

Avicenna on the Soul's Power to Manipulate Material Objects

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In his article on the foundations of Ficino's ideas on magic¹, James Hankins observes that, where Ficino justifies non-material causation in the universe, he is heavily indebted to Avicenna. As Hankins also points out, this Avicennan idea clearly violates the Aristotelian maxim that 'physical causation requires contact'. Because Avicenna holds the view that the soul is neither a physical entity nor simply the form of body, Avicenna's consent to the soul to manipulate material objects means assignment of the soul to perform actions upon physical nature. According to Hankins, this consent resorts to a vertical connectivity between physical objects and the human soul. However, we do not see in Hankins's argument how this connection can occur according to Avicenna and on what grounds Avicenna lets the soul cause changes on material objects. How does this non-material causation take place? Is this an arbitrary claim? Does Avicenna presuppose this power of the soul in order to be able to advance further arguments? If the answer to this last question is in the negative, what is the basis of this assertion and what warrants Avicenna had in mind when asserting this?

In the present paper, I will explore the status of the soul in Avicenna's metaphysical system in order to find out what, according to him, enables the human soul to manipulate material objects. For this end, first, I suggest to put Avicenna's theory of the soul in the metaphysical context in which it functions. Determining place of the soul and its functions in the whole cosmological system of Avicenna will allow me to decide whether Avicenna takes this power of the soul for granted.

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The cosmological system structured by Avicenna, also known as emanation, is Neo-Platonic in origin. According to this theory, everything in this universe -be it material or immaterial- is interconnected. Yes, it is not surprising in such an interconnected universe that soul has interactions with material objects, but it does not have to be the way soul is the controlling element while the matter is the controlled one. To know exactly the nature of this relation of the soul to matter, we need to explore how Avicenna sees the soul and what qualities and characteristics he assigns to it. Therefore, secondly, I will seek grounds in Avicenna's cosmology on which Aristotle's requirement of physical contact is violated and the soul gains ruling power over bodies.

To this, I identify contributions of three modern scholars of Islamic philosophy: that of Dimitri Gutas (and Hankins), of Lenn Evan Goodman, and of Theresa-Anne Druart. Even though none of their articles is mainly directed to answer my questions, their points of views on the problems related to the theory of the soul complement each other and help me develop a further explanation towards Avicenna's stand on the issue. In this respect, I agree with Hankins and Gutas on the high connectivity of the universe and with Goodman on the substantiality of the soul. I also find two different kinds of causation introduced and explained in Druart's article very helpful. However, in order to explain the soul's power to act upon material objects, it is necessary to extend their contributions with Avicenna's discussion of "On the Secrets of Signs" taking place in one of his latest books, Remarks and Admonitions. Therefore, my final task will be testing Avicenna's theory of unusual actions against the background of his own cosmological system and against his theory of soul. By this way, I will be able to show Avicenna's position on the soul's manipulation of matter without requiring physical contact.

Reproduction of the Higher Intellects

For Hankins, following Gutas, the main reason of this non-material causation is the correspondence between intellection and the higher intellects. According to this account, the soul is not only the core of the metaphysical system of Avicenna, but it also has special powers within the emanation system. Gutas's recent article "Avicenna: The Metaphysics of the Rational Soul" ² is quite helpful to understand how this argument works. Gutas stresses that, according to Avicenna, the rational soul is a substance itself. Even though soul and body come into being simultaneously, they are completely separable and abstracted from each other. Once the body helps

the soul get individuated from the lowest celestial intellect, called the Agent intellect, soul takes over.

Then we need to ask why the soul still needs body after generation. Why does not it get rid of the body as soon as it gains its individuation? Avicenna explains this by introducing two functions of the rational soul, one theoretical, another practical. The former is to perceive the universals while the latter is to make rational choices and to produce motivations to act. These dual functions of the rational soul establish human's relations with both celestial and terrestrial worlds. The first function of the soul is made possible by means of intellection (hitting upon the middle term – syllogism), a process in which the human soul reproduces in itself the structure of reality reflected from the intelligibles. The second function of the soul is to govern body. Nevertheless, to do the former, human soul has to advance from the level of pure potentiality (what Avicenna calls material intellect) to the level of ability to acquire higher intelligibles (what he calls acquired intellect). Therefore, body is needed even after the generation of the individual soul to get to the higher levels. As long as the soul needs intellection, it will be needing survival of the body. By managing and coordinating the body, soul will enable itself to receive intelligibles. In this account, the body becomes an instrument for the soul's practical functionality in the material world. Hence, the second function is no less indispensable for the rational soul than the first function is.

