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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ (RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Deconstruction of Ibn Sīnā's Essence-Existence Distinction and the Essence of the Necessary Existent

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Abstract

Ibn Sīnā's establishment of the distinction between essence and existence along with certain epistemological considerations led him to advance the novel idea of an essence-in-itself. This essence distinguished from universal and particular essences in order to provide a bridge between logic and science that will ground the validity and, indeed, possibility of knowledge. However, this same concept poses a number of problems regarding Ibn Sīnā's famous identification of the Necessary Existent. Among other things, Ibn Sīnā's intriguing hesitation on whether to grant the Necessary Existent an essence or not has split commentators vis-à-vis essentialist and existentialist readings of his metaphysics. This paper argues that neither position is correct as the problems associated with the Necessary Existent are inherently intractable from within the current framework. Rather, upon deconstructive criticism and consequent revisions of Ibn Sīnā's concept of the essence-in-itself, a resolution to the matter of the Necessary Existent is permitted while maintaining the bridge between logic and science.

Keywords

Essence • Existence • God • Universal • Particular • Ibn Sīnā • Necessary existent

İbn Sīnā'nın Mâhiyet-Vücûd Ayırımının Dekonstrüksiyonu ve Vâcibu'l-Vücûd'un Mâhiyeti

Öz

İbn Sīnā'nın mâhiyet-vücûd ayırımını belirli epistemolojik düşüncelerle uyumlu bir şekilde tesis etmesi, kendinde mâhiyete dair özgün bir fikir geliştirmesini sağlamıştır. Bu fikir, bilginin geçerliliğine ve aslında imkanına dayanacak olan mantık ve bilim arasında bir köprü sağlamak için küllî ve cüz'î mâhiyetlerden ayrılır. Bununla birlikte bu aynı kavram, İbn Sīnā'nın meşhur tanımlaması Vâcibu'l-Vücûd ile ilgili birtakım sorunlar doğurmaktadır. Bunların yanı sıra, İbn Sīnā'nın Vâcibu'l-Vücûda bir mâhiyet verip vermeme hususundaki merak uyandıran tereddüdü, buna müteakib yorumcuları onun metafiziğinin mâhiyetçi veya varoluşçu olarak anlaşılması konusunda ihtilafa düşürmüştür. Bu makale, Vâcibu'l-Vücûd ile ilgili problemlerin tabiatı itibarıyla mevcut çerçevenin içinde kontrol edilemez olmasından dolayı görüşlerden hiçbirinin doğru olmadığını iddia etmektedir. Aksine, İbn Sīnā'nın kendinde mâhiyet kavramının tarafımızca yapılan dekonstrüktif eleştirisi ve müteakip revizyonları, mantık ve bilim arasında köprü olmayı sürdürürken Vâcibu'l-Vücûd konusuna bir çözüm getirecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Mâhiyet • Varlık • Tanrı • Küllî • Cüz'î • İbn Sīnā • Vâcibu'l-Vücûd

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Deconstruction of Ibn Sīnā's Essence-Existence Distinction and the Essence of the Necessary Existent

Much ink has been spilt on Ibn Sīnā's revolutionary distinction between essence and existence, and in particular on whether his metaphysics is essentialist or existentialist.² Though still imbued with terminology from older ontological debates and theories (see below), the captivating distinction in question is principally of Ibn Sīnā's own making.³ It not only transcends those previous systems, but also brings into sharp focus a number of problems still confounding philosophers today. This study is not directly about whether Ibn Sīnā gives priority to essence or existence, rather it explicates the instability of inferences Ibn Sīnā makes regarding the essence of the Necessary Existent that still garner support from prominent scholars of Islamic philosophy; and, moreover, offers a tentative resolution of the problems associated with those views, which result from complications revolving around the essence-existence distinction. Of the various commentators on Ibn Sīnā's notion of an essence-in-itself and the term existence along with its related variations two views predominate: the first follows Ibn Sīnā's declaration that the Necessary Existent has no essence; the second holds that the concept of an essence is theoretically advantageous here by the positive way in which it helps to explain (the nature of) the existence of the Necessary Existence.⁴ In this study, I shall discuss reasons

- 2 On this topic, see Fazlur Rahman, "Essence and Existence in Avicenna," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1958): 1-16, and David Burrell, "Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish Thinkers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, eds. N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp., 65-70. Both authors defend the view that existence has as key priority to essence within Ibn Sīnā's metaphysical framework. For classic essentialist readings, see Anne-Marie Goichon, *Vocabulaires Comparés d'Aristote et d'Ibn Sina* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1939); *La Philosophie d'Avicenne et son Influence en Europe Médiévale* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1944); Étienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1944); Louis Gardet, *La Connaissance Mystique chez Ibn Sina et ses Présupposés Philosophiques* (Cairo: Publications de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1952).
- 3 Some scholars have pointed to the presence of this distinction in ancient Greek philosophy. See, for example, Nicholas Rescher, *Studies in the History of Arabic Logic* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), 41; Olga Lizzini, "Wuğūd-Mawğūd/Existence-Existent in Avicenna: A Key Ontological Notion of Arabic Philosophy," *Quaestio* 3, no. 1 (2003): 111-138; Stephen Menn, "Avicenna's Metaphysics," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 143-69. As Morewedge claims, notwithstanding previous formulations, the distinction took on unprecedented sophistication and importance in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy ("Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sīnā's 'Essence-Existence' Distinction," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 92, no. 3 (1972): 425-26).
- 4 The first group includes, Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952); Étienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960); Albert Judy, "Avicenna's Metaphysics in the Summa contra gentiles," *Angelicum* 52, no. 1 (1975): 340-84; George Hourani, "Ibn Sina

for each view and Ibn Sīnā's own wavering position. The line taken in this paper develops analyses already admirably started by Michael Marmura, Étienne Gilson and Parviz Morewedge, among others, though in each case not to its end. This study aims to achieve its goals via "deconstructive criticism". Preference here for the term "criticism" rather than "critique" (which is untypical for deconstructive analysis, as proposed by Jacques Derrida) is made since a wholesale interruption of the Avicennian framework is not intended.⁵ Rather the aim is to show how the concept of essence takes on a viable theological position in the Avicennian framework once erroneous metaphysical commitments are discarded. First, an explanation of the role the essence concept plays vis-à-vis the relation between logic and science is given to show from where the causes of debate stem. Second, I attempt to make two main points. The first is that there are problems with the idea of an essence-in-itself, problems that have already been shown to apply to similar philosophical concepts. However, as Ibn Sīnā's idea has not been identified in such terms, the relevant comparison has been crucially missed. The second point concerns the ramifications of this fundamental problem on one of Ibn Sīnā's most celebrated contributions to the philosophy of religion and theology: the cosmological argument for the existence of God. I argue that Ibn Sīnā fails to explain the essence of the Necessary Existent, and certainly the Islamic conception of God, given his own statements regarding the concept. Finally, a solution is proposed via a revised concept of essence that does not break completely with the Avicennian framework.

