314 «We say that the demonstration of our thesis that the existence of each thing is its essence consists in that, if [existence] were something additional to the essence of a thing, to its essential reality – like 'body' for example –, then it would be possible for one of the two to be known without the other. However, it is not possible to separate between the two in knowledge.» – *Tuhfa*, p.62.12-14.

315 «It is correct to say 'the substance is existent', whereas it is not correct to say 'the substance is substance' because 'existent' in 'the substance is existent' is a name that embraces substance and other things according to equivocality. In case [the thing the judgement is about] were mentioned by its ample name, and were predicated of itself in its restricted name, [the judgement] would be correct. An example is 'this concrete thing is a substance'. However, it is not correct to say 'this substance is a substance', because 'substance' is a restricted name: that would be pure repetition. In light of that, it is possible for a thing to be mentioned by its restricted name and then to be predicated of itself by the ample name, saying 'this substance is a certain concrete thing'. That does not provide anything but a single thing.» – *Tuhfa*, p.64.6-13.

§5.2.3 – Conceptualism: Existence is not Extra-Mentally Additional to Quiddity

By «conceptualism» (or «proper conceptualism» or «specific conceptualism»), I mean the thesis that the distinction between the existence and quiddity is a mental operation that does not have any correspondence to what exists in concrete reality. In other words, existence as such is distinct from quiddity and additional to it, but only inasmuch as it is a concept in the mind, not in concrete extra-mental reality.

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish this kind of conceptualism from the improper or unspecific conceptualism I mentioned in the case of Bahmanyār. Proper or specific conceptualism claims that existence is a mental concept inasmuch as we assume it as something distinct from quiddity: this assertion concerns existence in its specific relation to quiddity. On the other hand, unspecific conceptualism claims that existence is a mental concept inasmuch as it something universal: this assertion concerns universal existence in its relation to its particular instances, something that is not specific to existence as such (it is shared by all other universals).

Unspecific conceptualism neither requires specific conceptualism nor contradicts it: one might accept that universal existence is only mentally distinct from its particular instances (thus accepting unspecific conceptualism) while maintaining that those particular instances are extra-mentally distinct from the quiddities they predicated of (thus rejecting specific conceptualism). On the other hand, the acceptance of proper conceptualism entails the acceptance of unspecific conceptualism: if one concedes that existence as such is only mentally distinct from quiddity, he would believe that existence is always like that, regardless of whether it is assumed as universal or particular.

Four main interpreters can be identified as conceptualists, in some form or another. Bahmanyār defends unspecific conceptualism. Šāhristānī definitely affirms unspecific conceptualism too, while his acceptance of specific conceptualism is uncertain. Suhrawardī and Ṭūsī uphold specific conceptualism. In this section I will focus mainly on specific conceptualism because it concerns specifically the relation between quiddity and existence – whereas unspecific conceptualism primarily concerns the relation between universals and particulars, and secondarily that between that universal which is existence and its particular instantiations. Unspecific conceptualism concerns the issue of the ontological status of universal, which must be kept separate from the question of the ontological status of existence inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity.

I already described the peculiarities of Bahmanyār's unspecific conceptualism³¹⁶. I reiterate that the reason behind his stance is the discrimination between the particular instances of existence and universal existence, which is understood as an external concomitant of those instances. Universal existence is deemed to be conceptually existent inasmuch as it is universal, not inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity.

Šāhristānī he definitely affirms unspecific conceptualism. The discussion on «states» (*aḥwāl*) in the *Nihāyat al-aqdām* presents an overall conceptualist view of universals. Universals consist neither in

316 See *Supra*, §5.2.1.

pure expressions (as the deniers of *aḥwal* believe), nor in actual attributes of extra-mental things (as the defenders of *aḥwāl* believe): they are rather intelligible notions which are present in the mind³¹⁷. There are reasons to believe that this judgement extends to existence too (inasmuch as it is a universal). In the *Muṣāra‘a*, for example, Šahrastānī accepts that the distinction between universal existence (i.e., what is common to God and to the other existents) and necessity (i.e., what is specific to God as opposed to all other existents) is merely conceptual. He explicitly equates such distinction with that between genus and differentia, arguing that neither the genus exists extra-mentally as something distinct from the differentia, nor the differentia exists as distinct from the genus. Indeed, he argues, no universal exists extra-mentally³¹⁸. In sum, existence is only conceptually distinct inasmuch as it is something universal. That leaves the question of whether particular existence is only conceptually distinct from quiddity: i.e., the question of specific conceptualism. I believe that the evidence is inconclusive. On the one hand, Wisnovsky quotes a letter to Īlāqī (d.1141) where Šahrastānī argues that existence is «something conceptual» or «something related to consideration» (*ma‘nā it ‘ibārī*)³¹⁹. However, I were not able to access the text Wisnovsky refers to, so I cannot determine whether Šahrastānī is referring to existence inasmuch as it is universal (unspecific conceptualism), or to existence inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity (specific conceptualism). On other other hand, there is also reason to doubt that Šahrastānī affirms specific conceptualism. For example, in the *Muṣāra‘a* he argues that existence must be something «existential» (*wuḡūdī*), namely endowed with some positive reality³²⁰. This assertion is even more significant because a few lines before Šahrastānī explicitly considers the predicate «existential» as opposed to «conceptual» (*i ‘tibārī*).

Suhrawardī’s stance on the ontological status of existence is unambiguous: he upholds specific conceptualism, as the following passage from the *Hikmat al-išrāq* testifies.

«Existence is applied to blackness and substance, to man and horse, according to a single notion, a single concept. So, it is an intelligible notion, more ample than each one of them. The concept of ‘quiddity’ in an absolute sense is like that, just like that of ‘thingness’, ‘essential reality’ and ‘essence’ in an absolute sense. We claim that these predicates are purely intellectual. If ‘existence’

317 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, pp.147.14 – 149.4.

318 «As for the claim the distinction between existence and necessity according to commonality and restriction is something conceptual that exists in the mind, not in existence, that is an admission which clearly lends itself to the imposition of a necessary consequence. In fact, the distinction between the notion of genericity and the notion of differentiability is in the mind only. In existence there is no an instance of ‘animal’ which is genus and an instance of ‘rational’ which is difference: the two are considerations present in the mind, not in external reality. How could something universal be in [external] existence, since there is nothing universal except in the mind. You know that being-colour and being-whiteness are intellectual considerations in the mind, not in external reality: in [external] existence the being-colour of whiteness is not something different than its being-whiteness.» – *Muṣāra‘a*, p.51.5 – 52.1.

319 See ‘Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century,’ cit., p.39.

320 «Our discourse concerns first of all existence, and then necessity. What do you say about existence and its concept in the mind? Is it a comprehensive determination, something that embraces the necessary and the contingent in some way, or not? If it does embrace them, there must be a restriction operated by something else, by means of which the necessary is distinct from the contingent. It is not possible to say that the thing which embraces is something negative: how could existence not be existential?» – *Muṣāra‘a*, p.49.8 – 50.5.

were an expression of blackness as such, then it would not be applied to [blackness], whiteness, and substance according to a single notion.»³²¹

This passage clearly rejects equivocity: «existence» has a single, definite meaning, which is not to be confused with the quiddity which is peculiar to each thing (e.g. blackness, whiteness, or substance). The rejection of (extra-mental) additionality is to be found in the previous assertion: «we claim that these predicates are purely intellectual» (*nadda ṭanna haḍihi l-maḥmūlāta ‘aqliyyatun širfatun*). There is no doubt that this remark is precisely targeting the doctrine of the extra-mental additionality of existence.

Evidence from the claim that Suhrawardī affirms specific conceptualism, and not only unspecific conceptualism, comes from his argument against the extra-mental additionality of existence, which concerns existence inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity, not existence inasmuch as it is universal. Suhrawardī’s argument presents the following disjunction: if existence were something real, then it would be either independent (*mustaqill*) from the substance it is predicated of, or «inherent» (*ḥāll*) and «subsistent» (*qā’im*) in it. He refutes both options for of reasons I am not going to discuss in this context. What matters here is that Suhrawardī clearly distinguishes between two alternative theses that follows from the extra-mental additionality of existence: the substantiality of existence, and the accidentality of existence. The latter is clearly Avicenna’s doctrine. I believe that there are good reasons to identify the former with Abū al-Barakāt’s doctrine³²².

Ṭūsī’s position on this issue is somewhat less explicit than Suhrawardī’s. This is perhaps due to the fact that most of his major philosophical works clearly show a defensive attitude towards Avicenna, who Ṭūsī aims to shield from the (supposedly) deforming interpretations of authors such as Šahrastānī and Rāzī³²³. Ṭūsī takes pains to present the Avicennian position in the best possible way, and to refute various critiques levelled against him, even transforming the actual Avicennian doctrines in the process³²⁴. This might explain why Ṭūsī does not clearly assert conceptualism where this would be most adequate, like in his discussion of Avicenna’s proof for the externality of existence³²⁵. This reticence notwithstanding, there are good reasons to believe that Ṭūsī embraces a form of conceptualism concerning existence. First of all, his *Taḡrīd al-‘aqā’id* presents the following passage.

«Existence is among the intellectual predicates, by virtue of the impossibility of its independence from the subject of inherence, and [the impossibility] of its occurrence in it. It is among the secondary intelligibles, just like non-existence, the modalities of the two, quiddity, particularity, essentiality, accidentality, genericity (*ḡinsiyya*), differentiality (*fašliyya*), and speciality (*naw‘iyya*)»³²⁶

321 *Ḥikma*, p.64.10-14.

322 See *Infra*, §5.2.3.

323 The *Ḥall muškilāt al-Išārāt* is both a commentary on Avicenna’s *Išārāt* and a critical super-commentary on Rāzī’s commentary. The *Mašāri‘ al-mušāri‘* is a refutation of Šahrastānī’s refutation of Avicenna (the *Mušāra‘at al-falāsifa*).

The *Talḥīṣ* is a critical commentary of Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal*, which in turn presents various critiques to Avicenna.

324 A case of this is to be found in Ṭūsī’s discussion of modulation (*taškīk*) with respect to existence. See *Supra*, §4.

325 See *Ḥall*, I, p.552.

326 *Taḡrīd*, p.69.9-11.

The crucial point is the reason behind Ṭūsī's claim that existence is a mental predicate: he says that this is «by virtue of the impossibility of its independence from the subject of inherence, and [the impossibility] of its occurrence in it» (*al-wuğūdu mina l-ma'qūlāti l-'aqliyyati li-ımtinā 'i stigā 'i-hi 'ani l-maḥall wa-ḥuṣūli-hi fī-hi*). This is a reference to the argument mentioned by Suhrawardī: if existence were something real, then it would be either self-subsistent or subsistent in something else, and both possibilities are absurd.

Another sign of the fact that Ṭūsī defends specific conceptualism comes from a passage of his commentary on the *Iṣārāt*. There, Ṭūsī aims to undermine one of Rāzī's arguments for the claim that God's quiddity can cause its own existence. Rāzī argument states that, just like any quiddity can be said to be receptive cause (*qābila*) of its existence not on condition of being existent, the quiddity of God can be said to be the active cause (*fā'ila*) of its existence not on condition of being existent. Ṭūsī gives the following answer: quiddity is qualified by existence only in a conceptual sense, unlike a substance which is qualified by an accident (*e.g.*, whiteness)³²⁷. This assertion is unequivocal: existence is not extra-mentally distinct and additional to quiddity, unlike an actual accident with respect to a substance. I assume Ṭūsī's final remark to mean that the existence is not something superadded to the concrete quiddity: a concretely existent quiddity cannot be separated from its existence.

For additional information on the post-Avicennian conceptualists the reader should also consider the studies by Wisnovsky and Benevich I already mentioned³²⁸.

§5.2.4 – Abū al-Barakāt: Existence is Substantial

Abū al-Barakāt's position on the issue of existence and quiddity implies that existence is to be identified with God himself, and that obviously contradicts the claim that existence inheres in quiddities. In other words, he agrees with Avicenna on the distinctiveness of existence and its externality, but rejects its existence.

The analysis of Abū al-Barakāt's position must begin by considering his argument for the existence of God, which is based on the assumption that, when we consider the existence of a quiddity, it is possible for us to discriminate between the quiddity of that very existence and its (second-order) existence: this implies a pseudo-causal chain of instances of existence which terminates in God, namely an instance of existence whose existence is not accounted for by yet another existence³²⁹. Abū al-Barakāt explicitly states that God (the Necessary Existent) is existent in the sense that He is existence

327 «The attribution of existence to quiddity is something intellectual (*amr 'aqlī*), unlike the attribution of whiteness to a body. In fact, it is not true that quiddity has existence in isolation (*la-hā wuğūdun munfaridun*), and its accident called 'existence' has another existence, so that the two may come together just like what receives and what is received. On the contrary, when quiddity is, its 'being' (*kawni-hā*) is its existence. The result is that quiddity is receptive of existence only in correspondence of its existence in the intellect.» – *Hall*, I, p.577.1-5.

328 See R. Wisnovsky, 'Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century [...],' cit., pp.27-50; F. Benevich, 'The Essence-Existence Distinction [...],' cit., 203-258.

329 On Abū al-Barakāt's argument see *Infra*, §5.3.6.

itself, and not in the sense that He is a thing which possesses existence: He must be said to be «existent» just like the colour white is said to be white, not like a body is said to be white³³⁰.

After having formulated this doctrine, Abū al-Barakāt considers an objection³³¹. The adversary aims to present an unavoidable disjunction: either the Necessary Existent-Existence inheres in the other things as an accident, or not. If we assumed the former, then the Necessary would depend on what is not necessary, being an accident of contingent existents. If we assumed the latter, then the other existents would be absolutely non-existent, since to be existent means to possess existence, and the only true instance of existence is the Necessary Existent itself. Since both disjuncts have absurd consequences, the claim that the Necessary Existent is existence itself is absurd.

Abū al-Barakāt's answer implicitly discards the first option (God-existence inheres in contingent things as an accident). It maintains that God-existence does not inhere in things, while distinguishing distinct meanings of «existent» and «existence», one of the which can still be predicated of contingent things. This move enables Abū al-Barakāt to somehow avoid the absurd consequence highlighted by the objection, namely that nothing would be existent except the Necessary³³². In other words, «existence» and «existent» would have two essentially different meanings: an essential meaning that designates existence «in essence and according to the notion [itself]» (*'alà l-ḥaqīqa wa-bi-ḥadā l-ma'nā*), and a relative meaning that designates the connection with existence according to the essential meaning. The essential meaning is the Necessary Existent-Existence itself, which is self-subsistent and does not inhere in anything other than Itself. The relative meaning consists in the relation to essential

330 «That either goes on *ad infinitum*, or terminates in an existence which is existent *per se*, and not by means of an existence ascribed to it. This existence is necessarily existent. The meaning of the assertion that something similar is existent is not the composition out of an attribute and a subject of attribution – an existent which has an existence – but rather [that there is] an existent whose essence is existence: like the colour 'white', not like a white body. In fact, a white body is white on account of a colour which is whiteness, whereas the colour 'white' is white *per se*.» – *Mu'tabar*, III, p.63.19-23.

331 «Let it be said: 'Is the existence which is the attribute of all of the numerous existents, enduring and ceasing, that simple existence which is necessary by itself, or not? If it were, how then could the existent [which is] immaterial, enduring and necessary by itself, be an attribute for something other than itself, among the existents, [be them] necessary or not necessary with respect to existence, enduring or not enduring? And if it were not the existence of the other existents, then the other existents would not exist, and there would be no existent besides that one: how, then, could the existents be non-existent, namely not qualified by existence? And how could this speculation be correct? And how could this notion be ascertained?' » – *Ibid.*, III, pp.64.20 – 65.2.

332 «The ascertained answer to this is: the expressions 'existence' and 'existent' are said equivocally of this first existence, simple in notion and ipseity (*ḥuwwiyya*), and of the existent which is a quiddity and has an existence ascribed to it. In essence and according to the notion [itself], there is no existent but [the Necessary]. As for the existent whose existence is an attribute which is realised for its quiddity by means of another thing, the notion of its existence is the bond with that Existent, the relationship to it, the being-together with it, the relation to that First [Existent]. This form of affirmation of unity is comprehensible, among all unities, only with respect to this One what is the First Existent, the First Principle: it is established only for It. The existence that is ascribed to the caused existents, [that existence] by means of which it is said that they are existent, is other than the existence subsistent by itself which is [such that] the notion of the attribute pertains to the subject of attribution – *i.e.*, the existence and the existent are one. The expressions 'existence' and 'existent' are said of the two things according to sharing in name, and according to the way of transposition and assimilation, [the way of] priority and posteriority, and [the way of] borrowing from the first for the second, from what is followed for what is following.» – *Ibid.*, III, p.65.2-13.

existence: that relation which is not self-subsistent and can be said to inhere in quiddities. Concerning the relative meaning of existence, Abū al-Barakāt states what follows.

«The notion of its existence is the bind (*'alāqa*) with that Existent, the relation (*nisba*) to It, the togetherness (*ma'īyya*) with It, its annexation (*iḍāfa*) to the first [existence].»

This double semantisation of existence represents the crucial point of divergence from the Avicennian doctrine. In Avicenna, the existence of contingent things has non-relative meaning in itself, because we can distinguish it from its dependence on the First Cause: the existence of contingent things *has* a relation with God, but does not consist in that relation. For Abū al-Barakāt, on the other hand, the existence of contingent things (relative existence) consists in the very connection between those quiddities and the Necessary Existent-Existence (non-relative existence): the existence of contingent things *is* their relation with God.

In sum, the essential meaning of existence does not inhere in contingent quiddities and, still, there is some kind of connection between those quiddities and essential existence. That connection can be predicated contingent quiddities, being their relative existence. It is not completely clear what kind of connection Abū al-Barakāt is thinking about here: he may simply refer to a causal connection, but also to an inherential connection (contingent quiddities inhere in existence, just like accidents). If the latter hypothesis were correct, then Abū al-Barakāt's position would reverse the direction of the inherential connection of Avicenna's doctrine: existence in an essential sense is the subject of inherence of contingent quiddities, and not the other way round. Be that as it may, one thing is sure: Abū al-Barakāt believes existence (in its essential meaning) to be something substantial (*i.e.*, self-subsistent), not accidental (subsisting in something else). He thus rejects Avicenna's doctrine of the accidentality of existence: if existence as such is God, existence must be substantial, since God cannot be said to inhere in something.

The hypothesis that existence might be substantial is considered and rejected in Suhrawardī's argument against the additionality of existence³³³. It is possible that Suhrawardī's refutation is implicitly referring to Abū al-Barakāt's doctrine.

333 *Hikma*, p.64.14-16.

§5.3 – The Debates on the Accidentality of Existence

The Avicennian doctrine concerning the relation between existence and quiddity can be presented as subdivided into three tenets: the distinctiveness of existence, the externality (or additionality) of existence, and the accidentality of existence. These points are ordered according to increasing specificity so that, for example, the acceptance of externality requires the acceptance of distinctiveness, whereas the reverse is not true.

My analysis of the debates concerning the above-mentioned tenets will be structured as follows. First of all, I will consider the case for the distinctiveness of existence (§5.3.1), and the case against it, namely the arguments for nominalism (§5.3.2). Then, I will analyse two possible cases for the additionality of existence: one assumes the notional commonality of existence as a premise (§5.3.3), whereas the other does not (§5.3.4). Subsequently, I will consider the case against the additionality of existence and for conceptualism (§5.3.5). Finally, I will outline the case for the accidentality of existence and against its substantiality (§5.3.6).

§5.3.1 – The Case for the Distinctiveness of Existence

Avicenna's main argument for the distinctiveness of existence is based on the predicational meaningfulness of existence. When we predicate existence of a quiddity we obtain an informative, non-tautological proposition. On the other hand, when we predicate a quiddity of itself, we obtain a futile and uninformative tautology: the predicate does not add anything at all the subject. In other words, the predication «this quiddity is a quiddity» (A is A) is substantially identical to «quiddity» (A) because the predicate is identical to the subject. That is not the case in existential propositions, and so existence must be something different from quiddity³³⁴.

Avicenna's subsequent discussion implies that perfect verbal identity between the subject and predicate of a proposition is not necessary in order for that proposition to be tautological. In other words, subject and predicate need to be identical in their semantic content, but not in the expressions that designate such content. As a consequence, Avicenna discriminates between different types of tautologies. There are perfect tautologies, where subject and predicate are identical both verbally and semantically: for example, «this quiddity is this quiddity» (A is A). There are quasi-perfect tautologies, where subject and predicate are almost identical but the predicate repeats the subject as an element of a class of things: for example, «this quiddity is a quiddity» (A is one of the As). There are also strictly semantic tautologies, where subject and predicate differ verbally but not semantically because one is a synonym of the other: for example, «such an essence is a thing», which implicitly assumes that «essence» means «thing» (A is B, but B is A). Avicenna also notices that some propositions can be tautological when considered at face value, even though they become informative when something previously hidden is added, like in the case of «the quiddity of A is a thing and the quiddity of B is another thing»: this proposition is tautological in its apparent meaning, even though it becomes

334 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.31.12-14.

informative when we add that the quiddity of A differs from the quiddity of B on account of some feature which exceeds the mere formal difference between mark «A» and mark «B»³³⁵. The implicit result of the discussion is that the case of the existential predications is different from all the above-mentioned examples.

There is the question of what the argument from the predicational meaningfulness aims to prove. I claim that it merely aims to deduce the distinctiveness of existence (*i.e.*, the fact that existence is different from quiddity). That is also Rāzī's understanding: the argument proves only that existence is different from quiddity, not that it is external or additional to it³³⁶. However, Bahmanyār's understanding is significantly different, for he argues both that existential statements are non-tautological and that they entail the possibility of truth and falsity (Bahmanyār says «they bear truth and falsity», *yadhulu-hā l-ṣidqu wa-l-kidbu*), just like «this man is writing»³³⁷. This would broaden significantly the extent of the conclusion of the Avicennian argument: not only is existence distinct from quiddity, but it is also external and accidental for it. Indeed, if existence were an essential constituent of quiddity, it would be absurd to claim that existential propositions can be false.

Three objections are discussed by Ibn al-Malāhimī and Rāzī against the argument from the predicational meaningfulness of existence. They challenge the assumption that the predicational meaningfulness of existence requires the latter to be intensionally different from quiddity³³⁸.

The first objection frames predicational meaningfulness as a difference in extension between subject and predicate inasmuch as they are expressions, and not as a difference in intension between the things those expressions signify. In other words, a proposition such as «this substance is existent» can be informative and non-tautological because «substance» is less extensive than «existent», even though the former does not convey something that is intensionally distinct from the former. Rāzī presents a clarifying example: in the proposition «the *layt* is an *asad*», both Arabic words designate a single thing, namely a lion, but the proposition remains informative, whereas «the *layt* is a *layt*» is uninformative and tautological. I believe that the reason behind this is to be found in that, even though *layt* and *asad* may designate the same thing, the former is more extensive than the latter (it may also designate things that are not lions).

Rāzī answers that the analogy between the example and the case at stake does not hold, for the example assumes the existence of a particular linguistic medium and thus that of interchangeable nouns possessing different extensions, which is something arbitrary, since language itself is arbitrary. The situation in the case of existence and quiddity is different, for in that case we are considering the notions that are signified by those two expressions, and those notions are not arbitrary.

The second objection states that the argument from predicational meaningfulness merely demonstrates that an externally existent quiddity is different from a conceptualized quiddity (*i.e.*, a quiddity existent in the mind), not that existence is distinct from quiddity.

335 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.31.12 – 32.2.

336 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.23.15-18.

337 See *Tahṣīl*, p.284.3-7.

338 See *Tuhfa*, pp.62.20 – 63.3, 64.6-13; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp. 23.19 – 24.15.

Rāzī retorts that this is not an actual objection. In fact, if the adversary recognizes that the very same quiddity can be either externally existent or mentally existent, he must also admit that existence is distinct from quiddity as such.

Finally, Rāzī mentions a third objection, a dialectical reduction to absurdity: the assertion that no tautological proposition is informative is at odds with Avicenna's thesis that the Necessary Existent is nothing but pure existence, for that thesis requires the proposition «the Necessary Existent is existent» to be both informative (because the existence of the Necessary needs to be demonstrated via an inferential demonstration), and tautological (because the Necessary is the same as His own existence).

The answer is that necessity consists in a simple negation: the fact of not needing of a cause. So the proposition «the Necessary Existent is existent» is reducible to «something does not need a cause is existent», which is not a tautology. This answer is weak, however, because it is based on the semantization of necessity as a pure negation («Necessary» is «what does not need a cause»), which is deemed incomplete by Rāzī himself³³⁹.

In addition to Avicenna's proof from predicational meaningfulness, Rāzī presents three ancillary arguments for the difference between existence and quiddity³⁴⁰.

The first is the argument from the commonality of existence: existence is shared by all quiddities, whereas their specific natures are not, and so existence must be different from the specific natures of the quiddities.

The second is the argument from the primitivity of existence. Existence cannot be notified by means of something else, whereas the specific natures of quiddities can. It follows that existence must be different from those specific natures.

The third argument is the proof from the opposition between existence and non-existence, and from the notional division of existence. Existence is opposite to non-existence, whereas the specific quiddities of things do not. Moreover, existence is divisible according to necessity and contingency, whereas quiddities are not.

All these arguments, both primary and ancillary, establish that there must be some kind of distinction between quiddity and existence: this refutes any position that upholds an unrestricted or complete identification between the two, such as Ibn al-Malāḥimī's nominalism. However, we need to keep in mind that neither Avicenna's main argument nor Rāzī's ancillary arguments are adequate against conceptualism, for the conceptualists accept some form of distinction between quiddity and existence, even though they restrict such distinction to the level of mental concepts.

§5.3.2 – The Case for Nominalism and against the Distinctiveness of Existence

The case for nominalism is based on the conceptual inseparability of quiddity and existence. It is impossible to know an existent thing in isolation from its existence, and vice-versa. It follows that the two must be one and the same. Ibn al-Malāḥimī mentions the example of a concrete corporeal

339 Rāzī explicitly states that necessity is something positive and real – see *Mabāḥiṭ*, pp.114-118; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.283 – 289.

340 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.23.13-15, 24.16-19.

substance and its existence: we cannot know the concretely existent body without knowing its existence, and we cannot know that existence without knowing that it is the existence of that body³⁴¹.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī and Rāzī mention three objections against this argument³⁴². The first is the objection from the extension of existence. Existence can be conceptually separated from any quiddity it is predicated of because it can be predicated of other quiddities. Ibn al-Malāḥimī answers that existence is predicated equivocally: the existence of a certain quiddity is unlike the existence of another quiddity. However, this answer appears to be circular, because equivocality itself is grounded in the identification between quiddity and existence.

The second objection revolves around the insufficiency of conceptual inseparability as a criterion for identification. Conceptual inseparability is not sufficient to deduce that two things are one and the same, because there are things which cannot be conceived as separate from one another but remain distinct. Ibn al-Malāḥimī mentions the body and its location, noticing that the example is unsound because a body can change its location whereas a quiddity cannot change its existence. Rāzī adds two examples that seem to avoid such a problem: the body and the space it occupies, and relatives (*e.g.*, left and right).

The third objection is the objection from the equivocation of the meaning of «quiddity». According to Rāzī, the argument from conceptual inseparability is fundamentally misleading because it confuses the quiddity of a thing with the concretely existent thing that quiddity is the quiddity of. When we conceive a concretely existent thing, we are not conceiving its quiddity *qua* quiddity, but rather its quiddity inasmuch as it is concretely existent. Since existence is nothing but the fact of being existent, the argument from conceptual inseparability includes existence in the conceptualisation of quiddity, thus begging the conclusion.

§5.3.3 – The Case for the Externality of Existence on the Basis of its Commonality

Rāzī classifies the arguments for the externality or additionality of existence in two categories: those that assume the notional commonality (*i.e.*, non-equivocity) of existence, and those that do not.

The main argument of the first category is Avicenna's proof from modulation, which establishes that existence cannot be an essential constituent of quiddities since it is predicated according to modulation, while essential constituents are predicated univocally. Since existence is common to all existents (on account of the preliminary assumption), and since it is not an essential constituent of their quiddities (on account of modulation), it follows that existence must be an external addition to those quiddities³⁴³.

Avicenna considers a possible objection: some genera are actually predicated according to modulation. «Substance», for example, is said of primary and secondary substances according to priority and posteriority, and the same goes for matter and form with respect to the individual *synolon*. Moreover, «quantity» is said of the discrete and the continuous according to priority and posteriority:

341 See *Tuhfa*, p.62.12-15. Cf. Rāzī, *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.29.9-14.

342 See *Tuhfa*, p.62.5-17; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.29.30 – 30.9.

343 See *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, p.61.1-2. Also *Tahṣīl*, p.281.10-14; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.28.19-21.

the discrete is prior to the continuous in being quantity. Finally, numbers are ordered according to priority and posteriority: four is greater than three, and so on³⁴⁴.

Avicenna rejects this objection by reaffirming that quiddities and their parts are always predicated according to equivalence, even though at times the subjects they are predicated of can be said to be prior or posterior with respect to some external notion which accepts priority and posteriority, like existence or time. Father and son are equivalent in the quiddity of humanity, but differ in existence since the father is the cause of the son. Similarly matter, form, and the *synolon* are equivalent in the quiddity of substantiality, even though matter and form are existentially prior to the *synolon* because they are its parts. The difference between numbers also concerns existence, and not the quiddity of being number: that presumably means that lesser numbers are necessary conditions for the existence of greater numbers, while the contrary is not true (e.g., four exists only if three exists, whereas three can exist even when four does not). Avicenna does not explicitly tackle the issue of the asymmetry between discrete and continuous quantities³⁴⁵.

Rāzī lists five ancillary arguments based on the commonality of existence³⁴⁶. The first is the argument from the necessity to predicate existence of its differentiae. If existence were a genus, it would be necessary for it to be predicated of its own differentiae: at this point, the differentiae of existence would be just like the species of existence, and this would entail an infinite regress³⁴⁷. This argument goes back to Aristotle, and it is noteworthy that Avicenna does not accept it. He claims that the essence of the genus is external to the essence of the differentia, while being internal to the essence of the species. The consequence is that the genus is said of the differentia and the species in two different ways, namely as an external concomitant and as an internal constituent respectively³⁴⁸.

The second argument assumes that the differentia is the cause of the existence of the genus. If existence were a genus, then existence would possess yet another existence, since the differentia is the cause of the existence of its genus. However, existence cannot possess yet another existence. A similar argument appears also in Avicenna and Bahmanyār³⁴⁹.

The third argument revolves around the necessity to reject composition in God: if existence were a genus, the Necessary Existent would be composite of genus and differentia, and so it would be contingent. This argument is dialectical, for it requires us to accept there must be a necessary existent, and that all composites are contingent.

The fourth argument is the argument from the division into substantiality and accidentality. If existence were a part of the quiddities and accidents, existence would either mean «self-subsistent existence» or «existence which subsists in another»: in the first case, accidents would be substances; in the latter case, substances would be accidents.

344 See *Ibid.*, p.62.12-16.

345 See *Ibid.*, pp.74.16 – 75.6.

346 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.28.6 – 29.7.

347 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, B.3, 998b.21-26.

348 See *Šifāʾ – Maqūlāt*, p.62.7-11; *Šifāʾ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.235.1-5.

349 See *Šifāʾ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.45.1 – 46.1.

The fifth argument is based on the impossibility to conceive a quiddity without its parts. It is impossible to conceive a quiddity without knowing its constituent parts, whereas it is possible to conceive a quiddity without knowing its existence: it follows that existence is not a part of quiddity. This argument is very similar to the argument from doubt.

§5.3.4 – The Case for the Externality of Existence not Based on its Commonality

As for the arguments that do not need to assume the commonality of existence, the most important is the argument from doubt, mentioned by Avicenna: we can know a quiddity while doubting whether it exists, and this proves that existence is neither the same as quiddity nor a part of it, because a thing cannot be known if its constituent parts are not known. Avicenna mentions the example of the triangle: one can know the quiddity of the triangle without knowing whether a triangle exists, or even whether it can exist. He adds that mental existence is external to quiddity (just like concrete existence), even though it does not separate from quiddity when we know the latter³⁵⁰.

There are two noteworthy objections against this proof. The first – mentioned in Rāzī's *Mabāḥiṭ* – notices that the argument is only capable to prove that extra-mental existence is external to quiddity: it does not prove that mental existence is external to it. In fact, the mental existence of a quiddity is a necessary condition for conceiving that quiddity (*i.e.*, the quiddity must exist in the mind in order to be known). It follows that the act of knowing a quiddity cannot obtain without mental existence, and this contradicts the claim that existence can be unknown when quiddity is known, at least in the case of mental existence³⁵¹.

Rāzī presents a twofold answer. First of all, he notices that there is a difference between the conditions of the content of knowledge, like the constitutive parts of the known object, and the conditions of the act of knowledge, like mental existence: the former must be known when the object is known, whereas the latter does not need to be known when the object is known. In other words, even if we granted that mental existence is a necessary condition for a quiddity to be known, it would not follow that the knower must be aware of that condition when he knows that quiddity: one might know a certain quiddity while ignoring one the conditions of his own act of knowledge (mental existence). The second of Rāzī's answers notices that it is not absurd to suppose that a certain quiddity which exists outside the mind does not exist inside of it, because is not known: it follows that mental existence is external to quiddity, just like concrete existence³⁵².

The second objection against Avicenna's argument from doubt is a reduction to absurdity mentioned by both nominalists (Ibn al-Malāḥimī) and conceptualists (Suhrawardī): the argument from doubt can be applied to existence itself, thus requiring to distinguish the quiddity of existence from its concrete occurrence (*i.e.*, its existence). In other words, one could conceive the quiddity or essence of existence while doubting whether that quiddity or essence exists in extra-mental reality. It would follow that the

350 See *Šifā'* – *Maqūlāt*, p.61.2-14. Cf. *Išārāt*, p.140.1-3.

351 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.25.5-8.

352 See *Ibid.*, I, p.25.8-16.

existence of existence is additional to existence itself. This would lead to an infinite regress where every instance of existence requires yet another instance of existence additional to it³⁵³.

Abū al-Barakāt accepts the regress while arguing that it must stop with an instance of existence that exists by itself, namely God. In other words, he does not present the regress objection in order to refute the argument from doubt, but rather to establish a self-existent existence³⁵⁴.

Rāzī's answer, on the other hand, aims to prevent the regress from taking place³⁵⁵. For him, the argument from doubt cannot apply to existence in the way it applies to quiddities. The doubt on existence is unlike the doubt on quiddity. The former concerns whether existence is predicated of some quiddity as an attribute, whereas the latter concerns whether a certain quiddity is subject of attribution of existence (*i.e.*, whether it is a something existence is predicated of). The doubt on quiddity entails that existence is additional to it. However, the doubt on existence is structurally different from that on quiddity, and so it does not entail that existence is additional to existence. Indeed, it simply reiterates that existence is additional to quiddity, and nothing more. The foundation of Rāzī's solution is to be found in his assessment of the issue of the ontological status of existence. He argues that asking whether existence is existent or not (and how it is existent) is ultimately senseless, because existence and non-existence cannot be predicated of existence. The attribution of existence (or non-existence) to existence is simply a category mistake: existence is not among the things existence can be predicated of.

Besides the argument from doubt, Rāzī mentions four additional arguments for the externality of existence not on the basis of its commonality³⁵⁶.

The first states that existence must be additional to quiddity because the effect obtains its existence from the efficient cause, while it does not obtain its very quiddity for the cause: the quiddity of the effect belongs to the effect essentially, not by means of something else³⁵⁷. Rāzī is inconsistent on the perseity of the self-identity of quiddities. In a passage of the *Mabāḥiṭ*, he defends the opposite thesis, arguing that quiddities themselves are «made» (*mağ'ūla*) by their efficient causes, which contradicts perseity. In the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, he merely mentions arguments *pro* and *contra* the perseity of self-identity³⁵⁸.

The second ancillary argument revolves around the fact that there are contingent existents. Contingency is the fact of being receptive of existence and non-existence, and needs a subject. The subject contingency is predicated of must be quiddity as such, considered in isolation from existence and non-existence: in fact, what exists cannot be receptive of non-existence inasmuch as it exists (and, conversely, what does not exist cannot be receptive of existence inasmuch as it does not exist). It follows that existence must be external from quiddity³⁵⁹.

353 See *Ḥikma*, p.65.10-14; *Tuḥfa*, pp.62.23 – 63.2; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.25.16-17.

354 See *Mu'tabar*, III, pp.64-65.

355 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.25.17-20, 26.20 – 27.5,

356 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.27.5 – 28.4.

357 See *Šifā' – Maqūlāt*, pp.61.17 – 62.4, 75.10-13.

358 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, pp.52-55; *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fols 81v.17 – 82r.7.

359 Cf. *Iṣārāt*, pp.140.12 – 141.2. Avicenna states that a contingent quiddity is necessary inasmuch as it is considered together with its efficient cause, impossible inasmuch as it is considered without that cause, and contingent inasmuch as it is considered *per se*.

The third argument is a restricted reformulation of the first one. It assumes Avicenna's claim that the differentia is the cause of the fact that a «share» (*ḥiṣṣa*) of the genus is allocated in the species, and that makes the genus existent (the genus exists only in its species). It follows that existence is external to quiddity.

The fourth argument assumes the Avicennian account of modulation concerning efficient causality. The cause is prior to its effect in existence, not in quiddity. For example, the father is equivalent to the son in the quiddity of humanity, even though the former is prior to the latter in existence. The hotness of fire is equivalent to the hotness of the water heated by fire, but the two differ with respect to existence³⁶⁰.

§5.3.5 – The Case for Conceptualism and against the Extra-Mental Additionality of Existence

I will focus on the arguments for what I called «specific» conceptualism, *i.e.*, the thesis that existence is a mental concept inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity. I will not consider arguments for unspecific conceptualism (*i.e.*, existence is a mental concept inasmuch as it is universal), for these concern the issue of the ontological status of universals, which is fundamentally distinct from the issue of the ontological status of existence inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity.

Suhrawardī presents four arguments against the claim that existence is extra-mentally additional to quiddity. They are accepted by Ṭūsī and rejected by Rāzī³⁶¹.

The first and most important argument – whose original formulation can be traced back at least to 'Umar Ḥayyām (d.1131)³⁶² – states that the extra-mental additionality of existence entails an absurdity, in that requires existence to be predicated of existence itself. It argues that, if existence were additional to quiddity, it would be either substantial or accidental. The former hypothesis is absurd since what is substantial is not predicated of other things (and so substances and accidents would not be existent). The latter hypothesis is absurd because, if existence were an accidental attribution of quiddities, then existence would be existent, since existence would exist for the quiddities (*i.e.*, it would exist as an accident of them), and everything that exist for something else (*i.e.*, everything that exists as an accident of something else) must also exist in itself. Existence cannot be existent because that would imply an infinite regress. Furthermore, the realist cannot retort that the meaning of «existence is existent» is «existence is existence», because that would entail that the predicate «existent» is equivocal, sometimes signifying the possession of existence and sometimes signifying the identity with existence.

The crucial premise of the argument is that existence must be an entity (*i.e.*, an accident) that exists in order to be ascribed to the quiddities. This point is controversial. In his rejection of the entitative

360 Cf. *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.268-278.

361 See *Ḥikma*, pp.64.16 – 66.11; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.25.16-20, 26.20 – 27.5, 29.12-14; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.97.10 – 98.4; *Ṭaḡrīd*, p.69.9.

362 See *Risāla fī al-wuḡūd*, p.106.5-9. The argument is also mentioned by Ibn al-Malāḥimī as an objection against Avicenna's argument from doubt – see *Tuḥfa*, pp.62.23 – 63.2

semantization of existence, Rāzī argues that existence is nothing but the fact that a thing exists, not something that exists for that thing. In other words, existence is accidental, but is not an existent entitative accident.

The second conceptualist argument aims to entail the same conclusion of the first: the real additionality of existence requires the attribution of existence to existence. It consists in the application of Avicenna's proof from doubt to existence itself: it is possible to know the essence of existence while doubting whether existence is extra-mentally existent or not, just like it is possible to know a certain quiddity while doubting whether that quiddity is existent or not. If the second doubt entailed that existence is extra-mentally additional to quiddities, then the first doubt would entail that existence is extra-mentally additional to existence: that would entail an infinite regress, which is absurd. In sum, the argument which establishes that existence of a quiddity is extra-mentally additional to that quiddity would also establish that the existence of existence is extra-mentally additional to existence.

Rāzī's objection against this argument is identical to his defence of Avicenna's proof from doubt: existence cannot be predicated of existence, and the doubt on existence is structurally different from the doubt on quiddity (the latter concerns whether a quiddity possesses existence as its attribute, whereas the former concerns whether existence is possessed by a quiddity as its subject of attribution).

The third conceptualist argument mentioned by Suhrawardī is based on the priority of the subject of inherence with respect to what inheres in it: existence must be at the same time posterior to quiddity, because of the priority of the subject of inherence, and not posterior to it, because existence makes its subject of inherence existent. Rāzī answers that the subject of inherence is quiddity as such, and quiddity as such does not need to be prior to its own existence.

The fourth conceptualist argument is the proof from relation. The relation between quiddity and existence must be existent, and thus it must have a second-level relation with existence: this results in an infinite regress. Rāzī considers a possible answer: the relation between quiddity and existence is not something extra-mentally existent. However, his commitment to this kind of solution is unclear.

§5.3.6 – The Case against the Substantiality of Existence

Abū al-Barakāt discriminates between an essential meaning of existence and a relative meaning of existence. He argues that essential existence is God himself, whereas relative existence is nothing but the relation that connects quiddities to that essential existence. This entails that existence in its essential meaning is something substantial, for God cannot inhere in something other than Himself³⁶³.

The case against this thesis can be subdivided into two portions. The first consists in the refutation of the argument which backs it. The second part encompasses the arguments against the very possibility of the substantiality of existence.

The substantiality of existence is backed by the application of the argument from doubt to existence: existence exists on account of an existence different from itself. The pseudo-causal regress which terminates in an instance of existence which exists by itself, and does not need yet another existence to

363 See *Mu'tabar*, III, p.64.18 – 65.13.

exist (*i.e.*, God)³⁶⁴. Rāzī main objections against this argument rejects the assumption that an instance of existence can be predicated of another instance of existence³⁶⁵. That is because all instances of existence are equivalent in their essence, and so there is no reason why one of the two should inhere in the other, instead of the other way round. This entails various absurdities: each one of the two would inhere in the other, both would inhere in the same quiddity (and so a single thing would exist two times), and a single thing (one of the instances of existence) would inhere in two things at the same time (the other instance of existence and the quiddity).

As for the second portion of the case against the substantiality of existence, namely the rejection of the very possibility of such a hypothesis, two arguments need to be considered.

First of all, Suhrawardī claims that, if existence were substantial, it could not be predicated of any quiddity at all, because something self-subsistent is not said of other things³⁶⁶.