What is important in this account is the emphasis on the material object's obedience to the rational soul. Because it is ontologically subordinate to celestial intellects, the body has no difficulty to obey the rational soul's orders as long as the soul reproduces in itself the structure of the higher intellects. Therefore, what enables the soul to act upon the body is this reproduction.

This argument of Gutas-Hankins is useful in terms of extracting the structural background of the soul's privileged status in the cosmos, but it leaves open the issue of connection between soul and matter. By excluding the discussion of the nature of soul's actions on bodies, the argument falls short to explain how this reproduction interrupts natural causation and goes beyond the ordinary flow of events. In other words, 'the correspondence between thinking and the higher intellects' does not suffice to answer our question even though it shows the direction.

However, there is still a useful hint in their account for our discussion. Gutas and Hankins -though briefly- mention a kind of prophetic power, which Gutas calls 'the motive power'. This power, which is based in the free will, enables prophets to perform wonders and miracles. Both Gutas and

Hankins are content with considering this power of the prophets as part of Avicenna's attempt to rationalize prophecy. By this brief account, they think such 'supernatural' phenomena would infiltrate into the Avicennan universe through decent means. But neither goes on to elaborate the way this motive power produces effects on matter.

For our discussion, however, this point deserves further treatment because we know that this 'motive' power is not exclusive to prophets. Avicenna does not give privilege to prophetic soul over others in terms of their ontological statuses. The motive power used by the prophets is essentially one of many powers of any human soul. Although prophet's power differs 'in quantity and manner'³ from powers of other people, it is still attainable by others through soul and body training. Therefore, just like prophets, anyone can activate this power of their souls and can attain non-material causal capacity over other bodies.

From Gutas we know that Avicenna counts the following under the same category: influence of the moon on the ebb and flow of the tides, the effects of the evil eye, the magic, and the motive powers of the prophets. Since all these 'extraordinary' events refer to the soul's powers⁴, it is safe to suggest that Avicenna does not see any act on matter out of the soul's capacity. In other words, he releases the soul from boundaries of natural causation. The moon did not seem him to have any causal relation with the sea but there were tides. Evil eye would cause harm on someone without any physical contact. The magic is performed by violating ordinary flow of events. If all of these are in the reach of the soul, it is capable of stepping out of the natural causation and acts on the matter without physical contact.

This suggestion is supported by Gutas's another point in the same article. He observes that for Avicenna the goal of all intellection activity, intuition, is never automatic⁵. The process of intellection requires necessarily agent's efforts. A corollary of this observation is that the rational soul operates vertically, in contrast to horizontal operations of material beings. In other words, the soul's operations are different from that of bodies because it is acting out of the material existence. Therefore, as long as the soul proceeds towards the higher intellects, bonds of material causation will ease.

On the grounds that matter is obedient to the rational soul as in the case of prophetic actions and that the soul can actively come to contact with the higher intellects as it intuit, Avicenna points to an ontological difference between matter and the soul.

Free Will

To discover the nature of this ontological difference, we can proceed to the second article “A Note on Avicenna’s Theory of the Substantiality of the Soul”⁶ and learn from Goodman that according to Avicenna, the soul is purely a substance and its relation to body is not of a function but of a principle.

Goodman examines Avicenna’s definition of substance ‘A thing is a substance if and only if it exists in no other thing as an accident in a substrate’ and arrives at the conclusion that, by this definition, Avicenna frees the question of substantiality from all the problems of mind-body dualism. For Avicenna, we know the soul not from what it is but from what it does and when we examine its actions we will see that – whether separable from body or not - the soul lives and acts as a substance. Goodman bases his argument on the peculiar actions of humans. According to the argument, since we cannot ascribe any voluntary action, creativity, and self-consciousness to any material object, existence of these human actions demands for a reason. For Goodman, this reason is the rational soul. Since the origin of the voluntary and creative actions, of changing mental states, and of self-consciousness of humans is the soul, not the body, Goodman concludes that the soul operates as a substance.

