

**DOES EXISTENCE PRECEDE ESSENCE? EXISTENTIALISM
AND AVICENNA***

Eyüp ŞAHİN**

Abstract

Existentialism is one of the important matters of philosophy as a current in the centre of discussion as to whether existence precedes essence or essence precedes existence. In order to remove the obstacles in front of human freedom, Sartre argues that existence precedes essence. If existence precedes essence, man himself, will create his essence, and thus will be responsible for his actions. In this way of thinking, there is no necessity for the existence of God. According to Avicenna, the source of essence (māhiyya) is God himself as a necessary being. Therefore, man is not the source of his own existence, thus it is impossible to argue a concept of unlimited freedom. According to him, the physical and psychological necessity of universe is a result of metaphysical necessity, since God is the necessary being. In this article, the questions whether 'the I' of man can be regarded, according to Avicenna, as a starting point and whether one can doubt about the nature of existence, its perception, its knowledge, about it are sought to answer. Besides, the possibility of making a connection between 'existentialism' that has been identified in philosophy with Sartre, which focuses on such concepts as 'existence,' 'essence' and 'will' and Avicenna, on basis of the fact that how Avicenna explained and grounded these terms much earlier than existentialism. Is it possible to make a comparison between 'the conscience' of existentialism and 'flying man' of Avicenna? It is also aimed in this article to make an assessment if there are distinctive and parallel points in the relationship established by Avicenna between existence and essence and the views put by Descartes and philosophers after him.

Keywords: *Necessary Being, Existence, Essence, Will, Responsibility, Being, Conscience, Flying Man.*

* This article is a revised and extended version of the paper published under the title of "Existentialism and Ibn Sînâ (Avicenna)" in *Journal of Islamic Research*, December (2009), Vol. 2, pp. 101-115).

** Yrd. Doç. Dr., Ankara Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi, eyupsahin@ankara.edu.tr.

Öz

Varlık Mâhiyet (Öz)'den Önce mi Gelir? Varoluşçuluk ve İbn Sînâ

Varoluşçuluk, varlığın mı özden önce yoksa özün mü varlıktan önce geldiği tartışmasının merkezinde bir akım olarak felsefenin önemli konularından biridir. Sartre, insan özgürlüğü önündeki engelleri/sınırları kaldırmak gayesiyle varoluşun özden önce geldiğini savunmaktadır. Varoluş özden önce gelince, insan özünü kendisi yaratacak ve böylece eylemlerinden sorumlu olacaktır. Bu düşüncede Tanrı'nın varlığına ihtiyaç yoktur. İbn Sînâ'ya göre özün (mâhiyet) kaynağı bütünüyle zorunlu varlık olan Tanrı'nın kendisidir. Bu nedenle insan, mâhiyetinin kaynağı değildir. Dolayısıyla sınırsız bir özgürlük anlayışından söz edilemez. Ona göre âlemin fizik ve psikolojik zorunluluğu, metafizik zorunluluğunun bir neticesidir; çünkü Tanrı, zorunluluğu kendisinde olan varlıktır. Bu makalede İbn Sînâ'ya göre, insanın 'ben'inin bir başlangıç noktası olarak alınıp alınamayacağı, 'Varlık'ın mâhiyeti, kavranması, bilinmesi ve onun hakkında şüpheye düşülüp düşülemeyeceği gibi sorulara cevaplar aranmaktadır. Ayrıca felsefede Sartre ile özdeşleşen 'varlık,' 'öz,' 'mâhiyet' ve 'irade' gibi kavramlar etrafında odaklanan 'Varoluşçuluk'un ondan çok önce bu kavramların İbn Sînâ tarafından nasıl açıklandığı ve temellendirildiği noktasından, 'Varoluşçuluk' ve İbn Sînâ arasında bir bağlantı kurmanın imkânı üzerinde durulmaktadır. Varoluşçuluk'un 'bilinç' kavramı ile İbn Sînâ'nın 'uçan adam' kavramı arasında bir karşılaştırma yapılabilir mi? Ayrıca İbn Sînâ'da varlık ve mâhiyet arasındaki ilişki ile Descartes ve sonrası filozoflar tarafından ortaya konan görüşler arasında ayırım ve paralel noktalar bakımından bir değerlendirme yapmak makalenin hedefleri arasındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zorunlu Varlık, Varlık, Mâhiyet, İrade, Sorumluluk, Oluş, Bilinç, Uçan Adam.

Introduction

Plato categorized the universe of senses as the universe of beings and the universe of ideas as the universe of essence, setting out that there are two conceptions based on the universe of senses and the universe of ideas (Republic 1128-1130). However, in time, in the aftermath of the philosophies of Aristotle and especially that of St. Thomas in the Medieval Age, based on metaphysics, these philosophies changed with Descartes and Bacon. For instance, Bacon spoke of 'simple natures,' and Descartes of basic and definite concepts. Yet we see that the essence of things continues to be subject of controversy and debate. It is at this juncture that a noticeable aspect of the link between Descartes' cogito and Avicenna's metaphor of the 'flying man', which was adopted almost all through the Middle Ages in Europe, has long been recognized. The idea of God that stemmed from this

link and was enhanced in the course of time seems to have been disregarded by the 18th century philosophers (Folquie 24).

