AVICENNA'S CONCEPTION OF METAPHYSICS AS A SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents an interpretation of Avicenna's idea of metaphysics as a science of being qua being. Avicenna occupies a crucial place in the history of ontology. Part of the reason of this importance lies in his distinguishing metaphysics (as a science of being qua being), the first science, methodologically from theology and in his ascribing to it a systematical foundational function. But metaphysics is not only the source and origin of all other sciences, but it is also the end of them. Avicenna believes that the meaning of being and its basic determinations (meanings of thing, existent and necessary) are a priori and as such self-evident. Human knowers thus possess an a priori, immediate intelligibility of being that forms the starting points of any philosophical reflection after reality. Avicenna's idea of metaphysics as the science of being qua being rests on taking being as a matter of pure self-evidence and certainty, and this point is quite important for his project of sciences as a whole. Being fulfills this function as the most general meaning of human mind. We will here explore the implications of this idea of science in a critical manner.

Keywords: *metaphysics, theology, being, meaning, being qua being, substance, necessary being.*

IBN SİNA'NIN BİR BİLİM OLARAK METAFİZİK ANLAYIŞI

ÖZ

Bu makale İbn Sina'nın varlık olması itibariyle varlığın bilimi olarak metafizik bilimi düşüncesinin bir yorumunu sunmaktadır. İbn Sina varlıkbilim tarihinde önemli bir yerde durmaktadır. Bu önemin bir nedeni O'nun metafiziği (varlık olması itibariyle varlığın bilimi olarak), yani, ilk bilimi, yöntemsel olarak tanrıbilimden ayırması ve ona sistematik bir temellendirme fonksiyonu yüklemesidir. Fakat metafizik sadece diğer bilimlerin kaynağı ve kökeni değildir, ama aynı zamanda onların gayesidir. İbn Sina varlığın anlamının ve onun temel belirlenimlerinin (şey, varolan ve zorunlu anlamları) a priori olduğuna ve bu şekliyle bedihi olduğuna inanır. Dolayısıyla insan özneler gerçekliğe dair felsefi düşünümün başlangıç noktalarını oluşturan varlığın a priori, doğrudan anlaşılırlığına sahiptirler. Varlık olması itibariyle varlığın bilimi olarak İbn Sina'nın metafiziğinin varlığı salt bedahet ve kesinlik meselesi olarak ele alması bir bütün olarak onun bilimler projesi için son derece önemlidir. Varlık böyle bir işlevi insan zihninin en genel manası olarak yerine getirir. Burada bu bilim tasavvurunun imalarını eleştirel bir gözle tetkik edeceğiz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *metafizik, tanrıbilim, varlık, anlam, varlık olarak varlık, cevher, zorunlu varlık*

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Avicenna presents us a rich conception of metaphysics as a science. Though many of the elements of this view of metaphysics go back to Aristotle, Hellenic commentators and al-Farabi, some of them is his own original contribution to the subject.[1] In Avicenna's encyclopedic vision of sciences the place of metaphysics and the way metaphysics is understood as a science is of crucial importance. Any attempt at making sense of Avicenna will come to appreciate that at the very basis of his philosophical programme lies his view of metaphysics as science. Here our chief aim is to explore the original assumptions that underlie Avicenna's idea of metaphysics as a science. In what sense is metaphysics a science of being? According to Avicenna, what is a science that studies being as such? Further Avicenna believes that metaphysics is the fundamental and foundational inquiry. How and in what sense is metaphysics, as science of being, fundamental? How and in what sense is metaphysics the end of all sciences? Is it not contradictory to conceive of a science that operates both as the origin and the end of all sciences?

But, ultimately, a Heideggerian question will guide the analysis presented here; what kind of understanding of being is operative in Avicenna's project of metaphysics as a science of being? We explore this point principally by way of a look at the formulation of the structure of metaphysics Avicenna provides in the initial chapters of the Metaphysics of *the Healing* (*al-Shifā'*). Reading Avicenna's idea of metaphysics in this light is, as far as I know, is something never attempted before.

I. Metaphysics: The Science of Being qua Being

Let us start making a brief comparison of Avicenna's view of metaphysics as science with that of Aristotle's, which surely constitutes the initial framework of Avicenna's own enterprise. Aristotle, in *Metaphysics*, speaks of what he calls "first philosophy". He states, in Book IV of *Metaphysics*, that this is a science that studies "being qua being" (*to on hê on*, 1003 a21). The metaphysical study that he proposes, however, is variously formulated in the different parts of the work. It remains disputed whether or how much these formulations cohere with one another. In Book I, this universal science appears to have been formulated as "the study of first causes and principles of all things" (981 b28-29). In Books IX, XI and XII, Aristotle goes one step further and describes the subject-matter of this most supreme science as the investigation of the first causes which are, he argues, immaterial and immovable substances. Thus, explicitly in Book XII, first philosophy is identified

[1] For a penetrating discussion of this issue, see Robert Wisnowsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

as theology (*theologia*), as the study of divinities, the intellects that function as the unmoved movers of the celestial spheres, and especially the first and the highest God, which is pure actuality and pure thought. Theology then is the study of being as exemplified by the divine being, that is, being in the most perfect, highest and purest form. Aristotle, on the other hand, in Book VII, considers metaphysics to be the general study of all substances (*ousiai*): "the old question—always pursued from long ago till now, and always raising puzzles—'What is being?' is just the question 'What is substance?'" (1028 b3).