The Dilemma in *al-Madkhal*

For Ibn Sīnā, logic is essential to science and to understanding the natural world, though, strictly speaking, it is inherently divorced from reality. In *al-Madkhal* of his *al-Shifā*, Ibn Sīnā distinguishes logic from all other sciences because it considers

on Necessary and Possible Existence," *Philosophical Forum* 4, no. 1 (1972): 74-86; the second includes, Adamson, "Necessary Existent," 175; Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 170; Sayed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 27; Sayed Hossein Nasr, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Chittick, William (Bloomington, in: World Wisdom, 2007), 124; Edward M. Macierowski, "Does God have a Quiddity According to Avicenna?," *The Thomist* 52, no. 1 (1988): 87.

- 5 The tenability of this approach in comparison with typical deconstruction is no doubt open to question, since deciding if and how deconstruction can be substantively delineated demands serious philosophical assessment (See, for example, Samuel, C., Wheeler, *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), esp. Ch. 3; Reed W. Dasenbrock, ed., *Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction, and Literary Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).). The approach taken here explores a development rather than deconstruction of Avicennian philosophy, leaving argument about the general sustainability of this philosophy aside.

the essences of things, or the primary intelligible intentions (*al-ma'ānī al-ma'qūla al-'ulā*), in light of the properties (or accidents) known as the secondary intelligible intentions (*al-ma'ānī al-ma'qūla al-thāniyya*) that allow the former to be connected with one another. The distinction signifies a major Avicennian logical innovation. The primary intentions denote the objects of logic, which are concepts and their contents, as given in the five universal types: genus (*jins*), species (*naw'*), difference (*fasl*), property (*khāss*), and accident (*'arad*). But it is the first three, (genus, species, difference), which are considered essential to a thing, and therefore constitute its essence. The second intentions are the subject of logic, and include certain states such as being a “subject” and a “predicate”, “universal” and “particular”, “essential” and an “accident”, a “premise” and a “conclusion.”⁶ Like al-Fārābī before him, Ibn Sīnā considers logic as the language, or rather syntax, of a body of thought.⁷ In contrast to logic, science concerns extramental things and their causal relations, and scientific knowledge (*'ilm*), involves conceptualization (*tasawwur*) and verification (*tasdiq*). *Tasawwur* simply denotes understanding the meaning or intension (*ma'nā*) of a word, statement or inference. Thus, the conceptualization of a single essence involves simply the properties associated with a particular subject in the mind.⁸ The various claims of truth regarding an essence, for example, when or where it exists and whether various properties really belong to the subject, are addressed by the process of verification. Thus, with verification, an additional act of objectively checking, or “corresponding,” the thing is required. Without a truth-value, all propositions will simply remain conceptualization. What is important, though, is that assent presupposes conceptualization, for the latter provides the elements to which truth-values may attach. Definition first denotes conceptualization, only after which syllogisms can be applied.⁹

6 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitabu's-Şifa: Metafizik I* (with Arabic *al-Ilāhiyāt*) trans. Ekrem Demirli and Ömer Türker (Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2004), Bk. 1 Ch. 2, page 9, (hereafter abbreviated as 1.2, 9). On the use of the term *ma'nā* in Islamic thought, see Richard M. Frank, “Al-ma'nā: Some Reflections on the Technical Meanings of the Term in the Kalām and Its Use in the Physics of Mu'ammār,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 87, no. 3 (1967): 248-59; “Meanings Are Spoken of in Many Ways: The Earlier Arab Grammarians,” *Le Muséon* 94, no. 3-4 (1981): 259-319.

7 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitabu's-Şifa: Mantıga Giriş* (with Arabic *al-madkhal*), ed., Muhittin Macit, trans., Ömer Türker (Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2006) I.3, 14. Al-Fārābī makes the analogy in *Ihsā' al-'ulūm* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1931), 12.5-8. For detailed elucidation of the Avicennian relationship between logic and science, see McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 27-35.

8 Ibn Sīnā explicates the distinction between *ma'nā* (intention, or meaning) and *wujūd* (existence), and between *māhiyah* (essence) and *wujūd* with the example of a triangle in relation to its own possibility and the necessity of its essential features to itself. See, *Metafizik I*, 1.5, 28; 3.9, 130-31; *İşaretler ve Tembihler* (with Arabic *al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*), trans., Ekrem Demirli, Ali Durusoy, Muhittin Macit, (Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2017), 125.

9 Ibn Sīnā, *Mantıga Giriş*, 1.3 10-12. For a detailed history of this distinction, see Harry A. Wolfson, “The Terms *Tasawwur* and *Tasqid* in Arabic Philosophy and their Greek, Latin and

This division between logic and science is fundamental, for it marks a division both in the way things are technically approached and in the unique place logic has within the attainment of knowledge. The secondary intentions, for example, “being a subject” and “being a predicate,” apply without regard to the contents of the primary intentions that are the subject and predicate in a given proposition.¹⁰ All of these primarily relate to conceptualization and the objects of conceptualization, such as definitions (*had*), definite descriptions (*rasm*), exemplars, and the signs or terms of things.¹¹ The relationship of the objects of logic to the objects of science brings the concept of essence to the fore. Because of its universal application, logic concerns fundamental questions about knowledge and, ultimately, helps form syllogistic demonstrations to reach new information and acquaint us with reality. If the objects of logic are, however, to match the way things really are, then the essence of an object must be applicable to both the way things are in concrete and the way they are in the mind. For Ibn Sīnā, there must be some bridge linking the objects of logic to those of science to explain how our concepts accurately connect to the world.

Now, for Ibn Sīnā, essences can exist either in conceptualization or concrete particulars. One of the most important differences between the two is that those which exist in the mind exist as universal or general terms, whereas those that exist in the extramental world exist as particular or individuated beings. However, given this situation, a dilemma appears to would arise. Take the example of the essence “animal”. Perhaps Ibn Sīnā explains it best when he writes:

If it were in itself general [i.e. universal], it would follow necessarily that there would be no individual animal; rather, every animal would be general. If, moreover, animal by virtue of being animal were individual, it would then be impossible for it to be anything but one individual, that individual required by animality, and it would be impossible for any other individual to be an animal.¹²

The same dilemma will, of course, apply equally to all essences, regardless of how many, if any, individuals it encompasses. If any essence is universal only, it

Hebrew Equivalents,” *The Moslem World* 33 (1943): 114-28. For a more recent study, see Tony Street, “Logic,” in *Arabic Philosophy*, 247-65.

10 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.2.