It must be accepted that at the root of the criticisms by this new form of perception addressed to the former ones lies the idea of Christian doctrine of God and the contributions of the thinkers who are regarded as the representatives of this doctrine. According to Gilson, Descartes claimed that there is no difference between the idea of God and the Christian idea of God by way of correlating them. According to him, the essence of the idea of God is based on a deity that thinks is uncaused and self-subsistent and has a basic and distinct essence. Such an idea is an innate faculty. In the human mind exists a being that possesses all the attributes that could be ascribed to a deity and that is self-existing with nothing equal or resembling to Him. The very idea of a self-existing God would be sufficient to be sure of His existence. Accordingly, though the human is inclined to think that God is non-existent in reality since he is accustomed to distinguishing between essence and being, it appears that God's non-existent would not be possible, either. For Gilson, the idea of an absolute existence is the same as the idea of God. Existence is in fact perfection. Thus, thinking an Absolute Being devoid of the attribute of existence would be contradictory since we would then be presuming that He is devoid of perfection. Therefore, existence is an inseparable attribute of God, and hence the existence of God is necessary. "If Descartes had conducted some research on the idea of God he proposed, he would have probably realised that all people have a certain idea of divinity and that understanding does not always match the idea of God in Christianity. If all the people had the same idea of divinity as the Christians do, Moses would not have wondered what Jehovah would call him, or Jehovah would have replied: 'what a stupid question it is! You already knew the answer.' Descartes spent so much effort in spoiling the mental ingenuousness of his metaphysics by involving the Christian beliefs in the subject that he easily declared that the definition of God in Christian belief exists innately in all human beings. But this recollection (just like Plato did) was not a sort of remembrance that the soul has as in reincarnation but the one which Descartes learnt when he used to go to church as a boy" (Gilson 58-59). It thus seems that the common point found in Gilson's criticism of Descartes as well as in the 18th century understanding existentialism is that at that time the idea of being was dealt with independently of God. The aim of this article is limited to the efforts towards indicating the similarities and differences between the concepts of existence and essence that is the primary emphasis of the existentialist movement initiated by Descartes and given a new dimension by Sartre, and the concepts of existence-essence in Islamic philosophy, especially in that of Avicenna.

Existentialism

Existentialism is characterized with the tendency to lay emphasis on existence (Folquie 34). It does not stress on essences, possibilities or abstract concepts at all. In this respect, existentialism defines itself as a return to absolute truth. Then how will this be achieved? Without a doubt, the shortcut answer of existentialism to this question would be that man, who has will and consciousness and yet is thrown into the world of objects with no will and consciousness, can reach truth only through existentialism. A research into existence would require facing certain contingencies out of which one has to make some choices from the beings/the created. While classical philosophy does not doubt that essence precedes existence, existentialism claims that existence precedes essence. This gave rise to a new notion which reversed the fundamental medieval idea that essence precedes existence. According to this idea championed by the French thinker J.P. Sartre, first man came into existence and then formed his 'self' by defining his self. Therefore, we cannot speak of an unchanging nature of human beings. Since the possibilities/contingencies which provide man with opportunities to build up his own essence/self are created by his relations with things and other people, existence has to emerge under the circumstances in which one has to be a being on earth or he has to exist in a concrete, historical period of time which restricts his own choices (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 58-59; Molina 5-8). Existentialism, in this sense, claims to serve as a return to the concrete/tangible. To exist, to be or to be present do not bear the same meaning. For instance, as Sartre expressed, stones exist, however, they cannot exist on their own without the mental activity which materialize their being (*Being and Nothingness* 73). In this respect, existence is not a condition but an act; it is an ascension from potentiality to actuality.

This idea places the stress on the act of 'choosing.' In existentialism, man will determine and choose what he wants to be. For instance, having chosen 'to be energetic and active' would not be sufficient to remain energetic and active all the time. For the existent who is stuck with the example chosen will get hardened and then might cease to exist. Therefore, in order to exist, one should keep differentiating and choosing what s/he wants to be/come by checking out the possibilities of the new existent that results from previous choices. This is why existence is always defined as an action or ascension. Man is expected to transcend himself in this process. For he can only exist in a developmental process, which has been formed through free will, towards a superior being. So man in existentialism chooses his/her essence by having chosen what s/he wants to be/come. This is in fact

the reason why existence precedes essence.¹ For, in order to be able to choose, one has to exist first. What is meant here by existence preceding essence is limited to being human. The only being in universe that is truly free in the real sense of the word is human being alone. Almost all the beings other than human beings are dependent on certain rules and surrounded by them.

Actually, all the beings on earth exist in such a way that one can come face to face with them. Among these, according to Heidegger, it is only for 'dasein' that the flow of life and the formation thereof is worth contemplating (Heidegger 28-29).² As for the living beings that cannot consciously and individually choose the way they lead their lives, requirements for survival are completely determined by reproduction. To live, for 'dasein,' means to have an approach as to who s/he is and what is essential in his/her existence (Sallis 98-118; Molina 18-20). In a sense, life must be defined in line with this approach. Here 'dasein' has an extremely ontic significance.

The fundamental reason for the difficulties indicated are the reactions of those who consider themselves to be existentialists, which can be studied under two groups. The first group includes such leading Christian existentialists as Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, to which group apparently Gilson added Descartes as well. One must also mention Kierkegaard, who has ideas peculiar to him in this tradition. In his book entitled *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard tries to identify himself with the prophet Abraham, who obeyed God and attempted to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. Here he concludes that God is above ethical categories. This is also true of exceptional individuals; that is, general codes of ethics are not applicable to

¹ Kaufman criticises this and says: "...If indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism. Man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behavior. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself. Yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world, he is responsible for everything he does..." See: *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Ed: Walter Kaufmann, Meridian Books, New York, 1956, p. 295.