By discussing soul’s actions and the lack of such actions of material objects, Goodman not only establishes the rational soul’s substantiality, but also allows us to see the extent to which the soul is free from material causation. If these actions originate from an immaterial substance, then the power of this substance could not be limited by bonds of material existence. Thus, as the soul is a substance and as it is ontologically superior to matter, it is no surprise it can perform actions on it.

The main theme in his argument, which underlines the substantiality of the soul and soul’s production of voluntary actions, help differentiate the relation of the soul to material objects from the relation of a matter to another matter. According to his observation on Avicenna’s writings on the soul, Goodman argues that material objects are subject to the strict rules of natural causation but soul has a special kind of relation to the bodies, a relation we may call free will. The soul can step out of the strict rules of nature. It is unbound in terms of natural causation. Therefore Goodman’s argument is helpful to see the privileged status of the human soul within the universe. With this contribution, we understand that substantiality of the soul suffices to explain its governance over the body.

Nevertheless by bringing these peculiar actions of the soul to light Goodman’s account offers only a partial clarity to the issue. In the article,

Goodman is unwilling to deal with the question of the mind-body connection. Hence he does not clarify how the soul manipulates matter. And we still need more explanation for 'more' peculiar actions of the soul, those affecting the bodies other than the one to which the soul is attached.

Yet, following Goodman's explorations on substantiality of the soul and its exemption from material causation, we can say that by means of free will, the soul is able to move or to change other bodies as it does the body to which it is attached. Through body and soul training, one's soul can control not only his body but also other bodies. In other words, since the soul has capacity to choose freely and since the free will can cause motion of the body, it is not implausible to think the soul as gaining ability to perform actions on other bodies when it transcends the boundaries of the attached body. Just like higher intellects, it simply have effects on lower ontological existents. The density of the power of free will, therefore, determines how far one's soul can go beyond material causation and how powerful it can influence matter without physical contact.

Accidental Attachment

Finally, Druart's article on "The Human Soul's Individuation and Its Survival after the Body's Death"⁷ makes another important contribution to our discussion. While seeking where the individuation of the human soul starts in Avicenna's philosophy, she notes that Avicenna thinks that the body is only needed for individuation of the human soul. That is to say, the human soul cannot be generated without temporal origination (that is attachment to a body). However, once it is generated, it does not need the body to survive. For Druart, Avicenna argues this on the ground that body and soul have a strong connection, but it is not so strong that soul's activities would depend on body. Being conscious of its body and causing it to act, soul's position is of governing.

For the same token, body cannot survive after the soul leaves because, unlike the soul, body is bound by temporality. In other words, body and soul are simultaneously originated but this simultaneous origination does not bring never-ending association. As body corrupts due to the conditions set by temporality, soul will leave it behind. As Druart observes, the soul's survival after death without needing body indicates Avicenna's conviction that the causal connection between soul and body is accidental, not essential. Furthermore, this accidental causation is required until the soul reaches its first perfection (or entelechy), which is the earliest point the soul is able to contact with the higher intellects. Then we can conclude that "the body is not an integral feature of the human being but simply a vehicle and

an instrument the usefulness of which is limited to the first stage of development.⁸⁶

Since the relationship between body and soul is accidental and soul is released from bonds of material causation after the first perfection, the idea of a soul operating on other material beings is no surprise. Despite its relation to the body is a privileged one, it is not impossible for soul to act upon other bodies.

Another point Druart notes in her article, is that the causation for Avicenna is of vital importance and there is more than one kind of causation in the universe. After drawing a clear distinction between coming into existence (*wujud*) and origination (*buduth*), Avicenna holds the view that natural causation (or causes of motion) would suffice for origination while ontological causation (or causes of existence) is required for something to exist. Therefore, according to Avicenna, natural agents, those which produce motion, can only cause accidentally. That is to say that this kind of causation necessarily involves physical contact. But we have seen that soul is not a physical entity, then its rule over the body requires another kind of causation. This is of the second kind; ontological causation. 'As in the case of God with respect to the world', ontological causation does not involve in motion in ordinary sense. Instead, it is the principle and giver of the existence. As in the case of soul, it is the principle of the body's existence as a living subject. Nevertheless, Avicenna acknowledges that the true nature of their relationship remains unknown to us.