Avicenna argues that the proper subject-matter of metaphysics is simply being (*mawjūd*) in so far as it is a being, and as distinct from Aristotle, makes it clear that metaphysics considered in terms of its principal and fundamental sense is neither theology (MH: 3-4, 18)[2] nor the study of causes and principles (MH: 6), and nor ousiology (the general study of substance and categories). These and similar sorts of studies can only be called parts of metaphysics which in turn presuppose a more fundamental investigation of being, which, as we shall see, is the investigation of universal attributes of existent *qua* existent (*lawāhıq al-mawjūd bi-mā huwa mawjūd*), or "of existence qua existence" (*lawāḥiq al- wujūd bi-mā huwa wujūd*) [MH: 21]). Metaphysics, in the sense of ontology, Avicenna argues, is the *primary* and principal sort of inquiry, and in this capacity, is the source and origin of all other sciences. Further metaphysics also functions in his system as the end of other sciences.

He seems to suggest that all other functions of metaphysics are in fact subordinate to this core investigation that studies being *qua* being. Thus, one here needs to distinguish metaphysics (as the universal science) from the other sciences ("the particular sciences"). Metaphysics represents the most general form of knowledge possible, under which somehow all particular sciences branch out as specific and clearly demarcated forms of knowledge. The universal consideration that makes it possible to map out the whole terrain of knowledge depends on the pure universality of metaphysics consisting in the study of being *qua* being. In the case of metaphysics, as distinct from particular sciences, a look at the whole is achieved and executed. Metaphysics is "absolute wisdom" (MH: 3) just in virtue of its absolute generality. And it is *the* ontological investigation simply on account of its supreme universality. That such a purely holistic look is indeed possible and available for human knowers is the very presupposition of that kind of study, a presupposition which Avicenna nowhere seems to cast doubt. The idea that metaphysics is even prior to the study of divine being(s) (theology), surely means that it is more fundamental than theology. And in this regard, as indicated, Avicenna differs

[2] Avicenna's *The Metaphysics of The Healing* (trans. Michael E. Marmura, Brigham Young University Press, 2005) will henceforth be abbreviated as MH with page numbers.

from Aristotle. The reason for this is simple; metaphysics, in principle, cannot be the study of a specific entity or entities, be it God or other entities (e.g. numbers, forms, causes or principles), but being as such. It is in this most general ontological function that metaphysics appears to be the "philosophy in the real sense" (*falsafa bi-l-ḥaqīqa*) [MH: 3]).

Now, guided by the Aristotelian view of science, Avicenna thinks that any field of science is determined by the three distinct requirements; (1) it must have a subject-matter (*mawḍūʿ*), (2) it must have principles (*mabādiʾ*) posited beforehand and (3) it must have questions (*masāʾil* or *matālib*) for which adequate explanations are sought.[3] These perfectly apply to all other sciences. But metaphysics presents a distinct case. We might compare it with theology, the nearest case (a science which actually appears to be a branch and an outcome of metaphysics, not metaphysics itself). The subject-matter of theology is God, a subject-matter which can be established only by metaphysics. The existence of God is not self-evident, but must be proved by a higher science. On the other hand, theology, to function as a science, must have a set of principles which must again be established and given by a higher science, metaphysics. Theology also has questions whose explanations are sought after in it. In all these respects, theology is dependent on metaphysics. The case of all other sciences is also similar; they are epistemologically dependent on metaphysics. Yet as far as the epistemic status of metaphysics itself is concerned, we face an intricate situation here; because metaphysics is the highest and the primary science, the preconditions that determine and enable a science do not seem to apply to it.

First of all, the subject-matter of metaphysics, as suggested, is being *qua* being (*al-mawjūd bi-mā huwa mawjūd*). This subject-matter, however, is not something established, but posited (posited by metaphysics itself). What are the problems (*masāʾil*) for which metaphysics seeks to provide explanations? Avicenna makes it abundantly clear that things sought after in metaphysics are the general accidents or concomitants (*lawāhiq*) of being, that is, what accompanies a being inasmuch as it is a being (MH: 10). That is to say, Avicenna distinguishes the subject-matter of metaphysics from its object, which is not being qua being, but the concomitants of being qua being, which he then divides into two groups, one studied by the theory of the most general accidents (*lawāhiq*) of being qua being (e.g. one and many, potency and act, the universal and the particular, necessity and possibility etc.) and the other by the theory of substance and categories (MH: 19-21). As for the principles that can function as the given starting points for constructing definitions in a science,

[3] See also Aristotle (*Post. Analytics* I.10, 76b11–22) and al-Farabi (*On the Aims of the Metaphysics*).