² Heidegger says: "...the characteristics of 'dasein' are not 'qualities', but possible ways of 'being.' Therefore the term 'dasein' is to express not its 'essence', but its 'being'; it means 'being there.' To distinguish further the kind of being. Peculiar to 'dasein', from all 'vorhandenheit', the term 'existence' is applied exclusively to it. And the fundamental characteristics of 'dasein' corresponding to the categories of 'vorhandenheit' are therefore termed 'existentialia.'" See: Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, p. 29.

them (*Fear and Trembling* 57-82).³ As for Gabriel Marcel, he states: “Hardly a day goes by without my being asked what is existentialism? It is perhaps hardly surprising that my answers tend to be evasive: I should like to say, ‘It is too difficult,’ or ‘It would take too long to explain’; but I realise that such answers are disappointing and should not be given too often. What I propose to do now is not so much to define existentialism as to try to throw some light on what seems to me its essence by bringing out its key notions—that is, the notions which give the clue to it from my standpoint, which, I need hardly add, is very different from that of Sartre. Sartre has himself admitted that there is a Christian version of existentialism which is not to be confused with his own; though, for my part, I think it is insufficient and even incorrect to stress its Christian character, because I believe that many people are liable to adhere to it who do not regard themselves as Christians” (Marcel 91).

Jaspers on the other hand defines the essence of existentialism as free choice. That’s why his view is much closer to that of Sartre. According to Jaspers, the choice of what we want to be is not related to mind; therefore, it cannot be associated with reasons or evidence. Yet, everyone is still responsible for the choices they have made. Because this choice is his choice; thus, choosing the bad causes distress in him (Jaspers 58; 62).

The second group of existentialists are the atheist existentialists led by Heidegger and the French existentialists, into which Sartre included himself (Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* 13). Heidegger, in the first chapter of his *Being and Time*, focuses on the analysis of human’s existence. According to this, the existence of such an event stems from chaos including human. Heidegger’s view can be summarized as follows: Consciousness is that of a thing conditioned with the emergence of an object. It is quite ordinary to feel sorry for a person, who was thrown into this world and sentenced to death with no legitimate grounds, but who could see beyond the banality of his daily life. It is the duty of a thinker to endure the hardships that would elevate him to the real existence (Heidegger 11; Tugendhat 136-137).

According to Sartre, existentialism is a doctrine which leads one’s life and shows that every truth and every action embraces an environment, a humanistic subjectivity. In this sense, existentialism is in fact humanism. The word ‘subjectivism’ has two meanings: “It means on the one hand, that an individual chooses and makes himself; and, on the other, that it is

³ For the section about the place of God above the level ethical/moral categories. See: *ibid*, p. 83-90.

impossible for man to transcend human subjectivity. The second of these is the essential meaning of existentialism” (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 13). The fact that Sartre identified existentialism with humanism is important in that it is an answer to the criticism levelled against the existentialist to the effect that they always dwell on the pessimistic and negative aspects of life (*Existentialism* 196 etc). The central idea of existentialism championed by Sartre is to set man free. Only those who are not identified and determined by others can create their own selves/essence. That’s why man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he is not created himself. He is free because once he comes to live on earth and is thrown onto earth, he is responsible for all of his deeds. Sartre says: “If existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism’s first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men” (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 16).⁴ Sartre’s definition of freedom is completely different from the unlimited freedom of the Enlightenment philosophy. For this freedom is not a gift of God. “Man is all alone in universe. He is responsible for the situation he is in; though he seems to remain on earth, he is so free that he is capable of reaching the stars (Kaufman 72). While man is breathing, eating, sleeping, or behaving in this or that way doing different things, he moves within the boundaries of the absolute; in this sense there is no difference between existing freely and existing absolutely. There is no difference between being absolute that is embedded in time and placed in history and being universally understandable.

According to Kaufman, who disagrees with this idea, Sartre’s God-universe design does not have a developmental process which can be comprehended by reason. Kierkegaard, opposing both Thomas and Hegel goes one step further and rejects the whole conception of universe, seeing it as a sort of madness for Kaufman (16). On the other hand, Kierkegaard’s

⁴ Marcel criticizes Sartre’s this view: “These words ‘I am condemned to freedom’ should be underlined. What would they sounded like, say, to a Descartes or to a Biran or to any other genuine philosopher of the past? Surely as a most regrettable *flatus voci*. To what indeed can I be condemned? Surely it must be to a loss, to a deprivation-whether of life, of wealth, of honour or of freedom. I cannot be ‘condemned’ to freedom unless freedom is a deprivation, a loss. And indeed, for Sartre freedom is, like consciousness, a deprivation, a defect; it is only by a kind of paralogism that he later represents this defect as the positive condition of the emergence of a world and thus bestows upon it a creative value.” (See: Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, p. 78).

theist philosophy, despite Heidegger's stance on God, somehow maintains relationship with Him, and by virtue of man's consciousness about annihilation, leads him to faith by delivering from denial after his dramatic state vis-a-vis death and stressful internal struggle (Ülken 139). Although Heidegger's notion of God follows the same path as that of Nietzsche, it is different, in essence, from all the other atheist philosophies. In Heidegger we see a struggle against God or a war, as it were, rather than a godless design of the universe. By contrast, Kierkegaard opts for a dialogue with God. In this respect, he cannot be regarded as a theist existentialist like Marcel and Jaspers.⁵ In atheist existentialism, however, the universe does not have any rational aspect; it is man who gives the universe its meaning. when God ceases to be the subject of ontology, greater space will be left to man in the universe, filling in the space which God vacates and thus it will not matter whether God exists or not. So what should be meant by "being/existence" is the human being and things. As the question whether or not God exists is no longer a subject matter of ontology, it is not to be discussed. Now that there is no creator, there is no essence that would determine man before his existence.