11 Ibn Sīnā, *Mantiġa Giriş*, 1.3, esp. 40-57.

12 Ibn Sīnā, *ash-Shifā: al-Mantiq I: al-Madkhal*, ed. M. al-khudaytī, G. Anawātī, and A. F. Ahwānī, revised and introduced by I. Madhūr (Cairo 1953), I. 12, 65.12-16. Translation by Michael E. Marmura, “Avicenna’s Chapter on Universals in the *Isagoge* of his *Shifa*” in *Probing in Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (New York: Global Academic Publishing, 2005), 49. Bracketed words have been added by the author. See also, Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 5.1, 178 ff.

cannot exist as a particular, but if it is a particular only, it cannot exist as a universal. Essentially, the situation demands something more basic than either type of essence. So Ibn Sīnā writes, “In itself, it [animal] is neither general (*‘āmm*) nor particular (*khāss*).”¹³ “Rather, animal in itself is something conceived in the mind as animal and in accordance with its conception as animal is simply animal.”¹⁴ Ibn Sīnā thus adds the common element shared by logic and science: the essence-in-itself, namely a kind of essence that can be considered divorced from existence, and, indeed, all accidents.¹⁵ This is a unique third term, and with it an *ad hoc* solution, since there could have been no other reason to invoke such an idea.

The appearance of the term essence, usually deemed a metaphysical concept, suggests the terms used in logic are not metaphysically neutral. Marmura, for one, observes with surprise the appearance of metaphysical statements in a chapter of *al-Madkhal* discussing logic, a field Ibn Sīnā states must be treated separately to metaphysics. In a similar vein, McGinnis remarks on the inclusion of essence in discussions of logic.¹⁶ But while the presence of the concept of essence here is remarkable, remarks have hitherto been for the wrong reasons. It is more precise to consider essence in epistemological rather than metaphysical terms (as shall be seen below). The point is that, crucially, the essence-in-itself has the potential to be either universal or particular. Ibn Sīnā writes that considered in itself, “it is prior in existence to the animal, which is either particular by [reason of] its accidents or universal, existing [in the concrete] or [in the mind] in the way that the simple is prior to the complex and the part to the whole.”¹⁷ Though the essences considered in conceptualization and concrete particulars have different existential properties, all the various accidental features that follow upon essences, inasmuch as they exist either in the mind or concrete particulars, can be removed, and all that remains once this is done are the essences-in-themselves. As McGinnis explains, this is what allows us to maintain that what exists in the mind equates with what exists in the world, since what is in both the mind and the world has a common element, namely, an essence-in-itself.¹⁸ In this way, the world we conceptualize accurately connects with the real world by a link between reality and logic.

13 *Al-Madkhal*, I. 12, 65.11, translation by Marmura, “Chapter on Universals,” 49.

14 *Al-Madkhal*, I. 12, 66.1, translation *ibid*.

15 Ibn Sīnā, *Mantūḡa Giriṣ*, 1.2, 8; Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 5.1, 173-75.

16 Marmura, “Chapter on Universals,” 35-38. See also McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 30-31.

17 Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysics of The Healing: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, trans. Michael Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 5.1, 153. Cf. Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 5.1, 177.

18 McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 33-34.

The depth of the division that exists between essences and their objective existence should by now be clear. In light of what Ibn Sīnā says about essence, existence stands radically apart. Nevertheless, existence in a sense is the most fundamental of things. Ibn Sīnā writes that it is the first thing that the soul becomes aware of and it simply cannot be doubted.¹⁹ It would be impossible to try to prove the existence of existence, since, as Ibn Sīnā says, all demonstrations require something prior to and known better than the conclusion. And to call on such a thing, will assume the existence of that thing. But since existence itself was the very thing we were trying to demonstrate in the first place, a demonstration of existence will prove circular. Hence, Ibn Sīnā regards existence as so basic as to be beyond proof. As Shehadi puts it, “it can be known without the mediation of any other principle or concept.”²⁰ A similar conclusion is reached with the notion of thing (*shayʿ*) and that of the necessary (*lāzim*).²¹

Yet, before Ibn Sīnā, the essence-existence distinction had not been well established. Rather, the distinction between “existent” and “thing” occupied the center of debate. On the one hand, the Mutazili theologians, who formed the first school of Islamic doctrinal theology, generally held that “thing” (*shayʿ*) was the most basic term one could apply to reality. So much so that the terms “existent” (*mawjūd*) and “nonexistent” (*maʿdūm*) were considered its subcategories. On the other hand, the Ashari and Maturidi schools held “thing” and “existent” as virtually synonymous.²² The terms were coextensive and also identical in intension. Thus, they referred to the same object in the same way. Al-Fārābī advanced the discussion by complicating the Mutazili view when he described “thing” as the supreme genus, while highlighting differences in usage. An intensional difference between “thing” and “existent” meant it was possible to say “Zayd [is] existent [as] a good man” but not “Zayd [is] thing [as] a good man,” as the second sentence fails semantically.²³ More importantly for our purposes, al-Fārābī is also credited with first specifically introducing the critical distinction under discussion, stating: “We must distinguish in all existing beings their essence and their existence.”²⁴

19 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.5, 27.

20 Fadlou Shehadi, *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy* (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1982), 72.

21 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.5, 28-29.

22 Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition,” in *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 106. See also, Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 151-53.

23 Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 107.

24 Al-Fārābī, *Alfarabi's philosophische abhandlungen aus Londoner, Leidenner und Berlin Handschriften (Ba'du rasail al-Farabi fi al-falsafiyah)*; ed. Friedrich Dieterici; ed. Fuat Sezgin, Frankfurt am Main: Publications of the Institute for the History of Islamic-Arabic Science, 12

Having introduced the term essence (*māhiyya*), he identified existence (*wujūd*) as a mere accident (*'arad*).²⁵ And “essence” is in fact the term Ibn Sīnā went on, in certain contexts, to replace the term “thing” with, very likely taking inspiration from al-Fārābī and perhaps others.²⁶ This substitution was but part of a novel reframing that saw also the birth of the term “existence”. In a revolutionary move, Ibn Sīnā conceived of more general concepts from the separate terms of the old distinction and placed them in a new opposition. From the term existent (*mawjūd*) he abstracted existence (*wujūd*); and from thing (*shay'*), thingness (*shay'iyah*), paving the way for the later replacement of thingness with the Aristotelian-Fārābīan term for essence or quiddity (*māhiyyah*).²⁷ Al-Kindi, for one, certainly approached the same distinction, but, as Adamson notes, still spoke of essence as a predicate and being (*wujūd*) as a subject.²⁸ Renard considers St. Augustine to have been the first to “understand the meaning and the necessity of the real distinction between essence and existence in creatures.”²⁹ Nevertheless, Ibn Sīnā’s application marked a significant shift in ontological discussion from the thing-existent distinction to an essence-existence one.

