



DIVINE AGENCY, WILL AND FREEDOM IN AVICENNA

İbn Sînâ'da İlahî Faillik, İrade ve Hürriyet

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Makale Türü / Article Types: Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Geliş Tarihi / Received: 20 Mayıs / May 2026

Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 21 Ağustos / August 2026

Yayın Tarihi / Published: 31 Ağustos / August 2026

Yayın Sezonu / Pub Date Season: Din ve Özgürlük / Religion and Freedom 2026

Sayı / Number: 30 Sayfa / Pages: 15 / 26

Atıf / Citation: Tanrıverdi, Hasan. "İbn Sînâ'da İlahî Faillik, İrade ve Hürriyet [Divine Agency, Will and Freedom in Avicenna]". Bozok Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi [BOZİFDER]-Bozok University Journal of Faculty of Theology [BOZİFDER] 30 (Ağustos / August 2026): 15 / 26

<https://doi.org/10.51553/bozifder.1955281>

Çıkar Çatışması / Conflicts of Interest: Yazar, herhangi bir çıkar çatışması bulunmadığını beyan eder. / The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Abstract

One of the main criticisms directed at Avicenna's conception of God in the history of Islamic thought is the claim that he conceived of God as an essentially necessitating cause (*mūjib bi-l-dhāt*) and thereby eliminated divine will and freedom. This criticism, systematized especially by al-Ghazālī in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, later became a widespread assumption in kalām and philosophical literature, according to which the Peripatetic philosophers viewed God as a necessary, will-less and natural cause. This article argues that this assumption should be reconsidered within Avicenna's own metaphysical system. Its central claim is that Avicenna does not understand divine will as an independent faculty of choice added to God's essence, but grounds it as an essential perfection to be interpreted together with knowledge, providence, approval, generosity, and wisdom. Based on textual and conceptual analysis, the study first shows the conceptual limits of the binary opposition between the freely choosing agent and the essentially necessitating cause and then examines the divine attributes within the doctrine of the Necessary Existent. It further argues that emanation should not be read as a natural or mechanical compulsion, but as the necessary result of the perfection of divine knowledge and wisdom. The tension between the kalām theory of choice and the Peripatetic doctrine of necessity is therefore interpreted not as a simple opposition, but as the result of different ontological assumptions about the nature and operation of will. Although al-Ghazālī's criticisms are strong in terms of their kalām premises, they do not fully capture Avicenna's specific understanding of will, knowledge, and necessity. In conclusion, Avicenna's conception of God can be reduced neither to a temporal choosing agent nor to a will-less necessary cause. Rather, God acts through a transcendent will proper to the divine essence, identical with knowledge and wisdom.

Keywords: Philosophy of Religion, Will, Freedom, Essentially Necessitating Cause, Freely Choosing Agent.