Avicenna⁶

In Arabic, the word 'wujūd' is used as an equivalent of the word 'existence' in English. The word 'mawjūdāt' corresponds to particular and individual beings and the word 'mawjūd' to the 'existent.' With the term 'existence,' 'being' and 'existing' seem to have been combined. The word, 'existing' here is the attribute of being; the manner of existing is its mode (Ülken 144). In fact, what is meant here by using the word 'existing' is existence. As a counterpart of the word, despite the difficulties and discussions incurred by the difference between being and existing, the term, 'existence' is used. Likewise, existentialism, focusing on existing, draws a clear-cut distinction between being and existing. The concept of being in fact

⁵ Marcel criticises the assertion made by Sartre himself of the existence in each of us of an initial pattern which existential psychoanalysis should be able to reveal: Should we not ask what is the pattern at the origin of Sartre's atheism? The answer can be only one of two things. Either he must admit that his atheism derives from an attitude of the will or from an initial resentment (as would be the case of a man who, from the very depth of his being, willed that God should not exist); such an answer would be in keeping with his doctrine, but it would destroy much of its metaphysical bearing. Or else he must take up his stand on the traditional ground of objective thought and declare that *there is no God*, as one might say that there are no people on Mars; but in that case he must give up the plane of existentialism and fall back on the most absolute positions of traditional rationalism. See: *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, p. 85.

⁶Abū Alī Ibn Sīnā (980-1037).

requires an essence, some predicates, attributes and modes. This relationship, according to Ülken, led Aristotle to view being as essence/substance and concepts as accidents (Ülken 110). As is known, Aristotle did not distinguish between existence and essence. And Medieval philosophy, focusing on these two concepts, contributed to the birth of 18th century and 'post-18th century' existentialism. In this respect, it is important to emphasize that the philosophers such as Avicenna, Averroes, and St. Thomas pioneered in the conceptualization of these terms and also their introduction into philosophical terminology.

It is a known fact that the term 'existence' corresponds to the Arabic term 'wujūd' in Islamic philosophical terminology and that the word, 'mawjūd'⁷ which is derived from the same etymological root and which means meaning "that which exist" is widely used.

The discrepancy in the terminology naturally led to certain problems. For instance, according to Averroes, those who translated Greek thought into Arabic had to use the term 'mawjūd' because they were not able to find an Arabic equivalent for such terms as essence, accident, potentiality and actuality in Aristotle's metaphysics (*Tahāfut at-tahāfut* 371)⁸. In parallel to Averroes' argument here, we should say that the term 'mawjūd,' which was used to mean both 'being' and 'existent,' corresponds to 'being' rather than 'existence.' Thus 'wujūd' here signifies existence while 'mawjūd' (that which exists) means 'being.'

At the very beginning of the Metaphysics chapter of *The Book of Healing (al-Shifā)*, Avicenna employs the terms 'wujūd' and 'mawjūd' with regard to the concept of God. This shows that the above-mentioned general tendency is strongly represented in Avicenna. According to him, when we speak of the existence of God⁹ either we would mean by it that His existence is self-evident or we would be speaking of something that cannot be explained by way of reasoning. However, these two things cannot be

⁷ We should emphasize that the term, "mawjūd" is sometimes used as an equivalent of the term, 'inniyya', sometimes used as synonyms. For the subject see: Burrell, David B., "Essence and Existence: Avicenna and Greek Philosophy", *Melanges*, V. 17, Beirut, 1986, p. 60.

⁸ Averroes stated that whereas the terms 'huwiyya', 'dhāt', 'shay' does not correspond to the concept of existence / being (mawjūd) exactly, he asserted that they are synonyms and in this context, he preferred to use the term, mawjūd as an equivalent of the term, existence. For further information see: Ibn Rushd, *Talkhīs Ma Ba'd at-Tabī'a*, Ed: Osman Emin, Cairo, 1950, p. 16.

⁹ From this point onwards, when we utter the phrase, 'the existence of God in Avicenna, we would mean the term, 'wujūd.'

valid and true at the same time. For when something is inexplicable, then we cannot talk about its existence. Therefore, an investigation concerning the existence and attributes of God can be a subject matter of metaphysics, though not directly¹⁰ (*Kitāb ash-Shifā’/Ilāhiyyāt* 4). Avicenna, following Alfārābī,¹¹ thinks that the concept of existence, not only in the case of God, but in general, is so broad a general that it cannot be subsumed under any one term and cannot be explained by any concept. Thus no other words could be used to define it logically. He has no genus, nor species, nor differentia (*Kitāb ash-Shifā’/Ilāhiyyāt* 28). In fact, existence is such that whose meaning is formed a priori in mind.

For Avicenna, “It is not possible that (God’s existence) should be the subject matter. This is because the subject matter of every science is something whose existence is admitted in that science, the only thing investigated being its states. (This was known in other places.) The existence of God –exalted be His greatness- cannot be admitted as the subject matter of this science; rather, it is, (something) sought in it. This is because, if this were not the case, then (God’s existence) would have to be either admitted in this science but searched for in another, or else admitted in this science but not searched for in another...The inquiry concerning (God) would, then, have two aspects: one (being) an inquiry concerning Him with respect to His existence, and the other (an inquiry) with respect to His attributes. If, then, the inquiry concerning His existence is in this science, it cannot be the subject matter of this science. For it is not for any science to establish its own subject matter” (*The Metaphysics of The Healing* 3-4).