However, Ibn Sīnā did not fully extricate himself from the old distinctions set up by the philosophers and theologians, and his interchanging use of thing and essence unfortunately leads to severe ambiguity. Wisnovsky identifies three examples from the Metaphysics of *al-Shifā* alone as evidence of a muddled relation between existent and thing. There, Ibn Sīnā sometimes talks of existent and thing as non-identical in a similar way to the Mutazilis and al-Fārābī; and sometimes he talks of them in the same manner as the *mutakallimūn*, though maintaining al-Fārābī’s distinction between the two terms.³⁰ Later, Ibn Sīnā continued to further develop the distinction, so that thing referred to an object in terms of its being different from other objects. Thus, thingness (*shay'iyah*) refers to the differentiating quality that makes it an individual, whereas the term existent refers

(1999/1419), 66. Quoted English translation from Henri Renard, *The Philosophy of Being* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), 59.

25 Al-Fārābī, *Abu Nasr al-Farabi's Minor Philosophical Treatises*, ed. Abdulameer al-A'asam, (Damascus: Dar Attakwin Publishing House, 2012), 242; Shehadi, *Metaphysics*, 76.

26 Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 114. Ibn ‘Adi is also cited as an major influence, see Stephen Menn, “Avicenna’s Metaphysics,” in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 153-55.

27 Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 132.

28 Peter Adamson, “Before Essence and Existence: al-Kindi’s Conception of Being,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40, no. 3 (2002): 311-12.

29 Henri Renard, *Philosophy of Being*, 58.

30 Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 108. Cf. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics*, 158-60.

simply to its existence.³¹ This gives us two options: thing and existent (and, by implication, essence and existence) are extensionally identical and intensionally distinct, with neither having logical priority over the other – as held by al-Fārābī – or essence possesses a logical priority over existence. Yet most crucially of all, Ibn Sīnā also holds that thing and existent may not even be extensionally identical. As we have seen, he states that the essences of things (*māhiyyāt al-ashyā*) can be considered in themselves. Certainly, he follows al-Fārābī when he says that things exist as either concrete particulars or conceptualizations.³² But the idea of an essence-in-itself is novel. Ibn Sīnā's use of the term *māhiyyah* to mean essence comes from the Arabic of the logic texts that constitute Aristotle's *Organon*, where a sound definition is held to indicate the essence of a thing.³³ It is used to conceptually distinguish essence as logically prior to, and also extensionally broader than, existence. Thus, essence is extensionally and intensionally distinct from existence.³⁴ In *principle*, this states that although every existent must have an essence, not every essence will be found in an existent. Thus, in the same work we can see a spectrum of terminological usages, which mark an evolution of theory. The essence-in-itself is the last concept of this progression. If it was adopted not to entirely replace the other usages but rather complement them, then perhaps it was meant only to solve a specific problem – one we shall discuss below. In any case, the reason for highlighting the special place of this last addition is to show how eccentric the concept is even within the Avicennian framework, despite its very central position. By becoming entirely divorced from existence in this way, the concept takes on a primarily epistemological aspect.

Yet as noted above, both an essence considered in a concrete particular and an essence considered in conceptualization share the essence considered in-itself, thus bridging the gap between the extramental and the mental. So, by abandoning the concept of thing in dealing with particulars and replacing it with essence, Ibn Sīnā was able to introduce a link between the conceptual and the concrete to explain precisely how our scientific knowledge is verified by the correspondence of our logical concepts with those of the things we perceive.

The Essence is Not in Itself

The critical developments made by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā pushed ontology toward a fundamental philosophical puzzle. Certainly, the doctrine of an essence-

31 Wisnovsky, "Avicenna," 108.

32 Shehadi, *Metaphysics*, 77.

33 Wisnovsky, "Avicenna," 109.

34 *ibid.*, 109-110.

in-itself is one of the most philosophically significant that Ibn Sīnā advances, not only because of its fundamental position in his epistemology, but also because of its affinity to one of the most basic problems in philosophy. That is, the idea stands in line with, and also anticipates, various metaphysical concepts repeatedly reproduced to act as the locus of truth or reality – expressed (structurally if not substantively) by Plato’s forms, Cartesian dualism, Kant’s thing-in-itself, and Heideggerian Being, among others – which assume that what can be conceived as distinct is also distinct in reality. They also assume that (certain) things can be properly comprehended purely in-themselves. In regard to essences and more broadly, these are points that have been subject to serious critique, both in the analytic and continental tradition, from empiricist and linguistic approaches.³⁵ But my aim is not to undermine the theory of the essence or explore recent defenses of it.³⁶ The points mentioned above also fall subject to less radical criticism that upsets some points of Avicennian epistemology without complete disruption to its framework. I have called this “deconstructive criticism” due to its repetition of some deconstructive maneuvers.

To conceive of the essence-in-itself as such results in serious difficulties. The first of these is not especially fatal, but does point to ones that are. The essence-in-itself that Ibn Sīnā conceives of is, in fact, conceived of negatively, as what it is *not*; as neither a particular nor a universal. It is therefore, strictly speaking, not conceived *in-itself*. Now, the inter-relation of negative and positive description applies to our comprehension of all things, not just the essence-in-itself; strictly speaking we conceive of nothing in-itself as such. We say what something is by also necessarily saying what it is not. Our objection here is not a mere semantic quibble with Ibn Sīnā; the point is that the simultaneous negative-positive comprehension of entities is a mental event. True, metaphysically, “the simple maybe prior to the complex,” but epistemologically – that is, in the ability to comprehend and articulate any reality – this is not the case, for everything must

35 Classic empiricist critiques of relevant ideas are to be found in Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore*, in A.P. Martinich (trans.), Part I of *De Corpore*, (New York: Abaris Books, 1981), 3.4; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 220; and Willard Van Quine, *Quiddities: An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 139-42 as well as his “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) 20-46. Example continental critiques can be found in Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); and Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

36 The concept is famously defended by Saul Kripke in *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980). See also his “Identity and Necessity,” in *Identity and Individuation*, ed. Milton K. Munitz (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

contain a trace of what it is not, or what is outside it, to be differentiated. Only by this condition of difference can meaning occur, yet by the same token this complexity leads to a contamination of purity, origin and self-presence.³⁷ Derrida famously describes metaphysics as:

The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.³⁸

In the case of Avicenna, a special theoretical lacuna appeared; and the solution arose *ad hoc*. The metaphysical gesture has epistemological form, for what is thought pure is always only impurely conceived. Let us recall that the need for an essence-in-itself was not metaphysical; the event of the trace is an event of comprehension. Specifically, the need to postulate such a thing arose to connect the operations of logic with the objects perceived in the world.³⁹

Now, of course, all essences are conceived in the mind, but only some as *mental* existents. A careful analysis of this predicament is made by Marmura, who neatly explains that Ibn Sīnā's essence in the mind, precisely because it is in the mind, comes with additional predicates, such as universal and particular, which are used in the performance of logical inferences. And then there is the essence it itself, divorced from such logical predicates, precisely because it is *not* in the mind. As Marmura writes, "the concern is with *what* is being conceived, not with the fact *that* it is being conceived."⁴⁰ The essence-in-itself, Ibn Sīnā says, is neither in external reality nor the soul.⁴¹ The result is that though conceived in the mind, it is not supposed to be understood as being burdened with the predicates that are associated with that status, and hence, not as a mental entity at all. It will be recalled that for Ibn Sīnā, universality (*kullīyyah*) exists only in the mind because it is arrived at by the

37 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 44-64. See also, Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit*, trans., Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 107-108.