Secondly, Ġazālī and Rāzī claim that the impossibility of the self-subsistence of existence is intuitively known: existence is always the existence of some thing³⁶⁷. Rāzī adds that the rejection of the entitative semantization of existence corroborates such claim: existence is nothing but the fact that a thing exists in concrete reality, and so it cannot be something self-subsistent in itself. Moreover, existence cannot be conceived alone, in isolation from the things it is predicated of: that also proves that existence is not self-subsistent. It is worth noting that this kind argument as a whole is not viable for those (like Avicenna and Bahmanyār) who believe that there is at least one instance of self-subsistent existence, namely God, even though all other instances are accidental.

364 See *Ibid.*, III, p.63.17-23.

365 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.25.17 – 26.18.

366 See *Ḥikma*, p.64.15-16.

367 See *Tahāfut*, p.117.18 – 118.14; *Maṭālib*, I, p.300.5-20.

§5.4 – Concluding Remarks

The Avicennian position on the nature of the connection between quiddity and existence is both extremely influential and extremely controversial. Avicenna's interpreters discuss each one of the three elements that constitute the Avicennian doctrine: the distinctiveness of existence, the externality or additionality of existence, and the accidentality of existence.

The Avicennian proof for the distinction between quiddity and existence argues that existential propositions are non-tautological: the subject (*e.g.*, substance) is different from the predicate (existence). Nominalists like Ibn al-Malāhimī answer by presenting an extensional and nominalistic account of predication: not all non-tautological propositions require the intension of the subject to differ from the intension of the predicate, because some propositions are non-tautological in the sense that the extension of the expression conveying the subject is different from the extension of the expression conveying the predicate. In other words, the difference between subject and predicate may come down to an asymmetry in the extension of in their signification: when we say that «this substance is existent», we mean that what is called by the specific name «substance» is also called by the generic name «existent». Rāzī answers that a similar account cannot hold true in the case of existential propositions, because language and verbal signification are arbitrary and variable, whereas what we aim to convey in existential propositions is not. It is evident that the implications of this debate extend far beyond the question of the distinction between quiddity and existence, touching logical and epistemic issues.

As for the externality (or additionality) of existence, Avicenna presents two pivotal proofs: the argument from modulation, which assumes that the notion of existence is common (non-equivocal), and the argument from doubt, which does not assume the commonality of existence.

The former argument is fairly uncontroversial: realists and conceptualists agree that the essential parts of quiddities must be predicated univocally, and so every modulated predicate must be an external concomitant of the quiddities it is predicated of. However, they disagree on the actual implications of the argument from modulation. For the realists, the modulation of existence entails that existence is an extra-mental concomitant of quiddities. For the conceptualists, on the other hand, existence is merely a mental or conceptual concomitant of quiddities, something we ascribe to quiddities inasmuch as they are conceived in the mind.

The argument from doubt is a crucial element in the debate between realists and conceptualists. Indeed, such debate is centred around the argument from doubt: its acceptability, its limits and its implications. It is possible to distinguish three perspectives. The first is Abū al-Barakāt's «thick» realism: existence is an extra-mentally existent thing. Thick realism assumes that the argument from doubt is sound, and that it can be applied both to quiddity (deducing that its existence is additional to it) and to existence (deducing that the existence of existence is additional to existence), which leads to a finite regress which terminates in a self-subsistent instance of existence.

The second perspective is Rāzī's (and perhaps Bahmanyār's) «thin» realism: existence is not an existent thing, but is extra-mentally additional to quiddity nonetheless. Thin realism assumes the soundness of the argument from doubt when it comes to quiddities. However, the argument does not apply to existence, since existence cannot be predicated of existence.

The third perspective is Suhrawardī and Ṭūsī's specific conceptualism: existence is not extra-mentally distinct from quiddity, while existing as a distinct thing in the mind. Conceptualism rejects the soundness of the argument from doubt: if the argument were applicable to quiddity, it would be applicable to existence as well, and that would lead to an infinite regress.

The primary opposition that needs to be considered is not that between realism and conceptualism, but rather that between the acceptance of the applicability of the argument from doubt to existence and the rejection of that applicability. The fundamental issue is whether existence is an existent thing (thick conception of existence), or not (thin conception of existence). The question of whether existence exists in concrete reality or in the mind is secondary, and requires the preliminary assumption that existence is an existent thing, or entity.

The thin conception of existence is connected to three other doctrinal elements. First of all, the rejection of the entitative semantization of existence: both Bahmanyār and Rāzī stress that existence is nothing but the fact of existing, not something by means of which a thing exists³⁶⁸. The second element is the rejection of the noetical independence of existence: Rāzī states that existence cannot be known independently from the things that are said to exist, and recognizes that this contradicts Avicenna's assertion of the absolute noetic primacy of existence³⁶⁹. The third element is the rejection of the differentiation between existence as the fact of existing and existence as the form that can be known via its impression in the mind of the knower: Rāzī notices that existence cannot be known via the impression of its form in the mind of the knower, because the form of existence is identical to the fact of existing (*i.e.*, the predicate «existent»). In other words, existence is not an existent thing whose quiddity can be separated from the fact of existing. Existence is the mere fact of existing, and the only way to know that fact is directly, not via the mediation of a mental form³⁷⁰.

The question of how we know existence as such is crucial for the debate concerning thin and thick conceptions of existence. Indeed, the application the theory of impression to the knowledge of existence entails that existence is an existent thing, because existence would need to possess a knowable form which is different from its concrete instantiation: existence would possess quiddity and existence.

Avicenna himself indirectly (and probably inadvertently) corroborates this understanding by mentioning that the notion of existence is impressed in the soul in a primary way³⁷¹. Abū al-Barakāt (a thick realist) explicitly distinguishes between the quiddity of existence and the existence of existence, claiming that we know the latter while lacking knowledge of the former³⁷². Suhrawardī (a

368 See *Supra*, §1.3.1.

369 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.14.21 – 15.3, 16.20 – 17.8; *Maṭālib*, I, p.300.5-20.

370 See *Supra*, §1.3.3.

371 *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, p.29.5-6.

372 *Mu'tabar*, III, p.63.7-9.

conceptualist) presents a statement that is opposite to Abū al-Barakāt's in its implications, but equivalent to it inasmuch as the issue at hand is concerned: we may know the concept of existence, and doubt whether it has existence in concrete reality³⁷³. On the other hand, Rāzī either restricts the applicability of theory of impression, excluding existence from the class of things that can be known via impression (*Mabāḥiṭ*), or abandons Avicenna's noetical doctrine altogether (*Mulaḥḥaṣ*): in any way, he claims that what we know when we know existence is just the extra-mental fact of existing, and that fact is known directly, without the impression of a form in the mind of the knower.

There are three possible chain of deductions which lead to the three above-mentioned doctrines.

First of all, if we assume the thin conception of existence, we can deduce that the theory of impression cannot be applied to existence (this is Rāzī's reasoning)

Secondly, if we assume that the theory of impression can be applied to existence, we can deduce that existence must be thick. The regress which ensues terminates in God, namely a self-subsistent existence (this is Abū al-Barakāt reasoning).

Thirdly, if we assume that the theory of impression can be applied to existence, we can deduce that existence must be thick. The regress which ensues is absurd, and this demonstrates that existence exists only as a concept in the mind (this is Suhrawardī and Tūsī's reasoning).

At this point, one might ask what is the actual difference between conceptualism and thin realism. In fact, both positions reject the claim that existence is an extra-mentally existent thing, and for the same reason: the impossibility of the attribution of extra-mental existence to existence itself. The two perspectives might even be integrated to some degree: for example, it could be said that existence as the extra-mental fact of existing is thin (*i.e.*, it is not an existent thing on its own), whereas existence as the concept that corresponds to that extra-mental fact is thick (*i.e.*, it is a thing that exists in the mind).

What sets the two perspectives apart is how they answer the following question: once it has been established that existence is not an extra-mentally existent thing (because existence cannot be predicated of existence), is it still be possible to assert that it is extra-mentally additional and accidental to quiddity, or not? A mental experiment may better clarify the meaning of this question: if we supposed a situation when there are no human minds, would existent things still be somehow compositional and multifold in themselves (being constituted of quiddity and existence), before and regardless of our conceptual operations, or not? An affirmative answer entails thin realism, whereas a negative answer entails conceptualism.

In view of what has been said so far, it is possible to appreciate why conceptualism is problematic for the Avicennian model of efficient causality. Avicenna asserts that causal dependence is grounded in contingency, and contingency in turn is grounded in compositionality. If existent things inasmuch as they are existent were in themselves unitary, and the quiddity-existence composition originated as the result of a second-level operation of the mind that does not correspond to anything extra-mental, then no efficient cause would be needed by those existent things that include no composition except the quiddity-existence composition (*e.g.*, the separate intellects, the souls), precisely because they would

373 *Ḥikma*, p.65.10-11.

not be compositional in themselves: they would be compositional only inasmuch the human mind conceives them.

CHAPTER 6 – The Contingency of Existence

§6.1 – The Meaning of this Premise and the Need for It

§6.1.1 – The Meaning of this Premise

According to Avicenna, the existent can be divided into what is necessary *per se* and what is contingent *per se*. This preliminary division implies that there are contingent existents³⁷⁴. Avicenna's notion of contingency has a precise semantization and features proper to it, which require detailed analysis.

As for the semantization, contingency is held to be a primitive (or quasi-primitive) notion which cannot be explained in terms of other notions, except maybe necessity. This entails that any frequentist semantization of contingency is out of the picture.

As for the features, first of all contingency has no intrinsic temporal connotation, in the sense that it does not restrict to the possibility of existence and non-existence in the future: the contingent is not reducible to what may and may not exist in the future. Secondly, contingency is pure equivalence (equidistance) between existence and non-existence: it is impossible for a contingent thing to be more proximate to existence, or more proximate to non-existence. Thirdly, contingency is a property of pure quiddities inasmuch as they are considered in themselves, with no additional condition.

§6.1.2 – The Need for this Premise

The possibility of contingency is a necessary condition for the affirmation of causality, since contingency is the very reason why something needs an efficient cause in order to exist: if there were no contingent existent, there would be no efficient causes.

Furthermore, the peculiar features of Avicenna's understanding of contingency are crucial for the construction of his causal theory. On the one hand, his formulation of the principle of sufficient reason requires contingency to be understood as pure equivalence between existence and non-existence, since the efficient cause is precisely what makes one of the two prevail over the other. On the other hand, since Avicennian contingency has no intrinsic temporal connotation, and since causality is based on contingency, it follows that causality must have no intrinsic temporal connotation as well.

³⁷⁴ We need to notice that the simple assertion that there are contingent existents is not equivalent to the identification of the criterion which discriminates between necessary and contingent existents. That discriminating criterion consists in compositionality: all and only compositional existents are contingent – on this see *Infra*, Part 2, §1.

§6.2 – The Notion of Contingency in Avicenna and his Interpreters

This subchapter aims to present the three main positions concerning the notion of contingency and its features. First of all, I will consider the Avicennian position: contingency is a quasi-primitive notion which entails equidistance from both existence and non-existence, is a property of pure quiddity, and is not temporally restricted to the future (§6.2.1). Then, I will analyse a reductionist position mentioned by Ġazālī: contingency is nothing but the need for an efficient cause (§6.2.2). Finally, I will outline Ibn al-Malāḥimī's position: contingency is related to the future, and accepts degrees of greater and lesser proximity to existence (§6.2.3).

§6.2.1 – The Avicennian Position

Multiple moderns scholars analysed Avicenna's doctrine of contingency. Most focused on the relation between contingency and other metaphysical issues, like determinism, free will, God's foreknowledge, and future contingents: among these it is necessary to mention Hourani, Ivry, Marmura, Kogan, Janssens, Belo, and Koca³⁷⁵. For a detailed study of Avicenna's logical and metaphysical treatment of contingency (and necessity) the reader should refer to Bäck³⁷⁶. Chatti also examined the Avicennian approach to the modalities in logic³⁷⁷.

The aim of my inquiry is to provide a brief overview of the most relevant elements of the Avicennian take on contingency as such, without considering related issues (an adequate discussion of many of them presupposes the assessment of the nature and scope of the principle of sufficient reason)³⁷⁸. I will focus on Avicenna's metaphysical doctrine on contingency, taking into account his logical discussions only inasmuch as they are relevant from a metaphysical perspective.

The bulk of Avicenna's doctrine on contingency and necessity is presented in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5-6. A detailed discussion of modalities appears also in *Qiyās*, I.4, albeit with a different focus and different results. At the end of the analysis, I will discuss why the conclusions of the latter section does not invalidate those of the former.

In *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, Avicenna provides a semantization of the modalities, namely necessity, contingency, and impossibility. He claims that those notions accept no real «notification» (*ta'rif*), but

375 See G.F. Hourani, 'Ibn Sīnā's 'Essay in the Secret of Destiny',' *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962), 13-40; A. Ivry, 'Destiny Revised: Avicenna's Concept of Determinism;' in M.E. Marmura (ed.), *Islamic Theology and Philosophy: Studies in honor of George F. Hourani* (Albany: SUNY, 1984), pp.160-171; M.E. Marmura, 'The Metaphysics of Efficient Causality in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā),' pp.172-187; Id., 'Divine Omniscience and Future contingents in Alfarabi and Avicenna,' in T. Rudavsky (ed.), *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy. Islamic, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1985), pp.81-94; B.S. Kogan, 'Some reflections on the Problem of Future Contingency in Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes,' in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*, pp.95-101; J.Janssens, 'The problem of human freedom in Ibn Sīnā,' in P. Llorente (ed.), *Actes del Simposi Internacional de Filosofia de l'Edat Mijama* (Vic-Girona: Patronat d'Estudis Osonencs, 1996), pp.112-118; C. Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007); O. Koca, 'Revisiting the Concepts of Necessity and Freedom in Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (c.980-1037),' *Sophia* (2019), 1-18.

376 See A. Bäck, 'Avicenna's Conception of the Modalities,' *Vivarium* 30/2 (1992), 217-255.

377 See S. Chatti, 'Avicenna on Possibility and Necessity,' *History and Philosophy of Logic* 35/4 (2014), 332-353.

378 On the principle of sufficient reason see *Infra*, Part 2, §2.

only a «sign» (*‘alāma*), namely a pseudo-definition which makes the mind focus on what it already knows. This is corroborated by the fact that, when one tries to define one of those three notions, he needs to include one of the other two in that definition³⁷⁹. Avicenna presents the following examples: the necessary is either that whose existence is not contingent, or that whose non-existence is impossible; the contingent is either that whose existence and non-existence are not impossible or that whose existence and non-existence are not necessary; the impossible is either that whose non-existence is not contingent, or whose non-existence is necessary.

All these definitions are circular, and thus inadequate as definitions. This seems to mean that, just like existence, modalities are primitive, and cannot be properly defined in terms of other notions. However, Avicenna adds that necessity has some kind of priority over contingency and impossibility, because necessity is «assurance of existence» (*ta’akkud al-wuġūd*), and existence is more known than non-existence³⁸⁰. As Rāzī notices, this implies that notifying contingency and impossibility by means of necessity is more appropriate than the reverse³⁸¹.

The quasi-primitivity of contingency has a noteworthy implication: the inappropriateness of any definition of contingency in terms of temporal frequency, or temporal extension. The contingent is not what sometimes exists and sometimes does not, in opposition to what always exists (the frequentist definition of the necessary), and to what never exists (the frequentist definition of the impossible). Furthermore, contingency does not entail the negation of eternity.

However, a frequentist-extensional semantization of necessity does appear in *Qiyās*, I.4.

«We may use the expression ‘necessity’ (*darūra*), which is perpetuity (*dawām*), in several ways. For example, we say ‘God Almighty is living by necessity’, namely perpetually, both in the past and in the future.»³⁸²

This is an extensionalization of the meaning of necessity: the necessary is what is always, namely in all moments of time. Avicenna presents six additional senses of necessity. Each one of them restricts the frequentist-extensional semantization according to a peculiar condition (*e.g.*, the existence of the subject of the proposition, a specific moment of time, etc.). It is clear that none of those corresponds to the primitive, undefinable notion mentioned in the *Ilāhiyyāt*.

One might expect the semantization of contingency in *Qiyās* to be comparable to that of necessity. On the contrary, however, Avicenna abandons the extensional-frequentist approach.

«As for the affirmative, universal, contingent proposition – like ‘Every B is contingently A’ – its meaning is that each thing which is qualified as being B, be that qualification perpetual or not, is such that neither the existence of A is necessary for it, nor the non-existence of A is, if a condition is not considered. This does not consider whether A will have to exist for it in a certain future moment,

379 See *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.35.3 – 36.3. Bahmanyār and Lawkārī’s accounts follow closely that of Avicenna, adding that we cannot notify the modalities except by way of «reminding» (*tanbīh*) – see *Tahṣīl*, pp.290.14 – 291.8; *Bayān*, 31.15 – 32.10.

380 See *Šifā’ – Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, p.36.4-6.

381 See *Mabāhīt*, I, p.113.15-18.

382 *Šifā’ – Qiyās*, I.4, p.32.7-11.

or whether it is possible for A not to exist [for B] in any way, or whether it is possible for A to accompany B perpetually.»³⁸³

The last remark is decisive. Indeed, if it is possible for a contingent predicate to accompany its subject perpetually, then contingency cannot be semantized according to the extensional-frequentist approach.

In sum, Avicenna's approach to modalities in *Ilāhiyyāt* differs from his approach in *Qiyās*, and his treatment of necessity in *Qiyās* differs from his treatment of contingency. I believe that a similar inconsistency is what Rāzī stigmatizes in his *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, arguing that there are books on logic which proceed haphazardly, since they semantize «necessary» in equivocal ways: sometimes as what must be (*mā lā budda min-hu*), and sometimes as what is perpetual (*al-dā'im*)³⁸⁴. On the other hand, Avicenna's semantization of contingency appears consistent throughout his metaphysics and his logic.

According to Avicenna's understanding, contingency possess three particularly important properties. The first is that contingency is not necessarily restricted to the future existence of the thing it is predicated of, but concerns that existence in an absolute sense: as a consequence, a contingent thing can be said to to be contingent with respect to its present existence too. Indeed, there are two understandings contingency, whose distinction is hinted at in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, and clearly asserted in *Qiyās*, I.4: absolute or unrestricted contingency, and temporally restricted contingency³⁸⁵. The former has no temporal restriction and thus includes both the present and the future: the contingent is that thing whose existence is neither necessary nor impossible. The latter is restricted to what may and may not come to pass in the future: the contingent is that whose future existence is neither necessary nor impossible. The Avicennian notion of causality requires the unrestricted understanding of contingency, not the temporally restricted understanding. This can be deduced from the fact that, according to Avicenna, there can be eternal things whose existence comes from an efficient cause, and their causal dependence is based on their contingency³⁸⁶. If the reason behind the need for an efficient cause were temporally restricted contingency (*i.e.*, contingency with respect to the future), eternal things would not require any cause at all.

A second property of contingency, closely related to the first, is that contingency is said of contingent things inasmuch as their quiddities are considered in themselves, without taking into account anything else. Contingent things are contingent in the sense that their quiddities are contingent in themselves, or *per se*. When we consider those quiddities in relation to external conditions, the modal status of quiddities changes. If we add the condition of the existence of their efficient causes,

383 *Ibid.*, I.4, p.33.11-14.

384 «In the books on logic it sometimes happens that [the authors] proceed at random, because they apply the expression 'necessary' sometimes to what must be, and sometimes to what is perpetual.» – *Mantiq al-Mulaḥḥaṣ*, p.150.1-2.

385 «When they define the contingent, sometimes they say that it is what is not necessary, or that it is the presently non-existent whose existence is not impossible, with respect to any moment of the future we suppose.» – *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, p.35.9-10. See also *Šifā' – Qiyās*, I.4, pp.33.11 – 34.6; *Mantiq al-Mulaḥḥaṣ*, p.153.2-4.

386 See *Iṣārāt*, II.5, pp.149.7 – 150.4. Moreover, Avicenna clearly asserts that efficient causes are causes of existence, and not causes of coming-to-be out of non-existence (see *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.259-263; *Iṣārāt*, II.5, p.147.4 – 148.2). This means that causal efficiency is not essentially related to temporal succession. That being the case, it follows that the reason for causal dependence (*i.e.*, contingency) must also be unrelated to temporal succession.

those quiddities become necessarily existent *per aliud*. If we add the condition of the non-existence of the efficient causes, they become necessarily non-existent *per aliud*³⁸⁷. On closer inspection, these are not actual changes, but rather additional determinations. In other words, we do not see a passage from a certain status to another status that is incompatible with the former, but rather the addition of a particularizing status to a previous generic status that is compatible with it: necessity (or impossibility) *per aliud* does not contradict essential contingency, but rather particularizes it.

The third remarkable feature of contingency consists in the fact that contingency is to be understood as pure equivalence, or equidistance, between existence and non-existence. None of the two «sides» of the contingent (*i.e.*, existence and non-existence) is be more likely than the other, or more adequate than it, or otherwise distinguishable from it. This does not mean that existence and non-existence are indistinguishable in themselves, but simply that they are indistinguishable *from the perspective of the contingent thing*: the contingent does not tend towards one of the two at the expense of the other. Avicenna hints at this in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.6, while arguing for the principle of sufficient reason (*i.e.*, that every contingent thing needs an efficient cause in order to exist). He states that the quiddity of a contingent thing cannot account for the specification (*taḥṣīṣ*) of one of the two sides, namely for the fact that one of the two obtains as distinct (*mutamayyiz*) from the other³⁸⁸. Moreover, in the *Iṣārāt* he explicitly states that the existence of the contingent is not more adequate (*awlā*) than its non-existence³⁸⁹.

Bahmanyār, Lawkarī, Abū al-Barakāt, Rāzī and Ṭūsī agree with Avicenna on the basic semantization of contingency, as well as on its quasi-primitivity, on its equidistance from both existence and non-existence, and on its temporally unrestricted applicability³⁹⁰.

§6.2.2 – The Reductionist Semantization presented by Ġazālī: Contingency as Causal Dependence

One of Ġazālī's accusations against Avicenna is that the latter's modal division of the existent into the necessary and the contingent is reducible to another division: that between what is causally independent, and what is causally dependent.

«The expressions 'necessary existent' and 'contingent existent' are not comprehensible. All of the obfuscations [of the philosophers] are concealed in those two expressions. Let us change then into what is comprehensible, which is the negation of the cause and its affirmation.»³⁹¹

In sum, Ġazālī presents a reductionist semantization of contingency: being contingent means needing an efficient cause. This position entails that the principle of sufficient reason (*i.e.*, every

387 See *Iṣārāt*, pp.140.12 – 141.2.

388 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.38.11 – 39.4.

389 See *Iṣārāt*, II.4, p.141.3-6.

390 See *Taḥṣīl*, pp.62-67, 290-291, 524-528; *Bayān*, pp.31-32, 210-215; *Mu'tabar*, I, pp.78-79; III, pp.21-23 *Ḥall*, I, pp.635-648, 681-682.

391 *Tahāfut*, p.124.10-14. See also *Ibid.*, pp.94.4-5, 98.8-10, 99.4-8.

contingent needs a cause) is redundant, because contingency is no more a definite qualification which can be said to entail the need for a cause, but rather that need itself.

Rāzī mentions an identical reduction of the meanings of necessity and contingency as the basis for a demonstration of the Necessary Existent which avoids the intricacies of the Avicennian argument for God's existence (which requires the refutation of causal circularity and causal regress). However, he also dismisses that same demonstration, arguing that it fails to consider the hypothesis that a contingent thing exists without a cause, either because its existence is *per se* more likely than its non-existence, or because one of the two prevails over the other not by means of a cause, even though they are essentially equivalent³⁹².

The above-mentioned semantic reduction is not necessarily the position actually endorsed by Ġazālī: it rather seems a sort of dialectical tool formulated in order to attack Avicenna. Indeed, in a passage of the *Tahāfut* Ġazālī explicitly states that the contingent is that thing which is such that no contradiction follows from the supposition of its existence and from the supposition of its non-existence: this kind of account draws near to Avicenna's own explication.

§6.2.3 – Ibn al-Malāḥimī's Position

Ibn al-Malāḥimī's position on contingency is connected with the attempt to reconcile a libertarian theory of voluntary action with the principle of sufficient reason and the consequential thesis that voluntary acts occur on account of «motives» (*dawā' in*)³⁹³. In his *Tuhfa*, the formulation of contingency and its features emerges in the discussion on the distinction between the voluntary agent whose action is contingent, and the natural cause whose action is necessary. Ibn al-Malāḥimī describes the voluntary agent as follows.

«The intellect conceives an agent which gives existence to his act contingently (*'alā ḡihati l-ṣiḥḥa*). The meaning of this is that, before the action of giving existence, his object of power is in itself contingent with respect to existence: there is no factor which makes its existence prevail over its persistence in the state of non-existence, in the future. As for the efficient factor with respect to the action of giving existence, it is possible for it to give existence, and it is possible for it not to do so, indifferently (*'alā al-sawā'*), with respect to the future. That kind of efficient factor is called 'what is capable [of acting and not-acting]' (*al-qādir*).»³⁹⁴

This passage shows the first element of divergence from Avicenna: contingency is indeed defined as indifference between existence and non-existence, but it specifically concerns the future as opposed to being temporally unrestricted (as in Avicenna). A contingent thing is that whose future coming-to-existence does not prevail over its persistence in the state of non-existence. Furthermore, the very action of the cause (the voluntary agent) is contingent: with respect to the future, the cause may act and may not act, indifferently.

392 See Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, I, pp.134-135. On the refutation of the reductionist semantization see *Infra*, §6.4.1.

393 See Rāzī, *Arba' in*, I, pp.319-321. On the principle of sufficient reason see *Infra*, Part 2, §2.

394 *Tuhfa*, p.48.16-18.

At this point one might ask why a cause that is indifferent towards both action and inaction should act in the first place: it would seem that, in a similar situation, the action would be performed randomly. A similar kind of criticism is repelled by appealing to motivating factors (*dawā'in*, sing. *dā'in*) and diverting factors (*ṣawārif*, sing. *ṣārif*). Ibn al-Malāḥimī argues that, in order for a voluntary agent to perform an action, something additional must occur which makes that action more adequate (*awlā*) than inaction: that is a motivating factor (e.g., the belief that the action will benefit the agent, or the belief that the action is good in itself). On the contrary, when some diverting factor occur, the agent does not perform the action. It is also possible for the agent to hesitate (*taraddada*), remaining undecided until either the motivating factors or the diverting factors prevail. This means that there can be a situation where neither motivation nor diversion prevails, either because no factor exists or because multiple opposing factors are equipotent.

As Ibn al-Malāḥimī himself notices, this account is superficially similar to Avicenna's own theory of voluntary action, which abides by the principle of sufficient reason³⁹⁵. However, there is a crucial element which sets the two doctrines apart. According to Ibn al-Malāḥimī, the occurrence of the motivating factor makes action more likely and more adequate than inaction, but does not make the action absolutely necessary: it is still possible for the agent to choose inaction.

«Incitement is conceivable only with relation to what is not a necessitating cause by nature and essence. In correspondence of the incitement, it only happens that giving existence to the action is more adequate (*awlā*) than its non-existence, even though it is still possible for the action not to exist. This demonstrates that there is a discrimination between the voluntary potency and the natural potency.»³⁹⁶

This has an important consequence for the concept of contingency as such. In fact, since Ibn al-Malāḥimī admits that an action can remain contingent even when its existence becomes more adequate and more likely than its non-existence, it follows that contingency do not always entail pure equivalence between existence and non-existence. The contingent must be said to accept at least three levels or degrees: greater proximity to existence (when motivation prevails), equidistance from both existence and non-existence (when motivation and diversion are equipotent), and greater proximity to non-existence (when diversion prevails).

It is important to notice that the notion of contingency as encompassing greater and lesser adequacy or proximity to existence is a multifaceted tool. As I showed, Ibn al-Malāḥimī makes use of it in his theory of voluntary action that tries to reconcile freedom of choice with a weakened version of the principle of sufficient reason³⁹⁷. However, the idea that some contingent things can be more proximate

395 «The active potency is subdivided into potency over the action, and not over its contradictory – like the potency of fire over burning –, and potency over both action and inaction – like the potency of man over movement and rest. The former is called 'natural potency'. The latter is called 'voluntary potency'. The voluntary potency is such that, any time the complete will is added to it, and there is no obstacle, the obtaining of the act necessarily follows according to nature. In general, every cause is such that its effect follows according to necessity. When the conditions of the cause are complete, the obtaining of the effect is determined, and it is not possible for it not to obtain.» – *Ibid.*, p.49.13-19.

396 *Ibid.*, p.50.4-6. See also *Ibid.*, pp.51.11 – 52.5.

397 On this see *Infra*, Part 2, §2.2.3.

or more adequate to existence than other is also connected to another doctrinal element, namely the causelessness of persistence.

The doctrine of the causelessness of persistence is specific to the Bahšāmi Mu'tazilites (the followers of Abū 'Alī and Abū Hāšim al-Ġubbā'ī), who believe that persistent things persist on account of themselves. In this respect, they diverge from both the Baġdadian Mu'tazilites (Abū al-Qāsim al-Balḥī and his followers) and from the Aš'arites, who argue that persistent things persist on account of an additional accident of persistence that comes to inhere in them and is produced by an efficient cause³⁹⁸. The consequence of this thesis is that, while the coming-to-be of things depends on external efficient causes, their persistence in existence does not depend on any external cause. Avicenna himself mentions this in polemical terms, noticing that for the Bahšāmis the material world would continue to exist even on the counter-factual supposition that God ceased to exist³⁹⁹. Furthermore, the causelessness of persistence entails that the annihilation of persistent things requires a positive cause of annihilation: since persistent things persist by themselves, something external is required in order for their existence to cease. In other words, annihilation is a real causal act, not just the cessation of the act of creation.

The connection between the causelessness of persistence and greater proximity to existence is that between a feature and its explanation: persistence does not need a cause because the persistent thing becomes more proximate to existence in the moment of persistence. To the best of my knowledge, this connection is not made explicit in extant Bahšāmi texts. However, it is possible to hypothesize that some Mu'tazilite formulated the idea of greater proximity while defending the causelessness of persistence in the context of a debate with the *falāsifa*, whose causal theory is indeed based on contingency understood as equidistance.

Some trace of that may be present in Avicenna's own texts. Indeed, Avicenna's argument for causal necessitation is based on the pure equivalence of contingency and is constructed in a way that aims to prevent a possible objection based on greater proximity: the discrimination between the existence and non-existence of the contingent occurs on account of an efficient cause and, in case the effect did not become necessary on account of that causal action, yet another cause would be required in order for the discrimination to occur. Avicenna explicitly stresses that contingency entails equivalence or indifference, and thus cannot accept greater and lesser proximity to existence⁴⁰⁰.

The explicit connection between greater proximity to existence and the causelessness of persistence appears in Rāzī's discussion of contingency. Indeed, some of Rāzī's arguments against greater proximity assume such a doctrine as connected with the Bahšāmi account of coming-to-be, persistence, and annihilation: something begins to exist on account of an external positive cause, continues to exist on account of itself without needing any cause, and eventually ceases to exist on account of a positive

398 «There is no divergence between our masters concerning the fact that the body cannot persist by means of a persistence.

Our master Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥayyāt already said that. He say that substance is annihilated because it connects to the power of annihilation that the Eternal has over it. Abū Hafs al-Qarmīsīnī said that the persistent is not persistent by means of a persistence. He had Abū al-Ḥusayn doctrine concerning the annihilation of substances. Abū al-Qāsim said that substance persists by means of a persistence that inheres in it.» – Abū Rašīd al-Nisābūrī, *Masā'il al-ḥilaf bayna al-baġdādīyyīn wa-al-bašrīyyīn*, eds. M. Ziyāda, R. Sayyid (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inmā' al-'Arabī, 1979), p.74.16-20.

399 See *Išārāt*, pp.147.4 – 148.2.

400 See *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, p.39.6-16; *Išārāt*, p.153.9-15.

act of an external cause⁴⁰¹. Furthermore, Rāzī explicitly argues that the seemingly intuitive strength of the claim that persistence is causeless actually comes from an erroneous judgement concerning contingency. In particular, those who believe that persistence is causeless implicitly assume greater proximity: they assume that, in the moment of persistence, the existence of the persistent becomes more adequate or more proximate than its non-existence⁴⁰².

401 See *Infra*, 6.4.4.

402 *Maṭālib*, I, p.86.4-8.

§6.3 – The Ontological Status of Contingency in Avicenna and his Interpreters

The present subchapter aims to present the two main positions concerning the issue of the ontological status of contingency: Avicenna's realist position (§6.3.1), and the anti-realist position which is shared by several of his interpreters, including Ġazālī, Suhrawardī, Rāzī and Ṭūsī (§6.3.2).

§6.3.1 – The Realist Position

Avicenna's assertions imply that contingency is something extra-mentally real. Such implication appears most clearly in a passage of the *Išārāt* where the *Šayḥ* aims to prove that everything which comes-to-be must be temporally preceded by some material substrate which is the subject of inherence of the contingency of its existence.

«Everything that comes-to-be was contingently existent before its existence. So the contingency of its existence obtained [before its existence]. Its contingency is not the power that the agent has over it. Otherwise, when we say that the absurd is not object of power because it is impossible in itself, we would actually say that it is not object of power because it is not object of power, or that it is impossible in itself because it is impossible in itself. Thus, it is clear that its contingency is not the power that the agent has over it. Nor contingency is something intelligible by itself whose existence is not in a subject. Indeed, it is something relative, and so it depends on a subject. Thus, what comes-to-be is preceded by the potency of its existence and by a subject.»⁴⁰³

Avicenna notices that what comes-to-be was contingent before its existence: this entails that its contingency existed before its existence. At this point he presents two nested disjunctions: if contingency existed, it would be either self-subsistent or subsistent in a substrate. However, contingency cannot be self-subsistent because it is something relative (*i.e.*, a qualification of the relation between the quiddity of the contingent and its existence), and relative things are not self-subsistent. On the other hand, if contingency were subsistent in a substrate, it would consist either in the power that subsists in the efficient cause or in the potentiality that subsists in the material cause. Contingency cannot be the active potency that subsists in the agent because contingency is the reason why the efficient cause has power over what comes-to-be in the first place, and something cannot be the reason for itself. The conclusion is that contingency must be the potentiality that subsists in the material cause of what comes-to-be.

Such an argument requires a realist understanding of contingency: contingency is something that exists in concrete reality. If that were not the case, there would be no need to ask whether contingency is self-subsistent or not, and then to look for its subject of inherence: purely mental concepts need no extra-mental subject of inherence.

Rāzī relates that realism is the position of the majority of the philosophers (*al-akṭarūn*), probably referring to Avicenna and to his early interpreters (Bahmanyār, Lawkarī, etc.). However, most of the later interpreters (Rāzī included) reject realism, defending a conceptualist (or, more broadly, an anti-realist) position instead.

403 *Išārāt*, p.151.2-9.

§6.3.2 – The Anti-Realist Positions

Conceptualism asserts that contingency does not exist extra-mentally, being nothing but a notion existing in the mind. The earliest interpreter who explicitly defends a conceptualistic understanding of contingency is Ġazālī. In the *Tahāfut*, he presents conceptualism as an objection against one of the Avicennian proofs for the eternity of the world, namely the proof from the dependence of contingency on a subject of inherence. Since contingency is something purely conceptual, it does not require any extra-mentally existent substrate.

«The contingency that you mentioned reverts to a judgement of the intellect. We call ‘contingent’ everything whose existence is can be supposed by the intellect. If that is impeded, it is called ‘impossible’. If the intellect is incapable to suppose its non-existence, we call it ‘necessary’. These are intellectual judgements that do not need something existent they are attributions of.»⁴⁰⁴

Conceptualism about contingency is a widespread position among Avicenna’s interpreters after Ġazālī. Šahrastānī makes use of the Ġazālīan objection in his discussion of the coming-to-be of the world⁴⁰⁵. Suhrawardī also upholds conceptualism about contingency⁴⁰⁶. Ṭūsī is a conceptualist to (he defends a refined version Avicenna’s proof for the existence of a substrate of what comes-to-be which dispenses with realism about contingency)⁴⁰⁷. A noteworthy case is that of Rāzī, for he is anti-realist about contingency despite defending realism about existence. Rāzī stresses that the attribution of contingency to the extra-mental existence of a certain thing does not imply that contingency is extra-mentally existent.

«The intellect does not judge that its contingency exists extra-mentally, but rather that its extra-mental existence is contingent.»⁴⁰⁸

When it comes to Rāzī, we can speak of conceptualism only in a restricted sense. That is because conceptualism requires the assertion mental existence, which is a problematic premise for Rāzī: in the *Mabāḥiṭ* he defends it, albeit with some caveats and hesitations, whereas in the *Mulahḥaṣ* he decisively rejects it⁴⁰⁹. It is clear that we need to distinguish between anti-realism as such and that specific kind of anti-realism that is conceptualism. Rāzī’s position in the *Mulahḥaṣ* might be called «non-conceptualist anti-realism»: he explicitly rejects that the knowledge of absolute non-existence (and other unreal things) is reducible to the knowledge of a form existent in the mind. We must know absolute non-existence as such, not merely its mental form, even though absolute non-existence cannot be existent or real in any way, be it mentally or concretely. This is neither a conceptualist position nor a realist position: non-existence is not an extra-mental existent, but this does not mean that it is a mental

404 *Tahāfut*, p.42.2-5.

405 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.34.2-6.

406 See *Ḥikma*, pp.68.13 – 69.4.

407 See *Tagrīd*, 67.5-8; *Hall*, pp.660-666. Ṭūsī argues that conceptualism does not invalidate the Avicennian proof: contingency as such has a merely conceptual existence, but it needs to refer to some extra-mental existent: the contingent thing, in case it exists, or its material substrate, in case it does not exist (see *Hall*, pp.664.4-14, 665.8-11).

408 *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.119.10-12.

409 See *Supra*, §2.2.2.

existent. The same reasoning could be applied to contingency, if we accepted that the latter is something unreal just like non-existence or impossibility: contingency is not an extra-mental existent, but this does not mean that it has conceptual existence⁴¹⁰.

In sum, conceptualism is a form of anti-realism, whereas the reverse is not true. A terminological mark of the subtle but important difference between conceptualism and non-conceptualist anti-realism can be found in how conceptualists (*e.g.*, Ṭūsī) and anti-realists (*e.g.*, Rāzī) designate predicates like contingency. Conceptualists speaks of «conceptual» (*i'tibarī*) or «intellectual» (*'aqlī*) things, whereas anti-realists speaks of a «negative» (*salbī*) or «non-existential» (*'adamī*) things⁴¹¹.

410 On Rāzī's thesis that absolute non-existence can be known see *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fols.80v.21 – 81r.11.

411 A clear distinction between negative and conceptual predicates appears in *Maṭālib*, I, pp.101.20 – 103.2.

§6.4 – The Debates on Contingency

This subchapter presents how Avicenna's interpreters discussed several issues concerning contingency: its very notion, its possibility, its features, and its ontological status. It consists of five parts. The first tackles the case against the reductionist semantization of contingency (§6.4.1). The second part analyses the case for the possibility of contingency, namely the case for the possibility of the existence of contingent existents (§6.4.2). The third part discusses the case for contingency as greater and lesser proximity to existence (§6.4.3). The fourth part tackles the case for contingency as equivalence or equidistance between existence and non-existence (§6.4.4). The fifth part considers the debate on the ontological status of contingency (§6.4.5).

§6.4.1 – The Case against the Reductionist Semantization of Contingency

Ġazālī and Rāzī consider a reductionist semantization of contingency that equates contingency and causal dependence: «contingent» means «needing a cause».

Rāzī rejects such a semantization on account of three arguments⁴¹². The first notices that the attribution of causal dependence to a certain thing requires a justification, and that justification is based on the acknowledgement that such a thing is contingent in itself. Contingency is semantically different from causal dependence precisely because the former is what justifies the latter. This basic reasoning behind this argument is already implicit in Avicenna's distinction between the intrinsic contingency of a thing and the active potency that the cause has over that thing.

The second argument states that the discrimination between the predicate «contingent» and the predicate «needing a cause» corresponds to the distinction between the status of a certain thing inasmuch as it is considered in itself, and the status of that thing inasmuch as it is considered in connection with something else (*i.e.*, its cause). This reasoning can be traced back to the Avicennian assertion of the compatibility between contingency *per se* and necessity *per aliud*: the same thing can be contingent in itself and necessary by means of something else⁴¹³.

The third argument argues that the identification between contingency and causal dependence is methodologically unsound in that it prevents us from considering the possibility to challenge the principle of sufficient reason or the understanding of contingency as pure equivalence between existence and non-existence. Indeed, one might argue that the contingent does not need a cause in order to exist, either because it is essentially more proximate to existence (rejection of contingency as equivalence) or because its existence prevails over its non-existence, even though the two are absolutely equivalent (rejection of the principle of sufficient reason). In sum, the reductionist semantization of contingency hides the possibility to reject the connection between contingency and causal dependence, and thus is methodologically unsound.

412 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.114.1-12; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.134.6 – 135.15.

413 See *Iṣārāt*, pp.140.12 – 141.2.

§6.4.2 – The Case for the Possibility of Contingency

None of Avicenna's interpreters seems to seriously question the possibility of contingency, namely the possibility of the existence of contingent existents. Still, Rāzī considers three kinds of arguments against the possibility of contingency, and tries to reject them. The first kind encompasses the arguments for the impossibility to find a subject contingency can be predicated of. The second kind encompasses the arguments for logical and ontological determinism. The third kind consists of the arguments from the extra-mental reality of contingency.

First of all, it is necessary to remark that, according to Rāzī, any argument for the impossibility of contingency is sophistical, for it contradicts intuitive knowledge in two instances. First of all, what comes-to-be must be capable to receive both existence and non-existence (this is Avicenna's unqualified notion of contingency). Additionally, a thing which is in a certain condition may persist and may not persist in that condition (this is a temporally restricted notion of contingency which relates to the future)⁴¹⁴.

The first kind of arguments against contingency encompasses two almost identical proofs, one being the generalization of the other. They aim to deduce that contingency cannot be predicated of any subject whatsoever. The fundamental assumption behind them is that all self-identities are necessary: this entails that contingency is a relative predicate, meaning that it is said of a thing with respect to another thing, and cannot be predicated of a simple with respect to itself. Then, the adversary adds a reductionist account of composition: any composite whatsoever comes down to a sum of simples. All of this entails that contingency cannot be said of anything, because any potential subject for contingency would be either simple or composite: contingency cannot be said of simples, because self-identities cannot be contingent, and cannot be said of composites, because composites come down to sums of simples, which in themselves cannot be contingent. The objector also rules out the option that contingency might be said of the structural or formal aspect of the composition. The «configuration of the composition» (*ḥay'at al-tarkīb*) is understood as one of the parts of the quiddity of the composite, and that part is in turn either simple or composite. In sum, all composites can be reduced to mereological sums of formal and material parts, which in turn must be simple⁴¹⁵.