¹⁰ Avicenna explains here that, since the topic of metaphysics is existence / being, the subject is existence; whereas he determines that the issues are linked here due to the fact that they exist on their own, without restricted with any condition. Whether the existence of God is a subject of metaphysics in Avicenna should be discussed. This discussion is doubtlessly dependent on Avicenna. For instance, İlhan Kutluer, in his work, *The Necessary Being in Avicenna’s Ontology (İbn Sînâ Ontolojisininde Zorunlu Varlık)*, despite the widespread opinion, rightly defends that the existence of God cannot be a subject of metaphysics, based on the views of Avicenna mentioned in the introductory part of his book, *Metaphysics*. According to Kutluer, the subject of every scholarly field, because of their ontological reality, is related to a field based on metaphysics; these fields are only dealt with restricted field of existence and thus examine their states. The existence of God, however, is not a topic to be based on through metaphysics; nonetheless, it is a question to be solved by metaphysics through evidence. See: Kutluer, İlhan, *İbn Sînâ Ontolojisininde Zorunlu Varlık*, İstanbul, 2002, p. 70.

¹¹ Alfārābī, in the works in which he dealt with existence, repeats almost the same things and states that existence is too clear and obvious in the mind to be told or identified. A much clearer term seems to be required to explain it. Yet is no such a term. In this subject, see: *Uyun al-Masā’il*, p. 56; *ad-Da’awā al-Qalbiyyah*, Hyderabad, 1349, p. 2; *al-Siyāṣah al-Madaniyyah*, Hyderabad, 1346, p. 50.

According to Avicenna, existence is the basis and first principle of everything. It cannot be explicated by anything other than itself. For, as have mentioned, he has neither genus nor differentia, which are required to define something. Existence is a clear and definite concept.¹² In reality the shortest way to define something is that that thing, as we have mentioned before, should have a gender/category and developmental stages (Davidson 173). While existence cannot be defined, how can will it be comprehended? Avicenna's answer to this question is that the conception of existence is a human (*an-Najāt* 325). Thus, existence can be comprehended without a definition or qualification. The concept of existence, which is most clear in human mind, cannot be explained through another concept since there would not be any clearer concept than existence. A question as to what are the propositions that are accepted as philosophical principles (*Kitāb ash-Shifā'illāhiyyāt* 27). It is in this why that Avicenna holds an original stance here by placing on the same level existence and the principles that are of philosophical certitude (Ay 84).

What is the distinction between existence and essence (wujūd/māhiya)?

The term essence (māhiya) consists in the answer to the question as to what a thing is in and of itself. The answer to this question will exactly show the nature and essence of that thing. The Arabic term 'māhiya' generally corresponds to, 'essence' and 'quiddity' (Marmura 77-88) in Western terminology. Philosophically, it is that which makes a thing what it is, viz., its essence. When we take into account that the most distinguished feature of existentialism is the distinction between existence and essence, we then have to admit that the grounds for this discussion dates back to the ancient times, most notably to the Muslim Peripatetics. Although there are some thinkers claiming that Aristotle was the first to draw a distinction between existence and essence based on his statements in *Posterior Analytics* that "...how will you prove what a thing is? For it is necessary for anyone who knows what a man or anything else is to know too that it is (for of that which is not, no one knows what it is) ...we say it is necessary that everything that a thing is should be proved through demonstration, unless it is its substance. But being is not the substance of anything; for what is is not a genus. Therefore there

¹² This idea is a follow-up of Alfārābī's understanding of existence. The principle of 'clarity' or manifestness became well-known with Alfārābī and Avicenna followed and adopted his principle. According to this, the concept existence precedes all the terms and it can easily be comprehended though not defined. For detailed information, see: Alfārābī, "'Uyun al-Masā'il'", in *al-Majmu'*, Cairo, 1907, p. 57.

will be a demonstration that it is¹³” (152), from these statements, nevertheless, we can only get some limited information about existence and essence rather than a distinction between them. It is widely accepted that the distinction between existence and essence was first made by Alfarābī and was later maintained and developed by his follower Avicenna. So it’s easy to say that the origins of Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence lay not in ancient Greek philosophy, as has generally been supposed, but in early Islamic doctrinal theology (Kalām), and specifically in the ninth and tenth century debates between Muslim dogmatists (mutakallimūn) (Goodman 154) over how the terms ‘thing’ (shay’) and ‘existent’ (mawjūd) relate to each other (Wisnovsky 144). To know the essence of something means to know what it is (or its huwiya/identity) (Marmura 81). In this respect, essence is a mental concept denoting that a thing can be both comprehended and uttered (Atay 76). Essence is thus related to identifying something and it is determined by it. For the real definition is the one that accounts for the nature of something, which can only obtain when something is put forth with its all constituents (*al-Ishārāt wa-t-Tanbīhāt* 126).

According to Wisnovsky, *al-Ishārāt wa’t-Tanbīhāt* represents us the most remarkable details. For him, “Avicenna’s final articulation of the distinction, the formal and material causes are held to be distinct from the final and efficient causes not because the former pair is intrinsic to or immanent in the effect, while the latter pair is extrinsic to or transcends the effect. Instead, the criterion by which the two pairs of causes are judged to be distinct now consists in the fact that the formal and material causes are held to be causes of ‘essence’, while the final and efficient causes are held to be causes of ‘existence.’ In other words, Avicenna now appeals to his own, more basic distinction between essence and existence, in order to supply the foundation on which formal and material causes can be distinguished from final and efficient causes. Because Avicenna’s distinction between immanent and transcendent causes has now been exposed as part of a long tradition of Aristotle’s four cause theory, a ‘displacement’ can truly be said to have occurred only in the *al-Ishārāt wa’t-Tanbīhāt*, where Aristotle’s four causes are now distinguished between those of essence and those of existence, instead of between those which are immanent and those which are transcendent” (Wisnowsky, *Towards* 67).