38 Jacques Derrida, "Limited Ibn a b c ..." in *Limited Inc*, 93.

39 In addition to the logico-epistemological reasons cited for the concept of the essence-in-itself, Marmura notes a metaphysical problem regarding the one and the many. The problems are no doubt related. See, Michael in Marmura, "Quiddity and Universality in Avicenna," in *Probing*, 62-63.

40 Marmura, "Chapter on Universals," 44-46 (italics added).

41 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 5.1, 173.

mind through a process of abstraction from particulars that display this essence.⁴² But this immediately raises two questions. Firstly, on the one hand, for Ibn Sīnā, the essence-in-itself is neither a mental or extramental existence as such. On the other hand, he does not say that these essences do not exist.⁴³ Thus, even if we grant that the essence-in-itself exists, we must ask *how* it exists. Secondly, he says that universality does not apply to the essence-in-itself, so it cannot be applicable in a general way to more than one thing, yet he also says that the essence in itself applies commonly to both the essence in the mind and the essence in the concrete.

These critical comments correspond closely with Marmura's observation that Ibn Sīnā talks of the essence-in-itself in two ways.⁴⁴ Firstly, in an "abstract" sense, as something "apart" from individuating circumstances of external existence and the accidents of the mind, which we may call a metaphysical reference, and secondly in a "primary" sense of referring simply to its content (for example, that horseness is simply horseness), which we may call an epistemological reference. The two are related. Now, though we have quoted Ibn Sīnā above referring to the essence-in-itself as an existence, contra the Platonist doctrine, he holds that independent of anything else an essence exists only in the mind.⁴⁵ Perhaps to avoid this, in the *Danish Name*, he makes a distinction between "existence" and "being" (*ḥastī*), which Morewedge claims manages to deflect an objection of self-reference, among others.⁴⁶ But it seems little more than a semantical development is being offered to the distinctions made so far, with *ḥastī* appearing as subordinate to mental, and existence to extramental, reality. Ultimately, the essence-in-itself, as a point of logic, can never be separated from logical predicates; and if it is so separated, its signification ends. Fortunately, we need only retreat to a "meta- or "arch-universal" to speak of the essence in its most basic determination, to maintain simultaneously that it exists in the mind and also that it has an epistemologically unique status. As Gilson claims, essence is only a possible existence, and "exists" only in so far as the thing it belongs to

42 Ibn Sīnā, *Mantiḡa Giriş*, I.2, 5-7; See Marmura's comments on the concept of universality in this regard, "Chapter on Universals," 34. See Dag Nikolaus Hasse, "Avicenna on Abstraction," for an account of the development of Ibn Sīnā's theory of abstraction, which claims it cannot be reduced to a mere aspect the theory of emanation, in *Aspects of Avicenna*, e.d. Robert Wisnovsky, (Princeton, NJ: Weiner, 2007).

43 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 5.1, 173.

44 Marmura, "Chapter on Universals," 47; Marmura, "Quiddity and Universality," 66.

45 See Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 5.2.

46 See Morewedge, "Philosophical Analysis," 432-34; Parviz Morewedge, "Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Malcolm and the Ontological Argument," *The Monist* 54, no. 2 (1970): 237-238

exists, and so it is up to us to simply infer that they “never exist in themselves”.⁴⁷ So the essence-in-itself does not exist as such.⁴⁸ What Ibn Sīnā really appears to be talking about is just the identity of the essence *to* itself, in terms expressed with the law of logical identity, as he writes, “consideration of the essence inasmuch as it is that essence” (*‘itibār al- māhiyyah bima hiya tilka al- māhiyyah*).⁴⁹

Marmura worries that the essence-in-itself cannot act as the bridge, for once it assumes that role it is no longer the essence-in-itself, or “logical genus”, but rather the “*mental* genus” that comes with the required predicate of universality, leaving an “unresolved puzzle”.⁵⁰ But the correct conclusion to draw is that, in the first place, the essence-in-itself does not exist as such, that is, as the “logical genus,” regardless of whether Ibn Sīnā claims that it does. Being in the mind — for there simply is nowhere else it could be — it will still necessarily carry predicates that the mind applies. In itself, the essence might be held separately from existence, but not from the designations or potentials of existence, which are mental connections. On one level, Marmura is correct to write that “the nature [essence] in itself is not a universal, but it has the suitability to become one when it is conceived as such.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, the essence is not really in-itself, and therefore not really divorced from what it can be, but rather is necessarily a potential. In short, the mental predicates still apply. *Pace* Marmura, no matter how we conceive of it, the essence will always be comprehended as either a particular or a universal of some kind. Specifically, the very fact that Ibn Sīnā expects to be able to apply the essence-in-itself to both the formulae of logic as well as objects of the world demonstrates that it is nothing but another, higher kind of universal. Admittedly, the universality is certainly not the same as the one Ibn Sīnā talks of in relation to the possible particulars in the world.⁵² All the same, one of the defining features of a universal is its abstraction from particulars, which makes it applicable, in principle, to multiple entities. And in this case we have something that can be applied to both concrete particulars and universals.⁵³ Moreover, we have something that was “abstracted” or rather deduced, from particularity and universality, each viewed as particular classes.

47 Gilson, *Being*, 75-78.

48 For discussion of possible ways the essence-in-itself may exist, see Marmura, “Quiddity and Universality,” 66-67.

49 Ibn Sīnā, *Mantiğa Giriş*, 1.2, 7-8. See also Gilson, *Being*, 76-77.

50 Marmura, “Quiddity and Universality,” 69.

51 Marmura, “Chapter on Universals,” 40.

52 See Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 5.1 179.

53 Marmura too writes, “while the quiddity in itself is distinct from the universal, it relates to it” (“Quiddity and universality,” 62).