Öz

İslâm düşünce tarihinde İbn Sînâ'nın Tanrı anlayışına yöneltilen temel eleştirilerden biri de onun Tanrı'yı *mūcibü'n bi'z-zât* olarak tasavvur ettiği ve böylece ilahî irade ile hürriyeti fiilen ortadan kaldırdığı iddiasıdır. Özellikle Gazzâlî'nin *Tehâfütü'l-Felâsife*'de sistematik hâle getirdiği bu eleştiri, sonraki dönem kelâm ve felsefe literatüründe Meşşâî filozofların Tanrı'yı zorunlu, iradesiz ve tabîî bir neden olarak gördükleri yönünde yaygın bir kanaate dönüşmüştür. Bu çalışmada, söz konusu kanaatin İbn Sînâ'nın metafizik sistemi içinde yeniden değerlendirilmesi gerektiği savunulmaktadır. Makalenin temel iddiası, İbn Sînâ'da ilahî iradenin Tanrı'nın zâtına eklenen bağımsız bir tercih yetisi olarak değil; bilgi, inayet, rıza, cömertlik ve hikmetle birlikte kavranması gereken zâtî bir yetkinlik olarak temellendirilmiştir. Metin merkezli ve kavramsal çözümlemeye dayanan çalışmada önce *fâil-i muhtâr* ile *mūcibü'n bi'z-zât* ikiliğinin kavramsal sınırlılıkları gösterilmekte, ardından Zorunlu Varlık öğretisi çerçevesinde ilahî sıfatların nasıl yorumlandığı incelenmektedir. Devamında sudûr öğretisinin tabîî yahut mekanik bir mecburiyet değil, ilahî bilginin ve hikmetin zorunlu yetkinliği olarak okunabileceği ileri sürülmektedir. Çalışmada, kelâmî tercih teorisi ile Meşşâî zorunluluk öğretisi arasındaki uyumsuzluk, basit bir karşıtlıktan ziyade iradenin işleyişine ve mahiyetine dair farklı ontolojik kabullerin sonucu olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Gazzâlî'nin eleştirilerinin kelâmî öncüller bakımından güçlü olmakla birlikte İbn Sînâ'nın irade, bilgi ve zorunluluk kavramlarına yüklediği özel anlamı tam olarak karşılamadığı ileri sürülmektedir. Sonuçta İbn Sînâ'nın Tanrı anlayışının ne zamansal tercih yapan beşerî bir fail modeline ne de iradesiz bir zorunlu neden tasavvuruna indirgenebileceği; Tanrı'nın zâtına özgü, beşerî iradeye benzemeyen fakat bilgi ve hikmetle özdeşleşen aşkın bir iradeyle fiilde bulunduğu savunulmaktadır. Böylece makale, İbn Sînâ'nın ilahî faillik anlayışını kendi kavramsal bütünlüğü içinde yeniden konumlandırmayı ve tartışmaya analitik bir katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Felsefesi, İrade, Hürriyet, Mūcibü'n bi'z-Zât, Fâil-i Muhtâr.

Introduction

In Islamic thought, the relation between God and the world is not merely cosmological; it also bears on the divine attributes, the world's ontological status, human freedom, and religious responsibility. One of its sharpest questions is whether God created the world through free will or whether the world necessarily proceeded from His essence. Classical literature often formulates this through the opposition between the freely choosing agent (*fā'il mukhtār*) and the essentially necessitating cause (*mūjib bi-l-dhāt*). The first model presents God as willing and choosing; the second treats divine activity as necessarily following from the divine essence. Avicenna's place within this binary has long been controversial, and kalām literature often places him near the second category.

This view was shaped above all by al-Ghazālī's criticism of the Peripatetic philosophers in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*. Since the philosophers maintain that the world necessarily emanates from God, al-Ghazālī argues, they in fact deny God's will and choice. For him, to be a proper agent is to choose the existence of an act by will where that act could either exist or not exist.¹ Once this criterion is accepted, a system in which the world proceeds eternally and necessarily from God appears unable to explain creation as voluntary. Yet the central difficulty is that Avicenna's own claims are often conflated with conclusions drawn from them through kalām premises. The issue is therefore not simply whether Avicenna attributes will to God, but what ontological and theological meaning he assigns to will.

This article argues that reducing Avicenna's God to a natural necessity devoid of will and consciousness results from treating the kalām theory of preference as the measure of agency and necessity. In Avicenna, by contrast, divine agency must be understood in a way compatible with divine simplicity, actuality, and self-knowledge rather than through a human model of deliberation and subsequent choice.²

The study proceeds through textual and conceptual analysis. It first examines the theory of will and agency presupposed by the kalām binary, then clarifies how the doctrine of the Necessary Existent shapes the divine attributes. It next relates will to knowledge, providence (*'ināya*), and approval (*riḍā*), stressing that emanation is not unconscious overflow but a structure grounded in divine knowledge and wisdom. Finally, it asks whether al-Ghazālī's criticism targets Avicenna's claims themselves or their reconstruction within kalām.