On the other hand, we know that the relation between soul and body is accidental and we also know that the body's subordination to soul is essential. Therefore, in Avicenna's view, the soul does not need to touch the body in order to cause the latter's motion. This is because, first, the former is not material, second, soul's operation does not take place on the same ontological level as material causation does. If we are right in our earlier account that soul and body are ontologically different and soul is the governor for body, then the motion of any body caused by soul does not entail any physical contact. Therefore, we can infer that the soul's ontological precedence over material objects reserves a higher status for the soul, in which it has potency to control not only human body but also other material beings.

Because the soul is not subject to material causation, its actions are not bound by any body, including the one the soul is attached. Even though the soul's relation to its fellow body is very intimate in comparison to its relations to other bodies, it is ontologically no different action for a soul to manipulate the body with which it is intimately attached and to manipulate

other bodies. In other words, it is capable of transcending the body and act upon other material objects.

To summarize what we learn from discussions of Gutas, Goodman, and Druart: because of the ontological setting, body is the instrument for soul in order the latter to reproduce the structure of the higher intellects in itself. The soul is active in the sense it receives intuitive knowledge from the higher intellects by means of syllogisms. It is active again in the sense it gains powers, one of which is motive power, through body and soul training. By its theoretical activity, it is connected to the higher intellects, while by the practical activity, it can act upon the body without physical contact. What enables this soul to perform these actions and many other is free will. After the first perfection, which refers to the first encounter with the higher intelligibles, soul is no longer bound by restrictions of physical nature by exercising free will. As it is inherently able to produce causes of existence (ontological causes), the higher intellect it contacts, the more it gains power over the material beings. That is to say, it steps out of the natural causation as it practices free will to reproduce the structure of higher intellects. After understanding the metaphysical context in which the soul operates and the place of the soul within it, we can start analyzing Avicenna's direct account on the issue.

Three Principles

Against this metaphysical background we should restate our main question: How does the soul, a substance which is ontologically superior to body but at the same time accidentally attached to it, manage to manipulate objects without physical contact?

To answer this question, I suggest reading his direct explanation on the matter while keeping in mind what we learn from discussions above about Avicenna's position. The tenth book of his *Remarks and Admonitions*, one of his latest works, is devoted to 'Secrets of Signs'. It mainly deals with reasons behind what is called today 'supernatural events'. Particularly, in the chapter thirty of this book, he clearly expresses the reasons of this kind of unusual phenomena. After discussing highlights from the entire book, I will delve into this particular chapter.

Avicenna opens the book with an advice: "If you learn that a knower⁹ has refrained for an unusual interval from receiving the little food he has, graciously assent and consider this among the well-known principles of nature."¹⁰ And throughout the tenth book he repeatedly states that the kind of things that are not familiar to most people should not be immediately

ruled out. For him, if one examines them closely, he will see that they depend on 'natural' (*tabii*) rules. Avicenna does not consider them as suspensions of nature, but rather they follow 'the principles of nature'. He says that people's tendency to deny them merely stems from these events' being 'unusual'. Nevertheless, if you have wisdom you should "relegate such a thing to the region of possibility as long as you are not driven away from that by firm evidence"¹¹.

As is clear here, Avicenna thinks, strictly speaking, everything is natural, but some natural phenomena can be considered extraordinary or unusual due to their rare occurrence. This means that it is not the human's own powers that enable him to manipulate matter. It is the structure of the universe – in its full sense - allowing some people to act upon material beings without physical contact.