¹³ In *Metaphysics*, he dwelt on the idea that essence and nature are the same things, claiming that in order to know something, essence and nature should be the same. See. “*Metaphysics*” in *The Complete Works Of Aristotle*, Ed: Jonathan Barnes, V: 2, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 1628-1629.

Now, whether we speak of the essence of something in the external world or in our mind, the constructive elements constituting the essence must co-exist in either case. Here the essence is something distinct from existence. When we take the human being into account, we can talk about his existence on the one hand and his essence on the other. But which one is prior? The answer to this question will give us the possibility of drawing parallelism between Avicenna and the existentialists. We know that Alfārābī, in establishing the distinction between existence and essence, offers us some explanations about which one precedes the other. According to him, if essence were to precede existence, we would then be able to talk about two different beings: one prior to its attachment with existence and the other after this attachment. This is impossible, since there is no essence prior to existence so as to precede it. Existence is brought onto essence from an external cause. Thus, essence had not existed before it was predicated of existence (Alfārābī, *al-Hurūf* 128; *Fī Ithbāt al-Mufāriqat* 4-5). In our opinion, the combination of existence with essence should be conceived not as the combination by coming together of two different beings but rather as the formation of 'one being' by two things. In a case which might suggest that 'existence' brings the essence into existence, it seems as if existence preceded essence. However, this does not mean that existence precedes essence (as opposed to existentialism) but rather that they co-exist, making it differ from the existentialist philosophers. Presumably Alfārābī aimed to account for creation by such an explanation (Atay 73).

On the other hand, unless one mentally attributes existence to a thing, it is rather difficult to grasp and understand it. That's why in order to understand and comprehend the essence (of something), one needs to shroud it with existence in mind. How could essence possibly be separated from existence? If nature is to be attributed and given existence, existence will precede nature somehow in this case. If existence is to be attributed to essence and then given existence, in this case existence would inevitably precede essence. If existence has to be given to essence in order for it to be comprehended, one has but to accept that existence logically precedes essence. Here what we conceive of existence as gains significance and this appears to be the point of divergence between the two distinct views. If we philosophically understand by existence the extramental existence, in such a case, 'individual', 'person' will be differentiated from 'mental beings' as a subject of logic. Thus, Avicenna, aware of this point, calls our attention to the fact that there are two possible ways of thinking essence as separate from existence. According to this, essence can be thought of either absolutely, that is in and of itself, where it is spoken of only as essence without any

qualification or it can be considered in the mind, that is, without taking into consideration its extramental existence. In such a case, it might not have any relationship to existence. However, for existentialism championed by Sartre, in beings other than humans, it does not seem possible to make a separation between existence and essence, just like we cannot separate the existence and of a tree from its essence.

Avicenna's work *al-Ishārāt wa-t-Tanbīhāt*, offers a great deal of explanations as to how he views man as a being. According to him, man can be conceived of in mind without a body or parts of a body. For if man is thought to be comprised of a body or parts of a body alone, his existence as a human being will disappear after the parts of his body have been disintegrated. Therefore, human existence is not something that is comprehended through mere body, but something beyond it. Thus, man should turn to himself and contemplate. "In self-awareness, thinks Avicenna, one consciously reflects on oneself as an object of intellection. As such, self-awareness might be thought of a second-order awareness: being aware of oneself as an object of awareness. Avicenna, however, also identifies a more basic or primitive form of self-awareness that he believes is essential not only to the intellect but also to the human soul generally. This primitive self-awareness is the subconscious awareness of the 'I' that accompanies all of one's actions and conscious experiences, underlying and unifying them. It is for Avicenna our awareness of the very substance of our soul considered independently of its relation to the body and bodily activities. It is one's self (dhāt)" (McGinnis 143; Goodman 149).

Let us imagine that a man has been created with a sound and intelligent nature. Let us also suppose that he is suspended in clear air without him seeing his bodily parts and without these parts touching one another, being totally independent of each other. "These activities are all diverse and do not share a common instrument, one meaningfully says things like 'When I saw it I knew what it was and I desired it, and I then began thinking how I could get it.' Simply stated there is some single subject of all of these disparate experiences, namely, the 'I'. Moreover, for Avicenna, inasmuch as I am aware of having any experience, I am aware that I am the one having it; for Avicenna this level of self-awareness is the most basic" (McGinnis 143-144). In such a situation, he would be conscious of nothing but his existence, viz. that he exists. Thus if the body perishes, the thing that is called 'self/I', that is, what makes a human what he is, will still be there. What man senses or perceives is different from what he cannot perceive. What perceives the essence of man (his self) is his self again. Without a doubt, this is exactly what we call 'the consciousness of being' and is what existentialism call the

very existence of man. How would then men be able to prove and establish his essence (his being)? While existence according to the heart of Sartre's existentialism is defined by virtue of disposition and action, here essence of man is distinct from his action. As Avicenna puts it: "If you prove that your action is an absolute action, then you have to prove an absolute actor/agent, which is the same as your essence, that is, yourself! Even if you prove that your action is your own activity, this cannot prove your essence. Otherwise, your essence, in terms of its being your action, could be a component of your activity. Then it has been established that your essence is not due to action" (*al-Ishārāt wa-t-Tanbīhāt* 125-126). From this we understand that man's essence or self is not something that he brings about. "Finally, imagine that one by one you are stripped of your concepts ending finally with the concepts of 'thing' and then 'existence' itself. At which point in this stripping process could you no longer say, 'I am something' or 'I exist'? For Avicenna, it is only when your very existence is removed that 'the I' ceases" (McGinnis 147; Goodman 153).