The Perplexing Case of the Necessary Existent

Perhaps the most celebrated Avicennian legacy is his proof for God's existence. Ibn Sīnā's modal metaphysics provided previously unavailable categorizes to surpass Aristotle's proof for the unmoved mover, which Ibn Sīnā found an inadequate expression of God.⁵⁴ To initiate this new framework, he dismisses the various principles assumed by lower sciences, namely substances (material and immaterial) and accidents (as enumerated in Aristotle's *Categories*), and the modal status of mathematical objects as well as the more popular questions (*masā'il*) of God and causation.⁵⁵ Like Aristotle, Ibn Sīnā holds that each science begins from propositions the science itself cannot demonstrate; and so distinguishes the "subject-matter" (*mawdū*) of a science from the questions or objectives (*matlūba*, lit. sought-things) within it. What all the questions assume in common is existence *qua* existence (*al-mawjūd bimā huwa mawjūd*), and since this is their basis Ibn Sīnā identifies it as the subject of metaphysics.⁵⁶ As Bertolacci states, Ibn Sīnā forms the first coherent and systematic articulation of the theme of metaphysics, while retaining its main characterizations in Aristotle as "things-searched", including causes and God.⁵⁷ The groundwork for Ibn Sīnā's proof for the existence of God starts with his identification and analysis of existence and its different modes. In this regard, he identifies the necessary (*wājib*), possible (*mumkin*) and impossible (*mumtani*) as the most basic ways of considering existence.⁵⁸ He adds to these distinctions the terms "through itself" (*bi-dhātīhi*) and "through another" (*bi-ghayrihi*), which allows him to further detail the modes of existence.⁵⁹ Thus, there is that which necessarily exists through itself (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātīhi*), that is, having no source other than itself. In contrast, the existence of contingent existents must be explained by reference to another source and, hence, as being possible through itself and

54 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitabu'ş-Şifa: Fizik I* (with Arabic *al-Samā' al-Tabī'ī*), trans. Muhittin Macit and Ferruh Özpilavcı (Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2004) 1.5, 34-39. See also Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1988), 261-265.

55 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1. For an account of Ibn Sīnā's attaining his interpretation of the subject matter of metaphysics as per Aristotle's metaphysics and, indeed, transcending it, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna* Ch.6; Stephen Menn, "Avicenna's Metaphysics."

56 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.2, 11. On the difference between the terms existence and being as used by Ibn Sīnā vis-a-vis Aristotle and whether Ibn Sīnā correctly translates Aristotle's *ousia* as substance or existence, see Fadlou Shehadi, "Arabic and 'to be,'" in *The Verb 'Be' and Its Synonyms*, ed. J. W. M. Verhaar, (New York, 1969), IV, 112-125; Morewedge, "Philosophical Analysis," 429-30.

57 Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Shifā*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), Ch.4.

58 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.5, 32-34.

59 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.6, 35-36.

“necessary existent through another” (*wājib al-wujūd bi-ghayrihi*). Finally, that which is impossible through itself is simply unable to be, such as square circles.⁶⁰ These categories mark an improvement on the Aristotelian terms of caused and uncaused and allow Ibn Sīnā to differentiate God from other eternal things. They also prove instrumental in allowing him to prove the existence of God in *al-Shifā* and *al-Najāt*.⁶¹ Here we reduce the argument in *al-Najāt* to its very basics: The fact of existence is undeniable. What exists is necessary either through itself or through another. If what exists does so through another, then there will be either a finite or infinite number of such existents. The sum of all things that exist can be taken as a single whole (*jumla*), so regardless of whether it is infinite or finite, this whole must exist either as something necessary through itself or possibly through itself. If this whole is something possible through itself, then since it actually exists, it must be necessary through another for its existence. Since all possible existents are included within the whole, this external thing cannot be possible in itself. The only remaining mode of existence is that which is necessary through itself, and therefore, something necessary through itself exists.⁶²

What concerns us here is not the proof itself, but the resulting concept. That which is necessary in-itself cannot be composed of internal principles, such as form and matter, or genus and difference since the being would then exist through parts. Assuming the parts to be distinct from the whole, if the necessary-through-itself is composed by conceptually distinct parts, a contradiction would result.⁶³ Hence, the necessary-in-itself must be completely immaterial, for material entities exist as a composite of form and matter.⁶⁴ This means that the necessary-in-itself is completely unique, simple, and immaterial – just as God is supposed to be. Yet it is the austere simplicity of the concept that proves to be troublesome. While the existence of the cosmos is explained by reference to the Necessary Existent, the existence of the Necessary Existent appears a brute fact incapable of explanation. But what makes the Necessary Existence exist necessarily? A principle is needed to make sense

60 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.5, 33.

61 For an account of the development of these terms in Ibn Sīnā's previous works, see Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 122-23

62 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.6-7; Ibn Sīnā *Metafizik II* (with Arabic text *al-Ilāhiyyāt*), trans. Ekrem Demiri and Ömer Türker (Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2004), 8.1-3; Ibn Sīnā *En-Necât*, trans. Kübra Şenel, (Istanbul: Kabalcı Yayıncılık, 2013), 213-14. The exact location of the formal proof for God's existence in the *Ilahiyat* is debated by Daniel D. De Haan, “Where does Avicenna Demonstrate the Existence of God?,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 26 (2016) 97–128.

63 Ibn Sīnā, *İşaretler ve Tembihler*, 130-31.

64 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik I*, 1.7; Ibn Sīnā, *En-Necât*, 206.

of the fact.⁶⁵ In short, the question demands information about the *essence* of the Necessary Existent. But for Ibn Sīnā, the essence of an entity concerns the qualities particular to it in reality or the concepts that associate it with qualities in mental existence. So the Necessary Existent, being unique, simple and immaterial, should, technically, have no essence. Additionally, Ibn Sīnā holds that an essence can also be considered in itself devoid of any existence at all, which again makes applying an essence to the Necessary Existent problematic, because it is through the concept of existence that we are able to understand what exactly the Necessary Existent is.

Ibn Sīnā hesitates in *Metaphysics* to give an essence to the Necessary Existent precisely because the former concept can be thought of in isolation from any given mode of existence.⁶⁶ Yet sans essence, the existence of the Necessary Existent goes unexplained. Ibn Sīnā appears to be aware of this issue and in his later work *Pointers and Reminders*, deploys the essence-existence distinction to show the uniqueness of the Necessary Existent as the only being that is necessary of existence in itself.⁶⁷ As Nasr explains, “the Necessary Being, or God, [is One] who could not not be since His Essence and Being are the same; Being is His Essence and His Essence, Being.”⁶⁸ McGinnis notes that only by considering the essence of the Necessary Existent is one able to explain why He exists. Indeed, it is regarded as a substantial advantage over the Aristotelian system, since while Aristotle has no means of explaining the existence of form and matter to which he accorded eternity, Ibn Sīnā can explain the existence of everything in reference to the Necessary Existent, including form and matter, and also the existence of the Necessary Existent in regard to its essence, leaving nothing unaccounted for.⁶⁹ And it is generally thought that Ibn Sīnā’s system can validly employ the concept of essence, even if only “loosely speaking” (McGinnis), as one capable of metaphysical effect.