Rāzī presents two specific objections against this kind of arguments. The first is a reduction to absurdity: we can apply the same proofs to coming-to-be, and deduce that coming-to-be is impossible. Indeed, if the self-identity of simples is necessary, then simples cannot come-to-be nor cease. That in turn entails that composites cannot come-to-be, for composites are nothing but mereological sums of simples. However, sense-experience attests the reality of coming-to-be, and so the above-mentioned proofs are absurd⁴¹⁶. A similar objection invalidates the arguments, but does not pinpoint which of their premises must be rejected.

The second objection rejects the premise that contingency cannot be said of simples. Rāzī argues that both the temporally unrestricted notion of contingency (receptivity of both existence and non-

414 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.99.6-7, 205.18 – 206.3; *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, p.416.4-11.

415 See *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, pp.405.11 – 406.8; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.123.19 – 124.7; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.96.8 – 99.8.

416 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.117.3-8.

existence) and its temporally restricted notion related to the future (possibility of both persistence and non-persistence) can indeed be applied to simples, because something simple may exist and may not exist: *e.g.*, blackness may exist and may not exist its simplicity notwithstanding⁴¹⁷. This answer appears to evade the problem rather than solve it, for the subject contingency is said of is not the simple quiddity with respect to itself, but rather the simple quiddity with respect to its existence, and according to Rāzī existence is different from quiddity. Once again, contingency concerns the connection between two simple elements (*i.e.*, quiddity and existence), namely their composition.

The second kind of arguments against the possibility of contingency states that contingency is absurd on account of the intrinsic indetermination it implies. There are two similar proofs for this: the proof for logical determinism and the proof for ontological determinism. The first establishes that every proposition is either determinately true or determinately false: that is at odds with contingency, since the assertion that a given thing is contingent entails that none of the two propositions «such a thing is existent» and «such a thing is non-existent» is determinately true. Contingency cannot concern events past, present, or future. That is because, on account of the correspondence theory of truth, the truth-maker of every proposition must be something extra-mental, something which exists in concrete reality: since what exists extra-mentally must be determinate, it follows that the truth-maker of every proposition must be determinate, and thus that proposition must have a determinate truth-value. The second argument calls for ontological determinism, namely the thesis that every quiddity must possess a determinate ontological state. It revolves around the fact that there must be some kind of connection or implication between quiddities and their ontological states (existence and non-existence). That implication cannot be indeterminate (*i.e.*, a quiddity cannot imply either existence or non-existence in an indeterminate sense), because quiddities are concrete and determinate, and determinate things cannot have indeterminate implications. It follows that any quiddity is either determinately existent or determinately non-existent⁴¹⁸.

Some form of logical determinism and ontological determinism seems compatible with the Avicennian notion of contingency. That notion, in fact, asserts indetermination in a restricted and qualified sense: indetermination appears only when we consider contingent quiddities as such, with no additional condition. When we consider them together with the affirmation (or the negation) of their causes, indetermination disappears and absolute determination comes in⁴¹⁹. This perspective is accepted by the majority of Avicenna's interpreters, including both Rāzī and Ṭūsī⁴²⁰.

The third kind of arguments for the impossibility of contingency is based on the assumption that contingency is an extra-mentally real attribute of things. There are two arguments of this kind. The first deduces that contingency implies the thingness of the non-existent, since contingency is an attribute which obtains when its subject does not exist, and an extra-mentally real attribute requires an extra-

417 See *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, p.417.14-17; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.52.4 – 53.16, 124.7; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.117.9-22.

418 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.131.9-12, *Maṭālib*, I, pp.128.7-11, 129.11-20, 204.8 – 205.15. *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, p.405.1-10, 417.7-11.

419 See for example *Nağāt*, pp.548.8 – 549.12.

420 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.131.13 – 132.11; *Hall*, I, pp.557-558; II, pp.681-682.

mentally real subject of attribution⁴²¹. The second argument deduces that contingency implies the existence of the contingent, since it is a specific kind of relation between a quiddity and its existence, and the existence of the relation requires the existence of the related terms.

Rāzī's objection rejects the extra-mental reality of contingency. When we conceive a certain non-existent quiddity, we judge that it is possible for that quiddity to exist extra-mentally, and it is possible for it not to exist extra-mentally. There is no need to postulate any extra-mental substrate for contingency. In Rāzī's own words, the contingency of extra-mental existence does not entail the extra-mental existence of contingency⁴²².

§6.4.3 – The Case for the Possibility of Greater and Lesser Proximity to Existence

The idea that contingency accepts greater and lesser proximity or adequacy to existence is a multifaceted tool which can be used to corroborate at least two doctrinal elements: the conciliation of the principle of sufficient reason with a libertarian account of voluntary action (motivation makes action more proximate to existence than inaction, even though the two remain contingent), and the causelessness of persistence (persistence does not require a cause because the persistent is essentially more proximate to existence).

Rāzī mentions four arguments for the possibility greater proximity, rejecting all of them. The first argument states that flowing existents (*e.g.*, movement, sound, time) cannot persist in existence, and so they are more adequate to non-existence. It follows that existents which are more adequate to existence are also conceivable⁴²³.

Rāzī presents two distinct kinds of answer⁴²⁴. Both aim to prove that the example of flowing existents does not prove that these existents are essentially more proximate to non-existence, either by arguing that, despite contrary evidence, those existent are actually capable of persistence, or by arguing that, if they are incapable of persistence, that incapacity does not entail their greater proximity to non-existence. As for the first kind of answer, one may maintain that every quiddity is in principle capable to persist, because receptivity of existence is a necessary concomitant of every quiddity, and receptivity of existence obtains regardless of considerations concerning time and duration. The case of flowing existents must be explained away in one of two ways, depending on whether one accepts atomism or not. If one accepts atomism, he may argue that flowing existents are made of atomic parts and all of those atomic parts are in principle capable to persist: *e.g.*, movement consists in a series of atomic «occurrences» (*huṣūlāt*) of the moving object in distinct portions of space, and each one of those occurrences can persist (being merely the fact that the moving object is in a certain portion of space)⁴²⁵. If one rejects atomism, on the other hand, he may argue that flowing existents can persist inasmuch as

421 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.203.18 – 204.7; *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, p.404.11-19.

422 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.119.6-12; *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, p.417.7-9;

423 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.122.18 – 123.2.

424 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.130.21 – 131.7; *Maṭālib*, I, p.127.9-15.

425 This position is problematic in the case of time, since Rāzī himself argues that the parts of time are essentially incapable to persist – see *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.201.17-22; *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, p.402.9-15.

they are considered as continuous wholes, whereas their parts are only potentially existent: e.g., movement persists inasmuch as it is a continuous whole that stretches from the *terminus a quo* to the *terminus ad quem*, whereas its parts never come to actuality.

As for the second kind of answer, one could accept that some quiddities do not persist, while adding that persistence must be a separate accident which comes-to-be as something additional to the quiddity it is predicated of, and so there are actually two quiddities, namely the original quiddity and its persistence: in the case of persistent things, both quiddities are capable to receive existence; in the case of non-persistent things, the quiddity of the original thing) is capable to receive existence, whereas the quiddity of persistence is incapable to receive it. In other words, the persistence of flowing existents would be an essentially impossible quiddity distinct from the (essentially contingent) specific quiddities of those existents⁴²⁶.

The second argument for the greater and lesser proximity to existence states that some causes are essentially inclined to produce their effects, but may encounter certain obstacles than prevent them from doing so. The essential inclination of the causes means that the effects are more adequate and hence more proximate to existence, even though they are not necessary on account of the above-mentioned hindering factors that may occur. Rāzī answers that no cause is essentially inclined to produce a certain effect, regardless of the circumstantial conditions of its causal action. On the contrary, causal efficiency is binary: either all conditions are satisfied, and the effect follows necessarily, or some of the conditions are not satisfied, and the effect cannot follow⁴²⁷.

The third argument states that some contingent existents occur frequently, others occur with intermediate frequency, and others occur rarely. So, there are contingent things which are more proximate to existence, things which are equidistant from both existence and non-existence, and things which are more proximate to non-existence. The answer is that the frequency of an event does not depend on its essential proximity to existence, but rather on the frequency of its efficient causes⁴²⁸. An identical position is also present in Abū al-Barakāt⁴²⁹.

The fourth argument states that every quiddity must imply either existence and non-existence, because a determinate thing such as a quiddity must have a determinate implication. Thus, every quiddity must imply either existence or non-existence, even though it remains contingent: that entails its greater proximity to existence or to non-existence. Rāzī answers that quiddities imply only the disjunction «either existent or non-existent», and not one of the disjuncts in a determinate sense. That disjunction is a determinate implication, even though it is not something that has positive existence⁴³⁰.

§6.4.4 – The Case against the Possibility of Greater and Lesser Proximity to Existence

426 Similarly, the persistence of persistent quiddities would be an essentially possible quiddity additional to the specific quiddities of the persistent things.

427 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.129.5-8, 131.7-9; *Maṭālib*, I, p.123.9-14, 127.19-21.

428 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.123.14-20, 128.2-4.

429 See *Mu'tabar*, III, p.79.5-8.

430 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.131.9-12; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.123.22 – 124.19, 128.7-11.

Avicenna claims that the contingent must be equidistant from both existence and non-existence. Rāzī corroborates this thesis by mentioning four arguments which invalidate the idea that contingency may accept greater and lesser proximity to existence. In particular, he attacks the hypothesis that the contingent may be more proximate to existence. That is because such a hypothesis can be used to challenge the assertion that contingency entails causal dependence: one might argue that what is more proximate to existence exists on account of that greater proximity to existence, and nothing else.

Two of Rāzī's arguments against greater proximity assume the Bahšāmi tenets concerning the conditions for the annihilation of what is capable to persist on its own, being essentially more proximate to existence. In particular, he considers the claim that the annihilation of any persistent thing requires the positive causal action of an external cause, and the claim that the annihilation of a persistent accident requires the creation of an incompatible accident in the same substrate. The aim of Rāzī's arguments is to show that these two tenets about annihilation are inconsistent with the idea that persistent contingent things are more proximate to existence⁴³¹.

The first argument assumes that the contingent which is more proximate to non-existence can be annihilated (*i.e.*, made non-existent) only by the causal action of an external cause. There are two options concerning that cause of annihilation: either its absence is included as a condition of the affirmation of the greater proximity to existence that is predicated of the contingent, or not. In the former case, the affirmation of greater proximity would depend on something that is external to the essence of the contingent. In the latter case, the cause of non-existence could not annihilate that thing, since greater proximity would obtain regardless of the consideration of that cause, and the adversary says that what is more proximate to existence may exist on account of that greater proximity.

The second argument assumes that the annihilation of what is more proximate to existence may occur only when something that is incompatible with it comes into existence (*e.g.*, a certain colour can be annihilated only when a different colour comes into existence in the same substrate). Those two incompatible things must be either essentially asymmetrical in strength or essentially symmetrical in strength. In the former case, one of the two would be necessarily existent and the other would be necessarily non-existent, since an essential asymmetry in strength cannot be subverted. In the latter case, those two things would be equivalent with respect to existence and non-existence.

Rāzī presents two additional proofs which are based on the principle of sufficient reason, namely the assertion that contingency – understood as equidistance between existence and non-existence – requires causal dependence⁴³².

The first is an extension of the previous two arguments from the conditions of annihilation, as well as a generalization of them. When we say that a thing is more proximate to existence, all conditions for that greater proximity must be satisfied (otherwise that assertion would be unjustified). At this point, the non-existence of the contingent thing which is more proximate to existence is either possible or impossible. That non-existence cannot be impossible, for otherwise the contingent thing would cease to be contingent and become necessary. That non-existence cannot be both possible and dependent on an

431 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.129.21 – 130.21.

432 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.126.6 – 127.5.

external cause of annihilation either, for that would be at odds with the preliminary assumptions that all conditions for greater proximity to existence are already included in the attribution of greater proximity (and the absence of the cause of annihilation is to be considered among those conditions). Finally, if the non-existence of what is more proximate to existence were possible, and if the possibility of non-existence did not depend on external causes of non-existence, then that greater proximity to existence would obtain both in the moment of existence and in the moment of non-existence: greater proximity would be equivalent with respect to both existence and non-existence. It follows that greater proximity could not discriminate between the moment of existence and the moment of non-existence, and so one of the two would prevail over the other without any factor explaining why that prevalence happens: if we assume the principle of sufficient reason, we need to reject this.

The second argument begins with the assertion of the principle sufficient reason, stressing that, if existence and non-existence were equivalent, none of the two could obtain without the presence of an external cause. In the case of the contingent that is more proximate to existence (or to non-existence), existence and non-existence would not be equivalent: on the contrary, one of the two would be more adequate and proximate, and the other would be less adequate and less proximate. It would follow that the side which is less proximate could not obtain in any way. In fact, the principle of sufficient reason states that what is equivalent or equidistant cannot obtain: that impossibility holds true *a fortiori* of what is less proximate to existence. In sum, what is less proximate would be impossible *per se*, and so the side which is more proximate would be necessary *per se*. All of this shows that greater and lesser proximity to existence contradicts contingency, if we assume the principle of sufficient reason.

§6.4.5 – The Debate on the Ontological Status of Contingency

There are two main positions concerning the ontological status of contingency: realism (Avicenna) and conceptualism (Ġazālī, Suhrwardī, Tūsī, Rāzī in the *Mabāḥiṭ*). Rāzī's assertions in the *Mulaḥḥas* suggest a third doctrine: non-conceptualist anti-realism.

There are two main arguments for realism⁴³³. The first asserts that the unreality (*i.e.*, the non-existence in concrete reality) of contingency is equivalent to the complete negation of contingency: there is no difference between saying «contingency is unreal» and saying «there are no contingent things».

Ġazālī and Rāzī present a counter-example against this reasoning: impossibility cannot be real, but its unreality does not entail the negation of impossibility (*i.e.*, the claim that there are no impossible things). Rāzī adds an additional consideration: when we judge that a thing is contingent, we do not mean that its contingency is extra-mentally existent (like the realists assume), we mean that its extra-mental existence is contingent. In other words, the attribution of contingency to something does not require contingency to be the subject of an existential proposition: contingency is merely the modality in which the subject of an existential proposition (the thing) connects to its predicate (existence).

433 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.118.19 – 119.15; *Tahāfut*, p.42.6-9.

The second argument for realism states that contingency must be something real and positive because it is opposite to impossibility: impossibility is unreal and negative, and what is opposite to something like that must be real and positive.

Rāzī objects that this kind of reasoning can be used to deduce the opposite conclusion, namely the unreality of contingency. In fact, contingency is also opposite to necessity, and necessity is something real and positive⁴³⁴: it follows that contingency is negative and unreal. The realist must accept the reality of necessity because necessity is opposite to impossibility, just like contingency. In sum, it appears that similar arguments are fundamentally inadequate for establishing the ontological status of the modalities, precisely because contingency occupies an intermediate position between necessity and impossibility. Ṭūsī expresses the same opinion⁴³⁵.

As for the arguments against realism about contingency, Rāzī lists five distinct proofs⁴³⁶.

The first (also mentioned by Suhrawardī and Ṭūsī)⁴³⁷ is the argument from the modal status of contingency. If contingency were a real existent, it would be either necessary or contingent, and both alternatives are absurd. Contingency cannot be necessary for two reasons: on the one hand, contingency is not self-subsistent, and thus cannot be necessary *per se*; on the other hand, if contingency were necessary, there would be more than one necessary existent. On the other hand, contingency cannot be contingent for otherwise its own contingency would be a real existent additional to it, and an infinite regress would ensue. Additionally, Rāzī remarks that the realist cannot answer that contingency is contingent in the sense that it is contingency, and nothing more. In fact, if contingency were something existent, its existence would be additional to its quiddity, and that would require its (second-level) contingency to be additional to its quiddity as well.

The second proof against realism is the argument from the infinite multiplication of potentiality. If contingency were a real existent, its instances would be really distinct from one another: the contingency of the form X would be different from the contingency of the form Y. If that were the case, then an infinite number of real accidents would inhere in a single substrate, since the same portion of matter can potentially receive an infinity of forms (according to temporal succession), and the potentiality to acquire a certain form must be different from the potentiality to acquire another form.

The third proof is the argument from the causal dependence of contingency. If contingency were a real existent, it would either be dependent on a cause or not, and both alternatives are absurd. If it did not depend on a cause, then contingency would be necessary (see the first argument). If contingency depended on a cause, that cause would be either the quiddity of the contingent thing or something external to that quiddity. The former option is absurd because the causal action of an external cause requires the essential contingency of its effect (*i.e.*, the capacity of the effect to receive the causal action). The latter option is absurd because the quiddity of the contingent would need to exist in order to cause its own contingency, and consequently contingency would be posterior to the existence of that thing.

434 The reality of necessity is defended in most of Rāzī's works – see *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.114-118; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.283-289.

435 See *Maṣāri' al-muṣāri'*, pp.62.13 – 63.4

436 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.119.16 – 121.18.

437 See *Ḥikma*, pp.68.15 – 69.4; *Tagrīd*, p.67.7.

The fourth proof (also mentioned by Ġazālī)⁴³⁸ is the argument from the inherential status of contingency. If contingency were a real existent, it would be an accident, and thus it would have a substrate. That substrate cannot be the contingent thing, because a thing is contingent before being existent, and cannot be another thing, because contingency is a specific concomitant of the contingent thing and a specific concomitant of something cannot inhere in something else.

The fifth proof (also mentioned by Ṭūsī)⁴³⁹ is the argument from the relativity of contingency. Contingency is a specific kind of relation between the quiddity of a thing and its existence. If it were concretely existent, it would require that thing to be existent, since the existence of a relation requires the related things.

438 See *Tahāfut*, pp.42.10-17, 43.15-18, 45.16-18.

439 See *Ṭaḡrīd*, p.67.5.

§6.5 – Concluding Remarks

The impact of Avicenna's tenets about contingency on his interpreters is varied.

His basic semantization of contingency is fundamentally unchallenged, just like his assessment of the epistemic status of contingency (*i.e.*, its quasi-primitivity). The reductionist semantization presented by Ġazālī («contingent» means «dependent on a cause») appears more a dialectical tool than anything else and, as Rāzī notices, it is both epistemically and methodologically unsound.

No interpreter seriously accepts the impossibility of contingency. However, Rāzī discusses multiple arguments against the existence of contingent things: this proves that for him absolute necessitarianism (all existents are necessary *per se*) is at least a theoretical option to take into account. As for the actual content of those proofs, their strength is variable. The arguments for logical and ontological determinism are actually compatible with Avicenna's causal necessitarianism: contingency is predicated of things inasmuch as they are considered in themselves, whereas necessity is predicated of them inasmuch as they are considered in connection with their causes. On the other hand, the argument from the necessity of the self-identity of simples is a serious challenge to Avicenna's doctrine: if contingency cannot be predicated of what is simple with respect to its self-identity, then nothing can be contingent in itself, since composites are just collection of simples. The rejection of the necessity of self-identities appears unacceptable from an Avicennian perspective, since in that case God's absolute simplicity would not guarantee His necessity. A possible solution might be to challenge the account of composition that underlines it, namely the idea that composites are reducible to sums of simples. However, to the best of my knowledge none of Avicenna's interpreters takes this possibility into account.

As for the peculiar characteristic of contingency, namely equivalence or equidistance between existence and non-existence, it is crucial for Avicenna's thesis that all contingent things need an efficient cause, since the principle of sufficient reason applies to those contingent things whose existence and non-existence are equivalent.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī challenges the implication between contingency and equidistance, arguing that the former can accept greater and lesser proximity to existence. His idea can be used to defend two distinct doctrines: the causelessness of persistence, and the contingency of motivated voluntary actions.

Rāzī's refutation of contingency as greater and lesser proximity is a decisive advancement over Avicenna's mere affirmation of equidistance. Rāzī shows that, if we accept the principle of sufficient reason, then greater and lesser proximity to existence contradict contingency: greater proximity entails necessity, whereas lesser proximity entails impossibility. Furthermore, he tackles the arguments for contingency as proximity, showing that no difference in the kind of existence contingent things possess (persistence and impossibility of persistence, frequency and rarity) entails a gradation with respect to existence: contingency does not come in degrees.

As for the ontological status of contingency, the majority of the interpreters reject Avicenna's perspective, namely realism. The anti-realist argument from the modal status of contingency assumes that realism requires a thick or entitative conception of contingency: contingency is an existent entity, a

quiddity existence can be predicated of. If we concede that, the argument is decisive: contingency cannot be extra-mentally real. A hypothetical realist defence would need to reject the thickness of contingency (just like Rāzī does in the case of existence) claiming that, despite being extra-mentally real, contingency does not need to be an actual entity whose existence and contingency are additional to its quiddity (*i.e.*, the argument from doubt cannot be applied to contingency): contingency is the very contingency of a thing, not a contingent thing, just like existence is the very existence of a thing and not an existent thing.

Regardless of whether this kind of solution is actually viable, realism about contingency faces another problem, namely the fact that contingency occupies an intermediate position between existence and non-existence: it can be predicated of both existent and non-existent things. It is unclear how it can be possible for a real attribute to inhere in non-existent things. As Rāzī remarks, even if we accepted Avicenna's thesis that the contingency of non-existent things inheres in their matter, we would still face a problem, for things devoid of matter (*i.e.*, intellects, souls, prime matter itself) would be the subjects of their own contingency, and a thing must be existent in order to be the subject of real accidents: consequently, the existence of those things would precede their contingency⁴⁴⁰. This is inconsistent with the Avicennian account of efficient causality, since the existence of a contingent thing requires the action of its cause, and that causal action in turn requires the essential contingency of the effect: contingency must precede existence.

440 See *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.407.6-14.

SECOND PART
—
AETIOLOGY

Foreword

The first part of this work tackled six elements of Avicenna's general ontology. All of those are necessary conditions for establishing the possibility and conceivability of efficient causality, as well as that of its essential properties. The notion of existence is necessary for conceiving causality as the act of giving existence. The universality of existence is necessary for conceiving the universality of causality. The modulation of existence is necessary for conceiving the asymmetry between cause and effect. The contingency is necessary in that only what is contingent can be causally dependent. Such premises merely establish that causality is possible, not that it is necessary: if we accept them, we obtain that Avicennian efficient causes may exist, but this does not imply that they must exist.

The necessity to assert the existence of efficient causes is established on account of the three premises discussed in this second part of the work. They are the following: there are contingent existents, contingent existents require efficient causes in order to exist (principle of sufficient reason), and quiddities cannot be the efficient causes of their existence (rejection of self-causation).

CHAPTER 1 – The Existence of Contingent Existents

§1.1 – The Meaning of the Premise, and the Need for It

§1.1.1 – The Meaning of the Premise

This premise is fundamentally different from that mentioned in the sixth chapter of the first part, namely the contingency of existence as such. The latter tackles the very notion of contingency as well as its fundamental properties and its conceptual possibility. Here, on the other hand, we need to consider the factual existence of contingent existents: some of the things that exist are contingent.

There are two ways to justify the affirmation that there are contingent existents. The first is based on composition: some existents are composite, and all and only composite existents are contingent. This position is explicitly discussed and defended by Avicenna. In the Avicennian system, composition is both sufficient and necessary condition for contingency. Thus, it is a complete criterion of discrimination between necessary and sufficient existents: everything that is somehow compositional is contingent, and everything that is completely simple is necessary. In this context, the notion of composition should be considered in a wide sense, as pointing out any condition where something encompasses a multiplicity of internal constituents. This description can apply to several things: material or quantitative composition, hylemorphic composition, and composition from quiddity and existence. It is important to notice that, for Avicenna, every existing thing which possesses a quiddity different from existence itself can be said to be a composite existent. Indeed, existence is understood as an external addition to quiddity⁴⁴¹. It follows that the additionality of existence is a sufficient condition for establishing that there are composite existents, regardless of any other consideration: once it has been established that existence is additional to quiddity, and that existent things possess quiddities, it follows that composite things exist, with no need to further analyse the nature of those quiddities.

The second way of justifying the assertion of contingency is based on coming-to-be: we see that some existents come-to-be, and everything that comes-to-be is contingent. Avicenna clearly accepts both statements, but does not delve in this way of justifying the assertion of contingency. An in-depth discussion of the deduction of contingency from coming-to-be is to be found in Rāzī. From the Avicennian perspective that is accepted by Rāzī himself, coming-to-be is only a sufficient condition for contingency, and not also a necessary condition for it: everything which comes-to-be is contingent, but not everything that is contingent comes-to-be (there can be eternal contingent existents). This entails that coming-to-be is an imperfect or incomplete criterion of discrimination between contingent and necessary existents. In other words, it simply tells us that some existents (*i.e.*, those that come-to-be) are contingent and not necessary, but it does not tell us what sets all necessary existents apart from all contingent existents.

441 See *Supra*, Part 1, §5.

§1.1.2 – The Need for the Premise

The contingency of composite existents is essential for the assertion of causality. In fact, the assertion of efficient causality is based on the principle of sufficient reason, and the principle of sufficient reason requires the existence of contingent existents.

§1.2 – Composition and Contingency in Avicenna and his Interpreters

As I mentioned before, there are two ways to justify the thesis that there are contingent existents. The most powerful of the two is the assertion that contingency is implied by composition. There are three main positions concerning the implication between composition and contingency. The first is the Avicennian position: composition entails contingency (§1.2.1). The second is Ġazālī's position, namely the rejection of the necessity of the implication between composition and contingency (§1.2.2). The third position is Ibn al-Malāḥimī's, namely the rejection of the possibility of that implication, on the basis of the claim that no composite thing exists (§1.2.3).

§1.2.1 – The Avicennian Position: Composition entails Contingency

The assertion of the contingency of composite existents appears as the crucial premise for Avicenna's argument for God's uniqueness. The basic reasoning behind such argument is that, if God were not absolutely unique, then His essence would consist of different parts or aspects: something He shares with other things, and something that is peculiar to Him. This would imply some form of composition, and composition in turn implies contingency. In *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.7, Avicenna clearly asserts the contingency of composite existents.

«Not even that thing whose existence is always necessary by means of another is essentially simple, because what belongs to it in consideration of itself is other than what belongs to it from another: its ipseity (*huwwiyya*) obtains in existence from the two together. Because of this, no thing other than the Necessary Existent is free of association to what is potential and contingent, in consideration of itself. [The Necessary Existent] is the Singular (*al-fard*), while what is other than Him is a compositional pair.»⁴⁴²

Such an idea appears several times throughout Avicenna's works. For instance, when dealing with substance in *Ilāhiyyāt*, II.1, he states what follows.

«You already know that, among the properties that belong to the Necessary Existent, there is the fact that the Necessary Existent is only one, and what has parts or an existential homologous (*al-mukāfi' li-wuḡūdi-hi*), is not a necessary existent. From this you know that this composite thing [*i.e.*, the material substance] and all these parts are in themselves contingently existent, and they must have a cause that necessitates their existence.»⁴⁴³

This passage adds an important clarification. Contingency is said not only of what is composite in the sense of possessing proper parts, but also of what has an «existential homologous» (*al-mukāfi' li-wuḡūdi-hi*), namely a thing which is in reciprocal implication with something else and cannot be separated from it. This entails that contingency is predicated of both the material substance, which is composite of matter and form, and its parts, since they exist only as parts of that composite and in reciprocal implication with one another. Things like matter and form are not composite in a proper sense, but they might be called «compositional», in the sense that each one of them can exist only as

442 *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.47.16-19.

443 *Ibid.*, I, p.60.5-8

part of a composite and in conjunction with the other part. Both the *Nağāt* and the *Išārāt* present similar assertions⁴⁴⁴.

Avicenna does not thematize the contingency of composite existents when discussing efficient causality as such. In this sense, his theological discussions on God's simplicity and uniqueness clarify something which is implicitly required by his conception of efficient causality: if composite existents were not contingent, there would be no way to discriminate between essentially contingent existents (that are causally dependent) and essentially necessary existents (that are causally independent).

The Avicennian take on God's simplicity and uniqueness is widespread among post-Avicennian thinkers, and even more so is the principle of the contingency of composites. Bahmanyār and Lawkari follow Avicenna almost *verbatim*⁴⁴⁵. Abū al-Barakāt and Tūsī also accept both Avicenna's thesis (God is simple) and the reason behind it (every composite existent is contingent)⁴⁴⁶.

Šahrastānī claims that the Avicennian system is incapable to safeguard the divine simplicity, and that the only way to do so is to conceive the predicate «existent» in an equivocal sense, when it is applied to God⁴⁴⁷. However, his rejection of the Avicennian position does not entail that he is questioning the validity of the contingency of composites. On the very contrary, Šahrastānī judges the *falāsifa* incapable to hold fast to such a principle, a principle that he himself considers a crucial guideline for acquiring a sound conception of God: this is most evident in his *Muṣāra'a*⁴⁴⁸.

Rāzī does not accept Avicenna's proof for God's simplicity, but does accept the contingency of composites, and discusses some arguments in favour of it⁴⁴⁹. The motive behind Rāzī's rejection of

444 «It is not possible, for the essence of the Necessary Existent, to possess principles which are aggregated so that the Necessary Existent is constituted out of them: neither parts of quantity nor parts of definition and expression (*qawl*), be them like matter and form or in some other way. [This] is by means of the fact that each of the parts of the expression (*qawl*) that explains the meaning of Its name would point out something in existence which is essentially other than [the thing which is pointed out by] the other [part of the expression]» – *Nağāt*, pp.551.12-552.1. See also *Ibid.*, pp.555.13-556.2, 559.10-13.

«If the essence of the Necessary Existent were a combination (*ilta'ama*) of two or more things that are aggregated, then [the essence] would be necessary by means of them, and one of them, or each one of them, would be before the Necessary Existent, a constituent for the Necessary Existent. Therefore the Necessary Existent is not subdivided in meaning or in quantity» – *Išārāt*, pp.144.3-6.

445 See *Tahṣīl*, pp.504, 569-570, *Bayān*, 290-296.

446 «We say that it is adequate, for the First Principle, to be the First Existent, the Necessary Existent by Itself, and the Necessary Existent by Itself is the First Principle. It is not possible for It be other than one because, if more than one first principle necessarily existent by itself were in existence, then they would be associated in necessity of existence by essence and in being-principle by essence. Now, their multiplicity would be after their unity and association in necessity of existence by essence: by means of what [would this happen]?» – *Mu'tabar*, III, p.59.14-18.

447 On Šahrastānī's position about the predication of existence see *Supra*, Part 1, §3.

448 «When reciprocally adverse things are coupled, or when coupled things are aggregated, they need an aggregating [factor] that is absolutely independent. What is absolutely independent is not ascertained in two [things], because every one of them is [both] needing and needed with respect of the fact of [their] being-two» – *Muṣāra'a*, p.68.14-17. See also *Ibid.*, pp.56.12 – 57.3, 68.9-10. In the *Nihāya*, Šahrastānī presents both the theologians' proof for God's uniqueness, which is grounded in the impossibility of different all-powerful agents (established by the argument from reciprocal impediment), and the philosophers' proof, which is grounded in the contingency of composites. Although he seems to choose the former as his main argument, he does not attack the latter (see *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, pp.90.10 – 94.16, 98.11 – 100.18).

449 See *Arba'īn*, II, p.52.8-19; *Muḥaṣṣal*, p.66.14-16; *Šarḥ*, II.5, p.373.13-16; *Mabāḥiṭ*, II, p.456.19-22 and *Maṭālib*, I, p.170.11-16.

Avicenna's proof can be traced back to his rejection of a different Avicennian tenet, namely the impossibility of self-causation⁴⁵⁰. It is also important to notice that Rāzī discusses some notable objections against the contingency of composites.

Clear rejections of the contingency of composite existents are to be found in Ġazālī and Ibn al-Malāhimī.

§1.2.2 – The Ġazālian Position: Composition is not a Sufficient Condition for Contingency

Ġazālī explicitly rejects the contingency of composites, claiming that it is a groundless claim. In the *Tahāfut*, he argues that Avicenna is not able to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Necessary Existent. First of all, he mentions Avicenna's proof: two necessary existents would differ in something and share in something else; this would imply composition in both of them; composition, in turn, contradicts necessity. He answers by noticing that composition does not necessarily entail contingency.

«We assent to [the claim] that duplicity is not conceived but through otherness in something, and that the otherness of two things identical in every aspect is not conceivable. However, your saying that this species of composition is absurd, with respect to the First Principle, is an arbitrary judgement. What is its demonstration?»⁴⁵¹

Ġazālī's attacks Avicenna by arguing that the implication between composition and contingency lacks any grounding. The idea that not all composites must be contingent returns several times, throughout the *Tahāfut*. Ġazālī defends the possibility for God to possess positive attributes distinct from His essence: composition of essence and attribute does not necessarily require an external efficient cause⁴⁵². He also claims that, *a fortiori*, an essence composed of genus and differentia does not need to be contingent⁴⁵³. From all of this, Ġazālī argues, it follows that the *falāsifa* are incapable of

450 On the denial of self-causation see *Infra*, §3.

451 *Tahāfut*, pp.86.20 – 87.10.

452 «[Let us consider that they] say: 'When you establish an essence, an attribute, and the inherence of the attribute in the essence, this is composition; every composition requires a composer; because of this it is not possible for the First to be a body, since the body is composed'. We say that saying: 'every composition needs a composer' is like saying: 'every existent needs a existentiating [factor]'. To [one who says this], we say that the First is an eternal existent that has no cause and not existentiating [factor]. Likewise it is said that He is an eternal subject-of-attribution: there is no cause for His essence, and no cause for His attribute, and no cause for the subsistence of His attribute in His essence; rather, the whole is eternal by no cause. As for the body, it is not admitted that it be the First because it comes-to-be inasmuch as it is not devoid of [things that] come-to-be. For he who does not establish the coming-to-be of bodies it necessarily follows the acceptance that the First Cause is a body» – *Ibid.*, pp.100.21 – 101.7.

453 «From what do you know the impossibility of this species of composition? There is no proof of this but your saying, reported from you, on the negation of the attributes, that what is composed of genus and differentia is an aggregate of parts: if it is adequate, for one of the parts or [one element] of the set, to exist without the others, then [this], and not the others, will be the Necessary Existent; if[, on the other hand,] it is not adequate for the parts to exist without the aggregate, and [it is not adequate] for the aggregate to exist without the parts, then the whole will be caused and in need. We have already discussed on this with respect to the attributes, and we have shown that this is not impossible for what concerns the interruption of the causal regress, and the demonstration does not prove anything but the interruption of the regress» – *Ibid.*, p.112.17-28.

demonstrating that the Necessary Existent cannot be corporeal or that there cannot be more than one Necessary Existent⁴⁵⁴.

§1.2.3 – Ibn al-Malāḥimī’s Position: No Composite Exists

Ibn al-Malāḥimī rejects the contingency of composites in a radical way: by claiming that no truly composite thing actually exists. The *Tuhfa* presents a section devoted to the refutation of the philosophers’ proofs for the contingency of the world. That section begins by presenting the thesis of the contingency of composites. The philosophers say that the world needs an efficient cause because everything which has parts – be them «notional» (*ma ‘nawī*) like the parts of the definition, or «constitutive» (*qiyāmī*) like matter and form, or «quantitative» (*kammī*) like material parts – depends on those parts, and what depends on something else cannot be necessary⁴⁵⁵.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī argues that the philosophers claim is unjustified: they move from the unmotivated assumption that there are composite existents, and then argue that their existence must be contingent.

«Let it be said to them: before all of this, you need to present the demonstration of a principle, which is the claim that what has parts has existence by means of the aggregation of its parts in a specific way. Only then you may say that its existence is by means of the existence of its parts. The adversary does not assent to the claim that the aggregate has an existence by means of its parts; rather, he claims that the aggregate is [merely] the aggregation of its parts. You assented to your own claim that the aggregate has an existence by means of that, and then you have provided its parts as the causes for its existence, and this is to provide a cause for the reality of something before having proved its reality: this contradicts [sound reasoning]»⁴⁵⁶

Ibn al-Malāḥimī does not limit himself to noticing that the philosophers’ claim that there are composite existents is groundless: he presents some arguments for the opposite claim (*i.e.*, that there are no composite existents). Such arguments will be considered in detail later. The conclusion is the following.

454 «[They say that] body cannot but be composed, subdivided in parts according to quantity, and in *hylé* and form according to conceptual division, and in attributions by which the body is characterised in order to separate itself from the rest of the bodies: otherwise, bodies would be equivalent in the fact of being bodies. The Necessary Existent is one and does not receive division in these ways. We say: we have already invalidated this, and we have shown that you have no proof for this except the fact that, if some of the parts of an aggregate depend on the other [pars], [the aggregate itself] will be caused. We discussed this, and we showed that, if the determination of an existent without an existentiating [factor] is not implausible, then the determination of a composite without a composer is not implausible [as well]» – *Ibid.*, pp.119.6–120.2.

455 «[The Philosophers] say that [the world] is brought-to-be because everything that has parts of notion, like the parts of the definition, or [parts of] constitution, like matter and form, or [parts of] quantity, like ‘ten’, [all of this] is such that its existence is on condition of its parts, and its parts are other than it, because each one of its parts is in itself other than the rest. Everything which is like that is [such that] the essence of each part of it is neither the essence of the other [parts], nor the essence of the aggregate. So, [the aggregate] will not be the Necessary Existent by Itself. Contingency with respect to existence, and nothing else, is coming-to-be.» – *Tuhfa*, pp.28.22 – 29.4.

456 *Ibid.*, p.29.4-8.

«Since it has been demonstrated that the world has no existence in the sense that they believe, it is not possible to say that the world is a contingent existent, or is brought-to-be, on account of its composition.»⁴⁵⁷

Since Ibn al-Malāḥimī's arguments considers any composite inasmuch as it is composite, the conclusion he draws for the world can be generalized: no composite thing exists. This radically reductionist position is remarkably similar to what modern philosophers call «mereological nihilism»⁴⁵⁸.

If no composite thing is existent, it follows that we cannot qualify anything with contingency. Let us consider the contingency of composites in a propositional form: «every and all composite existents are contingent». If there were no composite existents, the contingency of composites would be false in the sense that it would be devoid of referent (the proposition that expresses it would be devoid of subject).

457 *Ibid.*, p.31.6-7

458 On mereological nihilism see R. Wasserman, 'Material Constitution,' *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 edition), available online at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/material-constitution/>>.

§1.3 – Coming-to-be and Contingency in Avicenna and his Interpreters

The second way to establish the existence of contingent existents is to argue that coming-to-be entails contingency. Avicenna's assertions clearly imply that everything which comes-to-be is essentially contingent. Let us consider for example the following passage from the *Išārāt*.

«As for everything which is not and then is, it is clear for the original intellect that one of the two sides of its contingency becomes more adequate [than the other] by reason of a thing or a cause.»⁴⁵⁹

What comes-to-be is essentially contingent, and that is why the principle of sufficient reason can apply to it: it can be both existent and non-existent, and for that reason it needs an external factor which entails the prevalence of its existence over its non-existence.

Avicenna does not provide any extensive discussion of this point. Such discussion appears in late post-Avicennian Aš'arite authors (Ġazālī, Šahrastānī, Rāzī), as they rework the classical *kalām* proof for the existence of God from the coming-to-be of bodies in the light of Avicenna's doctrine of causality. In a nutshell, the new proof assumes the fundamental premise of the *kalām* argument – the coming-to-be of the material world as a whole – and adds two Avicennian premises: the contingency of what comes-to-be and principle of sufficient reason. This is made explicit in Rāzī's *Maṭālib*.

«As for the discourse which establishes the coming-to-be of bodies, it will be carried out in a detailed way [in another section]. As for the discourse concerning the assertion that everything which comes-to-be must have an agent and a producer, its place is here. We say that everything which comes-to-be is contingently existent *per se*, and everything which is contingently existent *per se* has an agent and a producer. It follows that everything which comes-to-be has an agent. In this path the contingency of bodies is inferred from their coming-to-be, and then their dependence on an agent is inferred from their contingency.»⁴⁶⁰

Here there is a fundamental shift from the classical *kalām* argument from coming-to-be. Not only Rāzī does accept Avicenna's proof from contingency, but his reworking of the *kalām* argument from coming-to-be assumes the fundamental elements of the Avicennian doctrine of causality, first and foremost the idea that the real reason behind causal dependence is contingency, and not coming-to-be *per se*. Coming-to-be is merely a sign of contingency, if we understand contingency in an unrestricted sense (as the capacity to receive existence and non-existence), or a necessary concomitant of contingency, if we understand contingency in a temporally restricted sense (as related to the temporal persistence or cessation of a state of affairs in the future)⁴⁶¹.

Rāzī is aware that his reworking of the proof from coming-to-be gives rise to something fundamentally different from how the previous *mutakallimūn* envisaged that proof, so much so that he devotes two chapters of the *Maṭālib* to rejecting the claim that coming-to-be alone (without the mediation of contingency) is the reason behind causal dependence. First he attacks the position of the

459 *Išārāt*, p.153.9-10.

460 *Maṭālib*, I, p.200.10-16.

461 At the end of the discussion presented in the *Maṭālib*, Rāzī leans towards a temporally restricted definition of contingency, which is framed as the possibility for a state of affairs to persist and not to persist – see *Ibid.*, I, pp.205.18-218.3.

Bagdādian Mu‘tazilites and of the early Aš‘arites, *i.e.*, that we know by intuition that coming-to-be requires causal dependence. Then, he rejects the position of Bahšāmi Mu‘tazilites, *i.e.*, that the implication between coming-to-be and causal dependence can be proven by an inferential demonstration which assumes that man is the efficient cause of his own actions⁴⁶².

Rāzī is not the first author who reformulates the *kalām* argument from coming-to-be in the way that I mentioned, even though he surely presents the most complete discussion on the issue. The idea that contingency is necessary for causal dependence in the case of thing coming-to-be can be traced back at least to Ġazālī. In the *Iqtīṣād*, the latter presents the two premises of the classical argument for God’s existence: everything which comes-to-be requires a cause and the material world (understood as the sum of all bodies and their accidents) came-to-be. Ġazālī’s discussion of the former premise is significant because it clearly shows the passage from the early *kalām* understanding of causal dependence to the «Avicennized» understanding. First of all, he argues that the principle that what comes-to-be requires a cause is primitive and intuitive (*awwalī ḍarūrī*): at face value, this remark may suggest that he follows the early Aš‘arite position that the causal dependence of what comes-to-be is primitive. That is not the case, however, for Ġazālī quickly notices that the principle is intuitive only in case one understands the correct meaning of «what comes-to-be» (*hādīṭ*) and «cause» (*sabab*). Specifically, they must be understood in a way that assumes contingency and the principle of sufficient reason. Ġazālī argues that what comes-to-be must be essentially contingent before existing, and contingency in turn is the possibility of existence and non-existence: in sum, what comes-to-be must be essentially contingent. As for the cause, Ġazālī frames it as the external «factor of prevalence» (*murağğih*) which makes the existence of the effect prevail over its non-existence (the two being equivalent in themselves)⁴⁶³.