When we think that, in existentialism, to be aware of others is to be aware of yourself and therefore to exist (*Being and Nothingness* 221), it must be emphasized that the role of others in perceiving oneself was already highlighted by Avicenna much earlier. According to this, when man comes to perceive his real self, he cannot perceive others. For instance, when man comes to perceive his own self, he cannot perceive others. Logically, when I say 'I perceived it,' I must think that the perception I have of my own self must precede it. In other words, "If I say I know my essence through that thing, that means that the state of my knowing my essence occurred before. In this case, it will not be correct to say that I knew my self. In fact, that through which I know my essence is my essence itself. When I perceive others, then it would be necessary that there be a distinction between the perceiver and the perceived. You may have perceived yourself first, but you may have perceived others as well. It is thus your perception occurs and you become aware of distinction between yourself and others" (*at-Ta'liqāt* 172). So man's being aware of others' self is a result of man's being-for-itself. Man's essence is ready and present for himself. He is never without its consciousness. Thus, the existence of man's essence is the same as perceiving the essence (*at-Ta'liqāt* 172).

In Avicenna, the first being that man comes to be aware of his own existence and his own self. So it is evident that Avicenna, founds the bases of his ontology on the 'self/I' of man as does Sartre. We see that in Avicenna, in the face of the idea that man would spring up to coming into existence in the first phases of his genus being endowed with reason and but

without being endowed with an idea, his consciousness coexists with his own essence and that he is not the reason of anything and that the reason for his existence is actually his own self in existentialism. In existentialism, the cause of existence is nothing other than existence itself. It is for this reason that man's coming into being, that is, his existence, makes understanding the universe possible. But unlike what is in Avicenna, the first moment of this coming into existence is negative, that is, be thrown into this world (*Being and Nothingness* 119-120). The way out this situation is will be only through existent. On the other hand, in Avicenna's view, man's essence (self) would exist even if it is detached from his body and all of the bodily organs. By contrast, especially Sartre would claim that the existence of the universe would be to the extent to which consciousness is able to perceive (*Being and Nothingness* 73). What we call universe is just the same as consciousness, as in the case of what we call the essence (Goodman 156). In this respect, the perception, the perceiver and the perceived all obtain around the 'self/I' in Avicenna. Briefly, although the emphasis laid on 'self/I' is perhaps the most common point among the existentialist philosophers, it should be accepted that there are clear differences between them in details.

Finally, we should underline the following important point that in a famous argument at the outset of the *De Anima* of the *Shifā*, the 'flying man' or 'floating man' argument, Avicenna undertakes 'to establish the existence of the thing is called the soul.' He says: "We observe that certain bodies sense and move voluntarily. We observe, moreover, that some take nourishment, grow, and reproduce their kind." Avicenna, like other Aristotelians, understands ensoulment in functional terms (Goodman 149; 156). Avicenna thinks that, "the 'flying man' thought experiment is not an argument as such to show that one should identify oneself with an immaterial soul rather than the body; he feels that he can demonstrate the immateriality of the human intellect without appealing to such fantasy-style arguments. Still, he does want to use it as a tool so that one can think rightly about what he believes that we humans are. The I is most truly us regardless of whether there is any bodily input-at least this is intuition that Avicenna wants us to have" (McGinnis 147).

Conclusion

It appears that the most striking feature of existentialist philosophers is their emphasis on the finiteness of existence. This situation, according to existentialism, is the result of the being, who also born with fear, distress, inner nausea or worry; his life ends up with death. Since they state that existence is surrounded by nonexistence, ideals, beliefs, memories will not have a role other than escape or detachment from your own self. That's why

existentialism, though it is more moderate in Heidegger, acquires new dimension in Sartre which extends as far as the denial of values, ideals, and the Transcendent. Thus, in Sartre and in existentialism represented by him, man is entirely cut off from the Transcendent. Furthermore, this tie seems to have been cut off not only from God but also from the universe as well. However, existence, as Descartes put it, cannot be thought of without God. Yet the existence of beings in universe, their openness to possibilities, their continuous progress in the future realizations are the noteworthy aspects of existentialist philosophy. Man's limited lifetime should not frighten him; for he is conscious of finitude in a finite way. According to the design of the Eternal Being, the common characteristic of all the beings is their being finite.

By taking the 'essence' of man as a starting point in existence, Avicenna points out that is a being easily and readily comprehensible and certainly knowable by human beings so much so that he would not doubt his existence. Many centuries later, one sees in Descartes that self is perceived and comprehended through thinking. For Heidegger, man grasps his self through the fear of death. Sartre, viewing himself closer to Heidegger, nevertheless thinks that the content of the 'self' is the result of being condemned to freedom. Thus, Heidegger with 'dasein,' Sartre with 'en soi' (being in itself) and 'pour soi' (being for itself), and Avicenna with 'māhiya' (essence) have secured their places in ontology.