Avicenna seems to assimilate this precondition of science to the things sought after in it (*matālib*) saying that in metaphysics the inquiry into principles is also the inquiry into the *lawāhiq* of being qua being (MH: 10). This implies that principles in metaphysics cannot be already given starting points, but should be constructed in the process, which is tantamount to saying that metaphysics, as different from other dependent sciences, does not have principles (in advance).

Metaphysics cannot have any principles, even though all the basic principles of the particular sciences are to be produced and explained in metaphysics itself. Metaphysics as the study of being *qua* being cannot have any principles, because such principles, if any, could only be the principles of being, which in turn would lead to an infinite regress or vicious circle (MH: 10**).** Given that only caused beings can have principles, metaphysics in the primary sense cannot be designated as the study of principles, for in this case it cannot treat being qua being (that is, everything that exists in terms of their most universal attributes), but only *some* of all that exists. For the same reason, metaphysics as the study of being qua being is not the same as the study of causes. Metaphysics, to be sure, investigates causes and principles conceived in the most general sense, but these are only some of what are "sought after" in metaphysics, and do not constitute its subject-matter which must be purely general.

It follows that the study of being *qua* being (metaphysics) is, unlike all other sciences (the particular sciences), not a sort of study done *primarily* from principles or dependent on principles. This would also suggest that all the particular sciences have ultimately their ground in metaphysics, but metaphysics itself is devoid of any such ground. Metaphysics, in the first place, neither is a sort of investigation *from* principles nor *based on* principles. Setting principles and designing proofs, a task which ultimately behooves metaphysician and is done from the fundamental level of metaphysics, is performed only with a view for the other sciences, that is, for the use of the other sciences, thus it is simply a subsidiary function of metaphysics. The way metaphysics relates to the other sciences is radically different from the way metaphysics relates to itself.

Metaphysics somehow consists in a reflection on being and considerations developed about being are often seen, in the history of metaphysics, as foundational and fundamental for everything else. In a sense, metaphysics goes back to and starts from the absolutely first things. And it is this reflection that functions as the origin behind the creation of the fields and objects of knowledge. Yet this reflection in itself is obliged to be independent of any principle, Avicenna thinks. Metaphysics is the first science in one respect because it provides the foundations or the principles that all other sciences

need in order to function as sciences, principles which these sciences by themselves can neither produce nor justify; all of the particular sciences in this sense remain deeply dependent on metaphysics as fundamental ontological inquiry. Indeed, it is the task of metaphysics to carry out the fundamental ontological determinations and to furnish most basic proofs that constitute the enabling ground of particular sciences. This, however, is not what makes metaphysics the highest area of human knowledge. For this would reduce metaphysics only to a means for other sciences. Instead metaphysics, as the first and the highest theoretical study, must *essentially* be an end in itself (MH: 13-14). Considered in terms of its primary function metaphysics is an end in itself; it represents the perfection of human soul in and through the knowledge that is best and purest of all. Considered in terms of its secondary function, metaphysics bestows the ground in which particular sciences can function as science, that is, plays a foundational role for them, one which metaphysics alone is entitled to do.

From Avicenna's point of view, all sciences start with and presuppose ontological principles. For example, mathematics investigates being/existent as something quantifiable. But it certainly does not ask the question; what is a number? Defining quantity in any of its form is not something a mathematician can be expected to do. Mathematics takes for granted the ontological determination of the object which it studies, namely existent as quantifiable. For Avicenna, without this ontological determination mathematics would lack the principle that grounds and governs its own sort of inquiry. Mathematics, thus, does not study the essences of mathematical entities, but the accidental determinations following from these essences (i.e. the classification of the existent under the aspect of its quantifiability). The study of essences, mathematical or otherwise, then falls purely within the purview of metaphysics as ontological inquiry.

Avicenna, however, draws a sharp distinction between essence (*māhiyya*, *ḏāt*) and existence (*wujūd*), and we should expect metaphysics to study not the former, but the latter. At the very least, we might think, this cannot be the primary task of metaphysics, but perhaps a secondary one. The primary task of metaphysics must be the study of being as such, rather than the essences of things. If one, in view of the fact that this distinction is so fundamental to Avicenna's ontology, reasons that metaphysics must study existence, as distinct from all other sciences which study the essences of things, one is simply wrong. Rather we observe that the one part of the distinction, perhaps the most important one, namely existence, does not appear in Avicenna's philosophy as the object of any science. Metaphysics, in so far as it studies the concomitants (*lawāhiq*, *ʿawāriḍ* or *aḥwāl*) of being qua being, pursues the knowledge of quiddities, albeit in the most universal way.