But there is reason to believe that Ibn Sīnā erred in resorting to the concept of essence to explain a certain instance of existence, regardless of what particular instance that is. Given that an essence can be considered divorced from existence, the term seems neutral towards or incapable of any existence claims, which is troubling if an entity’s *definition* depends upon the concept of necessary existence. Certainly, the essence is not the cause of existence. Ibn Sīnā writes that “It is not possible that the attribute called “existence” be caused in a thing by its

65 There is reason to believe that the question is misled. Indeed, Ibn Sīnā states that because the first has no cause (*illah*), “it has no ‘why?’” (*la lima lahu*). Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik II*, 8.4, 92

66 See, Ibn Sīnā, *Kitabu’ş-Şifa: Metafizik II*, 8.4, 89; 91-92.

67 Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 127.

68 Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 27.

69 McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 168-70.

essence, which is quite distinct from its existence or any other attribute.”⁷⁰ The only other option is that it *explains* or *justifies* existence. Yet, existence can be referred to without essence, and that is precisely how Ibn Sīnā understands the science of metaphysics: *existence qua existence*. Rather the problem that must have worried Ibn Sīnā was: How can *something* exist without an essence? And this, in turn, must have led him to the following question: How can an essence be derived simply from the concept of existence? True, there is simply nothing left but existence to which Ibn Sīnā can point toward to provide contents to the Necessary Existent's essence. But that does not in and of itself grant him access to the concept of existence as the contents of the essence.

Sometimes Ibn Sīnā attempts to move to the concept of essence from the concept of existence via a less hazardous route, specifically through the idea of individual nature (*anniyah*, also translated as quiddity, essence or individual being).⁷¹ Indeed, it does seem possible to say that the nature of the Necessary Existent must be His unique mode of existence. It is then but a small step, though still a fallacious one, to claim that “the individual nature of Him who is necessary of existence is for Him what quiddity [essence, *māhiyyah*] is for other things.”⁷² The move is certainly tempting, because the concept of an essence is very close in content to that of a thing's particular nature. Nevertheless, the logical and methodological role that essence plays simply prevents it from being explanatively associated to any existence, without exception.⁷³ It is perhaps as a result of this anxiety regarding the application of the term essence to the Necessary Existent that Ibn Sīnā is also wont to use two other terms to explain the status of this being, specifically, *dhāt* (essence or self) and *haqīqah* (nature or reality).⁷⁴ But a problem will not disappear simply because it is called by another name.

If an essence were applied to the Necessary Existent it would be a rather strange essence because there would be no genus or species. Of the essence there is just necessary existence.⁷⁵ Hence, one wonders if this is really an essence at all. Indeed,

70 Ibn Sīnā, *İşaretiler ve Tembihler*, 129. English translation from Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 78.

71 See, for example, Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik II*, 8.4, 91. See also Peter Adamson, “Before Essence and Existence,” 299; 311; Macierowski, “Quiddity,” 82.

72 Hourani, “Necessary and Possible,” 78

73 For an account of the ultimate failure of this approach, see Macierowski, “Quiddity,” 81-84.

74 John Inglis, *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: In Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 237.

75 See, Peter Adamson, “From the Necessary Existent to God” in *Interpreting Avicenna* ed. Peter Adamson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 174.

because the Necessary Existent has no limitation, there is little by which an essence can define Him. Here there is Ibn Sīnā's more compliant remark that everything which has an essence is caused.⁷⁶ This relates to other major issues, as the lack of definition prevents the ascription of any other attributes to the Necessary Existent. Specifically, it seems impossible to derive from the concept of existence alone the traditional attributes of God, including omniscience, omnipotence and benevolence. Ibn Sīnā's arguments that the attributes do follow from necessity are very weak. In short, necessary existence through itself does not lead to anything else except perhaps the coherence of other possible attributes. Therefore, the only reason we can identify the Necessary Existent with God is nothing more than its necessary existence, and no other attribute of God can be easily attributed to it. Furthermore, if an essence were designated, existence would be no typical concomitant. Gilson, for one, notes how unusual treating existence as a mere accident is. Certainly, existence cannot be a mere accident among the other ten Aristotelian accidents, since it is already implied by substance, and the world is divided between accident and substance alone.⁷⁷ But the essence-existence distinction changed things, and now there is a price to pay. Indeed, in the case of the Necessary Existent, the relation is doubly complicated. Just like the essence-in-itself, God too is a being that can have no accidental conditions attached to Him. As Menn observes, the application of an essence-in-itself to necessary existence risks making God like the Platonic Forms that Ibn Sīnā sought to avoid. Therefore, Ibn Sīnā must again distinguish the essence-in-itself from existence to avoid a dangerous parallel.⁷⁸ Thus, just as the derivation of an essence from a mode of existence appears impossible, so too does it appear that the unique existence of the Necessary Existent cannot be connected directly to the essence-in-itself.

Now one may say the solution is easy enough; that Ibn Sīnā should simply fall back on his original inclination to say the Necessary Existent does not have an essence at all. Unfortunately, serious problems will be encountered, least of all explaining the existence of the Necessary Existent. To begin with, a thing's essence translates into its definition, and if the Necessary Existence has no proper definition, it is simply a mode of existence and nothing else. As Macierowski states, God

76 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik II*, 8.4, 91. Cf. Macierowski, "Quiddity," 84-85. Macierowski appears to suppose there is great difference in saying, on the one hand, that God has no essence and, on the other, that God's essence is His being; but as we have been arguing, essence and being (existence) are quite incommensurable as they stand, making the latter formulation a semantic manoeuvre of little substance.