The contribution is not to assimilate Avicenna to kalām or to dismiss al-Ghazālī. It is more limited: when knowledge, providence, approval, generosity, and simplicity are considered together, the charge of a will-less necessary cause proves too general. The debate should therefore ask not only whether the world is eternal or originated, but in what sense divine agency is free and necessary.

1. The Limits of the Freely Choosing Agent/Essentially Necessitating Cause Distinction

In the kalām tradition, God's acts are often discussed through two basic categories: the freely choosing agent and the essentially necessitating cause. The freely choosing agent can prefer among options and perform an act through will and choice. In this view, will is the specifying attribute that determines one possibility rather than another. The existence of the world at a particular time, in a particular order, and with particular qualities requires a will that

¹ Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, Critical ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 134-135.

² Rahim Acar, "Avicenna's Position Concerning the Basis of the Divine Creative Action", *The Muslim World* 94/1 (2004), 76; Özgür Koca, "Revisiting the Concepts of Necessity and Freedom in Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna)", *Sophia* 59 (2020), 699.

explains this specification. By contrast, the essentially necessitating cause is an agent whose act follows necessarily from its essence and leaves no room for preference or choice. On this view, the act is inseparable from the essence and could not be otherwise. For theologians, the second approach risks weakening God's power, will, and freedom.

In Ash'arite kalām, will becomes especially prominent as the principle that removes indeterminacy in the realm of possibles. God's creation of one order among many possible orders is explained by His will. In this framework, will cannot be reduced to the necessary consequence of divine knowledge; even if knowledge encompasses all possibles, a further will is needed to explain which of them is brought into existence.³ In the Māturīdī tradition as well, will is one of the central attributes that prevents God's acts from being understood as unconscious, natural, or necessary processes.⁴ For theologians, therefore, God's status as a real agent depends on explaining His act not only through knowledge but also through will and power.⁵

This scheme is powerful within kalām, but it creates difficulties when applied directly to Avicenna's metaphysics. For Avicenna, God's act cannot be explained as a human-like process of choosing among possibles. One cannot ascribe to God a sequence in which there is first a potential inclination, then a consideration of options, then a decision, and finally the act. Such a sequence would imply potentiality, change, and temporal becoming in God. Avicenna's point should be read as follows: if will is to be attributed to God, it must be purified of the deficiencies of human will and made compatible with the divine essence's absolute actuality and perfection.⁶

The opposition between *fā'il mukhtār* and *mūjib bi-l-dhāt* is therefore not an adequate final scheme for classifying Avicenna's God; it only displays a kalām tension. If the freely choosing agent is modeled on a human who deliberates, decides, and acquires a new state, Avicenna's God cannot belong to that category. Yet if the essentially necessitating cause means a cause that does not know its act, lacks approval and wisdom, and acts like fire burning or a stone falling, Avicenna's God cannot be identified with that either.⁷

Applying this kalām distinction to Avicenna's metaphysics risks conceptual anachronism. Since theologians define will as specification among possibles, they tend to treat any account that fails to meet this definition as a denial of will. Avicenna, however, subjects every concept used of God to the doctrine of the Necessary Existent. The same term therefore serves different theoretical demands: in kalām, will explains why this world exists; in Avicenna, it signifies the identity of divine knowledge and wisdom with the actual order. Much disagreement arises from this semantic difference.

2. The Necessary Existent and the Divine Attributes

A proper assessment of Avicenna's view of divine will and freedom must begin with his doctrine of the Necessary Existent. The basic axis of his ontology is the distinction between the necessary and the possible. A possible being is one whose existence and non-existence are equal with respect to its own essence and which needs a cause outside itself in order to exist. The

³ Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Ismā'īl al-Ash'arī, *Kitāb al-luma' fī al-radd 'alā ahl al-zaygh wa-l-bida'*, Critical ed. Richard J. McCarthy (Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Kāthūlikiyya, 1953), 18-24; İbrahim Coşkun, "Klâsik Kelâmî Anlayışta İnsanın Eylem Yapma Gücü ve Hürriyeti", *Dicle Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 3/2 (2001), 18.