Yet as regards the way metaphysics and the other sciences (special sciences) are related it should also be noted that Avicenna's system is not a purely deductive one. We can speak of a reciprocal relation of benefit between metaphysics (as ontology) and the other (particular) sciences. The function of metaphysics is indispensable for the perfection of all other sciences that are lower than itself (MH: 14). He, in fact, likens the relationship to the master-slave relationship in which both parties benefit each other, though in different ways. Avicenna summarizes the sort of benefit metaphysics renders to the particular sciences as follows; "the benefit of this science … is to bestow certainty (*yaqīn*) on the principles of the particular sciences and to validate the quiddity of the things they share in common, even when [the latter] are not principles" (MH: 14). The first thing we should notice is that this relation of epistemological dependence between metaphysics and the particular sciences at bottom parallels the ontological one between the first cause (the necessary being) and the whole universe of forms of beings. This is perfectly in accord with Avicenna's foundationalism, in which lower sciences receive their principles from the higher ones, and all of them ultimately from metaphysics as a science of being qua being. That is, an epistemic emanative hierarchy closely correlates with an existential emanative hierarchy. Just as in the existential emanative framework the higher one establishes the lower one, gives being and reality to it, so in the epistemic one, too, all sciences ultimately issue from metaphysics, the first philosophy, which provides their principles, thereby grounding the certainty of their knowledge and validating it.

But Avicenna, as indicated, also sees metaphysics as the end and purpose of all other sciences (MH: 13), which is clearly not compatible with a purely deductive view of science. He speaks of the benefit and service rendered by other sciences to metaphysics. Avicenna actually believes that all other sciences ultimately exist for the sake of metaphysics and serve for its cause (a point master-slave model already implies). Physical sciences do this by providing the notion of the unmoved mover, and mathematical sciences by being useful for astronomy, which is in turn necessary for developing the notion of immaterial substances. That sounds a bit superficial. Actually, Avicenna follows an Aristotelian point; we can move to the metaphysical level only from the phenomena of the physical world immediately surrounding us. That is, we can move to the things more knowable in themselves, i.e. things as objects of *nous*, only from things more knowable to us, i.e. from things as objects of *aesthesis*.[4] We can also have, Avicenna suggests, principles in physics which are based on sense-perception. Some of the self-evident principles, then, can be obtained from sense-perception. But, to be sure, demonstrated

[4] See Aristotle, *Physics* I, 1.

principles require non-demonstrated, self-evident principles, thus ultimately the principles produced by metaphysics. Avicenna's point is that for the demonstration of *that* something is we only need sense-perception, but for the demonstration of *what* something is we need to have recourse to the first principles of metaphysics. So, sense-perception and thus induction (*istiqrā*) can also lead to principles in physics, but without the first principles provided by metaphysics physics and other sciences nonetheless cannot operate. We can say that induction and deduction work together in the particular sciences, where the latter has some priority over the former. The reason for this, most importantly, is that without recourse to the first principles, that is, without syllogisms (*qıyās*), certainty (*yaqīn*) cannot be established in the particular sciences or in any field of knowledge.

Avicenna sums up: "thus in its own right this science [metaphysics] should be prior to all the other sciences; but from our point of view, it is posterior to all of them" (MH: 17). Now metaphysics in its own right should be prior to all of the sciences "… because the matters investigated in this science are, in terms of essence and generality, prior to nature" (MH: 17). Avicenna then makes it clear that simply because of our human "impotence" we cannot proceed deductively in the first place, but stand in need of making use of induction, of proceeding from effects to causes. Metaphysics is posterior to all of the sciences (and therefore it should be studied after all of the particular sciences) because of this impotence, which means that we are in need of using sense-perception and thus induction to reach the causes from the effects, and finally the first cause, knowledge of which is the object (*maqsūd*) of metaphysics. The point with human impotence here cannot be other than this: the metaphysical knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of being qua being, is purely intellectual, but we humans are not purely intellectual beings.

But, closely connected with this, we have another implication. Avicenna, as just indicated, thinks that metaphysics is *in practice* posterior to all the other sciences. This is also because the natural and the particular with which these sciences concern themselves does not represent being in the real sense: "for when we first observe existence and get to know its states, we observe this natural existence" (MH: 17). The natural and the particular does not represent "the true meaning of being" (*ḥaqīqa maʿnā al-wujūd*), which is actually prior to nature, but for which our mind needs to be elevated far above the particular and the natural, something which in the first place, is rather difficult, "due to our impotence". Moreover, that the primary sense of being is never seen as represented by the particular and the natural constitutes the decisive premise behind the considerations that shape up Avicenna's view of metaphysics as the science of being. He somehow conceives of the immaterial substance (i.e. pure forms, intellect) as serving the paradigm for what it means

to be in the defining sense, so that metaphysics is also identified, quite easily, as the study of immaterial substances.

But if metaphysics, one wonders, is *in practice* posterior to all of the other sciences and therefore should be studied after all of them, how can it provide us with proofs and principles that are foundational for the other sciences and are required for the validation of their knowledge claims as well as for the grounding of the certainty of their knowledge?