The second overarching theme of this book is that whatever done is in the universe, be it usual or unusual, it is done through power (*quwwa*) of the soul (*nafs*) to have dispositions. Dispositions of any one of the vegetative, animal, or rational souls vary in density from human to human. The density of a disposition depends on one's temperaments, which can be given either primordially, or eventually realized, or acquired through the intensity of the soul's intelligence¹². In the former case, one finds this temperament embedded in his nature. He has choice to do good and become a sage or like a prophet, or to do evil and become a magician. But in the latter two cases, the powerful temperament is achieved through purification of the soul or through act of intellection. One uses his free will towards taking control of all his dispositional powers as far as his temperament allows¹³. Therefore, regardless of the temperament's origination, the disposition to act upon the material beings both usual and unusual ways reflects the extent to which one acts by free will, as in the case of any other disposition. If one was able to take full control of dispositions of his vegetative, animal, or rational soul, that is when one practices his free will without any restrictions, there would not have been anything out of his power.

Closely related to this point, Avicenna several times stresses that the relationship is between the active intellects and the recipient human intellect. It is the higher intellects which imprint knowledge of the intelligible world on the human soul. Whatever exists in universal form in the intelligible world can be received as a particular by those humans who prepare themselves and remove obstacles.¹⁴ However, it is important to notice here that it is not totally up to one side's decision to establish the contact. The celestial intellects could influence only those human souls which are capable and ready for reception. Therefore, this connection is the

product of “the active superior powers together with the passive inferior ones”¹⁵.

In short, what Avicenna draws here is a universe in which souls can attain the knowledge of the intelligibles thanks to soul’s dispositions to contact with the higher intellects. As for our question, how soul canalizes its powers so that it is able to manipulate matter, chapter thirty promises straight answers when it is read under the light of our discussions above. It is worth quoting in full:

Extraordinary things proceed to the realm of nature due to three principles. The first is the above-mentioned psychical dispositions. The second is the properties of terrestrial bodies, such as the property of the magnet to attract iron by means of a force that belongs to the magnet. And the third is the relation between the celestial powers and the mixtures of terrestrial bodies that are specifically disposed to a certain position or between these powers and the powers of terrestrial souls that are specifically equipped with celestial states - whether active or passive- that result in the occurrence of extraordinary effects. Magic is of the first kind. Prodigies, miracles worked by saints,¹⁶ and incantations are of the second kind. Finally, talismans are of the third kind.¹⁷

The three principles that Avicenna identifies in this chapter allow us to draw connections between the metaphysical context, that I have been trying to establish, and the way the soul acts upon the material objects without physical contact. In fact, the three principles indicate three categories of unusual events, so I will analyze the chapter’s argument in three categories.

(1) Some unusual phenomena are made possible by psychical dispositions. One’s primordial or acquired temperament is so powerful that he can employ his dispositions to step out of material causality. Avicenna writes:

... do not deny that these souls extend their proper powers to the powers of other souls on which they act, especially if the former souls have sharpened their fixed habit by means of subjugating their bodily powers which belong to them. Thus, they subjugate a desire, an anger, or a fear of other souls.¹⁸

Therefore, those who can extend their dispositional powers over other souls will influence the latter as easy as they influence their own. That is to say, weaker souls submit the wills of the powerful souls. In this respect, for instance, a magician, who has a powerful temperament, can create in someone’s animal soul an image of an approaching snake approaching. However, what happens in this category is not limited in the weaker soul’s imaginative faculty. It may have effects on the material objects. As in the case of evil eye, Avicenna asserts:

The principle of this act is an admirative state of the soul, and, due to its character, it affects the object of admiration by weakening it. This is thought to be far-fetched only by one who assumes that what affects bodies is either in contact with them, dispatches to them a part of itself, or exerts its character on them through an intermediary...

Then, as all bodies are subordinate to souls, by affecting another's soul, the powerful soul may cause physical changes in the bodies of weaker souls. By this way, the powerful soul does not need any of the three physical contacts mentioned in the quotation above to influence matter.

... one who reflects on that whose principles we have already presented will seek the removal of this condition from the rank of consideration.¹⁹

Miracles and prodigies worked by saints are also examples of this category. As our discussion revealed, by means of motive power, people like prophets, also saints and magicians, are able to contact with the souls of other bodies and produce tides, evil eye, and magic. For there is no problem with a soul's action on the attached body, when a weaker soul is taken under control of a powerful soul, the body of the weaker will obey the powerful soul without any difficulty.

Here, as we notice, souls act like the higher intellects in the sense that powerful one influencing the weaker. We also see how free will is in effect in all these acts. And again, it is obvious here how the powerful soul releases itself from the accidental relation to the body and acts outside of it.