77 Gilson, *Being*, 55.

78 Menn, "Avicenna's Metaphysics," 158-59. Cf. Gilson, who describes the essence-in-itself as but a "ghost" of Plato's forms, (*Being*, 76).

would be “utterly unknowable.”⁷⁹ Here, again, we see the epistemological aspect of the issue, since what is real has truth, but how does truth apply to any being without an essence? One may have already noticed in the above argument for the existence of God that there is a telling clause: “*If this whole is something possible through-itself, then since it actually exists, it must be necessary through-another for its existence.*” The question immediately arises: what if the whole is not possible through-itself, but necessary through-itself? Adamson writes that even if we admit that the mere conditional claim is all Ibn Sīnā needs to prove the existence of a necessary existent, this alternative is highly unfortunate; for then all we have is the entire universe as a necessary existent, not God. Furthermore, even if the Necessary Existent is not synonymous with the universe *in toto*, nothing allows us to equate this being with God.⁸⁰ Of course, the proof does not determine whether the entire universe or something outside this aggregate exists necessarily-in-itself, but either way, the identification with divinity does not follow and we are left with a general existential term.⁸¹ Accepting the proof for what it is, one way of escape would, of course, be to apply the essence concept and permit the required delimitation, but this Ibn Sīnā refrains from meaningfully doing. Indeed, Ibn Sīnā declares the First is “nothing but existence (*mujarrad al-mawjūd*) with the condition of negating non-existence and all other properties from Him.”⁸² Consequently, it is little surprise that his attempts to give the Necessary Existent the traditional divine attributes are generally weak.⁸³ But he is in a quandary, since the framework reveals serious problems whether he grants the Necessary Existent an essence or not.

Ultimately, the problems occur due to the particular construction of the essence-existence distinction, as it radically divides identity from existential mode by taking the mere *logical* possibility of considering an essence *in-itself* and existence *qua* existence to mean a *real* division, beginning with their basic and mutual incompatibility.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the division is ultimately superficial.

79 Maceirowski, “Quiddity,” 80.

80 Adamson, “Necessary Existent,” 170-71.

81 Even admitting proof of necessary existence, it is not enough to say that if God exists, He is that which we have proven to exist, since the whole point was to prove that God and the Necessary Existent are one and the same.

82 Ibn Sīnā, *Metafizik II*, 8.4, 92.

83 See Adamson, “Necessary Existent,” 188-89.

84 In his discussion of the essence-existence distinction, Morewedge claims that no dualism is necessary since an essence can be understood without ontological commitments, identifying the case of the Necessary Existent as an “exception” (“Philosophical Analysis,” 433-35). It is not clear to me that there is sufficient evidence to isolate the case of the Necessary Existent in this way, but it is clear that Ibn Sīnā erred in this “exceptional” case.

The essence divorced from the causal analysis of reality cannot, even logically, be divorced from the traces of reality itself, whether mental or extramental. This we have seen with the arch-universal essence. The error or unclearness in Ibn Sīnā is reduced by Rahman, who argues that existence is the “instantiation”, rather than predicate, of an essence, making the two simultaneously realized.⁸⁵ Any relation of priority between them will by necessity rely on a metaphysical claim. As Derrida says, “An opposition of metaphysical concepts (speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination.”⁸⁶ This is superficially transcended with the distinction at hand; we are not talking about different concepts, but a more basic relation of essence and reality (existence) itself. Still, the superficiality rests in that reality must be represented, and hence defined or “essentialized”, to be comprehended, giving us the original opposition of concepts. However, next to having a simple definition constructed vis-à-vis causality, every mode of existence must correspond to an essence if it is to apply to any particular thing, and, by *modus ponens*, any divinity. We must then reject the Avicennian doctrine that only contingent beings have essences. Rather, the Necessary Existent must have an essence, one peculiar to the mode of necessary existence and non-substantiality.⁸⁷ This discards the erroneous ontological details Ibn Sīnā applies to the concept, so that the problem is not that the Necessary Existent can have no essence, no individuality, but that the proof does not show which essence necessary existence as an extramental existent has, or, conversely, which essence enjoys necessary existence.⁸⁸ The essence of the Necessary Existent can neither be confined simply to its mode of existence, nor to existence simpliciter.

85 Rahman, “Essence and Existence.”

86 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 329.

87 In a parallel investigation to our own, Morewedge states rather than a substantial understanding of the self a process concept of self is required to describe union with God (“Concept of the Self”). Likewise, if the findings of this paper are correct, a modification of the Avicennian essence concept is needed.

88 Morewedge denies the Necessary Existent is an individual (“Ontological Argument,” 237-238), but his rejection of Ibn Sīnā’s claim that “in its first division being-qua-being is divided into substance (*jawhar*) and accident (*‘arad*)” (in “Concept of the Self,” 67) makes this denial unnecessary, given that he considers individual existence as substantial existence (“Ontological Argument,” 236; 238). Nevertheless, Morewedge does well to point out that Ibn Sīnā does not explicitly demonstrate the Necessary Existent is God, and that the two do not conceptually overlap. This agrees with our claim that though we may give the Necessary Existent an essence, a demonstration of qualities this essence could or does have in addition to necessary existence, and its analytic predicates, is not practicable in Ibn Sīnā’s philosophy.

Conclusion

By describing an object's thingness (*shay'iyah*) as the differentiating quality present in that object, Ibn Sīnā decisively broke down the meanings of the terms "existent" and "thing", and opened the way for the introduction of new conceptual apparatuses, including the essence-existence distinction. The concept of necessary existence therefore set up a new inquiry vis-à-vis the essence concept, with two resulting positions, both advanced by Ibn Sīnā, namely that the Necessary Existent has an essence and that it does not have an essence. However, neither position is tenable under current formulations. The problem goes back to Ibn Sīnā's idea of the essence-in-itself, as everything stems from the complete separation of existence from this concept. To solve the problem of theoretically addressing essential applications to both particulars and universal, Ibn Sīnā posits the notion of an essence-in-itself. This paper shows that the essence-in-itself is therefore a "higher", universal essence, since the defining feature of a universal is its abstraction from and hence denotation of something basic in various particulars. Hence, we never get to an essence-in-itself as such, which demonstrates that essences are always already existentially involved. This means, firstly, that existence is no mere accident. Essence pertains to existence only because it is found in (abstracted from) things in the extramental world of objects. More specifically, essence refers to all that knowledge, thought and language (through us (in existence)) applies to. However, for the Necessary Existent, Ibn Sīnā seeks to reverse the process and derive an essence from an analysis of existence qua existence. Secondly, if there *is* indeed an essence-in-itself we do not grasp it in itself, but only in a web of existing potential relations in the mind – hence the arch-universal essence. For as we have already seen Marmura note, there are two essences-in-themselves, or rather two ways of talking about the same essence. The metaphysical reference to an essence as something "apart" from individuating circumstances of external existence and the accidents of the mind is what we may call the genuine essence in itself, but the "primary" and epistemological sense of referring simply to its content (for example, that horseness is simply horseness) is really but the arch-essence we have described. And the one Ibn Sīnā wishes to refer to is not actually the one that we use to solve the problem of connecting logic and science. Rather, much like Kant's thing-in-itself, the real essence in itself is merely deduced and postulated (out of a purported necessity pertaining to the attainment of knowledge of the world), but there is very little we can say about it. Finally, since the essence can never be thought of in isolation from existence, we may also conclude that Ibn Sīnā's hesitance to give the Necessary Existent an essence is ultimately erroneous.

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