II. The Unquestionable Being

To repeat; the subject-matter of a science is not conceived as the object of search in that science, but simply functions as a presupposition or postulate: "The subject-matter in every science is something whose existence is admitted in that science, the only thing investigated being its states (*aḥwāl*)" (MH: 3). It follows that metaphysics does not really study being as such, but takes it for granted as the starting-point, thus needing no explanation or problematization at all. Metaphysics, in this sense, is a science that *seeks* to provide explanations for the most general properties or concomitants of the existent. For the philosopher here at the most basic level there is nothing problematic; being is all about something clear and evident. Being is the root and supreme case of the intelligibility in which we can ground our philosophical inquiry. Being is the subject-matter of metaphysics simply because as something purely self-evident and certain, being requires no reflection. Being qua being "… is above the need either for its quiddity to be learned or for itself to be established" (MH: 9). This, I would suggest, refers to the epistemic emptiness of being itself in Avicenna's system.

Of course, Avicenna admits the difference between being qua being and the states of being qua being, but the former is, he thinks, so transparent to our mind that it would be absurd to treat it as a possible object of knowledge. Being qua being as the subject-matter of metaphysics is a given starting-point, self-evident and wholly unproblematic, and thus not something investigated by metaphysics. Here again the difference between metaphysics and theology (as a sub-discipline of metaphysics) is illuminating enough. Theology does not study God, but its attributes or states, where of course the concept of God is established by metaphysics. In the same way, metaphysics does not study being but its states, where being (as different from God) does not require clarification or investigation. The only thing that does not require clarification in Avicenna's system is being itself. The question of being, as Heidegger calls it, would not make sense to Avicenna; being is the supreme instance of self-evidence (its

epistemic content, *maʿnā*, is simple, clear and certain) requiring no separate investigation. Thus, being is not really question-worthy.[5]

Recall that metaphysics, Avicenna argued, is the end of all other sciences, all sciences serving ultimately the cause of metaphysics, "absolute wisdom"! This now actually means this: all the sciences ultimately serve the cause of the knowledge of the states of existent in so far as it is an existent. But this also means that metaphysics carries out the clarification of the states of being qua being in the light of the a priori and/or self-evident meaning of being and its principal determinations (meanings of thing, existent and necessary).

To summarize; We know being so perfectly well that it does not require philosophical treatment at all, but nonetheless metaphysics as ontology is the fundamental and supreme science. Only "the truth of the meaning of being" can be as universal as to function as the subject-matter of metaphysics. For Avicenna no ascertainable meaning can be common to the plurality of states, forms and ways of being other "than the truth of the meaning of existence" (MH: 9). Metaphysics starts with this meaning of being ("*ḥaqīqa al-maʿnā al-wujūd*") as something self-evident. The truth of the meaning of being (or as the translator renders it, "the true meaning of existence") as something purely self-evident and certain to the human mind, is the common ground of the intelligibility of all the sciences and perhaps of all parts of human activity. The knowledge of existence, Avicenna is happy to admit, is presuppositionless.

Thus, as already suggested above, for Avicenna knowledge or awareness of being is a distinct and supreme epistemic case. He clarifies this point once more in *Dāneshnāme-ye ʿAlāʾī*:

Intellect (*khirad*) knows being (*hestī*) directly, without the aid of definition (*ḥadd*) or description (*rasm*). Because being has no genus or differentia, it has no essential definition. Because there is nothing more obvious than it, there cannot be inadequate definition of it, either.[6]

This implies that (1) we do not need learning being as such (2) being is indefinable because being has no quiddity, being has no quiddity because being is not a genus. (3) knowing being is also categorically different from knowing empirical things, for it neither requires nor can be an object of sense-perception (4) our perfect awareness of the meaning of being (its supreme self-evidence to our mind) refers to an entirely different sort of knowledge. It is different, more importantly, from the knowledge of quiddities and thus from

[5] It would be interesting to read the Introduction of *Being and Time* (especially, §1) together with the Book I of the Metaphysics of *The Healing*.
[6] Avicenna, *Dāneshnāme-ye ʿAlāʾī*, trans. M. Demirkol (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı. 2013), p. 142 (translation mine).

the canonical type of knowledge (in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition) based on definition, yet more essential and more fundamental than it. But it is intellectual nonetheless. Already in the Metaphysics of *The Healing* Avicenna suggests that the meaning of being is a meaning directly intellected or intuited by our intellect; an intellectual meaning (*maʿqūl al wujūd*) (MH: 27). The meaning of being is always implicitly understood by the intellect and is thus intellectual in the preeminent sense. Accordingly, when we understand anything the intellectual meaning of being is already involved in this understanding (MH: 27).

Now, all sciences ultimately deal with quiddities and thus aim at providing definitions; but being is not amenable to be defined, and not an object of definition and thus not an object of knowledge (for it is purely self-evident and certain to the human mind). Metaphysics, too, deals with quiddities and formulates definitions, for metaphysics investigates the *lawāhiq* of being qua being. Being as such is not amenable to definition, but *lawāhiq* of being as such are. Yet it remains that the primary and the fundamental cognitive moment in human knowledge, namely the intellectual meaning of being, is other than the knowledge of essences or sense-perception. Yet we need to ask: Is this radically exceptional epistemic status of being and the radical disparity between the epistemic status of knowing being and knowing other things acceptable? Indeed, it seems difficult to bring them under a unitary notion of knowledge, for they seem to have nothing in common. Above all, what is it that allows us to say that we know being clearly and self-evidently?