A similar reasoning appears in Šahrastānī’s *Nihāyat al-aqdām*. In a passage devoted to showing that the world requires an efficient cause, Šahrastānī mentions both the Avicennian argument, which deduces contingency from composition, alongside with the revised *kalām* argument, which deduces contingency from coming-to-be. He then argues that, in both cases, the world would need a factor of

462 *Maṭālib*, I, pp.207-218.

463 «If one says: ‘I challenge your assertion that everything which comes-to-be has a cause: how do you know that?’ We answer that it is necessary to affirm it. In fact, it is primitive and intuitive for the intellect. He who hesitates does so only because what we mean by ‘what comes-to-be’ and ‘cause’ is not clear to him. If he comprehended the two, his intellect would assert by necessary intuition that everything which comes-to-be has a cause. By ‘what comes-to-be’ we mean what is non-existent and then becomes existent. We say: before it existed, was its existence impossible or contingent? It is absurd that its existence was impossible, since the impossible never exists. If its existence was contingent, by ‘contingent’ we do not mean anything but what may exist and may not exist. However, it is not [necessarily] existent, since its existence is not necessary by its essence. If it existed and its existence were by means of its essence, it would be necessary and not contingent. On the contrary, its existence depends on a factor which makes its existence prevail over its non-existence, so that non-existence is subverted [and becomes] existence. Since its non-existence persists as long as no factor makes existence prevail over non-existence, then as long as the factor of prevalence does not exist, [the thing] does neither. By ‘cause’ we mean nothing but the factor of prevalence. The result is that, [when we consider] the non-existent thing whose non-existence persists, its non-existence is not substituted with existence as long as some of the things that make the side of existence prevail over the persistence of non-existence is ascertained. When the meaning of this expression obtains in the mind, the intellect is forced to assert the truth [of the claim that everything which comes-to-be requires a cause].» – *Iqtīṣād*, pp.25.7 – 25.4.

prevalence in order for its existence to prevail over non-existence (on account account of the principle of sufficient reason)⁴⁶⁴.

There is a noteworthy difference between Ġazālī's account and that of Šahrastānī and Rāzī. Ġazālī suggests that the reasoning which connects coming-to-be and causal need is simply an explanation of the meaning of the terms involved in the formulation of the proposition «everything that comes-to-be needs a cause»: in Ġazālī's words «what we mean by the expression 'what comes-to-be' and the expression 'cause'» (*mā nurīdu bi-lafzi l-ḥādīti wa-lafzi l-sababi*). This attitude may come from the desire not to diverge too much from the position of the early *mutakallimūn*, who claim that the causal dependence of what comes-to-be is intuitive. On the other hand, Šahrastānī and Rāzī recognize that the above-mentioned reasoning is an actual inferential demonstration that deduces contingency from coming-to-be, and then causal dependence from contingency (on account of the principle of sufficient reason). This position definitely and explicitly abandons the early *kalām* idea that the causal dependence of what comes-to-be is primitive, as Rāzī himself notices.

464 «Intellectual division restricts the quantity of the objects of knowledge to three subdivisions: necessary, impossible, and contingent. The necessary is that whose existence is obligatory: if its non-existence were supposed, an absurdity would follow. The impossible is that whose non-existence is obligatory: if its existence were supposed, an absurdity would follow. The contingent is that whose existence and non-existence are not obligatory. [Let us consider] the world inasmuch as it contains the intellectual substances, the perceptible bodies and the accidents that subsist in them, regardless of whether it is finite or infinite, or whether we suppose that it is a single individual or many individuals, or multiple species of things. [The world is neither] obligatory in its existence nor obligatory in its non-existence. That is absurd because we see that its parts change their states, and that whose existence is obligatory in every aspect does not change state. The composition of the demonstration on the basis of this is what follows. We say that everything which changes or contains multiplicity is contingent with respect to existence, in consideration of its essence. Everything which is contingent with respect to existence, in consideration of its essence, is such that it exists because something else gives existence to it. So, everything which changes or contains multiplicity exists by means of something else which gives existence to it. Moreover, the whole is composed of singular elements and, since every one of the singular elements is contingent with respect to existence, then the whole must be contingent with respect to existence. So, [the world] may exist and may not exist on consideration of its essence. The side of existence requires a factor of prevalence in order to prevail over non-existence.» – *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.15.2-17.

§1.4 – The Debates on the Existence of Contingent Existents

This subchapter encompasses four topics: a first argument for the contingency of composites, namely the argument from mereological dependence (§1.4.1); a second argument for the contingency of composites, namely the argument from the impossibility of causeless reciprocal implication (§1.4.2); the arguments against the contingency of composites (§1.4.3), and the argument for the contingency of what comes-to-be (§1.4.4).

§1.4.1 – The First Argument for the Contingency of Composites: the Argument from Mereological Dependence

Avicenna's first argument for the contingency of composites revolves around mereological dependence. Every composite is contingent because either one of its parts or all its parts are existentially prior to it and make it subsistent: what is made subsistent by something else cannot be essentially necessary⁴⁶⁵.

The interpreters disagree on the meaning of Avicenna's distinction between the case where all parts are prior to the composite and the case where only one part is prior to the composite. For Rāzī, the standard case is the former, the latter being an addition that aims to harmonize the specific case of the parts of the corporeal substance, namely matter and form. Indeed, Avicenna believes that form is prior to matter and makes it subsistent: if that were the case, only form would be really prior to the corporeal composite⁴⁶⁶. For Tūsī, on the other hand, the case where all parts are prior to the whole points to the absurd hypothesis that the parts of a composite necessary existent do not share the necessity of the whole, whereas the case where only one part is prior points to the absurd hypothesis that one of the parts of a composite necessary existent is the cause of the other part (*e.g.*, the hypothesis that the quiddity of the necessary existent causes its existence)⁴⁶⁷.

Rāzī's reformulation of the argument dispenses with Avicenna's distinction and provides a somewhat clearer picture of the point at stake. It states that every composite is contingent because it depends on its parts, and the parts of a composite are different from the composite itself. What depends on something that is different from itself is contingent⁴⁶⁸. Dependence in turn entails contingency.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī (who does not accept the soundness of the argument) presents yet another reformulation. A thing whose non-existence follows from the supposition of the non-existence of something else is contingent. The non-existence of composites follows from the supposition of the non-existence of their parts. Thus, composites are contingent⁴⁶⁹.

Avicenna's deduction is challenged by Ġazālī on the basis of the discrimination between causal and mereological dependence. The former requires the dependent thing to be intrinsically contingent,

465 See *Iṣārāt*, p.144.3-5; *Nağāt*, p.552.1-10. Cf. *Mu'tabar*, III, pp.60.19 – 61.1; *Tuḥfa*, pp.58.11 – 59.2; *Muḥaṣṣal*, p.66.14-16; *Mabāḥiṭ*, II, p.456.19-22; *Maṭālib*, I, p.170.11-16; *Talḥīs*, p.96.6-10; *Hall*, I, p.55.4-9.

466 See *Šarḥ*, II, p.374.8-19.

467 See *Hall*, I, p.590.9 – 592.1.

468 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, II, p.456.21-22.

469 See *Tuḥfa*, p.17.4-7.

whereas the latter does not necessarily entail contingency. Mereological dependence means only that the quiddity of the composite depends on the parts which constitute it: if the parts and their conjunction were necessary, the composite would be necessary on account of the necessity of its parts and would not require any external efficient cause in order to exist⁴⁷⁰. In other words, Ġazālī's objection notices there is a fundamental difference between those conditions that are external to the essence of a thing (e.g., its efficient causes) and those conditions that are internal to it (its parts). Dependence on external causes necessarily entails essential contingency, whereas dependence on internal conditions does not.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī agrees on the basic element of Ġazālī's objection. As I mentioned, he presents causal dependence in a negative form, arguing that Avicenna understands the contingent as what is such that the non-existence of another thing entails its non-existence. According to Ibn al-Malāḥimī, such a condition does not necessarily apply to composites *qua* composites, because a part is not something separated from the whole it constitutes, unlike an efficient cause which is something separated from its effect. The supposition of the non-existence of the parts is the same as the supposition of the non-existence of the whole, whereas the supposition of the non-existence of the cause is something which entails the non-existence of the effect as a consequence. The difference between the two situations means that mereological dependence does not entail contingency: the assertion that a whole depends on its parts is not different from the assertion that a thing depends on itself⁴⁷¹.

Rāzī considers a possible answer against this kind of objection: the Necessary Existent must be unique, and thus only one of the parts under consideration can be necessary. In other words, the simplicity of the necessary existent and the composition of the contingent can be deduced from the uniqueness of the necessary⁴⁷². Both Ġazālī and Tūsī highlight that a similar answer is inadequate, at least from an Avicennian standpoint. In fact, the Avicennian proofs for the uniqueness of the Necessary Existent assume his simplicity: if uniqueness in turn validated the argument for simplicity, we would have a circularity⁴⁷³.

§1.4.2 – The Second Argument for the Contingency of Composites: the Impossibility of Causeless Reciprocal Implication

The second Avicennian argument for the contingency of composites is based on the proof against the hypothesis of two necessary existents in reciprocal implication, namely two things that exist necessarily inasmuch as they are together, none of the two being the cause of the other. Avicenna speaks of «reciprocal balancing» or «equalization» (*mukāfa'a*, *takāfu'*). The proof argues that each of the four possible ways to conceive a causeless reciprocal implication either contradicts the hypothesis or contradicts itself.

If we say that [i] one of the two existents in reciprocal implication is necessary by itself and also necessary by means of the other, that is self-contradictory, since the same thing would be necessary by

470 See *Tahāfut*, p.124.17-18.

471 See *Tuhfa*, pp.58.11 – 59.1. Cf. *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.374.1-3; *Mabāḥiṭ*, II, p.457.2-3.

472 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, II, p.457.4-7; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.374.4-7.

473 See *Tahāfut*, pp.97.17-20, 124.18-20; *Hall*, I, p.592.9-11.

itself and contingent by itself (something must be contingent in itself in order to be necessary by means of something else). If we say that [ii] one of the two existents is necessary by itself and not by means of the other, that contradicts the hypothesis, because there would be no necessary implication (the former existence would be capable to exist without the latter). If we say that [iii] each one of the two existents is necessary by means of the necessity of the other, that is self-contradictory, since there would be circular causation, and so each one of the two would be both prior and posterior to the other. If we say that [iv] each one of the two existents is necessary by means of the essential contingency of the other, that contradicts the hypothesis, because the essential contingency of each one of the two does not come from the other (this contradicts the reciprocity of the necessary reciprocal implication), and because to be necessary on account of the contingency of something else entails the possibility of existing without the existence of something else (this contradicts the necessity of the necessary reciprocal implication)⁴⁷⁴. In sum, according to Avicenna the only way to properly conceptualise reciprocal implications between two things is by appealing to an external efficient cause which accounts for their necessary connection.

As it becomes clear in Ġazālī's *Tahāfut* and Rāzī's *Mabāḥiṭ*, the proof against reciprocal implication can be used as the bulk of an argument for the contingency of composites⁴⁷⁵. The argument comes down to the following disjunction: either the parts of a composite are not in a necessary reciprocal implication, meaning that they are capable to exist in isolation from the whole and from one another, or they are in necessary reciprocal implication, meaning that they are incapable to exist in isolation from the whole and from one another. In the former case, the composite would be contingent, since its parts can be separated. In the latter case, the parts would be in a reciprocal implication, and Avicenna's argument establishes that things in reciprocal implication need an external cause: thus, the composite would be contingent, because its parts are contingent.

Ġazālī presents an objection against this proof: each one of the parts of the whole could be necessary in itself, with no reciprocal implication between them. In this case, the composite would be necessary because its parts are necessary. Rāzī answers that, if there were no necessary implication at all between the parts, the composite would lack any real unity, being an accidental juxtaposition of essentially unrelated elements. This would be the case even if that juxtaposition happened to be eternal: it would be eternal but not necessary, because it would still be possible for each one of the parts to be isolated from the others. Rāzī presents the following example. The proposition «when man is something which speaks, donkey is something which brays» is eternally true, but expresses no true connection or unity, because there is no necessary implication whatsoever between the antecedent and the consequent: they merely happen to be together by pure chance.

In the *Maṭālib*, Rāzī considers another objection against the argument for the impossibility of reciprocal implication. According to Avicenna, if each one of two things depended on the other not on account of an external cause, there would be circular causation, and circular causation is absurd because it entails that each one of them is both prior and posterior to the other (and to itself). Rāzī's

474 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.39.17 – 41.8; *Nağāt*, pp.549.13 – 551.10.

475 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, II, pp.457.8 – 458.6; *Tahāfut*, p.97.17-19.

objection challenges the idea that necessary reciprocal implication must entail circular causation on the basis of an analogy with the accidents of relation. Two accidents of relation (*e.g.*, «brother» and «brother») imply each other in their quiddities, in the sense that it is impossible to conceive the quiddity of one without conceiving the quiddity of the other. Moreover, the necessary reciprocal implication between the quiddities of the relatives does not require an external thing, and does not entail any kind of priority and posteriority between them. For example, someone is a brother only if someone else is his brother: the quiddities of the two accidents of relation must be conceived together but there is no asymmetry between them, and no external thing is required in order to ascertain the necessity of their reciprocal implication. Rāzī suggests that something like that might be conceivable with respect to the existence of two or more things, rather than with respect to their quiddity (as in the case of the accidents of relation). In other words, two existents might imply each other in existence, in the sense that none of the two can exist without the other, their reciprocal implication requiring no asymmetry between them and no external cause⁴⁷⁶.

§1.4.3 – The Case against the Contingency of Composites

There are two basic positions against the contingency of composites. The first claims that composites must be necessary. The second position rejects the very existence of composites.

The claim that composites are necessary is discussed by Rāzī. It is based on the argument from the necessity of the self-identity of simples: since contingency cannot be predicated of simples inasmuch as they are simple, and composites are nothing but collections of simples, it follows that contingency cannot be predicated of composites as well⁴⁷⁷. The answer that contingency is predicated of the formal configuration of the composite (*i.e.*, the specific connection that unites its parts) is taken into account and dismissed, for the configuration of a whole is one of the parts of the essence of the whole, and as such it is either composite or simple: it follows that the formal configuration of the whole is ultimately either simple or reducible to a sum of simples (if that sum of simples needed another formal configuration, there would be an infinite regress). In sum, the whole is nothing but the sum of its material parts taken together with their formal configuration, which is itself one of the parts of the quiddity of the whole. The consequence is that contingency cannot be said of the formal configuration of the composition either, and so the answer cannot challenge the conclusion of the argument from the necessity of simples, namely that wholes or composites cannot be contingent⁴⁷⁸.

Rāzī's solution to the problem is twofold. On the one hand, he maintains that the argument from the necessity of simples *qua* simples is sophistical, for it can be used to invalidate the coming-to-be of things, which is known through sense-perception⁴⁷⁹. On the other hand, he claims that contingency can indeed be said of simples *qua* simples: blackness is contingent with respect to its being blackness and

476 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.170.11 – 171.18.

477 On the argument from the necessity of the self-identity of simples see also *Supra*, Part 1, §6.4.2.

478 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.55.5-13; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.98.14 – 99.8

479 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.117.3-8.

there is an external cause which makes it black⁴⁸⁰. However, the contingency of simples *qua* simples explicitly contradicts two Avicennian tenets. The first is the idea that the efficient cause gives only existence to the effect, not quiddity, and, more in general, the idea that what belongs to something *per se* (*i.e.*, quiddity) has some priority over what belongs to it *per aliud* (existence). The second tenet is the idea that absolute simplicity is the criterion of discrimination that sets the Necessary Existent apart from contingent existents: if simples *qua* simples can be contingent, the simplicity of the Necessary Existent does not guarantee its necessity.

The second position against the contingency of composites is defended by Ibn al-Malāḥimī, who challenges the very existence of composites. He claims that there is no difference whatsoever between the whole, or the composite, and the sum of its parts (mereological reductionism). A whole is not a unitary real thing: it is a merely a sum of parts arranged in a particular way, and that particular arrangement is not accounted for by anything unitary (like an Aristotelian substantial form) but rather by particular accidents of disposition (and possibly other kinds of accidents) that inhere in each one of the parts. It is obvious that, if no composite existent exists, no composite existent can be said to exist contingently⁴⁸¹. Ibn al-Malāḥimī presents two main arguments for the claim that composites do not exist: the proof from conceptual indiscernibility and the proof from existential inseparability⁴⁸².

The argument from conceptual indiscernibility argues that, if two things cannot be known separately from one another, then they are one and the same thing: since the whole and the sum of its parts cannot be known separately from one another, they are one and the same thing. A possible objection against this argument maintains that the formal element of a composite can be known in isolation from its parts: *e.g.*, the form of a house can be known in isolation from the material elements that constitute it. Ibn al-Malāḥimī answers in two ways. First of all, the objection assumes the theory the exact same thing can exist both in concrete reality and in the mind (*i.e.*, the theory of impression), and that is unsound. Secondly, even if we conceded that the same thing (which is the whole) can exist in two conditions, namely in concrete reality and in the mind, we would still be incapable to discriminate conceptually between the whole, inasmuch as it is a concrete existent, and the sum of its parts.

The argument from existential inseparability states that, if two things are existentially inseparable, they are one and the same. Since the whole and the sum of its parts are existentially inseparable, they are one and the same. Ibn al-Malāḥimī considers the following objection: it could be that the sum of the parts engenders the composite just like an efficient cause engenders its effect, and so the two are existentially inseparable because the former entails the latter. He presents two answers: on the one hand, cause and effect remain conceptually discernible, whereas whole and parts are not; on the other hand, it may happen that cause and effect are separated in existence, either because the effect persists after the cessation of the cause or because the cause is prevented from engendering the effect. It is evident that the soundness of the former answer is based on the soundness of the argument from conceptual indiscernibility. As for the latter answer, we need to notice that it is based on a conception of

480 See *Ibid.*, I, p.117.9-23.

481 See *Tuhfa*, pp.28.22 – 29.12.

482 See *Ibid.*, pp.29.12-23, 30.3-24, 31.1-5.

causality that is not Avicennian. For Avicenna, cause and effect are existentially inseparable: the effect does not persist after the cessation of the cause, nor the cause may exist without producing the effect.

The two arguments mentioned so far seem to focus on material composites, but it clear that Ibn al-Malāḥimī extends the conclusion to all composites. He explicitly mentions two other kinds of composites, namely quantitative composites (aggregates of discrete things, like ten people) and notional composites (things whose definitions include genus and differentia), claiming that in both cases the whole does not exist as something unitary and additional to the sum of its parts. Quantitative wholes lack any real unity in addition to the mere quantitative sum of their parts, and they even lack peculiar accidents that inhere in their parts, in contrast with material composites (*e.g.*, a house), whose parts acquire particular accidents of disposition and particular qualities when those composites come-to-be. As for notional composites, Ibn al-Malāḥimī presents a strictly nominalist account of definition: a definition is just a sum of words that designates a certain object, and it is evident that those words never exist together at the same moment (*i.e.*, they never constitute an existent whole).

§1.4.4 – The Case for the Contingency of What Comes-to-be

Ġazālī, Šahrastānī, and Rāzī presents an argument which aims to deduce contingency from coming-to-be⁴⁸³. The argument notices that everything which comes-to-be is non-existent and then becomes existent. If its quiddity were not capable to receive non-existence, it would not have been non-existent before its coming-to-be. If its quiddity were not capable to receive existence, it would not be existent when it comes-to-be. Thus, the quiddity of what comes-to-be is capable to receive both existence and non-existence, and that is nothing but contingency.

Rāzī mentions an objection which appeals to the possibility of the subversion of the essential modality of a thing⁴⁸⁴. It could be that a certain quiddity is essentially impossible before its coming-to-be, and when it comes-to-be it undergoes essential subversion (*inqilāb*), becoming essentially necessary. Essential subversion is generally deemed absurd, but the objector presents four examples which aim to corroborate the idea that the subversion of the modal status of what comes-to-be is indeed possible.

The first example concerns the impossible persistence of the accidents. Some (the Aš‘arites, the Baġdādian Mu‘tazilites) believe that the accidents cannot persist. This means that it is conceivable for a thing to be essentially possible (in the moment of its origination), and then become essentially impossible (in the following moment), since it cannot persist.

The second example concerns the impossible persistence of the instants of time. The present instant of time cannot persist when the future instant comes. Thus, a certain instant of time is essentially impossible (when it is yet to come), then becomes essentially necessary (when it is present), and finally become impossible again (when it has passed away).

483 See Ġazālī, *Iqtisād*, 25.7 – 26.4; Šahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, 15.2.17; Rāzī, *Maṭālib*, I, pp.200.17 – 201.22; *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl*, I, pp.399.11 – 400.2, 418.3-7.

484 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.201.9 – 202.7, 205.18 – 206.3; *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl*, I, pp.400.13 – 403.14, 416.3 – 417.9.

The third example concerns the possibility of the world's existence. Those who believe that the world came-to-be from non-existence must assert that its existence was essentially impossible in pre-eternity, and then became essentially possible. That is because those who assert the coming-to-be of the world must assert that the existence of the world was not pre-eternally possible.

The fourth example concerns the impossibility of persistence by means of a cause. Some (the Bahšami Mu'tazilites) believe that what persists persists *per se*, not on account of an external cause. This means that the need for a cause is necessary (when the thing comes-to-be), and then becomes impossible (when the thing persists).

Rāzī elaborates three answers to the objection and to the examples.

The first answer is generic: coming-to-be entails contingency as the capacity to receive both existence and non-existence. That is intuitively true. Any argument whose conclusions contradict that implication is sophistical, for it rejects an intuitive truth.

The second answer is specific, and targets the assumption that the kind of modal subversion presented in the supportive examples can be transferred to the issue at stake. Rāzī argues that the examples concern things that are not extra-mentally real existents: only such things may accept subversion in their modal status, whereas real entitative existents which come-to-be (*e.g.*, substances, accidents) must be essentially contingent. A similar answer is demanding in that it requires an anti-realist understanding of several things (non-persistent accidents, time, causal dependence). Perhaps that is the reason why the answer appears in *Nihāyat al-'uqūl* and not in the later *Maṭālib*.

The third answer consists in redefinition of the kind of contingency at stake, together with an implicit reassessment of the whole argument from coming-to-be. Contingency inasmuch as consists in the equivalence between the future persistence and the future cessation of a certain state of affairs is something intuitively known: we know by intuition that a currently seated man may continue to be seated and may also cease to be seated and stand up. The same can be said about the coming-to-be of the world, and more generally about the coming-to-be of everything that comes-to-be: the contingency of what comes-to-be is the possibility for its previous state of non-existence to persist and not to persist. This is the only answer that appears in the *Maṭālib*, and thus is probably Rāzī's final say on the matter. The shift from the perspective assumed at the beginning of the whole argumentation is remarkable. There, Rāzī understands coming-to-be as a sign of contingency, something which proves contingency, understood as the pure fact of being receptive of both existence and non-existence. Coming-to-be as such is known by intuition, and contingency is deduced from it. In this answer, on the other hand, coming-to-be becomes an element of the definition of contingency, not a sign of it. In other words, coming-to-be is a condition for conceiving contingency – inasmuch as we understand the latter as the possibility of future persistence and non-persistence – and not what proves it. This is corroborated by the fact that Rāzī needs to appeal to primitive knowledge in order to validate the assertion that what comes-to-be does so contingently. In other words, it is not that the knowledge of contingency is deduced from the knowledge of coming-to-be: the contingency (understood as possibility of persistence and possibility of non-persistence) is itself known by intuition.

§1.5 – Concluding Remarks

Avicenna's position on the contingency of composites is accepted by the majority of his interpreters, with the exception of Ġazālī and Ibn al-Malāḥimī.

The Avicennian argument from mereological dependence (every composite is contingent because it depends on its parts, and what depends on something else is contingent) is challenged by a compelling objection by Ġazālī: mereological dependence does not necessarily imply contingency, because the whole might be necessary on account of the necessity of its parts. Such an objection introduces a noteworthy differentiation between the internal and the external conditions of a thing. When we say that a composite thing is dependent on its parts, and that it is necessary on account of the necessity of its parts, we do not mean that it is dependent on an external condition (*i.e.*, a cause), and thus it must be contingent in itself: parts are unlike external conditions, for they are included in the very quiddity of the thing they are conditions for. Ibn al-Malāḥimī also presents a similar reasoning.

The argument from the impossibility of causeless reciprocal implication (parts cannot be in a necessary reciprocal implication that requires no external cause, for that would imply circular causation) appears more solid. Rāzī rejects Ġazālī's objection (each one of the parts of a composite necessary existent might be necessary in itself, in isolation from the others) by noticing that a composite of parts which have no necessary connection would lack any real unity, being rather a juxtaposition of elements that happen to be together. However, Rāzī himself casts doubt on the soundness of the argument from the impossibility of causeless reciprocal implication: reciprocal implication without circular causation might be conceivable with respect to existence, just like it is conceivable with respect to quiddity in the case of the accidents of relation. Ultimately, the demonstrative strength of the Avicennian argument rests on whether a similar hypothesis is conceivable or not.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī's mereological reductionism is the most radical way to challenge Avicenna's position, since it rejects its basic ontological assumption: the very existence of wholes, or composite things. The thesis that the whole is nothing but the sum or the aggregation of its parts has a noteworthy implication, namely the elimination of the unity of the formal or structural aspect of composites. When Ibn al-Malāḥimī speaks of «aggregation», that word does not refer to a unitary thing which may exist in extra-mental reality and supervenes when the parts are united: aggregation adds nothing real to the pure summation of the material parts. The only remnant of the formal or structural aspect of composites is to be found in the accidents that convey the dispositions and the qualities the parts acquire when they are aggregated. However, such accidents account for no unity whatsoever, because accidents are multiplied on account of the substrates they inhere in, and so there are as many accidents as there are parts.

This position has counter-intuitive implications. In fact, if wholes have no real existence, then everyday objects do not exist as unitary things, regardless of whether they are organic or inorganic, natural or artificial. «Stone», «table», «horse»: those are simply names for aggregates of material parts arranged according to certain dispositions and endowed with certain qualities. We call this aggregate

«stone» and that aggregate «table», but these nouns do not refer to anything unitary in extra-mental reality.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī's uncompromising mereological reductionism is an isolated position among Avicenna's interpreters. That being said, a softer form of reductionism is presented by Rāzī in his discussion of a possible objection against the argument from the necessity of simples: even if the simples which constitute every composite were necessary, it would still be possible for contingency to be predicated of the formal aspect of the composition, its «disposition» (*hay'a*). Rāzī answers that even the disposition of the composition (the structure of the whole which connects the parts) is a part of the quiddity of the composite thing, and as such it must be either simple (like the form of an hylemorphic composite) or composed of a sum of simples (like Ibn al-Malāḥimī's accidents of disposition). The mereological account that emerge from this answer suggests that there can be two kinds of parts: a first kinds of material parts, namely the «building-block» elements, and a second level of formal parts, namely the structural aspects that connect the first-level elements. This account avoids the counter-intuitive consequences of Ibn al-Malāḥimī's position – it leaves the possibility to say that the unity of a material composites is safeguarded by the unity of its formal disposition – but entails a form of mereological reductionism nonetheless: the composite is nothing but the sum of its material parts together with their disposition (which is itself a part)⁴⁸⁵.

As for the deduction of contingency from coming-to-be – implied by Avicenna and explicitly thematized by interpreters such as Ġazālī, Šahrastānī, and most notably Rāzī –, it constitutes the point of junction of a hybrid proof for the existence of God which assumes a premise accepted by the *mutakallimūn* (the coming-to-be of the world) and joints it to the Avicennian account of causality (contingency as the reason for causal dependence). The most complete discussion of the issue is to be found in Rāzī. According to him, the capacity to receive existence and non-existence diachronically (coming-to-be) implies the capacity to receive existence and non-existence synchronically (contingency): if a thing is existent at moment A and non-existent at moment B, or the other way around, then it is possible for it to be existent and non-existent at each one of those moment. In sum, coming-to-be is a sign of essential contingency. The conclusion is sound if we assume that coming-to-be implies no subversion in the modal status of the quiddity that comes-to-be.

The counter-examples presented by Rāzī himself target precisely that assumption: coming-to-be might correspond to an essential subversion of the quiddity of what comes-to-be, which becomes necessarily existent after having been essentially impossible. The example of time is perhaps the most significant: time is such that each one of the instants which constitute it cannot exist when the preceding moment exists, and must come into existence when the preceding moment ceases.

In the *Nihāya*, Rāzī rebuts that similar objections are sophistical, since they aim to invalidate what is known by intuition: we intuitively know that what does not exist and then exists must be capable to

485 The idea that the formal aspect of the composition is itself a part of the composite thing is presented in defence of the argument from the necessity of simples. While it is true that Rāzī deems the argument specious and rejects it, he does not do so by challenging the reductionist account of composition the argument is built on. He rather challenges the idea that the self-identity of simples is necessary, and shows that the argument can be used to reject the coming-to-be of things, which is known by sense experience.

receive both existence and non-existence (*i.e.*, must be contingent). In the *Maṭālib*, however, Rāzī presents a different line of defence, in that he appeals to intuitive knowledge in order to corroborate the soundness of a temporally qualified notion of contingency that is intrinsically related to coming-to-be, namely the possibility for a present state of affairs to persist and not to persist in the future: *e.g.*, we know by intuition that a presently seated man may stand up and may remain seated. This temporally qualified notion of contingency changes the overall outlook of Rāzī's whole argumentation, for coming-to-be becomes a part of the definition of contingency, not a sign of its presence. In other words, contingency is not deduced from coming-to-be. Rather, contingency as the possibility for the present state of affairs to persist or to cease in the future is something known by intuition, together with (and not on the basis of) our intuitive knowledge of coming-to-be.

CHAPTER 2 – The Principle of Sufficient Reason

§2.1 – The Meaning of the Premise, and the Need for It

§2.1.1 – The Meaning of the Premise

The expression «principle of sufficient reason» has no direct equivalent in Arabic philosophical terminology. Nevertheless, it is adequate to designate the foundation of the Avicennian doctrine of causality. Three clarifications are necessary in order not to equivocate the meaning of this expression. First of all, the term «reason» must be understood in a restricted way, as designating the cause for the existence of a thing, not any explanatory principle whatsoever. Avicennian efficient causes are real principles that explain the existence of their effects.

Secondly, the conditional sufficiency I mentioned must not be considered in a restricted sense. In other words, an efficient cause is not a strictly sufficient reason, namely a sufficient reason that is not also a necessary reason⁴⁸⁶. On the contrary, Avicennian efficient causes are both sufficient and necessary for the existence of their effects: the effect exists in case the cause exists, and the effect does not exist in case the cause does not exist. This entails that the non-existence of a thing has a cause, in a certain sense: the cause of the non-existence of a thing is the non-existence of the cause of its existence.

Thirdly, the principle is restricted in its application, since only what is essentially contingent requires a sufficient reason. What is essentially necessary (or essentially impossible) does not need any sufficient reason in order to exist (or in order not to exist). Essential contingency requires dependence on a sufficient reason because it entails pure equivalence or equidistance from both existence and non-existence.

Avicenna and his interpreters present a single formula which encompasses what has been said so far: each of the two equivalent sides of the contingent (*i.e.*, existence and non-existence) can prevail over the other only by means of a factor of prevalence, namely something that tips the scales in favour of one of the two.

§2.1.2 – The Need for the Premise

The principle of sufficient (and necessary) reason is the core of Avicenna's aetiological doctrine: the assertion of the existence of efficient causes depends on it. Without the principle there would be no way to deduce the existence of efficient causes from the existence of contingent existents.

486 A reason or principle that is sufficient and not necessary is such that its existence entails the existence of its effect, whereas its non-existence does not entail the non-existence of the effect.

§2.2 – The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Avicenna and his Interpreters

This subchapter discusses four positions about the principle of sufficient reason: the Avicennian position (§2.2.1), Ġazālī's position (§2.2.2), Ibn al-Malāḥimī's position (§2.2.3), Šahrastānī's position (§2.2.4), and Rāzī's position (§2.2.5).

§2.2.1 – The Avicennian Position

Among modern scholars, Richardson is the one who most explicitly thematized Avicenna's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason, as well as its implications⁴⁸⁷. Many others considered issues that are directly related to the principle, first and foremost the question of whether Avicenna's metaphysics is absolutely deterministic or whether it allows randomness and freedom (*i.e.*, freedom of indifference), in some way or another. Among the proponents of determinism there are Hourani, Marmura, Belo, and Richardson himself⁴⁸⁸. The defenders of some form of indeterminism are Ivry, Goodman, and Janssens⁴⁸⁹. As I will show, a thorough analysis of Avicenna's assertions concerning the principle of sufficient reason decisively settles the debate in favour of determinism, if we understand the exact kind of determinism at stake here. Avicenna does not believe in a form of essential or intrinsic necessitarianism: he does not believe that all quiddities are necessary in themselves. However, he does believe in a form of causal or extrinsic necessitarianism. As I noticed in the section on contingency, in Avicenna's view contingency is a property of quiddities *qua* quiddities, and that does not contradict the idea of causal necessitation, namely the idea that the cause necessitates the existence of its effect⁴⁹⁰. That being said, the primary aim of the present section is not to discuss necessitarianism and its implications in detail. My aim is to provide an explication of Avicenna's position on the principle of sufficient reason itself, highlighting the elementary parts that compose its formulation, as well as the necessary assumptions behind that formulation, and the implications that follow from it.

Avicenna mentions the principle of sufficient reason in all his major works. The most complete discussion is to be found in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.6. There, the principle is formulated as follows.

«Everything which exists contingently in consideration of itself is such that both its existence and its non-existence are by means of a cause.»⁴⁹¹

In light of this preliminary formulation it is possible to see that the principle consists of two elementary parts. First of all, what requires a cause is «everything which exists contingently in consideration of itself» (*kulla mā huwa mumkinu l-wuġūd bi-`itibār dāti-hi*). This amounts to say that

487 See K. Richardson, 'Avicenna and the Principle of Sufficient Reason,' *The Review of Metaphysics* 67/4 (June 2014), 473-478.

488 See G.F. Hourani, 'Ibn Sīnā's 'Essay in the Secret of Destiny',' cit., 13-40; M.E. Marmura, 'The Metaphysics of Efficient Causality in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā),' cit., pp.172-187; Id., 'Divine Omniscience and Future contingents in Alfarabi and Avicenna,' cit., pp.81-94; C. Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*, cit.

489 See A. Ivry, 'Destiny Revised: Avicenna's Concept of Determinism,' cit., pp.160-171; L.E. Goodman, *Avicenna* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.87-ff.; J.Janssens, 'The problem of human freedom in Ibn Sīnā,' cit., pp.112-118.

490 See *Supra*, Part 1, §6.

491 *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.38.11-12.

contingency is the reason for causal dependence. Secondly, the non-existence of the contingent needs a cause, just like its existence. Later in the same chapter, Avicenna circumscribes this assertion, arguing that the cause of existence is a real existent, whereas the cause of non-existence is a negation, an absence: the non-existence of the cause of existence⁴⁹². This implies that the efficient cause is both a sufficient and a necessary condition for its effect: its existence entails the existence of the effect, and its non-existence entails the non-existence of the effect. Another noteworthy implication of the Avicennian take on sufficient reason is the temporal co-existence of cause and effect: cause and effect must exist together, even though the former is essentially prior to the other. Avicenna clearly establishes this in *Ilāhiyyāt*, IV.1⁴⁹³.

In *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.6 Avicenna presents a corroboration of the principle of sufficient reason. Here I will not delve into details of his argumentation, nor I will discuss whether it is an actual demonstrative inference or a pseudo-demonstration (as Rāzī claims)⁴⁹⁴. However, the argument needs to be taken into account because it highlights another crucial feature of the Avicennian formulation of the principle of sufficient reason, namely the assumption that the contingent thing at stake must be equivalent with respect to (equidistant from) both existence and non-existence.

«If [the contingent] exists, it has already obtained existence as distinct (*mutamayyiz*) from non-existence. If it does not exist, it obtains non-existence as distinct from existence. So, either it obtains each one of the two from something else, or not. If it obtained [each one of them] from another thing, that thing would be the cause. If it did not, it would still be clear that everything which did not exist and then exists has been made appropriate (*taḥṣṣaṣa*) [to existence] by something other than it which comes [from outside] (*ḡā'iz*). The same holds true in the case of non-existence.»⁴⁹⁵

It is evident that Avicenna understands the efficient cause as what breaks a situation of indifference between existence and non-existence, and introduces a differentiation. The cause is the source of the distinction, or discrimination (*tamyīz*), between existence and non-existence, the source of the «act of making [something] appropriate» or the «restriction» (*taḥṣīṣ*) to existence (or to non-existence). These are two ways to express the same concept: the cause discriminates between existence and non-existence in the sense that it makes the contingent appropriate to one of the two. Consequently, the contingent is not essentially appropriate to existence or to non-existence. In the *Iṣārāt*, Avicenna says that the existence of the contingent is not «more adequate» (*awlā*) than its non-existence⁴⁹⁶. In sum, the Avicennian formulation of sufficient reason requires essential contingency as pure equivalence with respect to both existence and non-existence.

A noteworthy implication of the principle of sufficient reason is causal necessitarianism, namely the claim that every existent must be necessary on account of the action of its cause.

492 «As for the existential notion, that is by means of a cause which is an existential cause. As for the non-existential notion, that is by means of cause which is the non-existence of the cause of the existential notion» – *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.39.5-6.

493 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.164.18 – 169.17.

494 On both issues see *Infra*, §2.4.3.

495 *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.38.12-17. See also *Naḡāt*, p.547.12-15; *Iṣārāt*, p.141.3-6, 153.9-15.

496 «What deserves contingency in itself is such that it does not become existent *per se*. In fact, its existence is not more adequate than its non-existence on account of its essence, inasmuch as it is contingent.» – *Iṣārāt*, p.141.3-4

«Every contingent existent does not exist as long as it is not necessary with relation to its cause.»⁴⁹⁷

Avicenna argues that, if the effect were contingent with relation to its cause, then it would be possible for the former to exist and not to exist: thus, it would need something additional which makes it appropriate to existence⁴⁹⁸. This implicitly entails that contingency as such contradicts appropriateness to existence (or to non-existence), thus requiring equivalence and equidistance: contingency as greater proximity to existence or to non-existence is out of the picture. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that Rāzī makes use of a similar argument in order to reject the following objection: it is true that the contingent which is equivalent requires a cause in order for its existence to become more appropriate than its non-existence, but it could be that the contingent acquires greater appropriateness (greater adequacy, *awlawiyya*) to existence while remaining contingent. Rāzī's answers paraphrases Avicenna's reasoning in favour of necessitarianism: if that greater appropriateness obtained regardless of existence and non-existence, its relation to the moment of existence would be equivalent to its relation to its moment of non-existence, and so none of the two would be adequate to occur⁴⁹⁹.

Let us recollect what has been said so far about Avicenna's position on sufficient reason. His formulation of the principle consists of two elements: the first is that causal dependence is based on essential contingency; the second is that both existence and non-existence require a cause (the cause of non-existence is the non-existence of the cause of existence). That is because existence and non-existence are indiscernible with respect to the contingent, and some external factor is required that discriminates one from the other. The implicit assumption behind this reasoning is that essential contingency entails pure equivalence between existence and non-existence (*i.e.*, it is impossible for a contingent thing to be more proximate to existence or to non-existence). As for the implications of the principle of sufficient reason, it is necessary to mention three things: first, the cause is both sufficient and necessary condition for its effect; second, cause and effect co-exist in time; third, everything which exists is necessary on account of its cause.

In the *Iṣārāt*, Avicenna presents the principle of sufficient reason with the following formula, which recapitulates most of the above-mentioned elements.

«The prevalence of one of the sides of contingency becomes more adequate (*awlā*) by means of a thing, or a cause.»⁵⁰⁰

497 *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.39.15-16.

498 «[The contingent] must become necessary by means of its cause, and in relation to it. Were it not necessary, it would be contingent in correspondence of the existence of its cause, and in relation to it, and so it would be possible for it to exist and not to exist, without being made appropriate to one of the two things. So, when the cause exists, [the contingent] would again need the existence of a third thing by means of which existence is determinate for it at the expense of non-existence. That would be another cause. The discourse would continue to infinity. In case it continued to infinity, the existence of the contingent would not be made appropriate to it, and would not obtain for it. That is absurd, and not only because it goes on to infinity in the causes – so far, the absurdity of that is still doubtful –, but rather because what makes it appropriate [to existence] does not exist yet, and [the contingent] has been supposed to be existent» – *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.39.6-15.

499 See *Šarḥ*, II, pp.618.14 – 619.3. On the discussion concerning whether contingency may encompass greater and lesser proximity to existence, see *Supra*, Part 1, §6.4.3-§6.4.4.

500 *Iṣārāt*, p.153.10.

Later authors such as Rāzī and Ṭūsī adopt the formulation of the *Iṣārāt*, which becomes more or less standardized. The most notable variation that takes place after Avicenna is terminological: the generic term «cause» (*sabab*, *'illa*) is often replaced by the technical «factor of prevalence» (*muraḡḡiḥ*), which precisely designates a cause inasmuch as it is what tips the scales in favour of one of the two sides of the contingent.

It is worth noting that voluntary actions do not fall outside the scope of the principle of sufficient reason. According to Avicenna, a voluntary agent that may act and may not act is only potentially a cause: what actualizes that potentiality is something additional to the essence of the voluntary agent, be that a final cause or a constriction or something else. In other words, since the voluntary agent may act and may not act, his action is contingent. That being the case, the action requires a factor of prevalence that is external to the essence of the agent.

The principle of sufficient reason applies to God's action as well. This becomes clear when we take into account one of Avicenna's key argument for the eternity of the world, namely the argument from the impossibility for an absolutely eternal cause to have a temporal effect, which is based on the application of the principle of sufficient reason to the action of the eternal cause (*i.e.*, God)⁵⁰¹. However, for Avicenna the sufficient reason of God's action is not to be found in something external to God's own essence, like the goal or the motivation of a voluntary agent. Indeed, Avicenna clearly states that what acts in order to attain something is essentially imperfect⁵⁰². This means that the sufficient reason of God's action is God's very essence. That is the reason why subsequent authors speak of «essential necessitation» (*iḡāb dātī*), when referring to Avicenna's doctrine of God's causal action.