It is clear that Avicenna, having considered the fact that the closest being to human is his own existence, sought to know and prove the existence of being/existence. The way in which it was to be done is "to comprehend existence and its principle directly, without mediation." In a parallel way, Heidegger thought that the way for one to understand existence is to understand and grasp one's own existence. However, since understanding existence precedes understanding what existence is, Sartre, referring to this in his own way, coined the concepts 'en soi' and 'pour soi' and claimed that the real issue was for man to grasp his own existence. To put in a nutshell, the debate over existence and essence has been a philosophical issue for centuries. In the course of history of philosophy, from the ancient times onwards the question has been revolving around the controversy whether or not existence precedes essence. There is no doubt that so long as man and philosophy exist, this problem will not cease to be one of the fundamental problems of philosophy to be discussed. However, it seems that without determining/knowing the evolution of existentialism in the course of philosophical thinking, this topic will not get any easier to understand with the narrow vision of the 18th century philosophy alone without taking the views/contributions of Islamic philosophers to the existence-essence issue.

REFERENCES

- ALFĀRĀBĪ. *ad-Da'āwa al-Qalbiyyah*. Hyderabad, 1349.
- ALFĀRĀBĪ. *al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyah*. Hyderabad, 1346.
- ALFĀRĀBĪ. *Fī Ithbāt al-Mufāriqat*. Hyderabad, 1926.
- ALFĀRĀBĪ. *K. al-Hurūf*. Ed: Muhsin Mahdī. Beirut, 1969.
- ALFĀRĀBĪ. “Uyun al-Masā'il.” in *al-Majmū'*. Cairo, 1907.
- ARISTOTLE. “Metaphysics.” in *The Complete Works Of Aristotle*. Ed: Jonathan Barnes, V: 2, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984. pp. 1552-1729.
- ARISTOTLE. “Posterior Analytics.” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Ed: Jonathan Barnes, V: 1, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984. pp. 114-167.
- ATAY, Hüseyin. *İbn Sînâ'da Varlık Nazariyesi*. Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 2001.
- AY, Mahmut. *Sadrüşşerî'a'da Varlık (Existence in Sadr al-Sarî'ah)*. Ankara: İlahiyat, 2006.
- AVICENNA. *The Metaphysics of The Healing*. A paralel English-Arabic text translated, introduced, and annotated by Michael E. Marmura. Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005.
- BURREL, David B. “Essence and Existence: Avicenna and Greek Philosophy.” *Melanges*. V. 17, Beirut: 1986.
- DAVIDSON, Herbert A. “Avicennas's Proof of the Existence of God as a Necessarily Existent Being.” *Islamic Philosophical Theology*. Ed: Parviz Morewedge, New York: 1979.
- FOLQUIE, Paul. *Varoluşçuluk (Existentialism)*. Turkish Trans: Yakup Şahan, İstanbul: 1991.
- FYNSK, Christopher. *Heidegger Thought and Historicity*. Cornell: 1986.
- GILSON, Etienne. *Tanrı ve Felsefe*. Turkish Trans. Mehmet Aydın. İzmir: Birleşik, 1986.
- GOODMAN, Lenn E. *Avicenna*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Existence and Being*. (Introduction and analysis by Werner Brock), Chicago: 1968.
- IBN RUSHD. *Tahāfut at-tahāfut*. Ed. Bouyges, Beirut: 1930.
- *Talkhīs Ma Ba'd at-Tabī'a*. Ed: Osman Emin, Cairo: 1950.
- IBN SĪNĀ. *al-Ishārāt wa-t-Tanbīhāt*. Turkish Trans: Muhittin Macit-Ali Durusoy-Ekrem Demirli, İstanbul: Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü, 2011.

- IBN SĪNĀ. *Kitāb ash-Shifā' Ilāhiyyat* (Metafizik I). Turkish Trans: Ekrem Demirli-Ömer Türker, İstanbul: Litera, 2004.
- IBN SĪNĀ. *at-Ta'īqāt*. Ed: Abdurrahman Badawī. Cairo: 1947.
- JASPERS, Karl. *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*. Trans: Ralph Manheim, New York: 1949.
- KAUFMANN, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: Meridian Books, 1956.
- KIERKEGAARD, S. *Fear and Trembling*. Trans: Alastair Hanay, London: 1985.
- KUTLUER, İlhan. *İbn Sînâ Ontolojisinde Zorunlu Varlık*, İstanbul: İz, 2002.
- MARCEL, Gabriel. *The Philosophy of Existentialism*. Trans: Manya Harari, New York: 1968.
- MARMURA, Michael E. "Quiddity and Universality." *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*. Ed: Parviz Morewedge, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. (pp. 77-88).
- McGINNIS, Jon. *Avicenna*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- MOLINA, Fernando. *Existentialism as Philosophy*. Prentice-Hall, 1962.
- PLATO. "Republic." in *Plato Complete Works*. Ed: John M. Cooper, D. S. Hutchinson, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997. (pp. 971-1224).
- SALLIS, John. "Where Does Being and Time Begin?" *Delimitations: Phenomenology and the End of Metaphysics*, Ed: John Sallis, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, Burlington, 2006.
- SARTRE, J.P. *Being and Nothingness (A phenomenological Essay on Ontology)*. Trans: Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1956.
- SARTRE, J.P. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. New York: 1957.
- SHEHADI, Fadlou. *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy*. Caravan: 1982.
- SOLOMON, Robert. *Existentialism*. New York: 1974.
- TUGENDHAT. "Heidegger's idea of truth." *Critical Heidegger*. Ed: Christopher Macann, Routledge, 1996.
- ÜLKEN, H. Ziya. *Varlık ve Oluş (Existence and Being)*. Ankara: 1968.
- WISNOWSKY, Robert. *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- "Towards A History of Avicenna's Distinction Between Immanent And Transcendent Causes." *Before And After Avicenna*. Ed: David C. Reisman, Brill, Leiden, Boston: 2003, (p. 49-68).