III. Basic Meanings of Being

As suggested, Avicenna seems to say that being is the primary, the fundamental and the foundational meaning (*al-maʿnā*), which is simple enough. He actually speaks of the three a priori (*awwalī*) meanings of human mind; existent (*mawjūd*), thing (*shayʾ*) and necessary (*wājib*). He puts it as follows;

> We say the ideas of the existent, the thing and the necessary are impressed in the soul in the primary way (*awwalā*). This impression does not require better known things to bring it about. [This is similar] to what obtains in the category of assent, where there are primary principles, found to be true in themselves, causing [in turn] assent to the truths of other [propositions]. (MH: 22)

If they are understood only in and through themselves, no other thing can explain them, for any explanation to function as explanation (i.e. to reveal anything meaningfully) must somehow appeal to them. They are the primary

data for the possibility of any explanation. Because they can only be directly conceived, they are not amenable to conceptual explanation. If needed, one's attention can be drawn to these meanings only by suggestions.

Obviously, these three meanings through which our mind can mind anything are ontological. But they are self-evident, needing no other thing for their explanation. But given that they are ontologically most interesting, it follows that the highest form of philosophical knowledge is about things which are self-evident. Thus, they cannot be proven, for they are the items of immediate knowledge better known than anything proven; they are the basis of all proving. Any attempt to prove, define or explain these three intuitions (*maʿānī*; i.e. "thing", "being" and "necessary") leads inevitably to circularity. As Avicenna states:

How then would it be the state of one who strives to define the state of the evident thing in terms of some quality belonging to it which requires a proof to establish that it exists for [that thing]. (MH: 23)

Thus being, thing and necessity are the three a priori grounds of all intelligibility. But Avicenna's analysis, I suspect, comes to show that they are ultimately reducible to the determinations of one meaning, namely the meaning of being, thus presupposing at bottom the meaning of being. Let us briefly explain.

Avicenna shortly discusses the difference between existence (*wujūd*) and thing (*shayʾ*). That which is existent is identical with realized or established. The thing, however, is different. Avicenna's discussion implies that thing actually refers to the essence (*māhiyya*) that somehow determines each individual, albeit contingently. Taken as such, a thing (*shayʾ*) is an abstract object (*māhiyya*) wholly indeterminate and indefinite in itself, that is, devoid of any existential determination. It becomes the form of a concrete individual when it is instantiated in concrete reality (*fī l-ʿayān*), is caused (given existence) ultimately by the first cause (the necessary being, God). In that case, that ideal structure merely possible in itself turns into form as an organizing principle of a material content and the proper object of knowledge (where, however, matter and therefore particularity remain outside the interest of science). Thus, thing refers to the individual essence which, when abstracted from the material accidents attaching to it, gives us the truth about that thing.

In a sense, we may divide being into two levels; namely, (1) what-being (*māhiyya*, *shayʾ*) and (2) that-being (concrete, extra-mental being, existent, *mawjūd*). That being is the realization of what-being in the actual world, which is to say that substance becomes real with categorical determinations

(accidents). Cognition in turn takes place as the abstraction of what-being from these accidents.

Hence you have now understood the way in which "the thing" differs from what is understood by "the existent" and "the realized" and that despite this difference, the two [that is, "the thing" and "the existent"] are necessary concomitants. (MH: 27)

Avicenna actually calls *shay'* and *mawjūd*, both, beings, but the former refers to possible, indefinite beings while the latter to definite, actual (extra-mental) ones. Thus existent and thing can be reduced to the concept of being, for they are simply two ways of being. It is in this sense that he calls them "necessary concomitants" above and he indicates earlier that "the expression existence is also used to denote many meanings, one of which is the reality a thing happens to have. Thus [the reality] a thing happens to have is, as it were, its own special existence (*al-wujūd al-ḫāṣṣ*)" (MH: 24).

As for the meaning of the necessary, the same circularity takes place here as well, as soon as one attempts to explain it, in which case one inescapably would need to use terms like "possible" and "impossible" that are evidently the words formed by reference to the concept of the necessary. Actually, given that they are formed by reference to the concept of necessary, they are themselves not understandable without this concept, and thus prove insufficient here as regards their explanatory value.

Existence and necessity are two primary matters and notions of Avicenna's ontology. And it appears that they are absolutely inseparable; to exist for something means always to exist necessarily. And this implies that prior to its coming into existence, that thing *is* only as something possible. As Avicenna is quick to admit, necessity is just a word signifying the full certainty of being: "the necessary points toward the assuredness of being (*ta'akkud al-wujūd*), which is better known than non-being. Because being is known in itself, whereas non-being is in some respect or another, known through being" (MH: 28). Given this point and the crucial importance of the category of necessity in Avicenna's ontology as a whole, it is even possible to argue that Avicenna comes to conceive of necessity as the basic meaning of being.[7] Basing on this recognition, he arrived at the idea of "necessary being", for necessary being is, in a sense, just tautology; it actually means being in the pure and absolute sense.