Most of Avicenna's interpreters accept the unqualified, universal validity of the principle of sufficient reason: every contingent thing or state of affairs requires a factor which make its existence prevail over its non-existence, even voluntary actions. Bahmanyār, Lawkarī, Abū al-Barakāt, Suhrawardī, and Ṭūsī are to be counted among the defenders of the principle. Ġazālī and Ibn al-Malāḥimī explicitly disagree with the Avicennian take on sufficient reason with respect to voluntary actions, albeit in two different ways. The case of Šahrastānī is peculiar, for he appears to agree on the applicability of sufficient reason to voluntary actions, even though that may be at odds with other elements of his thought. Rāzī's position also needs to be considered in detail: even though he strongly defends the principle in its unqualified formulation, granting that it applies to human voluntary actions, he struggles with the application of sufficient reason to God's action, sometimes accepting and sometimes rejecting it.

Finally, the epistemic status of the principle of sufficient reason needs to be taken into account. Is the principle a primitive truth, or something which must be demonstrated? The defenders of the principle disagree on the issue. In the *Ilāhiyyāt*, in the *Naḡāt*, and in a passage of the *Iṣārāt*, Avicenna presents what could be interpreted as a demonstration of the principle⁵⁰³. In the *Iṣārāt*, however, he says that the principle is primitive, even though it is possible that some forget its clarity and thus ask for a

501 See for example *Ibid.*, pp.154.16 – 156.10.

502 See *Ibid.*, p.158.10-14.

503 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.38.11 – 39.4; *Iṣārāt*, p.141.3-6.

demonstration⁵⁰⁴. The principle of sufficient reason appears to occupy an ambiguous position, in the middle between primitive and inferential knowledge. Rāzī stigmatizes Avicenna's ambiguity, claiming that his assertions are confused and end up contradicting one another⁵⁰⁵.

According to Rāzī's account, Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī presented a demonstration of the principle similar to that of Avicenna⁵⁰⁶. As for Rāzī himself, he upholds the primitivity of the principle, claiming that those who reject it are «dialecticians» (*ḡadaliyyūn*). At the same time, however, four inferential proofs for the principle and discusses a formidable set of objections against it. Ṭūsī aligns himself with the position expressed in Avicenna's *Iṣārāt*: the principle of sufficient reason is primitive, even though the intellect may become confused and search some proof⁵⁰⁷. Bahmanyār, Suhrawardī and Abū al-Barakāt do not seem to thematize the epistemic status of the principle.

§2.2.2 – Ġazālī's Position

Ġazālī believes that the principle of sufficient reason is not universal in its application: specifically, it does not apply to free voluntary actions. Rāzī relates that this position is widespread most of the *mutakallimūn*, being one of the key points where they diverge from the *falāsifa*⁵⁰⁸. This generalization should be taken with a grain of salt, since there are notable exceptions. Rāzī himself mentions Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī among those who defend the application of the principle of sufficient reason to voluntary actions: voluntary actions happen on account of «motives» or «factors of motivation» (*dawā'in*). As I will show in detail later, Ibn al-Malāhimi develops a compromise position that aims to reconcile the contingency of voluntary actions with a weakened version of the principle of sufficient reason⁵⁰⁹. As for Šahrastānī, his position on the issue is ambiguous⁵¹⁰.

That being said, Ġazālī is far from being the only author who rejects the application of the principle of sufficient reason to voluntary actions, even though he is probably the first interpreter of Avicenna who explicitly thematizes the issue. Despite their disagreement on several related issues (*e.g.*, whether human beings possess the capacity to perform equally possible actions or not⁵¹¹, whether God's will is

504 See *Iṣārāt*, p.153.9-15.

505 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.87.4-10.

506 See *Ibid.*, I, p.87.10-14.

507 See *Ḥall*, I, pp.681-682.

508 See *Maṭālib*, III, p.37.4-5.

509 See *Infra*, §2.2.3.

510 See *Infra*, §2.2.4.

511 The Mu'tazilites state that man possess the capacity or power to perform voluntary actions before performing them, and such capacity is something unitary that persists through time. Additionally, the same instance of power can connect to both action and inaction, or to both an action and its contrary. In other words, man has freedom of indifference. His will or volition is the sufficient reason why a certain possible action is performed instead of other possible actions. On the status of man's power according to the Mu'tazilites see Nišābūrī, *Masā'il*, pp.83-94; Ġuwaynī, *Kitāb al-iršād ilā qawā'it al-adilla fī uṣūl al-i'tiqād*, eds. M.Y. Mūsā, 'A. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ḥānīḡī, 1950), p.223. For the Aš'arites, on the other hand, the human power to perform an action is a non-persistent accident that comes-to-be in the same moment of the action itself and is specifically connected to that action and not to others. Every time one performs a voluntary action that is because God create in him a new, distinct instance of power connected to that specific voluntary action alone. It follows that man does not have freedom of indifference. See Ġuwaynī, *Iršād*, pp.208-210, 217-226.

something eternal and subsistent in God's essence or not⁵¹²), the Baṣran Mu'tazilites and the early Aš'arites agree that volition is the reason why the actions of an agent endowed with the capacity to perform equally possible actions performs just one of them (or some of them) and not the others. Power or capacity alone cannot account for the discrimination between the possible actions that are performed and the possible actions that are not performed, because the connection of power with any of its objects is equivalent to its connection to any other. In other words, the act of volition is the sufficient reason why some possible actions are discriminated from the others and actually performed. At this point, one may ask whether the volitional act itself has a sufficient reason: why does the agent want to perform this specific action rather than another? Aš'arites and Baṣran Mu'tazilites agree that the volitional acts of an agent capable of performing equally possible actions have no sufficient reason⁵¹³. Their disagreement concerns which existent can be said to be an agent capable of performing equally possible actions: the Mu'tazilites believe this qualification to apply to both God and man, whereas the Aš'arites restrict this qualification to God alone⁵¹⁴.

Let us turn to Ġazālī's position. His discussion of sufficient reason in the light of the nature of voluntary actions appears in the section of the *Iqtisād* devoted to God's will, as well as in the section of the *Tahāfut* devoted to the refutation of the philosophers' proofs for the eternity of the world *ex parte ante*⁵¹⁵. The first of those proofs claims that an absolutely eternal and unchanging cause (*i.e.*, God) cannot give rise to a non-eternal effect without mediation. The coming-to-be of the world needs a sufficient reason, and that sufficient reason cannot be anything eternal, for what is eternal is indifferent with respect to both the moment of time when the world did not exist, and the moment of time when the world came-to-be: one of two equivalent things would prevail over the other for no reason at all⁵¹⁶.

512 For the Baṣran Mu'tazilites God is «willing» (*murīd*) on account of multiple instances of will that come-to-be in succession and exist in no substrate (Šahrastānī ascribes the formulation of this position to Abū al-Hudayl, noticing that subsequent authors adopted it from him – see *Milal*, p.54.3-4). This sets the qualification «willing» apart from other qualifications (or «states», *aḥwāl*) such as «powerful» and «knowing», for these two are eternal qualifications that are accounted for by God's own essence – see 'Abd al-Ġabbār, *al-Muġnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-al-'adl*, eds. M.M. Qāsim, I. Madkūr, Ṭ. Ḥusayn, vol.VI/2 (*al-Irāda*), pp.104-174. On the other hand, the Aš'arites believe God's will to be an eternal and unitary attribute that subsists in God's essence, just like power and knowledge (Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd al-awā'il wa-talḥīṣ al-dalā'il*, ed. 'I.A. Ḥaydar (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Ṭaqāfiyya, 1987) pp.47-52; Ġuwaynī, *Iršād*, pp.80-98).

513 As for the Aš'arites, Ġuwaynī clearly states that God does not create on account of «motives» (*dawā'ir*), namely reasons that prompts a voluntary agent to act in a certain way rather than another (see *Iršād*, p.202.1-5; cf. *Tamhīd*, pp.51-52). As for the Bahšāmīs, Ibn al-Malāḥimī relates that for them God is capable to choose between two alternatives by pure volition, when motives are equivalent and there is no sufficient reason to prefer one alternative over the other (see *Mu'tamad*, p.246.11-21). The same seem to be true of any voluntary agent in general (see *Ibid.*, p.510.10-14). Šahrastānī argues that, according to the Mu'tazilites, man himself remains capable to perform an action and its contrary regardless of the sum of all motives which may prompt him to choose one or the other (see *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, p.83.8-11). For a modern study on freedom of indifference in the Bahšāmīs see R.M. Frank, 'The Autonomy of the Human Agent in the Teaching of 'Abd al-Ġabbār,' *Le Muséon* 95 (1982), 323-355.

514 That is because, according to the Aš'arites, human capacity to act does not entail freedom of indifference, being a non-persistent accident that existence is the moment of the action and is specifically connected to it. Moreover, Ġuwaynī argues that there is nothing absurd in supposing that the motives that prompt human will to action are created by God in the moment when the latter creates the capacity to act and the action itself (see *Iršād*, p.202.6.-10).

515 See *Tahāfut*, pp.21-24; *Iqtisād*, pp.332-339.

One of Ġazālī's answers is to maintain that God has an eternal and unchanging will, and that an eternal and unchanging will can give rise to a non-eternal effect, deciding the moment in which that effect comes-to-be.

«How do you contradict he who says that the world came-to-be by means of an eternal will which requires its existence in the moment in which it existed, and says that non-existence persisted until existence began? [He would also say] that existence before that moment was not willed, and the world did not come-to-be because of that, whereas its existence was willed in the moment in which it came-to-be, and the world came-to-be because of that. What declares this belief impossible and absurd?»⁵¹⁷

The adversary objects that this hypothesis contradicts the principle of sufficient reason. The fundamental assumption of the objection is that any instant of time is equivalent for God's will: that is precisely because God's will is eternal, and any moment of time is equivalent for what is eternal. If that is the case, then any moment of time is equally appropriate to be chosen as the beginning of the existence of the world. It would follow that one of infinite equivalent possibilities prevails over the others for no sufficient reason. At this point we would end up denying the principle of sufficient reason. The rejection of sufficient reason, in turn, can be used to deny the existence of the Creator of the world: the world came into existence by means of no cause, because its existence prevailed over its non-existence without any factor of prevalence, even though the two are equally possible⁵¹⁸.

Ġazālī answers that the rejection of sufficient reason concerns only will: will is an attribute whose peculiar characteristic is to discriminate between equivalent things.

«Will is an attribute whose property is to distinguish a thing from what is identical to it. If it were not so, power would suffice. However, since the relation of power to the contraries is equivalent, and since there must be a factor which specifies a thing [distinguishing it] from what is identical to

516 «They say that it is impossible for what comes-to-be to proceed from an eternal thing, on no condition. That is because, if we suppose that the eternal thing was, and the world did not proceed from it, [the world] did not proceed since its existence did not have a factor of prevalence: on the contrary, the existence of the world was absolutely contingent. When, afterwards, the world came-to-be, either a factor of prevalence supervened or not. If it supervened, who brought-to-be that factor of prevalence? Why did that factor come-to-be now, and not before? The question on the coming-to-be of the factor of prevalence remains. In sum, since the states of the eternal are identical to one another, it follows either that nothing exists by means of it, or that something exists perpetually. As for the discrimination of the moment of inaction from the moment of the beginning [of the action], that is absurd» – *Tahāfut*. p.13.8-14

517 *Ibid.* p.15.1-6.

518 «The moments of time are equivalent with respect to the possibility of the connection of the will to them. What is that distinguishes a determinate moment from the one before and the one after, since it is not impossible for anticipation and postponement to be willed? Concerning whiteness and blackness, movement and rest, you say that whiteness comes-to-be by means of an eternal will. Since the substrate is receptive of blackness just like it is receptive of whiteness, why does the eternal will connect to whiteness and not blackness? What is that distinguishes one of the two possibilities from the other, with respect to the connection of the will to it? We know by intuitive necessity that a thing is distinct from what is identical to it only by means of a factor of specification. Were it possible [for that distinction to occur not by means of a factor of specification], it would be possible for the world to come-to-be when its existence is possible just like its non-existence: the side of existence, which is identical to the side of non-existence with respect to possibility, would be specified without any factor of specification» – *Ibid.* p.21.3-11.

it, it is said that, beyond power, the Eternal has an attribute whose property is to specify a thing [distinguishing it] from what is identical to it.»⁵¹⁹

Ġazālī does not reject the principle of sufficient reason altogether. Rather, he restricts its reach: the principle is applicable to the case of power, and not applicable to the case of will and voluntary action. If the principle did not apply to the case of power, Ġazālī's claim that God's power is insufficient for the discrimination of the contraries (being equivalent with respect to them) would be void. On the other hand, if the principle did apply to the case of will, it would still be necessary to look for the sufficient reason which discriminates the alternative chosen by will from the other (equivalent) possibilities.

The refusal to assert that voluntary action requires a sufficient reason becomes even more evident in Ġazālī's subsequent discussions. In particular, two elements catch the eye. The first is that Ġazālī considers a question which aims to reintroduce the principle of sufficient reason: why is will restricted to one of two identical things and not to the other? In other terms, why does the voluntary agent want this instead of that, given that the two are equivalent for him? Ġazālī simply answers that such is the peculiar nature of will: will consists in a faculty which discriminates between identical things⁵²⁰. It follows that will has a peculiar status which sets it apart from any other faculty, and that the principle of sufficient reason cannot apply to voluntary actions.

The second element comes from a sort of thought experiment Ġazālī presents while defending his understanding of will against a possible objection, namely that human will does not behave in that way. There are always factors which discriminate between possible objects of will: a thirsty man may discriminate between two apparently identical cups of water on account of their distance relative to him, or his habit, or other factors⁵²¹. Ġazālī answers that none of those factors is necessarily present when someone performs a voluntary action: it is possible to imagine a situation where all of the possible factors of discrimination are indifferent for the choice the voluntary agent, and in that case intuitive knowledge asserts that his will would discriminate between identical things not on account of any sufficient reason⁵²². All of this means that, at its root, will does not require a sufficient reason in order to discriminate between equivalent alternatives.

§2.2.3 – Ibn al-Malāḥimī's Position

Just like Ġazālī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī rejects Avicenna's understanding of the principle of sufficient reason by appealing to the nature of free voluntary action. Unlike Ġazālī, however, he does not restrict the application of the principle: he rather modifies the context in which the principle is formulated, thus transforming the principle itself.

519 *Ibid.* p.22.2-5.

520 «To ask why will is restricted to one of two identical things is like asking why knowledge implies the comprehension of the known according to the way it is. It is said: 'that is because knowledge consists of an attribute whose property is this'. Likewise, will consists in an attribute whose property is that, or rather its very essence is the discrimination of a thing from what is identical to it» – *Ibid.* p.22.6-9.

521 See *Ibid.* pp.22.11 – 23.3.

522 See *Ibid.* pp.23.16 – 24.4.

The crucial point at stake is the understanding of contingency. For Ibn al-Malāḥimī, contingency can embrace three possible dispositions, namely equivalence, greater adequacy to existence, and greater adequacy to non-existence. As a consequence, he accepts that the contingent that is equivalent needs a factor of prevalence in order for its existence to be more adequate than its non-existence, but does not accept that everything whose existence is more adequate is absolutely necessary: there can be contingent things whose existence is more adequate or more probable than their non-existence. It is clear, then, that the soundness of Ibn al-Malāḥimī's position rests on the soundness of the above-mentioned understanding of contingency⁵²³.

All of this means that the principle of sufficient reason is radically transformed, because the factor which makes the contingent more adequate to existence does not necessitate its existence, and thus cannot be said to be «sufficient» for it: the principle of sufficient (and necessary) reason becomes the principle of necessary reason only.

This peculiar understanding of contingency is connected to the account of voluntary action. Ibn al-Malāḥimī clearly differentiates between two kinds of causal efficiency. The first is necessitation by a necessary and sufficient reason: the act of a necessitating cause (*mūḡib*). The second is contingent voluntary action according to a strictly necessary reason: the act of a free choosing agent (*qadir*).

«When the motivating factor obtains, the free agent sees that the existence [of his act] is more adequate than its non-existence. So, he effectuates his act in such a way that it is possible for him not to effectuate the act, according to his very essence.»⁵²⁴

The factors which make action more adequate are the so-called «motivating factors», or simply «motives» (*dawā'in*). Those which makes inaction more adequate are the «diverting factors» (*ṣawārif*). When motives prevail over diverting factors, the free voluntary agent is prompted (but not compelled) to act. All of this entails that voluntary action is explainable, albeit in a weak sense: it is explainable in terms of non-necessitating motives and conditions which makes action more adequate (more proximate to existence) than inaction.

In sum, Ibn al-Malāḥimī presents a picture which is remarkably different from Ġazālī's absolute voluntarism: free will does not discriminate between completely equivalent alternatives, but rather requires an essential asymmetry between action and inaction, even though both remain possible for the agent. According to Rāzī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī's idea that asymmetry between existence and non-existence does not entail necessitation is an attempt to reconcile two conflicting elements of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī's account of voluntary action: that human beings are free voluntary agents, and that voluntary actions have reasons, in the sense that they occur on account of motives⁵²⁵. Just like Baṣrī, Ibn al-

523 On whether contingency may entail greater and lesser adequacy or proximity to existence see *Supra*, Part 1, §6.4.3, §6.4.4.

524 *Tuḥfa*, p.52.4-5.

525 «[Some] say that we know by intuitive necessity that we give existence to our acts: that thesis is the choice of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī. The author of the book says: 'I am very surprised by this. How can he combine that thesis with his thesis that the act rests on the motivating factor? The latter, in fact, goes to the extreme in the affirmation of compulsion. How can he combine that with an extreme affirmation of [man's] free power (*qadar*)?' Since Muḥammad al-Ḥwārazmī wanted to combine those two theses, he said that the act becomes more adequate to happen, together with the act, but does not reach necessity. We will demonstrate that this supposition is weak» – *Arba'in*, I, pp.320.18 – 321.3.

Malāḥimī states that the existence of free voluntary agents is something known by intuition⁵²⁶. He also accuses the philosophers of incoherence on this point. On the one hand, they discriminate between natural and voluntary power, recognizing that the latter is potency over contraries. On the other hand, they equalize the two, claiming that voluntary agents are necessitated to action, once all the conditions for the completion of their will obtain⁵²⁷.

§2.2.4 – Šahrastānī's Position

Just like Ġazālī and Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Šahrastānī maintains that God is a voluntary agent that acts by choice, not a cause whose essence necessitates the effect, as the *falāsifa* claim. The thesis that God acts by voluntary choice is based on the claim that not all contingent things are created: some are created and others are not, despite their essential equivalence (they are all contingent). Will is precisely the factor which operates a restriction of the set of the contingent things, determining which are actually created and which are not⁵²⁸. In other words, the volitional act of the divine will is the sufficient reason why certain contingent things exist instead of others. At this point, it is necessary to investigate whether volition itself has a sufficient reason, according to Šahrastānī.

It is certain that he does not agree with Ibn al-Malāḥimī's compromise solution that blends a weakened version of freedom of indifference and weakened version of sufficient reason: Šahrastānī does not frame contingency as something that can accept greater and lesser proximity to existence.

We need to delve into Šahrastānī's argumentations in order to ascertain whether he subscribes to Ġazālīan voluntarism or not. In fact, the claim that God is a voluntary agent does not necessarily entail the impossibility to apply the principle of sufficient reason to God's actions. One may affirm that God is a voluntary agent and still maintain that God's voluntary choices do have a sufficient reason. A notable example is the theory of the *optimum* (*aṣṣlaḥ*) ascribed to some Baġdādian Mu'tazilites: God voluntarily chooses to create only what is best or most adequate for his creatures, and in that respect his choice does have a sufficient reason that explains it⁵²⁹. Šahrastānī rejects the theory of the *optimum* on

526 «As for the demonstration that the free agent is such that he produces the act according to possibility, and not to necessity, the knowledge of that is something primitive for the intellect. The theologians say that it is intuitively necessary knowledge. The demonstration of this is that every man knows, with respect to himself, that it is possible for him to do what he has the capacity to do, and it is possible for him not to do that. He also knows that, if he had wanted to do what he has not done, that act would have existed. And he knows that, if he had wanted not to do what he has done, that act would have not existed. We knows that with respect to himself, and likewise he knows that with respect to other free agents» – *Tuḥfa*, p.50.11-15.

527 «That clarifies the discrimination between the voluntary potency and the natural potency. It is possible to divide the potencies into these two. You [philosophers] allude to this in the division of the potencies. You say that the natural potency has efficiency over its act, and not over the non-existence of its act, whereas the voluntary potency has efficiency over the existence of the act and over its non-existence, and over the act and its contradictory, just like he who has power over motion and rest. If the voluntary potency were necessitating, it would not have efficiency over the two contradictories. So, it is adequate for it not to be necessitating. On the contrary, both things come from it: it has efficiency over the fact of giving existence to one of the two in a contingent way. Afterwards, you [philosophers] neglected what you conceived concerning the discrimination between the two [potencies] and equalized them» – *Ibid.*, pp.49.14-17, 50.5-10.

528 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*, pp.15.17 – 17.5, 241.7.

529 See *Ibid.*, pp.397.10 – 398.4.

the basis that nothing is incumbent on God, namely that divine actions are not determined by final causes or by some deontic necessity⁵³⁰. However, it is not immediately evident that every sufficient reason which determines a voluntary choice must be a final cause or a form deontic necessity, so it is still possible to hypothesize that God's volition has some other sufficient reason which necessitates it. This might exactly what happens in Šahrastānī: God's voluntary actions have a sufficient reason which is not a final cause or anything of that sort. That sufficient reason is God's own knowledge.

In order to understand why that is the case, one needs to consider Šahrastānī's discussion of the Avicennian argument for the eternity of the world based on the impossibility of pre-eternal divine inaction. The proofs states that, if God begins to create the world after not having done so, either something additional to God's essence comes-to-be in the second moment (explaining the difference between the first and the second moment), or not. The former hypothesis entails either that something comes-to-be in God's own essence (which is absurd because God is absolutely eternal and unchanging), or that something external to God comes-to-be (which is absurd because the coming-to-be of that eternal thing would be to be explained, just like the coming-to-be of the world itself). The latter hypothesis contradicts the principle of sufficient reason, since the same unchanging thing (*i.e.*, God's essence) would entail two opposite things (the non-existence of the world and its existence) for no reason, all other conditions being equal in the two moments⁵³¹. Šahrastānī summarizes the result of this argument in the formula: «what comes-to-be has a cause that comes-to-be». He explicitly admits the strength of Avicenna's reasoning, stating that it is a «hardly-solvable and clever sophism» (*al-muğallīṭatu l-zabbā`i wa-l-dāhiyati l-dihyā*). He also mentions that his master Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d.1118) was deeply perplexed by the problem, as he suggested that human intellects cannot grasp the way in which God acts⁵³².

Šahrastānī's solution revolves around the intertwine of will and knowledge. He says that the coming-to-be of a certain existent in a certain moment and with certain peculiar characteristics is contingent in itself, but becomes necessary when we consider that God wills and knows its existence in that moment and with those peculiar characteristics.

«We may say that, in case the contingent exists in a determined time and in a specific form, its existence in that way is necessary because, since the giver of existence knows and wills that it obtains in that moment and in that form, the occurrence [of the contingent] is necessary, because what contradicts the object of knowledge cannot occur and cannot obtain. The contingent is

530 See *Ibid.*, pp.370-ff, 397-ff.

531 «The clear intellect which does not lie judges that, if at a previous moment a thing did not exist from a single essence that is one in all respects, even though it were possible for that thing to exist, then now that thing does not exist from it either. If something does exist from it, then there is no doubt that some factor came-to-be: intention, will, nature, potency, capacity, objective, or some other cause. That cause comes-to-be either in the essence [of the agent] as an attribute, or as something separate, and in that case the discourse concerning that thing which comes-to-be is like the discourse concerning the world. If [you claimed that] there is no discrimination between the moment of action and the moment of inaction, that is a contradiction: we impose this consequence because intellectual supposition posited an inactive essence. That is unsound, so the contradictory is true.» – *Ibid.*, p.36.4-14.

532 See *Ibid.*, p.38.14-18.

contingent in its genus and possible in its essence, and that necessity is on account of the necessitation of knowledge and will.»⁵³³

In other words, the sufficient reason for that coming-to-be is to be found in divine will and divine knowledge: what is willed and known to happen must happen, and its opposite cannot happen. The addition of knowledge is crucial, for it shows that Šahrastānī's position moves away from pure voluntarism: the sufficient reason why a contingent existent comes-to-be in a certain moment is not divine will alone, but rather divine will inasmuch as it is joined with divine knowledge.

This solution faces an objection. Since God's will, knowledge, and power are indeterminate (Šahrastānī says «ample», *'āmm*) in their connection to their objects, nothing explains their particularization or determination: nothing explains why certain particular objects (and not others) are willed and known to exist in certain particular moments (and not in others) with certain particular characteristics (and not with others)⁵³⁴. In other words, since God can know all that can be known, and can will all that can be willed, there is no sufficient reason why God should know and will the existence of a certain thing in a certain moment and with certain specific characteristics: knowledge, will, and power have the same indeterminate relation with each one of the contingent things. According to Šahrastānī, this kind of argument is behind the Bahšami erroneous doctrine that God has multiple instances of volition that come-to-be in succession and exist in no substrate, as well as the Karrāmite doctrine that God has both an eternal will (*mašī'a*) and temporal volitions (*irādāt*) that come-to-be in his essence. Both are attempts to provide sufficient reasons that explain why God wills certain things to happen at certain moments, those sufficient reasons being God's multiple temporal volitions.

Šahrastānī's answer to the objection argues that there is a sense in which the connection of God's attributes of will and power to their objects is indeterminate («ample», «generic», *'āmm*), as well as a sense in which that connection is determinate («restricted», «specific», *ḥaṣṣ*). That determination (restriction, specification) does not require any temporal change, be that in God's essence or outside of it.

Šahrastānī explains that the connection of God's attributes to their objects is indeterminate inasmuch as those attributes are considered in themselves. The connection of knowledge is indeterminate in the sense that knowledge is that by means of which God knows the infinity of things that can be known, both actual and possible. The connection of will is indeterminate in the sense that will is the capacity to discriminate some contingent things from the others (*i.e.*, the capacity to operate a restriction, *taḥṣīṣ*), and that capacity has an infinity of objects in the sense that the possible ways to discriminate some subset of an infinity of contingent things are themselves infinite. It is crucial to notice that will in itself is merely the «adequacy» (*ṣalāhiyya*) to discriminate, namely the capacity to do so, not the actual discrimination that brings to the creation of some contingent things and not others. The meaning of the

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, pp.21.17 – 22.1.

⁵³⁴ «If you say that [the agent] knows and wills the existence of the act in that moment, we say that knowledge and will are ample in their connection. So, inasmuch as the ample will is concerned, the existence of the effect in this moment and in this form has the same relation to will as its existence in another moment and in another form. The discourse on power is the same: it is ample in its connection, just like will and knowledge. So there is no specification in the attributes. How can the act be specified?» – *Ibid.*, p.39.4-8.

indetermination of power is left implicit by Šahrastānī, but it is easy to explain it by analogy with the other two cases: power is indeterminate in the sense that is the capacity to create any one of the contingent things, which are infinite in number⁵³⁵.

The relation of the divine attributes to their objects becomes determinate (restricted, specified) when we consider one divine attribute in relation to another. The determination of the object of power is due to will, meaning that God gives existence to what he wills: will is the sufficient reason why God creates some specific contingent things, despite having the power to create any contingent thing whatsoever in the same measure. As for the determination of the object of will itself, that is due to knowledge, meaning that God wills the existence of the things He knows to exist: knowledge is the sufficient reason why God wills some specific contingent things, despite having the capacity to choose any contingent thing whatsoever in the same measure. As for knowledge, it seems to be self-determining. Indeed, Šahrastānī states that God knows both the actual existence of the world and all the possible ways in which the world may have existed, thereby implying that God's knowledge discriminates factual existence from counter-factual possibilities. Furthermore, he argues that what contradicts God's knowledge is absolutely impossible: if God knows that X exists, it is impossible for X not to exist.

«The connection of will is restricted inasmuch as will existentiates and makes happen that thing whose existence is known and willed. In fact, what contradicts the object of knowledge cannot happen. All attributes are ample in their connection inasmuch as we consider the adequacy of their existence and their essences in relation to the infinite things that are connected to them. [However,] they are restricted in their connection inasmuch as we consider the relation of one of them to another. Will specifies existence only for the essence of that thing whose existence is known. Power makes happen only that thing whose happening is willed. When the connections of the attributes conform to one another in the way that we mentioned, existence obtains necessarily, without any change in the giver of existence.»⁵³⁶

In sum, will is essentially indeterminate and its determination comes from knowledge: knowledge is the sufficient reason of volition. Knowledge itself is self-determinate. I will not delve into the discussion of the merits and weaknesses of this position *per se*, or as a solution of Avicenna's argument against the coming-to-be of the world. I merely want to highlight that Šahrastānī's proposal is significantly different from Ġazālī's pure voluntarism, in that it accepts the possibility to apply the principle of sufficient reason to God's voluntary choices (whereas Ġazālī rejects that possibility).

It is important to notice that Šahrastānī appears not completely consistent with his own assertions. For example, in his argument against Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka'bī's (d.931) reduction of God's will to knowledge itself, he stresses that the reason why some possibilities are created and others are not is

535 «Given that the Creator knows the existence of the world in the moment in which it exists, He wills its existence in that moment. Knowledge is ample in its connection in the sense that it is an attribute which is adequate to be the means through which one knows all that than be known. The objects of knowledge are infinite in the sense that the Creator knows the existence of the world as well as the contingency of its existence before and after, in every aspect in which intellectual contingency applies to it. Will is ample in its connection in the sense that it is an attribute which is adequate to operate a restriction of what can be restricted by it. The objects of will are infinite in the sense that the ways in which they can be restricted are infinite.» – *Ibid.*, pp.40.20 – 41.6.

536 *Ibid.*, p.41.6-13.

will, not knowledge⁵³⁷. Knowledge is the source of «the skilful and sound execution» (*al-iḥkām wa-l-ittiqān*), namely the fact that God orders the parts of the world in a coherent and ordered way, not that of «restriction» (*taḥṣīs*), namely the fact that God discriminates some possibilities from the others, determining that some will exist and others will not.

«If it is necessary for each attribute to give its share of the essence, then knowledge is that by means of which skilful and sound execution obtains, will is that by means of which restriction obtains, and power is that by means of which giving of existence obtains. These implications are different, so the things that imply them are not unified.»⁵³⁸

This reasoning appears in conflict with Šahrastānī's previous assertion that knowledge is the sufficient reason for the determination of will. Indeed, if knowledge were the reason for the determination of will – will being indeterminate in itself –, then knowledge would be the source of the skilful and sound execution as well as the ultimate source of restriction, namely the discrimination of some possibilities from others as well as the determination of the existence of some of them as opposed to others.

§2.2.5 – Rāzī's Position

Rāzī's position on the principle of sufficient reason and its applicability is apparently clear on the face of it, but becomes elusive when it comes to the issue of divine causation. Generally speaking, Rāzī is a staunch defender of the principle in its unqualified, universal formulation: every contingent requires a factor of prevalence (*i.e.*, a sufficient reason) which makes its existence prevail over its non-existence (and the other way around)⁵³⁹. He also consistently and unequivocally rejects freedom of indifference in the case of human voluntary agents: there is always some motive (*dā'ir*) that constitutes the sufficient reason why a human voluntary agent chooses a certain alternative instead of others⁵⁴⁰. This means that the applicability of the principle is not restricted to natural causation as opposed to voluntary causation.

As I said, Rāzī's position becomes murky what it comes to divine causation in particular. A few elements are clear, though. First of all, he rejects the claim that God's causal action is on account of a reason which is external to God's own essence, like the good of His creatures⁵⁴¹. Moreover, he does not

537 *Ibid.*, pp.239.15 – 241.8.

538 *Ibid.*, p.241.6-8.

539 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.125-131; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.74-129.

540 See *Arba'īn*, I, pp.319-323; *Maṭālib*, III, pp.37-60; *Maṭālib*, IX, pp.21-33; *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fols.255v.6 – 256r.2.

541 In other words, Rāzī rejects the Mu'tazilite doctrines of the good (*ṣalāḥ*) and the *optimum* (*aṣṣlah*). The doctrine of the good (*ṣalāḥ*) says that God must act in a way that is beneficial for his creatures, but it does not restrict God's choice to a single beneficial course of action as opposed to all others. The assertion that God actions must benefit the creatures does not specify how that should happen. This idea does not bring about the principle of sufficient reason, for God maintains freedom over a wide range of equally beneficial alternatives. On the other hand, the doctrine of the *optimum* says that God must act in the way which is most beneficial (*i.e.*, optimal) for his creatures, which narrows down the possible alternatives to one course of action (if one believes that there is only one optimal options), or relatively few courses of action (if one believes that there are several equally optimal options). In the first case, the doctrine of the optimum brings about the principle of sufficient reason. On the doctrine of the *optimum* see R. Brunschvig, 'Mu'tazilisme et Optimum (*al-aṣṣlah*),' *Studia Islamica* 39 (1974), 5-23.

consider Šahrastānī's idea that the sufficient reason of God's voluntary choice is to be found in God's knowledge. That being said, Rāzī is inconsistent on the applicability of the principle of sufficient reason to God's action. He sometimes accepts the application of the principle of sufficient reason to God's actions, sometimes rejects that application, claiming that God is a free voluntary agent capable of choosing between equivalent alternatives, and sometimes appears to suspend judgement⁵⁴². In other words, he oscillates between the Avicennian thesis that the sufficient reason of God's action is to be found in God's essence (*i.e.*, the thesis of «essential necessitation», *iğāb dātī*) and the classical Aš'arite thesis that there is no sufficient reason whatsoever for God's action, be that intrinsic (*i.e.*, God's own essence) or extrinsic (*i.e.*, some final cause like the good of the creatures).

In light of this striking inconsistency, Griffel recently suggested that Rāzī implicitly assumes a form of double-truth theory, where the same proposition (*i.e.*, the principle of sufficient reason applies to God's action) is accepted in the context of his philosophical discourse and is rejected in the context of his theological discourse⁵⁴³. According to Griffel, Rāzī reaches this conclusion because he believes evidence to be in equilibrium: reasons for and against the application of the principle of sufficient reason to God's action are equivalent. This means means that both options remain on the table and so Rāzī can assume either the perspective of the *falāsifa* or that of the *mutakallimūn* depending on the context of a certain discussion.

Griffel's reconstruction of the reason behind Rāzī's inconsistency is fundamentally correct: the issue remains undecided. This is most evident in the *Maṭālib*, where Rāzī resorts to presenting the arguments of the *falāsifa* and those of the *mutakallimūn*, without subscribing to any definitive conclusion⁵⁴⁴. However, the notion of double-truth theory does not seem inadequate to describe Rāzī's attitude. The term «double-truth» has been used to describe the attempt to provide a (disingenuous?) reconciliation of a conflict between rationality and religious dogma. In other words, the conclusion of a rational demonstration conflicts with the content of the revelation, or with something that is deducible from the content of revelation. The defender of the double-truth theory resolves the contradiction by arguing that the same proposition can be true according to reason and false according to revelation (or the other way around). That is not what happens in Rāzī's discussion of the nature of God's causal action. What happens is that rationality primarily conflicts with rationality itself. I mean that the conclusion of a certain set of apparently sound demonstrations conflicts with the conclusion of another set of apparently sound demonstrations. Indeed, the great majority of arguments for the claim that sufficient reason does not apply to God's voluntary action do not include the content of the Qu'ranic revelation among their premises⁵⁴⁵. Griffel implicitly acknowledges this when he suggests that, for Rāzī, there is

542 Rāzī accepts the application of the principle of sufficient reason to God's causal action in *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.477-485; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.76-86. He rejects the applicability of the principle in *Arba'īn*, I, p.323.13-21; *Maṭālib*, IV, pp.323-360 *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, fols.251r.17 – 252r.9. He appears to suspend judgement in *Maṭālib*, III, pp.77-100.

543 See 'Was Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī an Averroist after All? On the Double-Truth Theory in Medieval Latin and Islamic Thought,' in S. Schmidtke (ed.), *Studying the Near and Middle East at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, 1925-2018* (Piscataway: Gorgias press, 2018), pp.205-216.

544 See *Maṭālib*, III, pp.77-100.

545 Rāzī takes into account several rational arguments against the application of the principle of sufficient reason to God's voluntary actions. The most outstanding are the following three: the argument from the coming-to-be of the world as a

evidential equivalence between the two contradictory theses: evidential equivalence means that there are equipotent rational arguments for the two contradictory conclusions. All of this means that the primary conflict is within rationality itself.

None of this means that the authority of the revelation lacks any importance for Rāzī's assessment of the issue at stake. As a matter of fact, Rāzī mentions two other kinds of arguments for God's free will, besides the purely rational (*'aqliyya*) ones: the arguments from intelligent design and the arguments found in the Qu'ran⁵⁴⁶. It seems that, despite not being proper rational demonstrations, these two sets of arguments perform a corroborative function: Rāzī says that, when we add them to the proper rational proofs, the case for God's free will becomes very strong⁵⁴⁷.

At this point, the question we need to consider is whether such strength is enough to conclude that Rāzī ultimately asserts that God acts by free will, and consequently that it is impossible to apply the principle of sufficient reason to God's action. What is certain is that, at least in the *Maṭālib* (his last work), Rāzī does not believe the issue to be decided beyond doubt. Nowhere does he state that there are decisive proofs on this matter, namely proofs so strong that they are capable to establish the necessity of the conclusion and the impossibility of its contradictory. That being said, two hypotheses are left concerning Rāzī's final assessment of the applicability of the principle of sufficient reason to God's voluntary action.

The first is that he believes one position to be better and more appropriate than its contradictory. In one of the prolegomena to the *Maṭālib*, Rāzī explicitly states that, when «the decisive judgement which makes the contradictory impossible» (*al-ḡazmu l-māni 'u mina l-naqīd*) cannot be obtained, we need to settle for the «most adequate and most befitting position» (*al-awlā wa-l-aḥrā*)⁵⁴⁸. However, it is unclear which one of the two positions should be preferred. Rāzī appears fundamentally inconsistent: the

whole (which entails that God chooses the moment of the beginning of the world among infinite equivalent alternatives), the argument from the coming-to-be and the passing away of present temporal existents (which cannot derive from an eternal cause, if we abide by the principle of sufficient reason), and the argument from the essential equivalence of all bodies (which entails that the differentiating features of bodies are allocated by God's arbitrary choice on account of no sufficient reason). I will provide a detailed analysis of these arguments in the section devoted to the debates on the principle of sufficient reason – see *Infra*, §2.4.4.

546 The arguments from intelligent design (Rāzī calls them «the considerations taken from the principles of wisdom», *al-i'tibārāt al-ma'ḥūda min uṣūl al-ḥikma*) corroborate the thesis of God's free will by noticing that the world is arranged in such a way that some of its parts (*e.g.*, the sun, the moon, the elements, etc.) are beneficial for other parts (*e.g.*, plants, animals, humans) – see *Maṭālib*, IV, pp.331-352. For Rāzī this situation is more in line with the hypothesis of a creator possessing knowledge and free will than with its contradictory (see *Maṭālib*, IV, p.327.2-7). Significantly enough, Rāzī does not say that the arguments from the good arrangement of the world is an actual demonstrative proof of God's free will: he speaks of «considerations that point to [the conclusion]» (*al-i'tibārāt [...] al-dālla*), as opposed to proper «rational proofs» (*al-dalā'il al-'aqliyya*). It would seem that the proofs from intelligent design lack the cogency of demonstrations and performs a sort of corroborative function. As the arguments from revelation, Rāzī speaks of «the proofs mentioned in the Qur'an» (*al-dalā'il al-maḍkūrātu [...] fī l-qur'ān*), which means that the Qur'an itself contains actual proofs (albeit in a condensed form) – see *Maṭālib*, IV, pp.355-360. On Rāzī's peculiar approach to the Qur'anic revelation and its interpretation see T. Jaffer, *Rāzī. Master of Qur'anic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University press, 2017).

547 «When the six rational proofs in the section on the powerful agent are added to these arguments (*wuḡūh*), they reach a high level of abundance and strength.» – *Maṭālib*, IV, p.325.7-9.

548 See *Ibid.*, I, p.41.6-9.

Maṭālib presents both the strongest defence of the universality of the principle of sufficient reason and the strongest defence of God's freedom of indifference.

The second hypothesis is that Rāzī is ultimately agnostic on the issue at stake and adopts one position or the other for dialectical or contextual reasons. When he needs to establish the existence of the Necessary Existent or to reject human freedom of indifference, he defends the universality of the principle of sufficient reason. On the other hand, he is forced to reject that universality when he needs to establish the freedom of the Necessary Existent. A sign of this hidden agnosticism might be found in Rāzī's discussion of the doctrines on God's existence and agency over the world. He mentions twelve positions, encompassing among others the doctrine of divine essential necessitation and that of divine freedom of indifference⁵⁴⁹. The last doctrine Rāzī takes into account is that of «the people of confusion and perplexity» (*ahl al-ḥayra wa-l-dahṣa*), namely those who suspend judgement on these matters. After having discussed the other doctrines, Rāzī states what follows.

«You should know that, when those doctrines are clarified in this way, and when the commendable and bad things in each one of them are made evident, those who are confused and perplexed say that those proofs are not so clear and so strong that they do away with doubt, interrupt the excuse, and fill the intellect with their strength and their light. On the contrary, in each one of those one faces a species of obscurity. So, it is appropriate for He who is merciful and magnanimous to exculpate those who commit errors in similar straits.»⁵⁵⁰

Surprisingly enough, Rāzī does not provide any specific critique of this position. Instead, the section ends with an invocation where he confesses the shortcomings of his knowledge, asking God to grant him favour, if his beliefs are indeed correct, or to grant him forgiveness, if they turn out to be wrong⁵⁵¹.

549 The twelve doctrines are the following. [i] There is no transcendent cause of the world, the celestial bodies being necessary in their essence and in their circular movement, which entails the generation of the corporeal composites (the Eternalists' doctrine). [ii] There is no transcendent cause, both the celestial bodies and the sub-lunar elements being composed of eternal corpuscular atoms in eternal motion (Democritus' doctrine). [iii] The world came-to-be not on account of any cause whatsoever. [iv] There is a transcendent cause of the world which acts by essential necessitation and immediately produces only one effect (Avicenna's doctrine). [v] The transcendent cause acts by essential necessitation and produces all contingent existents at once (Rāzī's reformulation of the Avicennian doctrine). [vi] The transcendent cause acts by free will and is good (*i.e.*, its actions benefit its creatures), the source of the evil in the world being another transcendent cause which is evil (the Dualists' doctrine). [vii] The transcendent cause is free and good, the source of evil being the conjunction between the soul and matter (Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's doctrine). [viii] The transcendent cause is free and good, the source of evil being the human souls' past evil deeds (Reincarnationism). [ix] The free and good transcendent cause creates evil and pain for some good reason and offers compensation for that (the Mu'tazilite doctrine). [x] The free transcendent cause acts without considering the benefit of its creations, and this entails that there is neither prophecy nor religious obligation. [xi] There is a free transcendent cause whose actions but not consider the benefit of the creatures, but prophecy and religious obligations are valid nevertheless (the Aṣ'arite doctrine). [xii] Agnosticism. See *Maṭālib*, IV, pp.364.3-368.14.