(2) Some unusual phenomena on the other hand are possible due to the properties of material beings. Avicenna's example is very clear. As magnets attract pieces of iron, there are certain bodily powers that affect other bodies. He refrains from calling this influence 'material' because there was no cause and effect relationship between them known to his day. He calls it the power of attraction, which is referring to a powerful body's power of the attracting suitable other bodies.

(3) Finally, some other unusual phenomena occur because of the relationships between celestial powers, terrestrial bodies, and terrestrial souls. If one can set the higher intellects in motion in certain ways, he will be able to make changes over terrestrial bodies as well as terrestrial souls. As we have seen, a human soul can contact with the higher intellects by means of cogitation (hitting upon the middle term) or by directly receiving as in the case of the prophets²⁰. Because they know the nature and its ways of functioning, they can cause changes on material beings without difficulty. Talismans, Avicenna gives as example, work this way. Therefore, in the case of this category of unusual events, the agent is the human in the sense he initiates the procedure. But in fact the action is made by the celestial

powers. In other words, here it is the higher intellects and their bodies who manipulate material objects.

There are three points we should highlight after reading Avicenna's own account within the context we established earlier. When talking about this category of events, we need to underline the reproduction of the structure of celestial intellects by the human soul. The universal system, namely cosmology, is being reprinted in the human soul, so that the soul acquires the power to act on matter. Second, it is important to note that free will plays an indispensable role in the process. We cannot imagine such an activity without devising free will. Finally, we observe that accidental restrictions of the body do not apply to the soul in such a high level of intellection.

In conclusion, Avicenna's position on the subject is based on three interrelated postulates: the supremacy of knowledge, human's privileged status in the universe, and the emanation system. As our discussions on reproduction and intuition suggest, only through knowledge human soul can attain the power to act in the universe in a way no other thing can. As we have seen in our discussions on free will and perfection, humans have a special place in the universe thanks to their capacities of knowing and choosing. Finally, this is only possible in a universe which is structured as emanating from the Highest Intellect down to earth. Therefore, all these three principles govern Avicenna's consent to the soul to manipulate material objects.

All things considered, Avicenna's grant to non-material causation is far from being arbitrary. Nor, it is taken for granted. By acknowledging the special place of the soul in the emanating universe and granting it extraordinary capacities, Avicennan cosmology coherently enables the soul to act upon material beings without any physical contact.

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Notes

- ¹ James Hankins, "Ficino, Avicenna and the Occult Powers of the Rational Soul" (2007), <http://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/3223908>.
- ² Dimitri Gutas, "Avicenna: The Metaphysics of the Rational Soul," *The Muslim World* 102, no. 3–4 (October 2012): 417–425.
- ³ Michael E. Marmura, "Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 1963): 49–56.
- ⁴ Gutas, "Avicenna." 422
- ⁵ *Ibid.* 421
- ⁶ Lenn Evan Goodman, "A Note on Avicenna's Theory of the Substantiality of the Soul," *Philosophical Forum (Boston)* 1 (June 1, 1969): 547–554.
- ⁷ Thérèse-Anne Druart, "The Human Soul's Individuation and Its Survival after the Body's Death: Avicenna on the Causal Relation between Body and Soul," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2000): 259–273.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* 262
- ⁹ The word Avicenna uses here and the whole tenth book is "arīf". Unlike the word "alim", which refers generally to scholastic knowledge, it has connotations of sagacity and wisdom.
- ¹⁰ Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions: Part Four*, 1st ed. (Kegan Paul International, 1996). 92
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* 107
- ¹² *Ibid.* 105
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 104–105
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 96
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 107
- ¹⁶ Inati puts prodigies and miracles in the second kind. However, the word order in the Arabic text may be read either way; they can be of the first kind. I opt for reading them as examples of the first kind, because on chapter twenty eight Avicenna stresses the equal levels of the prophetic actions and the acts of magicians, the first one is glorious, the second is wicked. Also, Turkish translation of the book supports my reading.
- ¹⁷ Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*. 106
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* 105
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* 106
- ²⁰ Marmura, "Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy." 51