Thus, existence is purely a matter of necessity. But this requires that as far as contingent things are concerned, one has to distinguish between their

[7] Cf. İlhan Kutluer, İbn Sina Ontolojisinde Zorunlu Varlık (İstanbul: İz Yay., 2013), p. 93.

quiddity and their existence. Quiddity is thus not sheer nothingness, but a certain way of being. Avicenna, as opposed to Mu'tezilīs, rejects to think of thing (*shay'*) as absolute nothingness.[8] Considered merely in terms of essence things *are*, but that is different from their existing. The former involves possibility, the latter necessity. They *are,* because they are not sheer nothingness, but possible things. Only that which is possible can come into existence. When they come into existence their being acquires necessity (albeit necessity through another, *wujūb bi ghayrih*). Acquiring necessity and acquiring existence are the same. A thing is the existent in the abstract, whereas the existent is thing in the concrete. When a thing gains definite form in actuality, is instantiated in the concrete world, it becomes a concrete individual subject to the categorical determinations. Things are divided into two ontologically distinct layers, namely possibility and necessity, essence and existence. Avicenna, however, will add that God is not a "thing", but pure, necessary being, in whom such division does not obtain.

But upon reflection it would appear that these three meanings are simply determinations of a more fundamental meaning, namely the meaning of being, which must be understood and known to us more directly than these meanings and is always presupposed in their contents, for, as Avicenna indicates, "[only] being is known in itself". Mental, determinate and necessary being, each of them, bear a reference to a root meaning, the meaning of being, as a meaning directly understood by us, apart from which these meanings will cease to be intelligible. Human knowers, Avicenna implies, enjoy an a priori, immediate intelligibility of being that forms the starting points of any philosophical search after reality. The meaning of being (*al-maʿnā al-wujūd*) necessarily accompanies all other meanings.

One cannot even say that these three self-evident fundamental meanings are "logical truths", because they are prior to logic, i.e. they are presupposed by all logical operations. Thus, logic is possible, that is, we can practice logical rules in thinking and speech, owing to the fact that we possess and execute the meaning of being, that we act with the intuitive meaning of being. If they are logical truths, they can only be the most fundamental logical truths, and in that case metaphysics and logic would be identical, which Avicenna cannot accept (because for him logic is basically confined to a study of second-order intelligibles [MH: 7]).

Finally, Avicenna insists that the necessary is more important than and is prior to the other two a priori, self-evident meanings … "because the

[8] For a good discussion, see R. Wisnowsky, "Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition", in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. P. Adamson and R. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 105-113.

necessary points to the assuredness of existence, existence being better known than nonexistence. This is because existence is known in itself, whereas nonexistence is … known through existence" (MH: 28). Here by nonexistence Avicenna does not mean "absolute nonexistence" (the notion which he dismisses as absurd), but those things which are contingent, i.e. not necessary by themselves, things other than God, that is, things in whom quiddity and existence are actually separated. Everything thus is thought and understood through the meaning of absolute being (through the assuredness of being), which the meaning "necessary" represents, which Avicenna will soon, in the subsequent chapters of the book, translate into the notion of the necessary being, God. But here the question is: Are the necessary being and the God, as presented in the Qur'an, the same things? In this way, does not one simply draw God into the epistemic emptiness of being implicit in Avicenna's understanding of being? or does not one thereby invoke the notion of God to cover over such emptiness of being? In fact, if one takes the priority of ontology over theology in the full sense, that mandates that everything about God is to be intellectually explicated ultimately from being itself. But, as discussed above, the notion of being in Avicenna seems sterile enough. And this is simply what is inevitable; the mere notion of being falls short of yielding any positive content. If this is granted, Avicenna's ontological theology, his attempt at forging a conceptual continuity from being to God, is problematic in a fundamental sense.

IV. Concluding Evaluation

Avicenna assumes that we already know being, that there is no need to think about it. And if so, it also follows that the subject-matter of metaphysics, for Avicenna, is being qua being, but there is no such thing as the inquiry into being as such, for metaphysics (as ontology) just takes the meaning of being for granted without further consideration; to be sure, a philosophically naïve position.[9]

That being said, one can find, nonetheless, significant clues in Avicenna's thought in the direction of a thinking of being qua being liberated from substance metaphysics, from an ontology of causes, grounds and principles, from theological underpinnings and from a logical search into quiddities. Avicenna takes the meaning of being as the first, the original given that starts metaphysics and rules it throughout. In so far as it is categorically dissociated from a consideration of things and quiddities, it can be regarded as

[9] Cf. Plato, *Sophist* (244 a) and Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Plato, in the *Sophist*, speaks of the impasse regarding being itself that has escaped attention because philosophers have always taken for granted its self-evidence.

a transcendental notion. That is why the schoolmen like Aquinas and Duns Scotus interpreted Avicenna's primary notions as *transcendentia*.[10] The meaning of being transcends the categories. But it is also a fact that Avicenna fails to give any content to the notion of being that is supposed to ground his project of metaphysics, which is ultimately, it seems, an attempt at *mathesis universalis*. Being as such, in the framework of this project, does not deserve careful and sustained reflection, but should play its part as the ground of full intelligibility of things, as purely self-evident, certain and clear beginning. Being hence appears here simply as the most general (or, as Nietzsche would say, as nothing).