550 *Ibid.*, IV, p.326.9-13.

551 «My God, you are my argument, my need, my tool, my craving. My way to you is your grace towards me. My intercessor in front of you is your goodness towards me. My God, I know that there is no way to you except by your favour, and that there is no separation from you except by your justice. My God, my knowledge is like a mirage, my heart is left in ruin by fear, problems are as numerous as the grains of sand. All of this notwithstanding, I hope to be among the loved ones: Oh Magnanimous Giver, please do not frustrate my hope. My God, you know that everything I said and wrote was meant only to attain truth and correctness, and to abandon ignorance and doubt. If I am correct, grant me your favour. If I err, skip over [my shortcomings] with your mercy and your patience, oh Generous, oh Giver

Even though Rāzī is clearly not committed to a full-fledged agnosticism, he shows some sympathy towards a similar perspective, casting doubts on his own beliefs and the proofs that support them. More importantly, the agnostics say that all doctrines encompass commendable things (*madā'ih*) as well as bad things (*qabā'ih*), and that their proofs include kinds of obscurities (*gumūd*). This implies that both the doctrine of essential necessitation and that of divine free choice have notable shortcomings. Evidence suggests that, in both cases, some of those shortcomings can be traced back to the failure to meet the principle of sufficient reason, in some way or another. The fourth prolegomenon to the *Maṭālib* states that the «frightening issue» (*al-maqām al-mubīh*) concerning God's actions involves the principle of sufficient reason, and that both the *mutakallimūn* and the *falāsifa* struggle with it. That issue concerns the situation where a temporal effect is produced from an eternal cause, which is at odds with the principle since the eternal cause is indifferent with respect to the existence and the non-existence of the temporal effect (which means that no sufficient reason explains why the cause produces the effect rather than not producing it). For the *mutakallimūn*, this problem concerns the coming-to-be of the world as a whole, whereas for the *falāsifa* (who believe in the eternity of the world) it concerns the coming-to-be of the particular temporal existents that come into existence at any particular moment⁵⁵².

In sum, Rāzī's attitude towards the applicability of the principle of sufficient reason to God's actions is extremely elusive. What is clear is that he staunchly defends the unqualified, universal formulation of the principle, which is the foundation of his arguments for the existence of the Necessary Existent and against the freedom of indifference of human agents. As for the issue of the conflict between divine essential necessitation and divine freedom of indifference, what can be said is that the sheer strength of the principle of sufficient reason is what keeps the doctrine of essential necessitation on a par (or almost on a par) with that of divine freedom of indifference, despite the fact that the latter is backed by several rational arguments and even by the authority of the Qur'an.

of existence!» – *Ibid.*, IV, 426.15 – 427.4.

552 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.61.17 – 62.9.

§2.3 – The Temporal Coexistence of Cause and Effect: Avicenna and Rāzī

One of the corollaries of the Avicennian formulation of the principle of sufficient reason is the temporal coexistence of cause and effect: when the cause exists, the effect exists; when the cause does not exist, the effect does not exist. The present subchapter investigates a subtle but significant difference between Avicenna's and Rāzī's conceptualization of this corollary. First of all, I will present Avicenna's understanding of temporal coexistence (§2.3.1), then I will consider Rāzī's understanding of it (§2.3.2).

§2.3.1 – Avicenna's Understanding of Temporal Coexistence

There are two aspects to Avicenna's understanding of the temporal coexistence of cause and effect. The first is the rejection of causal indifference. The cause – understood as the complete cause whose causal efficiency is actualized – cannot exist both in the moment that precedes the existence of the effect and in the moment of the existence of the effect. In other words, the existence of the cause cannot be indifferent with respect to the existence of the effect. This becomes evident in Avicenna's discussion of causal priority in *Ilāhiyyāt*, IV.1. The efficient cause must exist together with the effect because the existence of the former necessarily entails that of the latter⁵⁵³. Avicenna demonstrates temporal coexistence by appealing to the principle of sufficient reason. He argues that, if the cause were not temporally coexistent with the effect, then the existence of the cause might obtain together with that of the effect as well as without that of the effect. If that were the case, the cause would be indifferent with respect to the causation of the effect (*i.e.*, the essence of the cause would imply neither causation nor non-causation). That indifference is nothing but the contingency of causation itself. Since what is contingent requires an efficient cause which discriminates its existence from its non-existence (according to the principle sufficient reason), it follows that the original cause would require some additional factor which makes its causation prevail over non-causation. In conclusion, the complete cause of the effect would be the composition of the original cause, which is indifferent with respect to causation and non-causation, and the additional factor, which makes causation prevail over non-causation⁵⁵⁴. Avicenna explicitly associates causal necessitation with temporal coexistence: both are

553 «They transposed [the notion of priority] to what possesses this consideration in relation to existence. The posited that the thing which has existence primarily, even if the other does not exist, whereas the other has existence only if the former thing has existence primarily, before the other. Like the one: the existence of multiplicity is not among the conditions of the existence of the one, whereas the existence of the one is among the conditions of the existence of multiplicity. It is not necessary to consider that the one provides existence to multiplicity or that it does not. Rather, the one is needed so that multiplicity acquires existence by means of composition of [several unities]. Then they transposed this to the obtaining of existence in another respect. Indeed, if two things exist and the existence of one of the two does not come from the other, belonging to the former *per se* or from a third thing, whereas the existence of the other comes from the former, then the other acquires the necessity of existence from the first thing – since necessity of existence does not belong to it on account of its essence and from its essence, whereas contingency belongs to it from its essence –, even though it is admissible that, every time the first thing exists, its existence entails the causation of the necessity of the existence of the other thing. [In that case], the first thing would be existentially prior to the other thing.» – *Ibid.*, I, p.164.12 – 165.4.

554 See *Ibid.*, I, p.165.9 – 167.5.

corollaries of the principle of sufficient reason⁵⁵⁵. The conceivability of temporal coexistence is corroborated by the well-known example of the hand and the key: even though the two move at the same time, the intellect judges that movement of the hand is prior to the movement of the key (whereas the intellect does not accept that the movement of the key is prior to the movement of the hand)⁵⁵⁶.

The second aspect of the Avicennian understanding of temporal coexistence is the rejection of causal pastness. The effect cannot come to exist after the cause has ceased to exist: in other words, the cause of a present existent cannot be a past existent. This position assumes that the existence of the effect is produced by an existent cause, and not by a non-existent cause. Avicenna implicitly assumes this second aspect in his discussion on the principle of sufficient reason in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5, when arguing that the contingent requires a cause for both its existence and its non-existence: the cause of existence is something existent, whereas the cause of non-existence is the non-existence of the cause of its existence.

«In sum, one of the two things [namely existence and non-existence] becomes necessary for [the contingent] not on account of its essence, but rather on account of a cause. As for the existential thing, that is by means of a cause which is an existential cause. As for the non-existential thing, that is by means of a non-existential cause which is the non-existence of the cause of the existential thing.»⁵⁵⁷

In other words, Avicenna's formulation of sufficient reason implies not only that the factor of prevalence cannot be indifferent with respect to the existence of its effect (rejection of causal indifference), but also that the factor of prevalence must be something existent (rejection of causal pastness). A present existent cannot have a cause that existed in the past and then ceased to exist. It is impossible for the effect to come to be after the cessation of the cause⁵⁵⁸. The thematization of causal pastness as something distinct from causal indifference appears in the demonstration of God's existence presented in Avicenna's *Nağāt*. As Rāzī notices, this addition sets the *Nağāt* apart from the other Avicennian *summae*, which do not mention the rejection of causal pastness as a distinct premise⁵⁵⁹. The text reads as follows.

«There is no doubt that there is existence. Every existence is either necessary or contingent. If it is necessary, the existence of something necessary is correct: that is what is researched. If the existence is contingent, we will show that the existence of the contingent gets ultimately to the Necessary Existent. Before that, we need to present some premises. Among those, that it is impossible for everything essentially contingent to have a cause that is essentially contingent, and so on up to infinity, [when all causes and effects exist] at the same time. That is because all of them

555 *Ibid.*, I, p.167.1-3.

556 See *Ibid.*, I, p.165.4-6.

557 *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.39.4-6.

558 There is a caveat to this rule, for in some cases the cause of the coming-to-be of something is different from the cause of its persistence: for example, the cause the coming-to-be of a statue is its constructor, whereas the cause of its persistence is the dryness of his material constituents (see *Nağāt*, p.572.1-4). In these cases it is possible for the cause of coming-to-be to cease while the effect persists. However, it should be noticed that this is not a real exception to the rule, for the true effect of the cause of coming-to-be is only coming-to-be, not persistence, and the complete cause of coming-to-be must exist together with coming-to-be.

559 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.130.17 – 131.3.

either exist together or do not exist together. If they do not exist together, the infinity does not obtain at the same moment, but rather one element before the other: we postpone the discourse on this.»⁵⁶⁰

Here Avicenna does not explicitly assert that the pastness of causes is impossible, nor does he explain why that is the case: he simply postpones the question. His subsequent discussion of the argument for God's existence entails the rejection of causal pastness but does little in the way of clarifying the reason behind that rejection. In brief, the argument establishes the existence of God as the first efficient cause for the existence of eternal contingent existents, as well as for the persistence (*baqā'*) of temporal contingent existents⁵⁶¹. It is noteworthy that the persistence of temporal things is explicitly distinguished from their coming-to-be, and God is not characterized as the first efficient cause of the coming-to-be of temporal things.

Avicenna underlines that it is not necessary to conflate the cause of the persistence of something with the cause of its coming-to-be: the two may be aspects of a single cause (*e.g.*, the mold which impresses and maintains a certain shape in the water), as well distinct causes altogether (*e.g.*, the artisan which shapes the statue and the dryness of the elements which maintains it in existence). The rejection of causal pastness appears in the discussion on what is the ultimate cause of the coming-to-be of temporal existents. Avicenna reasons that the cause must be something both perpetual and changing, namely the circular motion of the heavens. In the counter-factual hypothesis that there were no such a cause, we would have two options, both unacceptable. If we accepted the temporal coexistence between cause and effect, there would be an infinity of causes that come-to-be at the same moment, each supervenient cause requiring yet another cause. The absurdity of this is clear. If we rejected temporal coexistence, on the other hand, the cause of the coming-to-be of a thing at the present moment would be something that existed previously and then ceased to exist⁵⁶². This entails the causal pastness, but Avicenna does not explicitly mention why that is absurd. The reason cannot be the inconceivability of an infinite causal regress that goes into past (according to Avicenna an infinity of sequentially ordered past events is possible). An adequate reason is probably to be found in Avicenna's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.5: the cause of the existence of something is an existent thing, whereas the cause of non-existence is the non-existence of the cause.

In sum, the temporal coexistence of cause and effect has two aspects. The first is the rejection of causal indifference, which is deducible from the principle of sufficient reason. The second is the rejection of causal pastness, which is implicitly included in Avicenna's formulation of the principle.

§2.3.2 – Rāzī's Understanding of Temporal Coexistence

Rāzī clearly discriminates causal pastness (the cause exists before the effect and then ceases to exist) from causal indifference (the cause may exist both with the effect and without the effect). He devotes an entire chapter of the *Maṭālib* to showing that the Avicennian demonstration of the existence of the

⁵⁶⁰ *Nağāt*, pp.566.16 – 567.8

⁵⁶¹ See *Ibid.*, pp.570.10 – 575.14.

⁵⁶² See *Ibid.*, p.576.5 – 577.5.

Necessary Existent requires the premise that the cause must exist when the effect exists (*i.e.*, the rejection of causal pastness). Rāzī explicitly mentions that it is necessary to reject the hypothesis that the cause of a contingent thing exists before that thing and ceases to exist when that thing comes-to-be.

«You should know that, if it were not necessary for the efficient cause to be existent when the effect exists, it would not be impossible for the contingent to exist on account of a thing that was existent before it and does not persist with it.»⁵⁶³

This hypothesis must be rejected because, if every temporal contingent existent came into existence on account of a contingent cause that existed in a previous moment and then ceased to exist, there would not be an infinite regress of contingent causes and effects that exist at the same moment. Rather, there would be an infinite regress of contingent causes and effects existing in different moments of time: that is possible for the Avicennian doctrine, for Avicenna accepts the possibility of infinite past events. That kind of regress would make it impossible to reach a first cause⁵⁶⁴. It follows that it is necessary to reject the hypothesis that the cause of a temporal contingent existed before that existent and ceased to exist when the effect came-to-be.

Rāzī's reasoning is incomplete as an invalidation of Avicenna's demonstration of the existence of the Necessary Existent, for it implicitly assumes that all contingent things that are known to exist are temporal, namely that we do not know the existence of any eternal contingent existent. The hypothesis of an infinite regress of past causes does not concern the case of eternal contingent existents, and it would still be possible to argue that there is a necessarily existent first cause of eternal contingent existents. However, this becomes less relevant when we take into account Avicenna's position on God's causality: Avicenna does not say that God is the first cause of a certain class of contingent existents (eternal contingent existents) as opposed to another class (temporal contingent existents). Surely he would not settle for the claim that only a subset of contingent existents acquires existence from God.

Rāzī argues that the demonstration mentioned in the *Nağāt* is better than those presented in other Avicennian texts precisely because it explicitly considers the rejection of causal pastness as an additional premise (along with the principle of sufficient reason, the impossibility of an infinite regress of coexistent causes, and the impossibility of circular causation). At this point, the crucial question is whether Rāzī understands the rejection of causal pastness as a corollary of sufficient reason, as Avicenna seems to do: if that were the case, the rejection of causal pastness would be substantially reducible to the principle of sufficient reason.

There is reason to believe that, unlike Avicenna, Rāzī does not treat the rejection of causal pastness as implicitly included in the formulation of sufficient reason. His argument against causal pastness is

⁵⁶³ *Maṭālib*, I, 130.6-8.

⁵⁶⁴ «If that were possible, it would be possible to say that every contingent is grounded in a contingent that existed before it, without a first [contingent]. This form of regress is not false for the philosophers. Indeed, it is true, for their doctrine is that every rotation [of the heavens] is preceded by another rotation, without a first [rotation]. Since that form of regress is not impossible for them, it would not be possible for them to demonstrate that the contingent things ultimately lead to an existent that is necessary. As for when it is established that the efficient cause must be existent when the effect exists, in that case we say that, if every contingent were grounded in another contingent *ad infinitum*, there would be infinite causes and effects that exist at the same time, and so the philosopher would be capable to establish the existence of the Necessary Existent *per se*.» – *Ibid.*, I, 130.8-17.

not based on sufficient reason *per se*: it is based on the remark that the cause of an existent thing cannot be something non-existent. That is because Rāzī's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason is narrower than Avicenna's. According to Rāzī, the principle merely states that the contingent requires a factor of prevalence (*murağğih*) for its existence, but that does not imply anything about the ontological status of the factor of prevalence itself: it states neither that the factor is an existent thing, nor that it exists when the effect exists⁵⁶⁵. These two assertions need to be kept distinct from the principle of sufficient reason as such. This is not case in Avicenna, whose formulation of sufficient reason states that the cause of the existence of the effect is an existent thing (and the cause of the non-existence of the effect is the non-existence of the cause of existence), thereby implying that the factor of prevalence of existence must be something existent.

In sum, Rāzī's discrimination between the principle of sufficient reason as such and the premise concerning temporal coexistence (*i.e.*, the rejection of causal pastness) should be considered a deeper level of the analysis of Avicenna's own doctrine, not a distinct position. In other words, Rāzī's aim is not to contradict Avicenna, but rather to make explicit an element that is implicitly included in Avicenna's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason (which does not discriminate between sufficient reason as such and temporal existence understood as the rejection of causal pastness).

565 «You should know that this proof is based on several premises. The first is that each one of the two sides of the contingent prevails only for a factor of prevalence. The second is the clarification of whether this need obtains in the moment of coming-to-be or in the moment of persistence. The third is that the factor of prevalence must be an existent thing. The fourth is that it is necessary for the factor of prevalence to be existent when the effect exists. The fifth is that circular causation is absurd. The sixth is that the regress is absurd. When the discourse that establishes these six premises is completed, we have the decisive judgement that we must recognize the existence of an existent which is necessarily existent *per se*.» – *Maṭālib*, I, pp.72.16 – 73.5.

§2.4 – The Debates on the Principle of Sufficient Reason

The overall structure of this subchapter is mainly based on the discussion of sufficient reason presented in Rāzī *Maṭālib*, perhaps the most complete analysis that can be found in post-Avicennian philosophy. The subchapter encompasses five sections. The first analyses the argument for the primitivity (intuitiveness) of sufficient reason, the objections against that argument, and the answers to the objections (§2.4.1). The second part considers the arguments against the primitivity of sufficient reason and the refutations of those arguments (§2.4.2). The third part considers the claim that sufficient reason is inferentially demonstrable, and the inferences that attempt to demonstrate the principle (§2.4.3). The fourth part analyses the arguments against the soundness of the principle sufficient reason, and the objections against them (§2.4.4). The fifth part focuses on the debate on a possible corollary of the principle of sufficient reason, namely the rejection of causal pastness (§2.4.5).

§2.4.1 – The Case for Sufficient Reason as a Primitive Truth

In order to discuss whether a certain proposition is primitive, it is necessary to assume some criterion of discrimination between primitive and non-primitive propositions, namely a feature which is true of all and only the primitive propositions. Along his discussion of the principle of sufficient reason, Rāzī mentions four criteria: universal consensus, undeniability, comparison with other primitive propositions, and analytic necessitation (*i.e.*, the analysis of the concept of the subject and that of the predicate necessitates the truth of the proposition that brings them together). Consensus and undeniability are presented as criteria met by sufficient reason, so they will be taken into account here. Comparison and analytic necessitation will be analysed in the part devoted to the case against the primitivity of sufficient reason, since they are discussed as criteria the principle might fail to meet⁵⁶⁶.

Rāzī's main argument for the primitivity of sufficient reason revolves around universal consensus. He argues that all sentient beings share an intuitive cognition of the existence of causality, presenting three examples. First of all, every rational person agrees that some events or objects are signs of the existence of causes: *e.g.*, the voice of a man points to the existence of that man, a construction points to the existence of a constructor. Secondly, even children – whose rationality is immature – show some cognition of causality: when they are in their playground, and encounter an object they did not place there, they ask who placed that thing there. Thirdly, causality is understood by non-rational animals too. For example, they flee when they hear the noise produced by a snake: that is because they understand that the sound points to the existence of the snake. In sum, causality (and, consequently, the principle of sufficient reason) is validated by the *consensus omnium*, namely the agreement of all sentient beings, regardless of the level of their rational capacity. This proves that the knowledge of causality is «the strongest instance of intuitive knowledge» (*aqwà l- 'ulūmi l-badīhiyyati*)⁵⁶⁷.

⁵⁶⁶ On comparison and analytic necessitation see *Infra*, §2.3.2.

⁵⁶⁷ See *Maṭālib*, I, p.74.4-13.

Rāzī mentions three objections against the argument from consensus: the objection from the insufficiency of the argument, the objection from the non-existence of consensus, and the objection from the inadequacy of consensus as an epistemic criterion.

The first objection accepts that consensus validates the assertion of the existence of causality, while rejecting that this validates the principle of sufficient reason. The objection claims that causality is asserted not on account of sufficient reason, but rather on account of the *ex nihilo nihil fit* principle (*i.e.*, the principle that what comes-to-be after non-existence needs an efficient cause). Indeed, all the above-mentioned examples (the voice of a man, the construction, the sound of the snake, etc.) concern things that come-to-be after having been non-existent⁵⁶⁸.

Rāzī presents a preliminary answer to the objection: the principle of sufficient reason does have an intuitive appeal in itself, regardless of the examples related to coming-to-be. Indeed, one intuitively judges that none of two equivalent alternatives prevails over the other if there is no external factor which tips the scales in its favour. However, the adversary explains away the intuitive appeal of the principle of sufficient reason as such by reducing it the intuitive appeal of the *ex nihilo nihil* principle. When we conceive that contingency implies the equivalence of the two sides, we intuitively judge that the prevalence of one side requires an efficient cause because we imagine prevalence as something which comes-to-be after a state of equivalence. In other words, the intuitive appeal of the judgement «the prevalence of one of two equivalent sides requires a cause» does not come from the actual notions of prevalence and equivalence, but rather from something external to them, namely the coming-to-be of prevalence after equivalence. According to the adversary, this point is corroborated by the fact that there is wide consensus on the thesis that the persistence of a persistent contingent existent does not need any cause: the majority of rational people agree that the persistence of a construction requires no external cause. In sum, since there is consensus on the causelessness of persistence, and since the causelessness of persistence is at odds with the principle of sufficient reason (which states that all contingent existents are causally dependent, regardless of whether they come-to-be or persist), we know that there is no consensus on the principle of sufficient reason⁵⁶⁹.

Rāzī lists three final answers to this reasoning. The first argues that, even if we assumed that consensus validates only the primitivity of the *ex nihilo nihil* principle, the soundness of the principle of sufficient reason could still be deduced via an inference that assumes the *ex nihilo nihil* as a premise. The condition on account of which what comes-to-be needs a cause is either contingency or coming-to-be, and it is possible to demonstrate that coming-to-be cannot be that condition: since contingency must be the condition for causality, the principle of sufficient reason is validated. The second answer argues that many people believe in the causelessness of persistence because they share a false understanding of the nature of contingency: they believe that the persistent which is contingent becomes more adequate or more proximate to existence, while remaining contingent. When one understands that contingency cannot encompass greater and lesser proximity to existence, the intuitive appeal of the causelessness of persistence vanishes. The third answer notices that the principle of sufficient reason

568 See *Ibid.*, I, p.75.7-9.

569 *Ibid.*, I, p.75.14 – 76.4.

satisfies another criterion of primitivity, namely undeniability: all those who verbally reject it actually affirm it, when it comes to their inner thought (*damīr*)⁵⁷⁰. In other words, no one is really convinced that the principle of sufficient reason is false. This kind of defence is interestingly similar to what Avicenna and Aristotle say about the principle of non-contradiction (or excluded middle), namely that it is impossible for anyone who is lucid and in good faith to reject the truth of the principle of non-contradiction: those who do so are either confused or in bad faith⁵⁷¹.

The second objection against the argument from consensus simply rejects the existence of any consensus on the principle of sufficient reason, since several doctrines of the *mutakallimūn* entail the rejection of the principle. Three examples are presented: first of all, those who uphold the coming-to-be of the world must reject the principle of sufficient reason, since they must say that God becomes cause of the world not on account of any sufficient reason; secondly, those who uphold that voluntary deliberation consists in distinguishing between identical alternatives must reject the principle, since there is no factor which necessitates the act of deliberation; thirdly, those who uphold that all bodies are identical in their essential nature must reject sufficient reason, since any instance of corporeality would acquire its distinguishing characteristics on account of no sufficient reason. In sum, since a consistent group of people hold doctrines that reject the principle of sufficient reason, the latter cannot be primitive⁵⁷².

Rāzī answers that there is a difference between the deliberate assumption of something for oneself (*iltizām*) and the imposition of a necessary consequence on someone else (*ilzām*). The rejection of sufficient reason is imposed on the *mutakallimūn* on account of the doctrine mentioned in the examples, but that does not mean that they reject the principle by deliberate assumption: they are forced to do so, in order to defend other theses, even though that is not their aim (by primary intention). The rejection of sufficient reason is an (absurd) consequence of their doctrines, not one of their deliberate and preliminary assumptions. According to Rāzī, the possibility to reject the principle of sufficient reason by necessary imposition is compatible with the existence of universal consensus on sufficient reason itself, unlike the possibility to reject the principle by deliberate assumption⁵⁷³. Indeed, if there were no distinction between the two kinds of rejection, it would be impossible for anyone to elaborate any false doctrine whose implications are at odds with any piece of intuitive knowledge (because intuitive knowledge could not be rejected in any way). This reasoning resonates with Avicenna's remarks concerning those who reject the principle of non-contradiction: Avicenna distinguishes between the sophists, who offer a merely verbal rejection of the principle, and the confused, who come to the rejection of the principle because of some doctrinal error or specious argument that engendered confusion in them. Rāzī's remark that the rejection of sufficient reason is by way of necessary imposition follows the same line of reasoning.

The third objection against the argument from consensus challenges the adequacy of consensus itself as a criterion to establish the soundness of a proposition, claiming that the *mutakallimūn* reject at least

570 *Ibid.*, I, pp.83.12 – 84.3, 89.4-8.

571 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, pp.48.14 – 49.3; *Metaphysica*, 1005b.5-34.

572 See *Mabāhīt*, I, p.126.3-13; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.76.6 – 77.13.

573 See *Mabāhīt*, I, p.128.9-11; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.85.21 – 86.1.

three theses that are corroborated by general consensus: the first is that what comes-to-be is temporally preceded by matter; the second is that what comes-to-be occurs in a determinate moment of time and in a determinate place; the third is that what comes-to-be must have a proximate corporeal cause. All of this proves that general consensus is not a reliable epistemic criterion to ascertain the soundness of propositions. The adversary adds that there is no difference in strength between the intuitive appeal of the above-mentioned theses and that of the principle of sufficient reason. It follows that either all of those theses (sufficient reason included) are deniable, or none of them is. At this point, since some of them are deniable (*e.g.*, that what comes-to-be is temporally preceded by matter), all of them must be deniable⁵⁷⁴.

Rāzī presents a preliminary and a definitive answer to the objection. The former argues that there is a difference in strength between the intuitive appeal of efficient causality and the intuitive appeal of the other theses, precisely because the *mutakallimūn* defend the former and reject the latter. This kind of solution is weak, as Rāzī himself notices, since it is based on the confusion between two distinct forms of consensus, namely unrestricted consensus and restricted consensus. Unrestricted consensus is the agreement of all rational people without qualification, whereas restricted consensus is the agreement of rational people with the exception of dialecticians and sophists, whose opinions are influenced by the habit of disputation for the sake of disputation. The preliminary answer is fallacious precisely because it assesses the soundness of the other theses by considering unrestricted consensus (the *mutakallimūn* reject it, even though most of the people accept it) while it assesses the soundness of efficient causality by considering restricted consensus (most of the people accept it). That shift is devoid of justification, for it does not take into account the possibility for a group of dialecticians (it does not matter how small) to reject the existence of efficient causes, just like the *mutakallimūn* reject the need for matter or secondary causality. In sum, when we ascertain the soundness of several propositions by appealing to consensus, we must always adopt either one criterion (unrestricted consensus) or the other (restricted consensus). When it comes to assess the intuitive soundness of a proposition, either we always consider the opinion of dialecticians and sophists, or we never consider their opinion⁵⁷⁵.

Rāzī's definitive answer to the objection from the inadequacy of consensus notices that the objection is inconsequential for the philosophers, since they may simply maintain that the soundness of all the above-mentioned propositions is known by intuition, dismissing the disagreement of the *mutakallimūn* as sophistry or confusion⁵⁷⁶. As for those theologians who aim to reconcile the assertion of sufficient reason on the basis of consensus with the rejection of the above-mentioned doctrines, they might argue that there is a difference in strength between the intuitive appeal of sufficient reason and that of the other theses. For example, the belief that what comes-to-be must be preceded by matter might be weakened by appealing to an argument by analogy: since we see that forms and accidents come-to-be after having been absolutely non-existent, it is not implausible to conceive that matter itself comes-to-

574 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.77.18 – 79.9.

575 See *Ibid.*, I, p.79.1-13.

576 It follows that the rejection of those theses would be like the rejection of sufficient reason, namely a consequential imposition and not an initial assumption. In other words, the very answer to the second objection could be used to repel the third objection.

be. Similar arguments cannot be employed against the principle of sufficient reason, so we know that the intuitive appeal of the principle is stronger and more solid than that of the other theses⁵⁷⁷.

§2.4.2 – The Case against the Primitivity of Sufficient Reason

One of the criteria for discriminating between primitive and non-primitive propositions is the comparison with other primitive propositions: a proposition is primitive in the case that, when we compare it with another primitive proposition, we find that the former has the same intuitive strength and the same clarity as the latter.

The main argument against the primitivity of sufficient reason asserts that the latter fails to meet the criterion of comparison. When we examine «one is half of two» (an evidently primitive proposition) and «the contingent needs a factor of prevalence», we find that the former is stronger and more evident than the latter. This asymmetry in strength entails that the negation of sufficient reason is possible. Consequently, the principle is not certain (*yaqīnī*) but rather opinative (*ẓannī*)⁵⁷⁸.

Rāzī presents several preliminary objections and one definitive objection against the argument from comparison. There are four preliminary objections, each one of which is repelled by the adversary.

The first preliminary objection states that there is no asymmetry in strength between «one is half of two» and «the contingent needs a factor of prevalence». The adversary answers that the asymmetry in strength is known by intuition, and to reject it is sophistry⁵⁷⁹.

The second preliminary objection argues there can be asymmetry in strength between the two propositions, but only in certain specific instances, namely when the variables «contingent» and «factor of prevalence» designate certain concrete things (*e.g.*, when «the contingent» designates the material world, and «factor of prevalence» designates God). In other specific instances (*e.g.*, when one hears the voice of a man and deduces the existence of that man), there is no difference in strength at all between the principle of sufficient reason and «one is half of two». The adversary rejects this objection by noticing that that every primitive proposition must meet the criterion of analytic implication, meaning that the pure conceptualization (*taṣawwūr*) of its subject and its predicate must necessitate the propositional assertion (*taṣdīq*) that joins the two. In case even a single specific instance of the principle of sufficient reason failed to satisfy this criterion, the principle would not be primitive⁵⁸⁰.

The third preliminary objection recognizes that there is asymmetry in strength between the two propositions at stake, but maintains that such asymmetry is explained by a difference in conceptualization (*taṣawwūr*), not by a difference in assertion (*taṣdīq*). In other words, «one is half of two» is stronger and clearer than «the contingent needs a factor of prevalence» not because the former satisfies the criterion of analytic implication whereas the latter does not, but rather because in the former proposition the quiddity of the subject and the quiddity of the predicate are clear and easy to grasp, whereas in the latter they are obscure and difficult to grasp. The adversary answers that «the

577 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.84.14 – 85.7.

578 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.128.11; *Maṭālib*, I, p.79.18-22.

579 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.79.24-25, 80.19 – 81.3.

580 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.79.25 – 80.3, 81.6-16.

contingent needs a factor of prevalence» can be explained as follows: «what is receptive of both existence and non-existence depends on something by means of which its existence obtains». The comparison of this proposition with «one is half of two» shows that the asymmetry in strength and clarity persists even when the meanings of its subject and its predicate are clearly explained. It follows that the difference in strength must concern propositional assertion, not conceptualization⁵⁸¹.

The fourth and final preliminary objection concedes that there is asymmetry in strength between the two propositions, and that the asymmetry is explained by a difference related to the nature of the propositional assertion which connects subject and predicate. However, two propositions can be certain and primitive while differing in strength and clarity. The objection appeals to an analogy with acquired knowledge: just like the instances of acquired knowledge may differ in strength and clarity, the instances of intuitive knowledge may differ in strength and clarity. This is Rāzī's definitive objection in the *Mabāḥiṭ*, but not in the *Maṭālib*. The adversary answers that pure certainty does not accept degrees of strength, for it depends on the exclusion of the possibility of the contradictory, and such an exclusion is something binary: either a proposition excludes the possibility of its contradictory, or it does not⁵⁸².

Rāzī's definitive objection against the argument from comparison draws elements from both the first preliminary answer (there is no actual difference in strength between the two propositions) and the third (difference in strength concerns conceptualization). He claims that, when we conceive the contingent as what is equivalent with respect to both existence and non-existence, the difference in strength between the principle of sufficient reason and «one is half of two» vanishes. Rāzī adds that this answer is decisive only if one abandons the habit of dialectical contention against an adversary and turns his attention on the intuitive assent he perceives in his own self. In other words, it seems that the issue cannot be settled at the level of dialectical disputation, and that the debaters must move to the level of honest introspection and self-examination in order to assess the soundness of the principle of sufficient reason⁵⁸³.

§2.4.3 – The Case for Sufficient Reason as an Inferential Truth

Rāzī presents five inferential proofs for the principle of sufficient reason. The first is the argument from the exclusion of essential prevalence, which is ascribed to Avicenna and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī. Rāzī also remarks that Avicenna makes conflicting assertions on the issue, presenting a demonstration for the principle of sufficient reason and then claiming that the principle is intuitive: he pinpoints a possible inconsistency between the Avicennian texts⁵⁸⁴. In a nutshell, the argument from the exclusion of essential prevalence asserts that, when the contingent exists, its existence prevails over its non-existence, and that prevalence obtains either on account of the very quiddity of the contingent or on account of something external: the reason which accounts for prevalence cannot be the quiddity of the

581 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.80.4-13, 81.19 – 82.9.

582 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.128.11-13; *Maṭālib*, I, p.80.14-16, 82.12-19.

583 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.85.11-17.

584 See *Ibid.*, I, p.87.4-10.

contingent, for otherwise the contingent would be necessary, and thus we must conclude that what accounts for prevalence is an external cause⁵⁸⁵.

Rāzī rejects this proof because it fails to consider the possibility that the prevalence of the contingent obtains for no reason at all. In other words, the proof fails to discuss and reject the possibility of brute facts, namely contingent things that obtain by pure chance, on account of no reason at all, be it internal or external. If the impossibility of brute facts were known by some other means (*e.g.*, by intuition), the proof would be redundant. If that impossibility were assumed surreptitiously with no justification, the proof would be fallacious⁵⁸⁶.

The second proof for sufficient reason deduces the latter from the assumption of the *ex nihilo nihil fit* principle: since what comes-to-be needs an efficient cause, and since the reason behind causal dependence cannot be coming-to-be, that such reason must be contingency. Rāzī rejects coming-to-be as the reason for causal dependence because the reason for causal dependence must be prior to the existence of the effect, and coming-to-be is actually posterior to it, being a concomitant qualification of certain kinds of existence. This reasoning draws near (but should not be confused with) Avicenna's argument for the claim that the efficient cause has influence over the very existence of the effect and not over its coming-to-be⁵⁸⁷.

The third deductive proof for sufficient reason is based on the ontological status of prevalence (*ruḡhān*) as such. It notices that prevalence is opposite to the essential equivalence (*istiwā'*) of the contingent. Indeed, absolute equivalence prevents the contingent from existing, whereas prevalence is exactly what implies the existence of the contingent. Prevalence obtains after not having been, so it must be a real positive accident that inheres in a real subject. However, that subject cannot be the existence of the contingent, since in that case prevalence would be both prior to the existence of the contingent (being what implies it) and posterior to it (being something that inheres in it). Thus, prevalence must subsist in something that is not the contingent: its efficient cause⁵⁸⁸.

The fourth proof for sufficient reason is based on the invariance of the implications of contingency. It claims that, since causal dependence (or its absence) is one of the implications of the quiddity of contingency, and since the implications of quiddities do not differ, there are only two alternatives: either all contingent things are causally dependent, or none of them is. Given that we know by intuition that some contingent things (*e.g.*, human acts) are causally dependent, we can deduce that all contingent things are causally dependent⁵⁸⁹. This proof is structurally similar to the Bahšāmi proof for the causal dependence of what comes-to-be: the Bahšāmis deduce that all things which comes-to-be depends on a cause from the premise that some things which come-to-be (*i.e.*, human voluntary acts) are causally dependent on a cause (human agents).

The fifth demonstration of sufficient reason is based on the nature of time, and on its infinite extension in particular. Here I do not aim to delve into the details of Rāzī's discussion of the infinity of

585 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, p.38.12-17; *Maṭālib*, I, p.87.12-14.

586 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.87.14 – 88.5; *Šarḥ*, II, pp.345.17 – 346.8.

587 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.88.11-15. Cf. *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.259.11 – 263.2.

588 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.88.16 – 89.7.

589 See *Ibid.*, I, p.89.8-18.

temporal extension. It suffices to say that the argument assumes time as a whole to be both essentially contingent (being a sum of essentially contingent parts) and unceasing (the coming-to-be of each one of the parts of time is posterior to non-existence, that posteriority being temporal and thus requiring a previous instant of time). At this point, if the existence of time prevailed over its non-existence by pure chance (*i.e.*, if the existence of time were a brute fact), it would be possible for time as a whole to terminate, since everything that exists by pure chance can cease to exist by pure chance: that contradicts the necessarily unceasing nature of time that has been demonstrated. Consequently, there must be an external cause which necessitates the existence of time in an unceasing way⁵⁹⁰.

§2.4.4 – The Case against the Principle of Sufficient Reason

Rāzī's *Maṭālib* lists no less than eighteen arguments against the principle of sufficient reason. They can be grouped into eight distinct categories. I will present only the most outstanding arguments pertaining to each category.

The first category encompasses revolves around the causelessness of persistence: if the contingent were dependent on a cause, the persistence of the persistent would depend on a cause; since the consequent is false, the antecedent must be false. The implication between antecedent and consequent is demonstrated by noticing that contingency is an essential predicate of contingent quiddities, and thus the contingent is contingent regardless of whether it comes-to-be or whether it persists. The falsity of the consequent (persistence depends on a cause) is shown by arguing that the causal dependence of persistence would lead to the «instantiation of the instantiated» (*taḥṣīl al-ḥāsil*): *i.e.*, what is already existent would be made existent another time. That is absurd, and so the causal dependence of persistence is absurd⁵⁹¹.

Rāzī presents a preliminary and a definitive objection against this argument. The former argues that what the cause has influence over is not the quiddity of the persistent thing in itself, but rather its persistence. The adversary answers that the persistence of a persistent thing is either the same as that thing or something different from it. In the former case, the absurdity of the re-instantiation of the instantiated would follow. In the latter case, the cause would not have causal efficiency over something that persists, but rather over a supervenient accident called «persistence» (which does not persist because it comes-to-be after the first moment of the existence of the persistent thing). The definitive objection against the argument of the causelessness of persistence consists in challenging how the adversary conceives the instantiation of the instantiated in relation to the case at stake. Rāzī argues that there are two ways to conceive the instantiation of the instantiated: either it means that the cause gives the effect a second instance of existence, additional to the first instance of existence that belongs to the effect *per se*, or it means that the cause gives the effect its one and only instance of persistent existence. The former may be absurd, but does not apply to the case at stake. The latter applies to the causes of

590 See *Ibid.*, I, p.89.19 – 90.18.

591 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.91.4-7, 92.2-10.

persistence and is not absurd: the cause gives existence to the existent in the sense that it what exists its one and only persistent existence, not a second additional existence⁵⁹².

The second category of arguments against the principle of sufficient reason revolves around the voluntaristic understanding of will as the faculty which can discriminate between identical things, and thus is not subject to the principle of sufficient reason. Ġazālī mentions two ways to answer to those who reject this account of voluntary deliberation by claiming that it does not correspond to how human voluntary deliberation works (there is always something that tips the scales in favour of one of the alternatives). Firstly, it may be that human will cannot distinguish between identicals, but that does not prove that divine will cannot do so. Secondly, it may be possible to imagine a man placed in front of two objects that are absolutely identical as far as the goal of his action is concerned (*e.g.*, a hungry man placed in front of two absolutely identical dates). It is absurd to dismiss a similar situation as impossible or to say that, in case that situation were possible, that man would remain forever hesitant, incapable to choose between the two identical alternatives. As a consequence, we must accept that will is capable to distinguish between identicals⁵⁹³.

The first Ġazālīan position (God's will may be completely different from human will) is generally left undiscussed by subsequent authors, even though Rāzī approves it in one of his works at least (the *Arba 'īn*)⁵⁹⁴. As for the second Ġazālīan position (human will must be capable to distinguish between identicals, because it is possible to imagine alternatives that are completely identical for the will, and indefinite hesitation in front of equivalent alternatives is absurd), there are three ways to challenge it.

The first is to maintain that the hypothesis of motivational equivalence is impossible: there is always something that distinguishes one option from the other (*e.g.*, habit, position of the objects, etc.). This can be corroborated by the Avicennian remark that the motivation of a voluntary action may be produced by a psychological process that is not grasped by conscious thought (Avicenna speaks of «desire and imagination without thought», *tašawwuq wa-taḥayyul bi-lā fikr*), either because it is fleeting and non-persistent, or for some other reason⁵⁹⁵. Ṭūsī mentions this approach, arguing that the sufficient reason which prompts an agent to choose between two equivalent alternatives may be some unconscious process the agent has no actual cognition of. In other words, the two alternatives are only apparently identical, namely identical only inasmuch as the conscious cognition of the agent is concerned: when his unconscious psychological processes are taken into account, the alternatives cease to be identical⁵⁹⁶.

The second way to challenge Ġazālī's second position is mentioned by Rāzī. It grants that a situation of motivational equivalence may indeed happen, while arguing that it is possible to suppose that the agent would hesitate in such a situation. The knowledge that hesitation can occur is something intuitive, and everyday examples corroborate it. Ibn al-Malāḥimī agrees on the plausibility of

592 See *Ibid.*, I, p.92.11-17, 115.6-13.

593 See *Tahāfut*, pp.22.2 – 23.15; *Maḥālib*, I, 108.8-11.

594 See *Arba 'īn*, I, p.323.13-21. 75 183

595 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.287.11-288.17.

596 See *Resāle-ye Ġabr va Qadar*, in *The Metaphysics of Ṭūsī*, p.24.

hesitation⁵⁹⁷. Rāzī stresses that the psychological factors which constitute the sufficient reason of voluntary choices are in constant and rapid flux: they come-to-be and vanish so quickly that it is almost impossible to completely grasp them. This suggests that the intuitive absurdity of Ġazālī's example of a man starving in front of identical dates is not to be explained by the absurdity of hesitation *per se*, but rather by the absurdity of the indefinite prolongation of hesitation, which in Rāzī's perspective is absurd not because hesitation is absurd *per se*, but rather because its prolongation requires a prolonged condition of static motivational equivalence, namely a persistent equilibrium between the factors of motivation. Such an equilibrium is implausible precisely because it requires the indefinite persistence of what is not persistent (*i.e.*, the mental states of the individual)⁵⁹⁸.

A third way to challenge Ġazālī's second position is also mentioned by Rāzī. It consists in conceding both that motivational equivalence may happen and that, in case it did happen, the human agent could not remain hesitant: however, one could argue that the influence of an external efficient cause (e.g., God, or the heavenly intellects) is the sufficient reason which interrupts hesitation and justifies the choice of one alternative over the other. In other words, Rāzī appeals to an occasionalist account of the act of voluntary deliberation: even if it were possible for a man to be placed in front of alternatives that are identical as far as his goal is concerned, he would choose one of the two on account of the action of an unseen transcendent cause (e.g., God) which infuses him with the volition to choose one of the two and not the other. It is crucial to notice that the alternatives would be indiscernible inasmuch as the goal of the human agent is concerned, and not indiscernible inasmuch as the external cause is concerned. This point is what sets Rāzī's challenge apart from Ṭūsī's and Avicenna's: the sufficient reason which explains choice comes directly from an external cause, not from the dynamics of human psychology⁵⁹⁹.