It is also important, in this connection, that Avicenna's metaphysics (following to a large extent the Greek tradition) privileges the intelligible; to be is, in a special sense, to be intelligible. That leads to an important reduction in our experience of being. Avicenna reads that intelligibility into the whole fabric of reality. God here functions as the rational foundation of the universe, i.e. the principle that grounds the rational explicability of everything. This God, however, turns out in the end as empty as the notion of being Avicenna develops or, better, assumes. (Perhaps here is the true context of Ghazali's critique of Avicenna, but we shall not explore that point here). This is the inevitable result once metaphysics sets itself the task of rational explanation of reality, a task which imposes on the metaphysician, almost unnoticeably, the unquestioned starting point of taking being as the clearest and in the most general sense, that is, by way of abstracting it from all beings, and from all its particular forms and ways of manifestation. This is the notion of being which Avicenna's metaphysics tend to presuppose. It is this abstract and formal notion of being which I above indicate as empty. The emptiness of this notion of being is thus crucially linked with the identification of pure being with pure form, which is thought to be most supremely represented in the case of God (as the identity of being and essence). Beings are absorbed in the pure universality and thus in the pure intelligibility of being. That way of bringing being and God together can do justice neither to being nor to God; both in the end evaporate in an abstract universality. Another element of this emptiness is the supposed self-evidence of being. Here self-evidence attached to being makes it impossible to problematize being as radically as it deserves, but actually functions to preclude any such radical inquiry.[11]

[10] J. A. Aertsen, "Avicenna's Doctrine of the Primary Notions and Its Impact on Medieval Philosophy", p. 26.

[11] This calls to mind Heidegger's interpretation of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy. Avicenna, as mentioned, argues that being considered in the pure and absolute sense refers us to God, the necessary being. In this sense, metaphysics leads up to theology and is fulfilled as theology. This twofold denomination of metaphysics is indeed prevalent in

In response to this criticism, someone might refer us to the theory of emanation as a very rich and integrated vision of being. The obvious question here, of course, is: how seriously can we take this theory today? Can we really think of it as anything more than a fantastic intellectual fiction, albeit one which is itself the product of a metaphysical desire to put all reality into an intelligible structure? At the expense of a digression, let me add here a further critical point. This intellectualism, coupled with spiritualism, leads not only to a reduction in our experience of being, but also to an alienation to the concrete world we live in. Thus we find in Avicenna an ego (most especially manifested in the thought experiment known as "flying man") uneasy with the terrestrial world, an ego who wants to leave it behind and fly into a purely spiritual space. Conceived of as incorporeal substance that ego, much like Cartesian ego, does not understand himself in terms of a "dwelling" in the world, but floats over it.

As discussed above, metaphysics as the study of being qua being resides at the top of the hierarchy of sciences, but it also lies at the foundation of all sciences. It occupies the top position in the hierarchy of sciences because it is the most valuable and supreme science, desirable for its own sake to the highest degree. Hence all sciences ultimately serve for it. Metaphysics lies at the foundation of all sciences because it is ultimately metaphysics which alone is capable of providing the basic proofs and principles for other sciences. With respect to the former, metaphysics is the ultimate and highest form of knowledge to be attained, that is, the *end* of human knowledge, while with respect to the latter it is the source, the enabling ground of all fields of theoretical knowledge, that is, the *beginning* of this knowledge. And both functions of metaphysics (as the culmination and the starting-point for other sciences) obtain on account of (or owing to) metaphysics' status as the science of being qua being. Both functions of metaphysics assume metaphysics' ability to start from being as such, which in turn assumes the self-evidence of being. In other words, by means of this central role assigned to being, that is, its intelligibility, supreme self-evidence and certainty for human mind and the foundational function tied to this, it becomes possible to locate metaphysics at the top of the hierarchy of sciences, and to conceive of it in complete continuity

Avicenna's work. He even expresses it clearly in the initial pages of the Metaphysics of *The Healing*: Metaphysics "is the first philosophy (*falsafatu al 'ūlā*) because it is the knowledge of the first thing in existence, namely first cause and the first thing in generality, existence and unity" (MH: 11). Heidegger argues that metaphysics, from its beginning in Ancient Greece on, unfolds itself as an onto-theo-logy, that is, a thinking of being in which being is understood as the most general (ontology) and as the supreme being (theology), both inseparably together. Here what matters is the knowledge of things. As a result, neither being nor God is essentially experienced, but projected in terms of their grounding functions for the knowledge of the world. See M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (1957).

and connection with the other areas of human knowledge proceeding somehow from it. That intelligibility which consists in noetic self-evidence is then assumed to obtain (permeate, pervade and prevail) in all spheres of being, in the whole cosmos and earth.

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