The third category of proofs against the principle of sufficient reason encompasses arguments for the freedom of the will that do not require the assumption that voluntary deliberation consists in the act of distinguishing between identicals. These arguments are suitable for defending both Ġazālī's pure voluntarism and Ibn al-Malāḥimī's weak voluntarism. The main arguments for free will are those which defend its primitivity, mentioned by Ibn al-Malāḥimī and Rāzī.

The first argument states that we know by intuition that our actions depend on our volition. That is because we intuitively know that the following conditionals are true: if we had not wanted to perform an action we performed, we would not have performed it; and if we had wanted to perform an action we did not perform, we would have performed it⁶⁰⁰. Rāzī objects by conceding the premise while rejecting the conclusion: even though we do know by intuition that our actions depend on our volition, that does not validate free will. Our volition itself comes-to-be either on account of another instance of our volition (which entails an infinite regress), or by pure chance, or on account of an external cause. The possibility of the third option entails that primitive knowledge does not validate free will⁶⁰¹.

597 See *Tuhfa*, p.49.2-4.

598 See *Maṭālib*, III, pp.59.2 – 60.6; IX, pp.29.7 – 30.17.

599 See *Ibid.*, I, p.119.8-12; III, p.43.12-16.

600 See *Arba 'in*, II, p.321.8 – 323.21; *Maṭālib*, III, p.60.9-11; *Tuhfa*, p.50.12-15.

601 See *Maṭālib*, III, p.60.11-18.

The second argument for the primitivity of free will states that we know by intuition that some actions are ethically meaningful whereas others are not: *e.g.*, a man beating another is ethically meaningful, a stone falling from height is not. The difference between these kinds of actions is explained by the difference between the agents that perform them: a man is a voluntary agent, whereas a stone is a natural cause. Voluntary agents differ from natural causes because their actions are contingent and free⁶⁰². Rāzī presents two main objections against this argument. First of all, contingency of action is not the only trait which distinguishes voluntary agents from natural causes: there are also self-consciousness (voluntary agents know that their actions come from them, whereas natural causes do not) and variability (the actions of voluntary agents vary on account of the variation of the motivations of the agents, whereas the actions of natural causes do not). It follows that what makes a certain action ethically meaningful does not need to be its contingency. Secondly, the argument assumes that ethical judgments are an objective matter: *i.e.*, that there are objective ethical truths objectively which can be discovered by pure reason. However, according to Rāzī (and the Aš‘arites), that is not the case, for ethical judgements are actually subjective convictions devoid of objective value. It follows that ethical judgements are insignificant for the discussion of objective reality (*i.e.*, the assessment of whether voluntary actions are contingent or not)⁶⁰³.

The fourth category of arguments against the principle of sufficient reason encompasses a single proof discussed by Avicenna, Ġazālī, and Rāzī: coming-to-be contradicts at least one of the premises which lead to the assertion of an eternal and necessary cause (*i.e.*, the principle of sufficient reason, the temporal co-existence of the cause and the effect, the rejection of circularity, or the rejection of an infinite regress)⁶⁰⁴. Since the principle of sufficient reason is the most specific of those premises, it is reasonable to understand the argument as an objection against the principle, at least by primary intention. In a nutshell, the argument from coming-to-be asserts that, if we assumed the principle of sufficient reason, then an absolutely eternal cause could not be the proximate cause for a thing that comes-to-be, since the conditions for the causal action of that eternal cause either were satisfied before the coming-to-be of the effect or not. The former option contradicts sufficient reason, since the moment of the existence of the effect and the moment of its non-existence would be equivalent for the cause. The latter option does not solve the problem, since the conditions of the causal action would be things that come-to-be, and thus they would need yet another cause.

There are three objections against the argument from coming-to-be. The first is that what comes-to-be can be the effect of an unchanging efficient cause because what changes is the receptivity or preparation of the substrate (*i.e.*, the receptive cause). Ġazālī rebuts that this objection is futile, for the receptivity of the substrate is something that comes-to-be, and everything which comes-to-be is causally dependent. It follows that the defender of sufficient reason fails to explain why the substrate becomes receptive (*i.e.*, why its receptivity comes-to-be), for the appeal to another efficient cause or to the receptivity of another substrate would produce a regress. More generally, this kind of objection is

602 See *Ibid.*, III, pp.58.18 – 59.2; *Tuḥfa*, pp.50.15 – 51.3

603 See *Maṭālib*, III, pp.59.16 – 60.6; IX, p.271.8-9.

604 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.110-112, 119-120, 158-162; *Naḡāt*, pp.276.12 – 277.11; *Tahāfut*, pp.27-29.

already implicitly refuted by the argument from coming-to-be, for the receptivity of the substrate is to be counted among the conditions of the causal action of the efficient cause⁶⁰⁵.

The second objection is explicitly defended by Avicenna in the *Nağāt* and rejected by Ġazālī in the *Tahāfut*: between the purely eternal causes and the purely temporal effects there is an intermediate cause which is both eternal and temporal, namely the circular movement of the heavens (or maybe the volition of the celestial souls, which is the proximate cause of that movement). That efficient cause is eternal and unceasing as a whole, as well as temporal in its homogeneous parts which come-to-be in continuous succession: that is the cause of what comes-to-be. For Ġazālī this objection is unsound, since it is still possible to distinguish between the temporal aspect and the eternal aspect of the cause. Even if we conceded that the cause of everything that comes-to-be is a first movement which is eternal and temporal at the same time, we would need to ask whether that movement is cause inasmuch as it is eternal or inasmuch as it is temporal. In the former case, there would be something eternal (the movement inasmuch as it is eternal) which causes what comes-to-be (this would contradict the principle of sufficient reason). In the latter case, there would be something temporal (the movement inasmuch as it comes-to-be) which has no cause, since we assumed that the movement of the heavens is the cause of all what comes-to-be (there can be no additional cause)⁶⁰⁶.

The third objection is mentioned by Rāzī, who tries to conceive a condition for the causal action of the eternal cause that both comes-to-be and does not need yet another external cause. He argues that the condition of the causal action of the eternal cause over what comes-to-be is to be found in the cessation of the thing that existed before what currently comes-to-be. In other words, when the previous temporal existent ceases to exist, all the conditions for the existence of the subsequent temporal existent are satisfied, and so the eternal cause produces the subsequent temporal existent. The cessation of the previous temporal existent is clearly a condition that comes-to-be. However, the crucial point at stake is whether that condition is causally dependent or not: indeed, if it were causally dependent, Rāzī's objection would not solve to the problem raised by the argument from coming-to-be. This issue is discussed in a counter-objection mentioned by Rāzī. The adversary argues that the cessation of the previous temporal existent is either due to its very quiddity or due to an external cause. In the former case there would be an absurdity, since what ceases on account of its own quiddity cannot exist at all. In the latter case, that external cause would be the coming-to-be of the subsequent temporal existent. However, the condition of that coming-to-be is cessation itself: that is circular⁶⁰⁷. Rāzī offers no explicit answer to this counter-argument. However, it seems that the only possible solution is to maintain that temporal existents cease to exist by themselves, explaining that essential cessation does not mean that temporal existents are essentially incapable to exist, but rather that they are essentially incapable to persist for more than one instant. As Avicenna notices, this kind of position leads to an atomistic doctrine of time. However, Rāzī does defend temporal atomism in his late works⁶⁰⁸.

605 See *Tahāfut*, p.28.5-14.

606 See *Nağāt*, p.577.6-10; *Tahāfut*, pp.28.16 – 30.6.

607 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.119.19 – 120.13; 160.11-14, 161.19 – 162.2.

608 See *Arba ʿīn*, II, pp.3-17; *Maṭālib*, VI, pp.29-82.

The fifth category of arguments against sufficient reason encompasses Ġazālī's arguments from the configuration of the material world. The first argument is demonstrative: all bodies share an identical essence, namely pure undifferentiated corporeality. Thus, each instance of corporeality acquires its distinctive characteristics by an arbitrary allocation performed by a free choosing agent (God) on account of no sufficient reason (all bodies being essentially equivalent). The second argument is a reduction to absurdity: the Avicennian account of the structure the material world is inconsistent with the principle of sufficient reason. In particular, it is possible to list some examples where the actual configuration of the world is completely equivalent to its possible alternatives: the direction of the rotation of the celestial sphere, and the location of the unmoving poles of that rotation. It follows that one of the equivalent alternatives is instantiated on account of no sufficient reason. Rāzī adds other examples: the precise location of the celestial bodies in the sphere, the location of the world in the extra-cosmic void (in case one accepts the existence of the extra-cosmic void, which is rejected by Avicenna)⁶⁰⁹.

Rāzī notices that the basic premise of the first argument is hard to validate, for it is possible (although implausible) to claim that bodies have completely different essences, and corporeality is a concomitant accident of those essences. As for the second argument, he says that a possible answer would be to argue that the matter of the celestial sphere may acquire only one kind of movement, in terms of both direction and inclination, and that movement is the sufficient reason on account of which the poles are individuated⁶¹⁰.

The sixth category of proofs against sufficient reason includes three distinct arguments that revolve around the ontological status of causal efficiency (*mu'attiriyya, ta'īr*), namely the factual influence exerted by the cause over the effect⁶¹¹. The main argument asserts that no thing can be the cause of another thing since causal efficiency has no place among the things that exist. Indeed, all the six options that are on the table must be rejected. Efficiency cannot be [i] the cause itself, for the essence of the cause can be conceptually separated from its efficiency. It cannot be [ii] the effect itself, since efficiency is what explains the existence of the effect (if efficiency were the effect, the effect would explain the existence of itself, and thus it would be necessary *per se*). It cannot be [iii] something unreal and negative, for the absence of efficiency is something negative, and efficiency is opposite to the absence of efficiency, and what is opposite to something negative is affirmative. It cannot be [iv] a mere concept existing in the mind, for that concept would need to correspond to something extra-mental. Efficiency cannot be [v] a real and positive accident subsistent in the essence of the cause, since that accident would require a cause in order to exist, and thus an infinite regress would follow. Finally, efficiency cannot be [vi] a real and positive substance which subsists in itself, for efficiency is an attribute of the cause (as well as a relation between cause and effect).

Rāzī rebuts that similar arguments can be used to invalidate things that are known by intuition, like the fact that a certain thing exists in the present moment of time, or the fact that a certain thing exists in

609 See *Tahāfut*, pp.24 – 27; *Maṭālib*, I, p.112.11-12..

610 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.120.14-19, 177.6-12..

611 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.99.13 – 103.14, 112.22 – 113.12, 114.11-15, 120.22 – 121.3, 121.12-13.

a certain place. For example, one could ask what is the ontological status of the relation between the present moment of time and the thing that exists in the present moment, and deduce that the relation cannot have an ontological status: it cannot be the same as present moment (because the present moment can be conceived without conceiving the existent thing), it cannot be the same as the existent thing (because that thing may also exist in another moment), and it cannot be something additional to the two (because that additional thing would exist in the present moment too, and so would have yet another relation to the present moment). According to Rāzī, this is the sign that at least one of the premises of the argument from the ontological status of causal efficiency is false⁶¹². Such an objection is incomplete, however, because it does not pinpoint which of those premises should be rejected, and why.

The seventh category of arguments against sufficient reason comprises three proofs revolving around the ontological status of causal dependence (*iḥtiyāğ, iftiqār*)⁶¹³. The main argument is similar to the one presented against causal efficiency: causal dependence have no place among the things that exist. First of all, dependence cannot be [i] the effect itself, for the effect as such can be conceptually separated from the fact that it depends on a cause. Secondly, dependence cannot be [ii] something negative, because the absence of dependence is something negative, and what is opposite to something negative is positive. Finally, dependence cannot be [iii] a positive accident subsisting in the essence of the dependent thing, for that would imply an infinite regress (dependence itself would be dependent on a cause, and the dependence of dependence would be yet another positive accident).

Rāzī answers that we must conceive dependence as something unreal, not as a real existent thing, and that the argument presented to repel the second option (dependence is negative) is sophistic because it could be used to demonstrate that non-existence is something positive, which is clearly absurd. In particular, it could be said that being opposite to something must be positive because the absence of opposition is negative: non-existence is opposite to existence, and thus non-existence must be positive, for a positive accident cannot be said of something negative⁶¹⁴.

The eight and last category of arguments against the principle of sufficient reason consists in the proof from the causal dependence of non-existence. If the principle of sufficient reason were sound, then the non-existence of the contingent would be causally dependent. However, it is impossible for non-existence to be causally dependent, so the principle cannot be sound. The argument validates the implication between the principle and the causal dependence of non-existence by remarking that existence and non-existence are equivalent for the contingent: if its existence is causally dependent, its non-existence must be causally dependent too. If that were not the case, one of two equivalent alternatives could obtain on account of no sufficient reason. As for the impossibility of the causal dependence of non-existence, the argument notices that causation amounts to the production of some positive state or thing, and non-existence is not like that: non-existence is pure nothingness, absolute negation⁶¹⁵.

612 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.104.13 – 106.6.

613 See *Ibid.*, I, p.93.16 – 95.18, 113.21 – 114.10, 116.19 – 117.2.

614 See *Ibid.*, I, p.116.4-14.

615 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.106.8 – 107.5.

Rāzī mentions two objections. The first concedes that the non-existence of the contingent is not causally dependent, while maintaining that its existence is. This entails that the principle of sufficient reason applies to existence even though it does not apply to non-existence. The second objection argues that the causal dependence of non-existence is not impossible, in case non-existence depends on another instance of non-existence. This is Avicenna's position: the cause of non-existence is the non-existence of the cause of existence⁶¹⁶.

§2.4.5 – The Debate on a Corollary of Sufficient Reason: the Temporal Co-Existence of Cause and Effect

Temporal coexistence has two important aspects. The first is the rejection of causal indifference: it is impossible for the cause to be indifferent (*i.e.*, contingent) with respect to its production of the effect. The second aspect is the rejection of causal pastness: it is impossible for the cause to exist before the effect exists and then cease to exist.

Both Avicenna and Rāzī understand the rejection of causal indifference as a corollary of the principle of sufficient reason. As for the rejection of causal pastness, there is a slight divergence between the two. Avicenna's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason includes that the cause of an existent thing must be an existent thing, whereas the non-existence of the cause is the cause of the non-existence of the effect: this formulation entails that the cause must exist in the moment when the effect exists. On the other hand, Rāzī distinguishes the principle of sufficient reason, understood as the assertion that the contingent is causally dependent, from the issue of the ontological status of the cause of the contingent. The assertion that the cause of the existence of a thing is an existent thing is not included in the assertion that the contingent is causally dependent. It follows that, for Rāzī, the rejection of causal pastness is not a corollary of sufficient reason as such: it is rather a corollary of the premise which assesses the ontological status of the efficient cause.

Rāzī's argument for the rejection of causal pastness is straightforward. If the cause existed in a moment that precedes that of the existence of the effect and then ceased to exist, the cause would have causal efficiency over the effect either in the first moment or in the following moment. Both options are absurd. The former is absurd because in the first moment the effect does not exist, and so the cause does not have causal efficiency. The latter option is absurd because in the following moment the cause does not exist, and what is non-existent cannot be the cause of what is existent⁶¹⁷.

Rāzī mentions a possible objection: the cause has causal efficiency in the sense that it necessitates the existence of the effect in the second moment. He quickly dismisses this reasoning: for the cause to have causal efficiency in a certain moment, it is necessary that something positive exist at that moment. It follows that the above-mentioned disjunction is forced on the adversary: either he says that the cause has causal efficiency when the cause is existent and the effect is not (which is absurd because the cause would not have any causal efficiency whatsoever), or he says that the cause has causal efficiency at the

616 See *Ibid.*, I, p.118.11-19.

617 See *Ibid.*, I, p.131.4-9.

moment when the cause is non-existent and the effect is existent (which is absurd because what does not exist cannot be cause of what exists)⁶¹⁸.

Rāzī's *Maṭālib* presents and refutes three kinds of arguments against the temporal coexistence of cause and effect⁶¹⁹.

The first kind of argument consists in the proof from the existential status of eternal causes, and God in particular. Cause and effect may be temporally coexistent when both exist in time. However, in the case of God and the world, the cause does not exist in time, so it is unsound to say that God and the world coexist, both of them being eternal. This kind of reasoning can be traced back to Šahrastānī, who corroborates his rejection of any «togetherness» between God and the world by mentioning an analogy with place. When both the cause and the effect have local existence (*i.e.*, when they both exist in a place), it is correct to say that they are together in place. However, when the cause does not have local existence, it is not correct to say that cause and effect coexist in the same place. The same argumentation can be transposed to time and temporal existence⁶²⁰.

Rāzī objects that primitive knowledge contradicts those who say that God is not temporal: we intuitively know that God exists in the present moment, just like all the non-eternal things. It is not absurd to say that an eternal and unchanging thing like God is temporal, in the sense that its existence has a relation with time. The only reason to say that eternal things are not temporal is the assumption that time is an accident of movement and change, for that would imply that an eternal thing would need to be moving and changing in order to be temporal. However, according to Rāzī, it is possible to demonstrate that time is not an accident of moment and change, being rather a self-subsistent substance whose parts come-to-be and cease-to-be on account of their very essence.

The second kind of arguments against the temporal coexistence of cause and effect encompasses three counter-examples, situations where it appears that the cause exists before the effect and ceases to exist when the effect comes into existence. The first is the throwing of a projectile. When we throw a projectile, we see that it travels some distance before landing. That is because the impulse produced by the thrower at the first moment produces another impulse at the subsequent moment, and so on. If that were not the case, the projectile would fall to the ground as soon as it leaves the hand. The second example is the fall of a heavy object: each part of its movement is either the efficient cause of the part of movement that exists in the following moment of time, or its preparatory cause. The third example concerns the cognitive act of acquiring knowledge through speculation: speculative thinking necessitates the acquisition of knowledge, even though that acquisition comes-to-be after speculation. Speculation is the cause of the acquisition of knowledge, but cannot occur together with the acquisition of knowledge, for it is absurd to speculate on what is already known.

Rāzī's objection against the first and the second example is the same: there is a persistent cause which produces each one of the parts of the moment (*e.g.*, in the case of the projectile, that cause is a force infused in the projectile by the hand). However, that persistent cause produces those parts in

618 See *Ibid.*, I, p.131.9-17.

619 See *Ibid.*, I, p.131.18 – 133.18.

620 See *Nihāyat al-aqdām*. pp.9.4 – 11.17.

succession, and not all at once, since the condition of its production of any given part of the movement is the cessation of the part that existed in the previous moment. This position seems to imply that each part of movement ceases *per se*. As for the third example, Rāzī argues that speculation is the cause of the acquisition of knowledge only if by «speculation» we mean the knowledge of the aggregation of all the premises that lead to a certain conclusion. However, the knowledge of the aggregation of the premises occurs together with the knowledge of the conclusion.

The third kind of arguments against temporal coexistence encompasses two proofs based on the nature of causal efficiency. The first argues that temporal coexistence implies that the cause gives existence to what already exists, and giving existence to what already exists is absurd. The second remarks that the cause must be prior to the effect and that such priority must be temporal: the existence of the cause must be complete before the effect comes into existence.

Rāzī objects that the first proof fails to understand what «giving existence to the existent» means. The Avicennian doctrine of causality does not say that the cause gives a second instance of existence to what already possesses an instance of existence *per se*, but rather that the cause gives the effect its one and only instance of existence. As for the second proof, Rāzī concedes that the cause is prior to the effect, while arguing that such priority is essential, and not temporal (just like Avicenna does). In other words, the cause is prior to the effect in the sense that the cause is that thing on account of which the effect exists (whereas the cause does not exist on account of the effect), not in the sense that the cause exists before the effect in time.

§2.5 – Concluding Remarks

Avicenna's formulation of the principle of sufficient reason and its corollaries is crucial for the subsequent debates: every contingent existent requires a cause, namely a factor which makes its existence more appropriate than its non-existence. The cause is both necessary and sufficient condition for the effect, meaning that the existence of the cause entails the existence of the effect, and the non-existence of the cause entails the non-existence of the effect. The Avicennian take on sufficient reason have two important implications, namely the rejection of causal pastness and the rejection of causal indifference, which connects with necessitarianism: everything that exists is either necessary *per se* or necessary on account of its cause. Furthermore, the principle of sufficient reason is absolutely universal: it applies to natural causation as well as to voluntary causation, and to divine causation.

Both accounts that oppose the Avicennian position revolve around the nature of voluntary action. Ġazālī's strong voluntarism asserts that the will consists in the capacity to choose between equivalent alternatives, with no need for a sufficient reason. Ibn al-Malāḥimī's weak voluntarism concedes that a voluntary action is performed only if there is a reason (motive) which makes that action more adequate than inaction (and more adequate than the contrary action). However, such reason is only a necessary condition for the action, for Ibn al-Malāḥimī accepts that what is more adequate to existence can remain contingent, that greater adequacy notwithstanding. It follows that it is possible for the agent not to perform an action even though there are reasons which make that action more adequate than inaction: the freedom of the will consists in the possibility of abstaining from an action that is more adequate than inaction.

Rāzī's position on the applicability of the principle of sufficient reason is extremely problematic. On the one hand, he defends the universal formulation of the principle, rejecting the idea that human voluntary actions may be without any sufficient reason. On the other hand, he is inconsistent on whether the principle applies to God's actions or not.

Rāzī presents an explicit thematization of the epistemic status of sufficient reason, criticizing Avicenna on this issue. Avicenna's account of the epistemic status of the principle is unclear, since he presents apparently conflicting assertions. On the one hand, in all of his major works he formulates what can be understood as an inferential proof for the principle (the argument from the impossibility of essential prevalence, namely the impossibility for the existence of the contingent to prevail over its non-existence on account of the very quiddity of the contingent). On the other hand, in the *Iṣārāt* Avicenna explicitly assert that he principle is primitive. A possibility to reconcile might reside in Avicenna's own remark in the *Iṣārāt*: the principle is primitive but the intellect may find itself unaware of it and thus look for proofs. Such proofs would not be proper demonstrations, but rather reminders of an intuitive truth, ways to make the mind focus on what it already knows (at least implicitly). This is an extension of the applicability of reminders from the case of representational primitive knowledge (*i.e.*, knowledge of conceptualizations, like that of existence) to the case of propositional primitive knowledge (*i.e.*, knowledge of assertions, like the principle of sufficient reason).

Rāzī believes the principle of sufficient reason to be intuitive, presenting a thorough defence of such a claim. He mentions four criteria of primitivity, claiming that sufficient reason satisfies at least three of them: *consensus omnium*, undeniability, comparison with other primitive propositions. This leads to a peculiar situation where the validation of knowledge that should be primitive requires the introduction of a pseudo-deductive mediation: *e.g.*, the principle of sufficient reason is primitive because it is upheld by universal consensus, and what is upheld by universal consensus is primitive. Similar arguments should be considered reminders, not proper deductive demonstrations.

Rāzī's defence of the primitivity of sufficient reason presents noteworthy analogies with the Avicennian defence of the principle of non-contradiction in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I.8⁶²¹. Avicenna classifies the deniers of non-contradiction in two categories: those who are in bad faith (the sophists), and those who are in good faith (the confused). Such a classification is not explicitly thematized in Rāzī's discourse, but looms in its background. Against sophists, Rāzī argues that their rejection of the principle of sufficient reason is merely verbal and dialectical, and thus null: they reject the principle in their words (*lisān*), but accept it in their inner thought (*damīr*). He adds that the assertions of sophists should be disregarded, when it comes to assess whether there is universal consensus on a certain piece of knowledge. As for the confused, Rāzī notices that there is a difference between deliberately assuming a certain doctrine and suffering the imposition of that doctrine as a consequence of another doctrine: those who come to deny the principle of sufficient reason in good faith are forced to do so as a consequence of their adherence to some other belief (*e.g.*, free will as freedom of indifference, the coming-to-be of the world), not because they deliberately aim to deny the principle.

More in general, Rāzī calls for a shift in the basic attitude one should assume while assessing the soundness of sufficient reason, namely a shift from the level of dialectical contention with an opponent to the level of the analysis of one's own cognitive experience. At its core, such an exhortation draws near to Avicenna's sarcastic remark concerning the denier of the principle of non-contradiction: let him jump into the fire, because for him fire and non-fire are one and the same (his experimental knowledge defies his verbal rejection of non-contradiction). Rāzī appears conscious that debate has limitations as an epistemic tool: some things lie outside the scope of discursive knowledge, and the soundness of the principle of sufficient reason is probably to be counted among those things.

Despite all of this, Rāzī attempt at shifting the focus from dialectical contention to immediate experience does not entail the exclusion of deductive reasoning and dialectical discussion on the issue at hand. Rather, that appeal emerges alongside (or even at the culmination of) multiple chains of logical mediations which take the form of proofs, objection and answers concerning the principle of sufficient reason. In sum, Rāzī's methodology is somewhat eclectic, and integrates three different kinds of argumentation: appeal to one's own direct internal experience, reminders of primitivity (*i.e.*, proofs that assume some criterion of primitivity and show that sufficient reason satisfies that criterion), answers to the arguments against primitivity, and actual deductive demonstrations (*i.e.*, proofs that dispense with the claim that sufficient reason is primitive and aim to deduce it from the conjunction of some premises).

621 See *Šifā'* – *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, pp.48.14 – 54.2.

Concerning the deductive demonstrations of the principle of sufficient reason, two arguments stand out: that from the *ex nihilo nihil fit* and that from the invariance of the essential implications of quiddities. The former assumes that the causal dependence of what comes-to-be is known by intuition, and proves that coming-to-be cannot be the reason for causal dependence (because coming-to-be is a concomitant qualification of the existence of a thing, and thus must be posterior to it): consequently, that reason must be contingency. This is a crucial element of Rāzī's reassessment of the classical *kalām* proof from the coming-to-be of the material world, which abandons both the perspective of the Aš'arites and the Baḡdadian Mu'tazilites (we know by intuition that coming-to-be is the reason for causal dependence) and that of the Baṣran Mu'tazilites (we know that coming-to-be is the reason for causal dependence via a deductive inference that assumes that man is the cause of his voluntary actions that come-to-be and extends causal dependence to everything that comes-to-be). He rejects the former perspective, noticing that what is known by intuition is that what comes-to-be requires a cause that comes-to-be, not a cause that was existent before the effect came-to-be. Rāzī also refutes the Bahšāmi demonstration, as I will show in a moment.

The second main deductive demonstration of sufficient reason is the argument from the invariance of the essential implications of quiddities: every contingent thing is causally dependent because some contingent things (*e.g.*, human actions) are causally dependent, and causal dependence (or its absence) is an essential implication of the quiddity of contingency (the essential implications of quiddities cannot vary). In sum, either all contingent things are causally dependent, or none of them is: since some contingent things are causally dependent, every contingent thing must be causally dependent. One might challenge this reasoning by transposing one of the objections that Rāzī himself presents against the Bahšāmi proof for the claim that coming-to-be is the reason for causal dependence. The Bahšāmis argue that coming-to-be is the reason for causal dependence because we know that we are the causes of our voluntary actions, which are things that come-to-be. Rāzī's objection goes as follows. First of all, there is no way to validate the claim that human actions are causally dependent on man itself (constant conjunction does not entail causation). Secondly, even if we conceded that our actions are causally dependent on us on account of their coming-to-be, we would still be incapable to deduce that everything which comes-to-be is causally dependent, because the coming-to-be of our voluntary actions is a specific kind of coming-to-be, and we cannot rule out the possibility that the reason for causal dependence is something related to the specificity of those actions, and not to coming-to-be in an unqualified and universal sense. This second objection can be transposed to contingency itself: even if we conceded that some contingent things (*e.g.*, our voluntary actions) are causally dependent because they are contingent, that does not mean that causal dependence is an essential implication of the quiddity of contingency as such, in an unqualified sense, because one could argue that causal dependence is related to the specificity of the instances of contingency we are considering (*e.g.*, the peculiar contingency of the action of writing, that of the action of cutting, and so on).

When it comes to arguments against the principle of sufficient reason, three of them stand out: the argument from the impossibility for an eternal cause to be the cause of what comes-to-be, the argument from the absurdity of indefinite hesitation in front of equivalent alternatives, and the argument from the

causal efficiency of volition. Rāzī's answers to these three arguments present important insights in his position on two issues that are closely related to causality, namely that of temporal succession and that of voluntary actions.

The solution of the argument from coming-to-be argues that the condition on account of which an eternal cause may cause what presently comes-to-be is the cessation of what existed before. It is implied that such cessation does not require an efficient cause. At this point there are only two alternatives, and it is unclear whether any of the two would be accepted by Rāzī. First, the cessation of a temporal existent may occur by pure chance: in this case, a part of the principle of sufficient reason would need to be rejected because, while it would remain true that the existence of a thing requires a sufficient reason that is the existence of the cause, it would not be true that the non-existence (or the cessation) of a thing requires a sufficient reason as well, be it the non-existence of its efficient cause or anything else. Secondly, it could be said that cessation is essential for every temporal existent, in the sense no temporal existent is capable to persist after the very instant of its origination: this would safeguard the principle of sufficient reason, but all temporal existents would become essentially incapable to persist for more than one instant. This position reintroduces an early *kalām* idea (the impossibility of persistence) in order to defend an Avicennian position (the principle of sufficient reason).

The solution of the argument from the absurdity of indefinite hesitation consists of three distinct points. The first is the intuitive possibility of hesitation in front of equivalent alternatives. The second is an occasionalist account of will which hypothesizes that, in case a voluntary agent is in front of alternatives that are equivalent inasmuch as his goal is concerned, an external cause like God may make his volition incline towards one of those alternatives. The third point is a dynamic account of the motives of voluntary actions that understands them as fleeting mental states in rapid succession: the situation of motivational equivalence depends on motives, and motives are constantly and rapidly replaced by other motives, so motivational equivalence cannot continue indefinitely.

The main solution to the argument from the causal efficiency of volitional acts argues that the latter has no consequence for the principle of sufficient reason. The assertion that will is the proximate cause of voluntary actions entails neither that will is independent from external causes (freedom of independence) nor that will is capable of choosing between equivalent contingent alternatives (freedom of indifference).

CHAPTER 3 – The Rejection of Self-Causation

§3.1 – The Meaning of the Premise, and the Need for It

§3.1.1 – The Meaning of this Premise

Self-causation is the hypothesis that the quiddity of a thing is the efficient cause its own existence. Avicenna and most of his interpreters decisively reject the possibility of this, arguing that no quiddity may have causal efficiency over its own existence.

§3.1.2 – The Need for this Premise

In the two previous chapters we discussed the existence of contingent existents and the principle of sufficient reason. If we conjoin these two premises, we obtain the following syllogism: there are contingent existents; every contingent existent needs an efficient cause in order to exist; thus, there are efficient causes.

This is enough for establishing that there are causes and effects in an unspecific sense, because it establishes that there are things contingent (existence of contingent existents) which need efficient causes in order to exist (principle of sufficient reason). However, if one disregards the rejection of self-causation, the above-mentioned syllogism is not enough for establishing which things are causeless and which are caused, because it does not establish exactly which things are contingent and which are not. In other words, without the rejection of self-causation we lack a criterion of perfect discrimination between necessary and contingent existents: we cannot subdivide the set of all existents in two mutually excluding subsets, one of which includes all and only the contingent existents, while the other includes all and only the necessary existents.

One could object that a criterion of perfect discrimination has already been discussed: compositionality (all and only compositional existents are contingent)⁶²². Such a remark is basically correct, but we need to add that compositionality can be a criterion of perfect discrimination only on condition of the rejection of self-causation. In other words, the rejection of self-causation is an implicit assumption behind the claim that all and only the compositional existents are contingent.

Let us see why that is the case. Self-causation means that the quiddity of a thing is the efficient cause of its own existence. If the quiddity of a thing were the cause of its existence, that thing would be necessary and not contingent: it would not be possible to suppose the non-existence of that quiddity, because that quiddity as such would entail its own existence. Consequently, composition from quiddity and existence would not necessarily imply contingency: not all existents that possess a quiddity distinct from their existence would be contingent, because it would be possible to suppose that their quiddity is the cause of their existence. All of this contradicts Avicenna's explicit assertion on the matter, namely that everything whose existence is additional to its quiddity must be contingent: if that were not the case, it would be impossible to conclude that the separate intellects (which are utterly simple in their

⁶²² See *Supra*, §1.

quiddities while being composite inasmuch as quiddity and existence are considered) are contingent and not necessary.

In conclusion, the defender of Avicenna's understanding of causality needs to hold that self-causation is impossible: only in this way can he defend the Avicennian criterion of discrimination between necessary and contingent existents.

§3.2 – Self-Causation in Avicenna and his Interpreters

§3.2.1 – The Avicennian Position

For Avicenna, no quiddity can be efficient cause of its own existence. The rejection of self-causation is a crucial step of his argument for the claim that the Necessary Existent is pure self-subsistent existence devoid of any additional quiddity. Avicenna's argumentation against self-causation boils down to a simple remark: something devoid of existence cannot be the efficient cause of its own existence because the efficient cause is prior to the effect in existence, and it is impossible for a thing to be prior to its own existence⁶²³.

Bahmanyār agrees with Avicenna on the identification between quiddity and existence in the Necessary Existent, so we can reasonably infer that they accept Avicenna's argument for the rejection of self-causation⁶²⁴. Tūsī explicitly considers the argument, defending it from Rāzī's objections⁶²⁵.

To the best of my knowledge, authors such as Ġazālī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī and Šahrastānī do not discuss self-causation. There is a solid explanation for this: for Avicenna, self-causation emerges as a topic of discussion in the context of investigations about the nature of the Necessary Existent, and precisely on whether the Necessary Existent is an instance of self-subsistent existence or a quiddity that causes its own existence. This question is relevant only on condition of the preliminary acceptance of some premises: [i] existence is additional to quiddity, [ii] causality depends on contingency, [iii] contingency depends on composition, and [iv] existence is predicated of God in a non-equivocal way. None of the three above-mentioned authors accepts all of those assertions: Ġazālī rejects [ii] and [iii]; Ibn al-Malāḥimī [i] and [iii]; Šahrastānī [iv]. In view of that, it is perfectly comprehensible that such authors do not discuss self-causation: they do accept the necessary conditions for discussing it.

623 «We say that if 'that-ness' (*anniyya*), namely existence, were accidental for that quiddity, then either that quiddity itself would entail [existence], or an external thing would. It is absurd for that quiddity itself to entail existence: in fact, what is consequential does not ensue but from something existent, and from this it would follow that the quiddity has an existence before its own existence, which is absurd. Thus, we say that everything which has a quiddity other than 'that-ness' is caused. This is because you know that 'that-ness', namely existence, does not have the place of the component (*muqawwim*) of the quiddity which is external from 'that-ness' itself. [Existence], then, is among the necessary concomitants. Now, either existence is necessarily concomitant for the quiddity because that quiddity is that quiddity, or its necessary concomitance with that quiddity is by reason of another thing. The meaning of the expression 'necessary concomitance' is the consequentiality with respect to existence, and an existent is consequential only to an existent. [If we consider] everything which is consequential in its existence, [we find that] a thing is in itself existent before [what is consequential to]. That quiddity, then, would be existent in itself before its existence, and that is a contradiction. It remains that existence belongs to the quiddity for a cause. So, everything that possesses a quiddity is caused. All the things that are not the Necessary Existent have quiddities, and those quiddities are in themselves contingent with respect to existence: existence befalls them as an accident from the outside» – *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, p.346.13 – 347.9.

«Pointer. Sometimes it is possible that the quiddity of a thing is the reason (*sabab*) for one of its attributes, and that one of its attributes is the reason for another attribute, like the differentia with respect to the *proprium*. However, it is not possible for that attribute which is the existence of a thing to obtain by reason of the quiddity [of that thing, if such a quiddity] is not existence, or by reason of another attribute. That is because the cause is prior in existence, and no thing is prior in existence with respect to [its own] existence» – *Išārāt*, p.142.17 – 143.3.

624 «You already know that It [*i.e.*, the Necessary Existent] has no quiddity, since It is necessary with respect to existence for itself. From this it follows necessarily that it is not a genus » – *Taḥṣīl*, p.570.11-12.

625 See *Hall*, I, pp.572-ff.; *Talḥīṣ*, pp.97-8.

§3.2.2 – The Rāzian Position

Rāzī is Avicenna's adversary on the issue at hand. He integrates the possibility of self-causation into his system on account of his rejection of the Avicennian thesis that God is self-subsistent existence, which is based on the denial of self-causation.

Most of Rāzī's major works are consistent with the claim that the quiddity of the Necessary Existent is the efficient cause of its own existence. Let us consider a passage from the first book of the *Maṭālib* as an example. Rāzī begins by presenting two disjunctions concerning the commonality that exists between God's existence and the existence of the contingent existents.

The first disjunction states that «existence» is applied to God's existence and to the existence of the contingents either according to commonality in expression (*ištirāk lafzī*), or according to «commonality in meaning» (*ištirāk ma'nawī*). The second disjunction states that, if «existence» is applied to God's existence and to the existence of the contingents according to commonality in meaning, then God's existence is either self-subsistent and devoid of any additional quiddity, or subsistent in a certain quiddity.

Three possible theses concerning God's existence ensue⁶²⁶. The first thesis asserts that existence is predicated equivocally with respect to God and contingent beings. This position implicitly includes both unqualified equivocality (existence is predicated equivocally in all cases), which is Aš'arī's and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī's position, and qualified equivocality (existence is predicated equivocally only in the case of God and contingent beings), which is Šahrastānī's position⁶²⁷. The second thesis is Avicenna's doctrine that the Necessary Existent is a self-subsistent instance of existence. The third thesis is Rāzī's: the Necessary Existent has a quiddity, and possesses existence as an attribute additional to it. In the *Nihāyat al-'Uqūl*, Rāzī adds that this thesis is shared by the Bahšāmī⁶²⁸.

The rest of Rāzī's discussion is devoted to argue against the first and the second position. Among the arguments against Avicenna's thesis, we find an explicit assertion of the idea that quiddity *qua* quiddity can be the cause for its own existence.

«Why is it not admitted to say that what implies that existence [*i.e.*, God's existence] is the quiddity?

He says: 'The implication of that existence by that quiddity is either on condition that such quiddity

626 « It is established that the theses on God's existence cannot exceed these three subdivisions. The first is the thesis of those who say that the expression 'existence' which is applied to the necessary by itself and to the contingent by itself does not provide a single concept shared by the two subdivisions: rather it is [applied to the two] according to commonality in expression only. The second is the thesis of those who say that the expression 'existence' does provide a single concept but, in the case of the Necessary Existent by itself, it is pure existence, namely it is existence on condition of not being accidental to any quiddities, an existent subsistent by means of itself: according to this hypothesis, the existence of God is be same as His essential reality. The third is the thesis of those who say that existence is one of the attributes of the essential reality of God, one of His qualifications: according to this hypothesis, the existence of God is other than His quiddity. Each one of these subdivisions has been the doctrine of some scholar. The first is the thesis of a great portion of the theologians, like Abū al-Ḥasan al-Aš'arī and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī. The second is the thesis chosen by Abū 'Alī ibn Sīnā in all his books. The third is the thesis of a great portion of the theologians, and the one that we defend in most of our books.» – *Maṭālib*, I, pp.290.15 – 291.10.

627 Rāzī does not mention Šahrastānī, though.

628 See *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, I, p.440.1.

is existent or not.’ We answer that what we choose is that quiddity inasmuch as it is itself is sufficient with respect to the implication of that existence.»⁶²⁹

For Rāzī, the claim that a quiddity inasmuch as such can cause its own existence does not entail that it can cause the existence of other things. In other words, God’s quiddity as such is the cause of His existence not on condition of its own existence, whereas God’s quiddity is the cause of the existence of all other existents on condition of being existent. The assumption that the efficient cause needs to be existent in order to have causal efficiency holds true in the latter case, but not in the former. Rāzī claims that the difference between the two cases (*i.e.*, the case where something causes its own existence and the case where something causes the existence of another thing) is intuitively known⁶³⁰.

Self-causation is supported in the majority of Rāzī’s works, with the exception of the *Nihāya*, where he oscillates between supporting self-causation and supporting the equivocality of existence, and the *Muḥaṣṣal*, where Rāzī supports equivocality, even though the above-mentioned possibility is presented as a counter-argument and left unanswered⁶³¹.

At this point we need to address an interpretation suggested by Toby Mayer in his work on Rāzī’s critique of Avicenna’s proof for the unity of the Necessary Existent⁶³². Mayer argues that Rāzī is inclined to believe that God possesses quiddity and existence because of his commitment to Aš‘arite theology, which emphasises the composite nature of God by qualifying Him with positive attributes additional to His quiddity. Mayer also remarks that Ġazālī shares the idea that God’s quiddity is distinct from His existence⁶³³.

I believe that we should not attribute too much importance to the influence of Aš‘arism on the issue at hand. Indeed, Rāzī accepts Avicenna’s thesis that composites *qua* composites are contingent, and that contradicts the Aš‘arite stance on God’s attributes. I claim that Rāzī’s argumentation in favour of self-causation stems from the need to defend two general tenets: the essential unity of existence (the thesis that existence is a species-like nature) and the distinction between quiddity and existence⁶³⁴. None of the two is peculiar to Aš‘arism, whereas both are fundamental elements of the Avicennian ontology. In asserting that God possesses both quiddity and existence, Rāzī’s primary concern is not to comply with the Aš‘arites doctrine on the nature of the attributes: rather, he is defending two principles of

629 *Maṭālib*, I, p.309.5-9.

630 «*Objection*. Just like you admit that God’s quiddity has causal efficiency over its own existence before existing, it might be possible that such quiddity has causal efficiency over the existence of the world before existing. Thus, it would be impossible to deduce the existence of the agent from the existence of the acts. *Answer*. Intuition discriminates between the two situations. In fact, we know by intuition that, as long as a thing does not exist, it cannot be cause for the existence of another thing. We also know that there it is not implausible for a thing to exist *per se*: what we mean by ‘a thing is existent *per se*’ is that its essence implies its own existence. Since the intuition of thought asserts the distinction, our discourse is sound.» – *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.362.9-13.

631 See *Arba ʿīn*, I, pp.144-148; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.30-41; *Muḥaṣṣal*, p.67; *Nihāyat al-ʿuqūl*, I, pp.358-ff., 367-ff., IV, pp.437-440; *Šarḥ*, I, pp.365-362.

632 See ‘Fahṛ ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī’s Critique of Ibn Sīnā’s Argument for the Unity of God in the *Išārāt* and Naṣīr ad-Dīn aṭ-Ṭūsī’s Defence,’ *cit.*, pp.208-9.

633 «Again, Rāzī is influenced in this by his concerns as an Aš‘arī theologian. The *kalām* motive is in fact quite explicit, for the openly says of the viewpoint he defends ‘many of the theologians... say that the existence of God (Exalted is He!) is additional to His quiddity, and is one of the attributes of His reality.’» – *Ibid.*, pp.208-9.

634 *Ibid.*, pp.209, 213.

Avicenna's general ontology. Since Rāzī follows Avicenna's conception of causality, he needs to integrate such a defence within the framework of that conception, which includes the principle of sufficient reason and the contingency of composites. Rāzī cannot simply assert that God is an existent quiddity, for such an assertion implies composition in God, and composition in turn implies contingency. At this point, Rāzī needs to abandon Avicenna's position on the issue of self-causation and assert that God's quiddity is the efficient cause of its own existence: the composition of God's quiddity with its existence is causally explainable, but the explanatory factor of that composition is God's own quiddity.

§3.3 – The Debate on Self-Causation

This subchapter consists of two sections. The first concerns the debate on self-causation (§3.3.1). The second analyses the debate on the self-subsistence of God's existence (§3.3.2).

§3.3.1 – The Debate on Self-Causation

The Avicennian argument against self-causation is based on the claim that causal efficiency entails existential priority (*i.e.*, efficient causes are existentially prior to their effects): no quiddity can be the cause of its existence since the cause is existentially prior to its effect, and it is impossible for a thing to be existentially prior to its own existence⁶³⁵.

Avicenna presents two clarifications of the meaning of existential priority. The first is an analogy with movement: existence passes through the cause and then reaches the effect. The second is both an exemplification as well as an appeal to consensus: people say that the movement of the hand is before the movement of the key, even though the two are simultaneous in time⁶³⁶.

Rāzī attacks Avicenna's argument against self-causation by rejecting the claim that the cause must be existentially prior to the effect. He argues that Avicenna's case for existential priority is weak. In particular, Avicenna is incapable to provide a conceptualization of existential priority as something distinct from causal efficiency itself: what Avicenna calls «existential priority» is nothing but causal efficiency itself. As for the two clarifications of the meaning of existential priority, Rāzī dismisses them as weak, claiming that the first is based on a metaphor and the second appeals to everyday language, which is not something we should rely on. He adds that, even if we conceded that philosophical discourses can rely on everyday language, the example presented by Avicenna would not demonstrate that existential priority is something different from causal efficiency: when people say that the hand moves and then the key moves, what they actually mean is that the movement of the hand has causal efficiency over the movement of the key, not that the former is existentially prior to the latter⁶³⁷.

Ṭūsī rejects Rāzī's reduction of existential priority to causal efficiency. He argues that the former must be distinct from the latter, being a condition for it: a thing must be existentially prior to another in order to have causal efficiency over it⁶³⁸.

Rāzī himself presents a reformulation of Avicenna's argument against self-causation which dispenses with the existential priority of the cause and appeals to the assumption that existence is a necessary condition for causal efficiency: a thing can have causal efficiency only on condition of its existence, for otherwise it would have efficiency when it is non-existent, and that is absurd. It follows that a thing cannot be the cause for its own existence, because its existence would be both the necessary condition causal efficiency and the result of its causal efficiency⁶³⁹.

635 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.346.13 – 347.8; *Išārāt*, p.142.17 – 143.3.

636 See *Šifā' – Ilāhiyyāt*, II, pp.164.18 – 165.11, 268.11-15, 269.15 – 270.10, 277.1 – 278.8; *Išārāt*, pp.151.12 – 152.1.

637 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.136-139; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, pp.361.3-12, 409.18 – 410.15.

638 See *Ḥall*, I, p.576.7-11.

639 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.306.16 – 307.14; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.362.2-3.

Rāzī rejects this new formulation by rejecting the premise that, if existence were not a necessary condition for causality, then non-existent quiddities would have causal efficiency. He argues that a quiddity may have causal efficiency over its existence inasmuch as it is a quiddity, not inasmuch as it is an existent quiddity or a non-existent quiddity⁶⁴⁰. Ṭūsī's answer to Rāzī's objection claims that know by intuition that only existent quiddities can have causal efficiency⁶⁴¹.

A possible defence on Rāzī's behalf might come from his discussion of another objection against the idea of self-causation: if quiddities inasmuch as they are quiddities could have causal efficiency, regardless of their existence, then a non-existent quiddity might be the cause of the existence of the world. Rāzī argues that there is an intuitive difference between causation and self-causation in this respect. Even though it is true that what has causal efficiency over the existence of other things must be existent in itself, it does not follow that what has causal efficiency over its own existence must be existent in itself⁶⁴². In other words, Ṭūsī's answer would be an undue generalization of a characteristic (the need for the preliminary existence of the cause) that is intuitively true of causation, but not of self-causation. However, it could be argued that this kind of defence of Rāzī's position is *ad hoc*: it would seem that the burden of proof lies on those who claim that self-causation is fundamentally different from causation, not on those who claim that the two are comparable.

Rāzī presents two additional ancillary arguments for the conceivability of self-causation, which rely on analogies with situations that are assumed to be comparable to that of self-causation. The first is based on the receptivity of existence: contingent quiddities are receptive causes of existence not on condition of being existent; similarly, a necessary quiddity might have causal efficiency over its existence not on condition of being existent⁶⁴³. The second analogy is based on the causal efficiency of quiddities over their attributes: Avicenna himself states that contingent quiddities have causal efficiency over some of their attributes not on condition of being existent; by analogy, a necessary quiddity might have causal efficiency over that attribute which is existence not on condition of being existent⁶⁴⁴.

Ṭūsī's dismisses Rāzī's first analogy by arguing that the receptivity of existence is something merely conceptual, since quiddity and existence are only conceptually distinct. The rejection of the second analogy is based on a subtle discrimination: Avicenna's assertion that existence does not need to be considered in the causal efficiency quiddities exert over their attributes does not entail that quiddities can have causal efficiency over their attributes when they are separated from existence. A quiddity has no self-identity, when separated from its existence, to say nothing of its causal efficiency over its attributes⁶⁴⁵.

§3.3.2 – The Debate on the Self-Subsistence of God's Existence

640 See *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.309-f., *Maṭālib*, I, pp.39.19 – 40.11; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.362.3-4.

641 See *Hall*, I, p.576.7-11.

642 See *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, I, p.362.9-13.

643 See *Maṭālib*, I, p.309.11-17; *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, p.361.13-16.

644 See *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, pp.361-16 – 362.1.

645 See *Hall*, I, pp.576.15 – 577.6, 577.12-14.

Rāzī claims that there are only three possible options, when it comes to God's existence: [i] existence is equivocal, and so God's existence is essentially different from the existence of the contingents (Aš'arī and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī's claim); [ii] existence is non-equivocal, but God's existence is self-subsistent and devoid of any additional quiddity, as opposed to the existence of the contingents, which inheres in their quiddity (Avicenna's claim); [iii] existence is non-equivocal and it inheres in God's quiddity, being is an effect of God's quiddity (Rāzī's claim). From an Avicennian standpoint, the equivocality of existence must be rejected⁶⁴⁶. By way of elimination, it follows that any argument for the impossibility of the self-subsistence of God's existence is also an argument for the necessity of self-causation.

Rāzī presents twelve arguments for the impossibility of self-subsistence. They can be grouped into five categories.

The first category revolves around the essential unity of existence, namely the assumption that all instances of existence share the same essential nature. It encompasses seven proofs that share a similar structure: they pinpoint a peculiar characteristic of God's essence – self-subsistence, independence from any substrate, causal efficiency, necessity, distinction from other instances of existence, etc. –, and notice that nothing can account for that characteristic. On the one hand, God must be absolutely simple, and on the other hand, the essence of God's existence must be identical to the essence of any other instance of existence, and so its properties cannot differ from those of all other instances of existence⁶⁴⁷. All of these arguments are expansions and refinements of a basic reasoning that can be traced back at least to Avicenna's *Mubāḥaṭāt*⁶⁴⁸.

The second category of proofs against the self-subsistence of God's existence encompasses the argument from intuition, which can be traced back at least to in Ġazālī. It is intuitively absurd to suppose something that possesses only existence and no additional quiddity⁶⁴⁹. Rāzī adds a dialectical corroboration that pinpoints the incoherence of the philosophers' understanding the nature of existence. The majority of the *falāsifa* (since Bahmanyār at least) reject the entitative semantization of existence, claiming that existence is only the fact that a thing exists, not an actual entity itself. It follows that existence is dependent on some quiddity both in its subsistence and in its conceptualization. That holds true in all cases except that of the Necessary Existent, where all of a sudden existence becomes something self-subsistent in all respects. Nothing justifies that differentiation.

The third category of arguments against self-subsistence consists in the argument from the primitivity of existence. Rāzī argues that Avicenna's claim that existence *qua* existence is intuitively or primitively known contradicts his thesis that God's essence is nothing but existence with no additional quiddity, because God's essence is currently unknown: the same thing would be both intuitively known and currently unknown.

The fourth category encompasses two arguments that appeal to the structure of existential predication. The first notices that, if God's essence were nothing but pure existence, existential

646 On the debates on the equivocality of existence see Part 1, §3.3.

647 See *Arba'īn*, I, pp.143-147; *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, pp.31-35; *Maṭālib*, I, pp.295-306, *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, II, pp.358-361.

648 See *Mubāḥaṭāt*, p.140.10-16.

649 See *Tahāfut*, pp.117.19 – 118.4.

statements concerning God would predicate existence of existence itself: «God exists» would mean «existence exists». That is absurd, because existence cannot be predicated of existence (rejection of the entitative semantization of existence). The second argument is quite similar. It states that, if God's essence were pure existence, existential statements about God would be tautologies: we know that existential statements cannot be tautologies, because tautologies are uninformative, whereas existential statements must be informative.

The fifth and last category consists in the application of Avicenna's argument from doubt to God himself. The argument from doubt states that existence must be an external addition to quiddity because we can know the quiddity of a thing (*e.g.*, a triangle) while not knowing whether that quiddity exists or not. Rāzī notices that this reasoning can be applied to God himself: we can understand the notion of a necessary existent while not knowing whether a necessary existent actually exists or not. He considers a possible objection: the argument from doubt can be applied to contingent quiddities but cannot be applied to the Necessary Existent, precisely because the former can be separated from their existence whereas the latter cannot (His non-existence is impossible). For Rāzī this line of reasoning is intuitively absurd because it entails that the existence of the Necessary Existent can be deduced from notion of its necessity. In other words, it leads to a modal *a priori* argument for God's existence (God must exist because we define Him as a necessary existent, and the non-existence of a necessary existent is impossible), which is at odds with Avicenna's own commitment to an *a posteriori* proof from contingency.

Ṭūsī presents an overall objection against the arguments mentioned by Rāzī in the *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*: namely the arguments from the essential unity of existence and the argument from the primitivity of existence. The objection rests on a peculiar understanding of modulation: the different instances of a modulated notion are essentially different from one another but share a single external concomitant. This conception is applied to the case of existence *qua* existence and God's essence: God's essence is a peculiar instance of existence restricted to Him which is essentially different from all other instances of existence and possesses existence *qua* existence as an external concomitant⁶⁵⁰.

This move enables Ṭūsī to answer arguments belonging the first category (the arguments from the essential unity of existence) and the third category (the argument from the primitivity of existence). Against the first category, he notices that what accounts for the specific characteristics of God's essence (*i.e.*, independence, universal causality) is God's specific instance of existence (which is essentially different from all other instances of existence), not existence *qua* existence. For example, what accounts for God's causal efficiency and self-subsistence is not the essence of existence *qua* existence, but rather the essence of that specific instance of existence which is God's nature. As for the third category, Ṭūsī argues that what we know by intuition is the existence *qua* existence, which is a concomitant of God's essence, whereas we currently do not know the specific instance of existence which is God's very essence⁶⁵¹.

650 See *Hall*, I, pp.572.2 – 573.7.

651 See *Ibid.*, I, pp.574.1 – 576.2.

However, Ṭūsī does not address the second category of arguments (the argument from intuition), the fourth category (the arguments from the structure of existential predication) and the fifth category (the application of the argument from doubt to God), since these are not mentioned in Rāzī's *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*. The objection from modulation does not seem useful against those arguments, since none of them rests on the direct or indirect appeal to the essential unity of existence: they rather appeal (directly or indirectly) to the quiddity-existence distinction. The second category argues that something which consists in pure existence and has no quiddity is intuitively absurd. The fourth category states that existential statements must consist of two different elements, because the subject (*i.e.*, the quiddity) must be different from the predicate (*i.e.*, existence). The fifth category states that the proof which establishes the distinction between quiddity and existence in the case of contingent existents can be applied to God Himself, establishing that God's existence is additional to His quiddity.

A possible answer might be conceptualism: the distinction between quiddity and existence is merely conceptual. In this situation, however, conceptualism does not seem adequate as a solution, because it is unspecific: it is not restricted to God's instance of existence as opposed to all other instances of existence. In other words, if we accept conceptualism about the quiddity-existence distinction, all instances of existence are only conceptually distinct from the quiddities they are predicated of: this cannot vindicate the claim that the specificity of God's essence consists in being pure existence without any additional quiddity, precisely because it is unspecific. In other words, one should ask why we should uphold conceptualism in the case of God's existence, and not in the case of all other instances of existence (or vice-versa).

§3.4 – Concluding Remarks

The debate on self-causation is fundamentally connected with the assessment of a crucial feature of causality, namely priority in existence. Overall, Avicenna's stance on the issue possesses an intuitive strength Rāzī's position do not possess: intuition suggests that there should be some kind of asymmetry between cause and effect, and that such asymmetry should concern existence, since existence is precisely what the cause gives the effect. Rāzī's own reformulation of the Avicennian argument is even less demanding: it merely requires us to assume that existence is a necessary condition for causal efficiency, namely that something needs to be existent in order to be causally efficient.

Rāzī's arguments struggle to overcome the intuitive appeal of the above-mentioned claims. The reduction of existential priority to causal efficiency itself might be considered a sophistic move. In fact, Rāzī needs to assume that causality requires some form of asymmetry between cause and effect, for the rejection of asymmetry leads to circular causation: if causality implied no existential priority, there would be no reason to reject the hypothesis that the effect is the cause of its own cause. This hypothesis in turn leads to the collapse of the metaphysical structure of causality, and to the impossibility to demonstrate the existence of a necessary existent. Rāzī himself is aware of this problem: in the *Maṭālib*, the reduction of existential priority to causal efficiency is presented as an argument for the possibility of circular causality⁶⁵². A possible way around the problem could be to appeal to Rāzī's distinction between causation and self-causation: causation entails priority in existence and requires the cause to be existent, whereas self-causation does not. However, this seems an *ad hoc* solution.

Additionally, the acceptance of self-causation would entail the incapacity to precisely determine which things are causeless and which are caused, because there would be no criterion of perfect discrimination between necessary and contingent existents. In fact, self-causation is not necessarily restricted to God (*i.e.*, the only Necessary Existent that is also the efficient cause of all contingent existents): it might be applied to an indefinite number of simple quiddities (*e.g.*, the separate intellects). The number and the nature of the necessary existents would remain uncertain, because there would be no criterion to discriminate between those simple quiddities that cause their own existence and those simple quiddities that do not.

All of these problems notwithstanding, an adequate evaluation of Rāzī's position needs to take into account the overall situation that position appears in. Rāzī notices that there are only three alternatives concerning God's existence: it is essentially different from the existence of the contingents, it is self-subsistent, or it is caused by God's quiddity. The equivocity of existence is rejected by both Avicenna and Rāzī, so it is out of the picture. As for the self-subsistence of God's existence, Rāzī presents several compelling arguments against it, the strongest of them being the application of Avicenna's own argument from doubt to God: it is possible to conceive God (a necessary existent) while not knowing whether God actually exists. The intuition that corroborates this argument is the same which makes us weary of the *a priori* proofs for the existence of God: it is unsound to deduce a fact from a notion. Just like Avicenna, Rāzī believes that the assertion of God's existence must rest on some *a posteriori* proof,

652 See *Maṭālib*, I, pp.136.14 – 138.6.

be that the proof from contingency or that from coming-to-be. Such proofs do not deduce a fact from a notion (*i.e.*, the existence of God from the concept of a necessary existent): they deduce a fact from a fact, namely the existence of God from the existence of contingent things, or from the existence of things that come-to-be. In any case, a material (factual) premise is needed: Rāzī explicitly stresses this point at the beginning of the *Maṭālib*⁶⁵³. If one accepts this reasoning, it would seem that he is forced to reject the self-subsistence of God's existence and to accept self-causation, as counter-intuitive as it is.

In sum, we should not consider the discussion of self-causation as a dispute between a counter-intuitive position (self-causation) and an intuitive position (the existential priority of the cause), but rather as a dispute between two counter-intuitive positions (the self-subsistence of existence and self-causation) each one of which is corroborated by compelling arguments (the argument from existential priority and the argument from doubt).

Ṭūsī's appeal to a peculiar understanding of modulation (God's essence is a specific instance of existence that has existence *qua* existence as a necessary concomitant) appears to be an intermediate position between Avicenna and Rāzī. On the one hand, God's essence is an instance of existence (as Avicenna's doctrine requires). On the other hand, there is a difference between God's essence and existence *qua* existence, and such difference is not reducible to the negation of an addition (as Rāzī's arguments from the commonality of existence assume). The roots of this position can be traced back to the *Mubāḥaṭāt*, even though that work does not anticipate Ṭūsī integration of the question into an overall theory of modulation⁶⁵⁴.

However, Ṭūsī's appeal to the modulation of existence is problematic in two respects. First of all, it assumes a peculiar and controversial understanding of modulation: the instances of modulated notions are essentially different from one another, even though they share a single necessary concomitant. Several authors (Šahrastānī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Rāzī) explicitly reject this idea, claiming that the instances of modulated notions share a single essential nature: they are species-like. In particular, Rāzī dismisses the hypothesis presented in the *Mubāḥaṭāt* (God's essence is a specific instance of existence that possesses existence *qua* existence as a necessary concomitant) by arguing that it implies the equivocity of existence⁶⁵⁵. This means that he would also dismiss Ṭūsī's understanding of modulation as an appeal to equivocity. More importantly, Avicenna's own assertions on the nature of existence and modulation support the essential unity of existence, not the essential disunity of existence. The roots of Ṭūsī's position are not to be found in Avicenna, but rather in Bahmanyār⁶⁵⁶.

653 See *Ibid.*, p.54.5-17.

654 See *Mubāḥaṭāt*, p.142.1-9.

655 «If we posited that the concept of the thing which is called 'necessary-ness' (*wāğibiyya*) is different from the concept of existence, then the quiddity of the Necessary Existent would not be existence, but instead something different from existence. So, either we say that such essence which is different from existence is His 'existent-ness' (*mawğūdiyya*), and thus the expression 'existence' is applied to [the essence of the Necessary Existent and to existence] according to commonality in name: we have already invalidated that. Or we say that the existence which is common to the existence of the contingents in concept is a necessary concomitant of that quiddity: the existence of the Necessary Existent would be connected to His quiddity, and that is to abandon their doctrine completely and to choose what we mentioned.» – *Mabāḥiṭ*, I, p.34.7-13.

656 See *Taḥṣīl*, pp.281.10 – 283.14.

Secondly, the appeal to modulation is only capable of defending Avicenna's position from a certain subset of Rāzī arguments: the arguments from the essential unity of existence and the argument from the primitivity of existence. The remaining arguments (*i.e.*, the argument from the application of the proof from doubt, the argument from the nature of existential predications) are directly or indirectly connected to the distinction between quiddity and existence, which is not invalidated by the appeal to modulation. Ṭūsī may appeal to conceptualism (the quiddity-existence distinction is merely conceptual), but that is at odds with Avicenna's doctrine. Furthermore, the appeal to conceptualism would be inadequate as an objection to Rāzī arguments, because conceptualism is unspecific: it applies to all instances of existence, not to some specific instance of existence as opposed to others. At this point, quiddity and existence would be only conceptually distinct both in the case of God and in the case of contingent existents. However, that is not what Avicenna affirms: Avicenna explicitly states that God's existence is not connected to any quiddity, as opposed to all other instances of existence.

CONCLUSION

Section I – The Controversies on the Foundation of Causality: a Recapitulation

The present section sums up the most relevant elements that emerged from the analyses carried out in the work. In particular, it highlights which Avicennian theses tend to be accepted by subsequent authors and, conversely, which tend to be revised or even rejected altogether. This helps to draw some unitary patterns for the positions of Avicenna's interpreters, outlining whether some kind of recognizable consensus emerges or whether it is possible to discriminate between a majority and a minority position. Additionally, the section intends to pinpoint some of the problems left open by Avicenna's interpreters. The section is subdivided according to the nine premises discussed in the bulk of the work.

I.1 – The Concept of Existence

According to Avicenna, the term «existence» has a definite semantic content that is known by intuition and cannot be explicated via any proper notification, namely any definition or description employing notions that are essentially more known than existence itself. Almost all of Avicenna's interpreters accept this position, either implicitly or explicitly. The only exception is to be found in Ibn al-Malāḥimī's nominalism, for his assertion that the existence of a thing is essentially identical to its quiddity entails that existence as such is not primitive: not all quiddities are known by intuition, just like not all of them are undefinable and indescribable.

Several interpreters discuss a related issue that is absent in Avicenna, namely the entitative semantization of existence. The entitative semantization of existence claim that the existence of a thing is an entity in its own right, *i.e.*, something existence is predicated of. Bahmanyār and Rāzī explicitly reject the entitative semantization of existence: existence is the fact that a thing exists, not a thing that exists. Abū al-Barakāt is the only author who explicitly affirms the entitative semantization, distinguishing between the quiddity of existence and the existence of existence, and mentioning an analogy with time: we know that time is, while we ignore what it is. Similarly, we know that existence is (*i.e.*, that there is a thing which makes quiddities exist), but we ignore what existence is.

Both the assertion and the rejection of the entitative semantization have noteworthy implications for the epistemic status of existence as such. The rejection of the entitative semantization entails that existence cannot be absolutely first in conceptualization, as Avicenna seems to imply: if existence is not a thing in itself, then its conceptualization must always be connected to some quiddity it is predicated of. The affirmation of the entitative semantization, on the other hand, entails some distinction between the quiddity of that thing which is existence (*i.e.*, what existence is) and the extra-mental presence of that thing (*i.e.*, the fact that existence is): this kind of distinction is at odds with the primitivity of existence, since the quiddity of existence would not be known by intuition.

I.2 – The Universality of Existence and Mental Existence

Avicenna's position on the universality of existence and mental existence can be summarized in three assertions. First of all, existence *qua* existence is universally or maximally extensive, meaning that it is predicated of every object of knowledge and every subject of predication: consequently, absolute non-existence cannot be known and cannot be subject of predications. Secondly, mental existence is extensionally disjunct from concrete existence: mental existents are not included among concrete existents. Thirdly, mental existence is interchangeable with mental existence, in the sense that the same quiddity can possess both mental and concrete existence.

As for the universality of existence, the majority of the interpreters who consider the issue (Bahmanyār, Abū al-Barakāt, Suhrawardī, Rāzī in the *Mabāḥiṭ*, Ṭūsī) side with Avicenna. In the *Mulaḥḥaṣ*, Rāzī revises this position: while maintaining that existence is as extensive as reality and thingness, he argues that what has no reality, no thingness and no existence (like absolute non-existence) can be known and can be subject of predication.

As for the extensional distinction between mental and concrete existence, Abū al-Barakāt and Rāzī explicitly reject it, claiming that concrete existence includes mental existence because mental existents inhere in a concrete existent (*i.e.*, the mind itself) and thus must be considered concrete existents.

As for the interchangeability of mental and concrete existence, most interpreters accept Avicenna's position. In the *Mulaḥḥaṣ* and in the *Šarḥ*, Rāzī presents a case against interchangeability: the same quiddity cannot exist both as something that subsists extra-mentally and as an accident subsisting in the mind. This claim basically rejects Avicenna's understanding of mental existence and is connected with Rāzī's rejection of the impression theory of knowledge: knowledge does not require the impression of the quiddity of the known in the knower.

I.3 – The Commonality of Existence

The great majority of Avicenna's interpreters accept that existence is a non-equivocal predicate: it does not acquire different meanings depending on the subjects it is predicated of. Other positions are minority. Šarḥrastānī's doctrine of restricted equivocity is connected with the Ismā'īli idea of God transcending existence and non-existence, which is unpalatable to other authors (*e.g.*, Rāzī and Ṭūsī). Ibn al-Malāḥimī's doctrine of unrestricted equivocity (existence is equivocal, being identical to the quiddity of the subject it is predicated of) does not take hold too. It is worth remarking that this doctrine connects to a specific account of the difference between the existence of a thing and its specific quiddity. The two differ not because they designate two elements that are intensionally distinct, but rather because the extension of their signification is different (*e.g.*, «existent» can designate more things than «substance»). This nominalistic account is not intrinsically restricted to existence: it can be applied to a variety of other universals as well (*e.g.*, genera with respect to their species, species with respect to their individuals).

I.4 – The Modulation of Existence

Avicenna asserts that existence is a modulated predicate, namely a single notion which is said according to priority and posteriority, as well as according to greater and lesser worthiness. Modulation accounts for the crucial asymmetries of Avicenna's ontology: inherential asymmetries and causal asymmetries.

The interpreters are split concerning the fundamental structure of modulated predicates and existence in particular. Some authors (Šahrastānī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Rāzī) believe that all instances of existence share an essential unity, while their differentiation is accidental: they are species-like. Others (Bahmanyār, Ṭūsī) argue that the instances of existence are essentially different but share a single concomitant accident (common existence, or existence *qua* existence). The former position is more proximate to Avicenna's own understanding of the issue, even though the latter is devised precisely to defend the Avicennian thesis that God is pure self-subsistent existence.

I.5 – The Accidentality of Existence

Avicenna asserts that existence is external to quiddity and accidental to it. He does not explicitly qualify the additionality of existence as real as opposed to merely conceptual, but several elements point out to that he is indeed a realist.

First of all, there is the internal evidence. Avicenna's account of causality requires existence to be extra-mentally additional to quiddity. Causal dependence is based on contingency, and contingency in turn is based on some form of composition: if existence were not extra-mentally additional to quiddity, then those existent things whose quiddity is absolutely simple (*e.g.*, the separate intellects) would not be extra-mentally composite, and thus it would not follow that they are contingent, in contrast with what Avicenna says. Moreover, Avicenna's realism is corroborated by his stance on the divine essence: if existence inasmuch as it is distinct from quiddity were nothing but a conceptual abstraction, it would be hard to make sense of his thesis that God is pure self-subsistent existence with no additional quiddity.

Secondly, there is the external evidence. The great majority of Avicenna's interpreters (Bahmanyār, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Suhrawardī, Rāzī) understand the doctrine of the accidentality of existence as implying a realist position, regardless of whether they defend realism or not. The only author who seems to imply that the Avicennian doctrine is compatible with conceptualism is Ṭūsī.

As for Avicenna's interpreters themselves, we can distinguish four positions. The first is Ibn al-Malāḥimī's nominalism: existence is identical to quiddity, the only difference between the two concerning the extension of their names. The second position is conceptualism, held by Suhrawardī and Ṭūsī: existence and quiddity are only conceptually distinct, whereas in extra-mental reality they are one and the same. Bahmanyār might be said to be partially conceptualist, since he distinguishes between common and specific existence, arguing that the former is something conceptual. The third position is non-entitative realism: existence is extra-mentally external and accidental to quiddity, but is not an existent thing in its own right. Rāzī is the main defender of non-entitative realism, which appears to be Bahmanyār's own position with respect to specific existence. The fourth position is Abū al-Barakāt's

entitative realism: the existence of a thing is an extra-mentally existent entity in its own right. According to Abū al-Barakāt's understanding, this position entails that God is the very existence of things: this entails the rejection of the accidentality of existence.

The majority positions are without doubt conceptualism and non-entitative realism. I claim that non-entitative realism is more proximate to Avicenna's own understanding. Ṭūsī seems to imply that conceptualism is compatible with the Avicennian doctrine, but Suhrawardī's treatment of the issue suggests otherwise. In fact, he asserts conceptualism in direct opposition to Avicenna.

I.6 – The Contingency of Existence

According to Avicenna, contingency is a quasi-primitive notion, meaning that the conceptualization of contingency does not rest on any proper notification, while being somehow subordinate to the conceptualization of necessity: describing contingency as the opposite of necessity is more adequate than describing necessity as the opposite of contingency. Contingency is connected to the very quiddity of the contingent thing, and thus is not restricted to its future existence as opposed to its present existence. Contingency entails absolute equidistance or equivalence between existence and non-existence. Finally, contingency is a real (*i.e.*, extra-mental) attribute that requires a real subject of inherence. Avicenna's position is challenged on two main issues: equivalence and realism.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī rejects the necessity of absolute equivalence, arguing that contingency accepts greater and lesser proximity to existence. This position is connected to other Mu'tazilite doctrines such as the causelessness of persistence and the freedom of voluntary agents, and is rejected by the majority of post-Avicennian authors.

Most of Avicenna's interpreters (Ġazālī, Suhrawardī, Rāzī, Ṭūsī) have an anti-realist stance on contingency: contingency is not an extra-mentally real attribute that inheres in an extra-mentally real subject of inherence.

I.7 – The Existence of Contingent Existents

According to Avicenna, every compositional existent is contingent, just like every existent that comes-to-be is. Unlike coming-to-be, however, compositionality is a criterion of discrimination between necessary and contingent existents, since all and only compositional existents are contingent (only absolutely simple existents are necessary).

The majority of the interpreters (Bahmanyār, Šahrastānī, Suhrawardī, Rāzī, Ṭūsī) accepts that composites are contingent, even though it is necessary to take some caveats into account. First of all, despite his overall approval of the Avicennian position, Rāzī presents noteworthy objections against Avicenna's argument for the contingency of composites (*e.g.*, the conceivability of causeless reciprocal implication in the case of the relatives), as well as remarkable arguments for the thesis that composites are indeed necessary (*e.g.*, the argument from the necessity of simples). Secondly, Suhrawardī explicitly asserts that some caused existents (*i.e.*, the separate intellects) are simple and not

compositional: this entails that composition is not a criterion of discrimination between necessary and contingent existents (some non-compositional existents are contingent). The same goes for another conceptualist such as Ṭūsī, even though the latter does not seem to highlight the issue: if existence is only mentally distinct from quiddity, then those caused existents which have simple quiddities (like the separate intellects) are utterly simple in concrete reality, since they are not composed of quiddity and an additional existence.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī and Ġazālī reject the contingency of composites. The former rejects the very existence of composites as such, whereas the latter deems it possible for a composite to be necessary on account of the necessity of its parts. Both positions assume some form of reductionist mereology, be it strong (the whole is nothing but the sum of its parts) or weak (the necessity of the parts entails the necessity of the whole). Rāzī himself leans towards some form of reductionism, accepting that every composite is a mereological sum of simple parts and that the formal element or configuration which connects the material parts of the composite must be considered one of the parts of the essence of the composite.

Avicenna does not discuss the contingency of what comes-to-be in great detail. However, it is worth noting that this point plays an important role in Ġazālī and Rāzī's reformulation of the *kalām* argument from the coming-to-be of the world, which deduces contingency from coming-to-be and causal dependence from contingency, rather than deducing causal dependence directly from coming-to-be, as earlier formulations of the argument do. This new formulation introduces an element of the Avicennian account of causality within a classical *kalām* proof.

I.8 – The Principle of Sufficient Reason

Avicenna asserts that every contingent thing needs an efficient cause in order to exist. Even the non-existence of the contingent requires a cause of some sort, namely the non-existence of the cause. This conclusion follows from two tenets, namely the equivalence of contingency and the principle of sufficient reason: contingency implies equivalence between existence and non-existence and one of two equivalent alternatives may prevail over the other only on account of an external factor of prevalence. All of this entails a form of necessitarianism, as well as the temporal coexistence of cause and effect.

It is possible to outline three perspectives on sufficient reason. Many interpreters of Avicenna (Bahmanyār, Suhrawardī, Ṭūsī) accept the principle in conjunction with the equivalence of contingency. The principle is universal in its validity, being applicable to natural causation, voluntary causation, and divine causation. The second perspective is Ibn al-Malāḥimī's weak voluntarism. He accepts a weakened version of the principle that does not assume the equivalence of contingency: contingent things may be equivalent with respect to existence and non-existence, but may also be more proximate to existence (or more proximate to non-existence). It follows that the principle does not entail necessitarianism, since prevalence may obtain without necessity. Ibn al-Malāḥimī links this possibility to the case of voluntary causality: a voluntary cause acts only if a certain action is better than another (or than inaction), but this does not mean that the action is necessary. The third perspective

is Ġazālī's pure voluntarism: he rejects the universal validity of the principle of sufficient reason while accepting that contingency entails equivalence. He argues that a voluntary agent may choose between equivalent alternatives on account of no explanation at all. The fourth perspective is Šahrastānī's intellectualist voluntarism. He clearly rejects the Avicennian doctrine that the sufficient reason of God's causal action is the divine essence itself. That being said, he seems to apply the principle of sufficient reason to God's causal action, claiming that the reason why God's will chooses to create some contingent existents instead of others is to be found in God's knowledge. However, Šahrastānī is inconsistent on that point, for he also claims that the knowledge of the existence of something is logically posterior to its existence: the conjunction of the two claims would entail a circularity, for the existence of a thing is logically posterior to God's will to create that thing, which in turn is posterior to God's knowledge. The fifth perspective is Rāzī's restricted agnosticism. He staunchly defends the universal formulation of the principle of sufficient reason, arguing that non-divine voluntary agents do not possess freedom of indifference (*i.e.*, that any voluntary action is necessitated by specific motives). Rāzī's stance on God's causal action is inconsistent and elusive: sometimes he supports the Avicennian doctrine of essential necessitation and sometimes he supports the Aš'arite doctrine that God's causal action is on account of no sufficient reason at all, be it internal or external. In the *Maṭālib*, Rāzī appears to believe that there is no way to decisively settle the issue.

I.9 – The Rejection of Self-Causation

Avicenna claims that no quiddity can cause its own existence. The conjunction of the contingency of composites with the rejection of self-causation constitutes a criterion of perfect discrimination between contingent and necessary existents: all and only compositional existents are contingent, and it is impossible to hypothesize that a thing composed of quiddity and existence is necessary because its quiddity implies its existence. It is worth noting that, for Avicenna, the rejection of self-causation entails that the Necessary Existent is be pure self-subsistent existence devoid of any additional quiddity.

Rāzī is the only author who defends self-causation. However, there is a caveat we need to consider concerning this issue, namely whether Avicenna's interpreters accept the claim that God is pure self-subsistent existence. Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī do accept it, even though their position is not exactly identical to Avicenna's. They argue that God's essence is a specific instance of existence that is self-subsistent and entails existence *qua* existence as a necessary concomitant: the difference between existence *qua* existence and God's instance of existence is to be found in something positive (the very specific essence of God's instance of existence). According to Avicenna, on the other hand, God's essence is pure self-subsistent existence as such, and differs from existence *qua* existence in something negative: God is existence together with the negation of any additional quiddity. This discrepancy can be traced back to Bahmanyār and Ṭūsī original take on on the modulation of existence: the instances of existence are essentially different and share a common accident which is existence *qua* existence.

CONCLUSION

Several other interpreters (Ġazālī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī, Šahrastānī) do not agree on the claim that God's essence is pure existence, even though they do not uphold self-causation. That is because they disagree with Avicenna on some other fundamental issue, like the contingency of composites (Ġazālī, Ibn al-Malāḥimī), the distinction between quiddity and existence (Ibn al-Malāḥimī), or the notional commonality of existence in the case of God (Šahrastānī).

Overall, even though no author except Rāzī accepts self-causation, only a few interpreters defend Avicenna's alternative to self-causation, and those who do so need to revise the doctrine of modulation in significant ways.

Section II – Future Prospects: the Context and the Evolution of the Controversies

My work presented how some of Avicenna's interpreters tackled an array of crucial issues related to his ontology and aetiology. The scope of the inquiry is restricted to a specific period (mid XI – mid XIII century) and, within that period, to specific authors I found worthiest of discussion. The picture I traced is obviously susceptible to revision and enlargement as knowledge of post-Avicennian Islamic philosophy expands. Further research should focus on two points.

Firstly, it should clarify the intellectual context of the debates presented so far, considering the contribution of other figures like 'Umar Ḥayyām (d.1131) Ibn Sahlān al-Sāwī (d. ca. 1143), Šaraf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī (d. ca. 1190), Nağm al-Dīn al-Nağğuwānī (d.1229), 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Bağdādī (d.1231) and Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d.1233), Aṭīr al-Dīn al-Abharī (d.1264) and Nağm al-Dīn al-Kātībī al-Qazwinī (d.1276).

Secondly, future research should outline the evolution of the debates, highlighting the main intellectual trends that carried over to subsequent centuries. Modern studies pointed out the existence of a Suhrawardian (or Illuminationist) school or trend in authors such as Šams al-Dīn al-Šahrazūrī (d. late XIII c.), Ibn Kammūna (d.1284) and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Širāzī (d.1311), as well as that of a Ṭūsian trend in Ğamāl al-Dīn al-Ḥilli (d.1325), Badr al-Dīn al-Ṭustārī (d.1332), and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Taḥṭānī (d.1364). The existence of a Rāzian trend is also beyond doubt, as is indirectly corroborated by Ṭūsī's systematic attacks against him in the *Ḥall muškilāt al-Išārāt* and in the *Talḥiṣ al-Muḥaṣṣal*⁶⁵⁷. Authors such as Našīr al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī (d.1286), Šams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī (d.1291), Šams al-Dīn al-Isfahānī (d.1348) agree with Rāzī on pivotal issues like the realist account of the quiddity-existence distinction and God's self-causation⁶⁵⁸.

With some notable exception, the history of Islamic philosophy from the XIII century onward remains uncharted territory to this day. A good heuristic tool for a preliminary reconstruction of the evolution of the debates on causality after Rāzī and Ṭūsī could be to analyse subsequent commentaries on the *Išārāt*, in particular the super-commentaries on Rāzī and Ṭūsī's own commentaries known as *muḥākamāt* («arbitrations»). Hereunder I list the works that are known to me⁶⁵⁹.

657 On these issues see H. Eichner, *The Post-Avicennian Philosophical Tradition and Islamic Orthodoxy: Philosophical and Theological Summae in Context*. (Unpublished Habilitationsschrift: Halle, 2009); G. Endress, 'Reading Avicenna in the madrasa: Intellectual Genealogies and Chains of Transmission of Philosophy and the Sciences in the Islamic East,' in J. Montgomery (ed.) *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy: From the Many to the One. Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp.371-422; R. Wisnovski, 'Avicenna's Islamic Reception,' in P. Adamson (ed.), *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Id., 'Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries of the Ishārāt,' *Oriens* 41/2-4 (2013), 349-378; Id. 'Towards a Genealogy of Avicennism,' *Oriens* 42/3-4 (2014), 323-363.

658 On Bayḍāwī and Isfahānī see *Nature, Man and God in Medieval Islam. 'Abd Allah Baydawī's Text Ṭawālī al-Anwar min Maṭālī' al-Anzar along with Maḥmūd Isfahani's Commentary Maṭālī' al-Anzār, Sharḥ Ṭawālī' al-Anwar*, eds E.E. Calverley, J.W. Pollock, 2 vols (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 2002), pp.192-213. On Samarqandī see *al-Šaḥā'if al-ilāhiyya*, ed. A. 'A. Al-Šarīf (Kuwait, 1985), pp.79-82.

659 The data gathered here comes from C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur*, Suppl.I (Leiden: Brill, 1937), pp.816-817 [English version in Id., *History of the Arabic Written Tradition*, tran. J. Lameer, Suppl.I (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017), pp.847-849]; G.C. Anawātī, *Mu'allafāt Ibn Sīnā* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1950), pp.9-12; G.

CONCLUSION

Author	Title	Description
Nağm al-Dīn al-Naḥğuwānī (d.1229)	<i>Zubdat al-naqd wa-lubāb al-kašf</i>	
Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d.1233)	<i>Kašf al-tamwihāt</i>	Anti-Rāzian commentary
Rafī' al-Dīn al-Ġilī (d.1244)	<i>Šarḥ al-Išārāt</i>	
Zayd al-Dīn al-Šadaqa (d.1279)	<i>Šarḥ al-mas'āl al-'awīša fī al-Išārāt</i>	Aporetic commentary (similar to Rāzī's in attitude)
Sirāğ al-Dīn al-Urmawī (d.1283)	?	
Ibn Kammūna (d.1284)	<i>Šarḥ al-uṣūl wa-al-ğumal min muhimmāt al-'ilm wa-al-'amal</i>	Commentary with an Illuminationist-Ṭusian perspective
Amīn al-Dawla Ibn al-Quff (d.1286)	<i>Šarḥ al-Išārāt</i>	Unfinished draft
Šams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī (d.1291)	<i>Bišārāt al-Išārāt</i>	Aporetic commentary
Burhān al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d.1291)	<i>Šarḥ al-Išārāt</i>	
Badr al-Dīn al-Ṭustārī (d.1300)	Unnamed	
Muḥammad ibn Sa'd al-Yamanī al-Ṭustārī (d.1306)	<i>al-Muḥākamāt bayna Našīr al-Dīn wa-Faḥr al-Dīn</i>	Super-commentary that sides with Ṭūsī against Rāzī
Akmal al-Dīn al-Naḥğwānī (d.1301)	Unnamed	
Quṭb al-Dīn al-Širāzī (d.1311)	<i>Šarḥ al-Išārāt</i>	
Ġamāl al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d.1325)	<i>al-Muḥākamāt bayna šurrāḥ al-Išārāt</i>	Super-commentary that sides with Ṭūsī against Rāzī
	<i>Iḍāḥ al-mu'dalāt min šarḥ al-Išārāt</i>	= <i>al-Muḥākamāt bayna šurrāḥ al-Išārāt</i> (?)
	<i>al-Išārāt ilà ma'ānī al-Išārāt</i>	Explicative commentary
	<i>Baṣṭ al-Išārāt</i>	Explicative commentary
Muḥammad al-Isfahānī [= Šams al-Dīn al-Isfahānī (d.1348)?]	?	
Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Taḥṭānī (d.1364)	<i>al-Muḥākamāt bayna Šarḥay al-Išārāt</i>	Super-commentary that sides with Ṭūsī
Ḥusayn ibn Ġamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ḥwānsārī (d.1688)	<i>Šarḥ al-Išārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt</i>	

Schwarb, *The Reception of Ibn Sina and Avicennian Philosophy in Christian-Arabic Literature* (Paper given at the Colloquium on Avicenna and Avicennisms held at SOAS, 6–7 June 2014); R. Wisnovski, 'Avicennism and Exegetical Practice [...]', 349-378; Id. 'Towards a Genealogy of Avicennism,' 323-363; *al-Išārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt*, ed. M. Zare'ī (Qom: Mo'assasa Büstān Ketāb, 2002), pp.14-16.



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