⁴ Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, Critical ed. Bekir Topaloğlu - Muhammed Aruçi (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2003), 292.

⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Muḥaṣṣal: Kelāma Giriş*, trans. Hüseyin Atay (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2001), 174.

⁶ Avicenna, *al-Shifā': al-ilāhiyyāt*, Critical ed. al-Ab Qanawātī and Sa'īd Zāyid (Qom: Zawī al-Qurbā, 2007), 2/376-378; Avicenna, *al-Najāt fī al-manṭiq wa-l-ilāhiyyāt*, Critical ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umayra (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), 2/111.

⁷ Acar, "Avicenna's Position Concerning the Basis of the Divine Creative Action", 66; Anthony Ruffus - Jon McGinnis, "Willful Understanding: Avicenna's Philosophy of Action and Theory of the Will", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 97/2 (2015), 160-161.

Necessary Existent is that whose existence belongs to its essence, whose non-existence is inconceivable, and which depends on nothing in any respect. This ontological framework determines how every attribute predicated of God must be understood. Composition, deficiency, potentiality, external determination, and temporal becoming cannot be attributed to the Necessary Existent.⁸

The implication for will is clear: one cannot speak in God of a potential, waiting, or unrealized will. In possible beings, will is often bound up with deficiency, need, and orientation toward an as-yet-unattained end. When a human wills something, he usually aims to acquire what he lacks, complete a deficiency, or choose one option and thereby enter a new state. Such will is procedural: inclination comes first, then evaluation, then preference, and finally the act. No such process can be conceived in the Necessary Existent. In God there is no unrealized possibility, no perfection awaiting completion, and no inclination to be activated by an external factor.⁹

In Avicenna's thought, divine will should be understood not as an inclination, decision, or purposiveness that arises later in God, but as a principle of action inseparable from the simple, eternal, and actually perfect essence of the Necessary Existent. God's will cannot therefore be conceived as orientation toward an unrealized possibility, the completion of a lack, deliberative preference among alternatives, or striving toward an external end. Rather, divine will expresses the necessary correspondence between God's essential knowledge and the order of being. This correspondence reduces divine action neither to natural necessity nor to a newly formed decision. Will is not an independent faculty of preference added to God's essence; it is a transcendent mode of action grasped within God's absolute knowledge, simplicity, and actuality.¹⁰

The claim that the Peripatetic thinkers denied the divine attributes must be clarified through systematic analysis. Their objection is not to attributing perfections to God, but to treating these attributes as ontological elements distinct from the divine essence and capable of introducing plurality into God. Avicenna does not regard God's knowledge, power, will, and life as separate attributes detached from one another; he sees them as different conceptual considerations of the simple and necessary divine essence. Thus the question of divine attributes in Avicenna is not a simple problem of affirmation or denial. The real issue is how attributes can be understood without compromising God's absolute simplicity.¹¹

Avicenna states explicitly that "the First does not become multiple because of the multiplicity of His attributes"; rather, His power and life ultimately refer to one simple reality. Accordingly, the plurality of divine predicates does not entail a corresponding plurality in the divine essence. The same principle applies to divine will: if will is predicated of the Necessary Existent, it cannot constitute an additional ontological determination alongside His knowledge

⁸ Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, 1/37-39; Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/77.

⁹ Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/81.

¹⁰ Acar, "Avicenna's Position Concerning the Basis of the Divine Creative Action", 67-68; Ruffus - McGinnis, "Willful Understanding", 161, 176.

¹¹ Avicenna, *al-Ta'liqāt*, Critical ed. 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawī (Qom: Maktab al-I'lām al-Islāmī, 1984), 18-19, 49; Muhammet Özdemir, *Gazzālī'nin Tehfütü'l-Felâsife Adlı Eserinde "Üç Mesele"nin Ele Alınışı ve İbn Sînâ'nın Görüşleriyle Mukayesesi* (İstanbul: Marmara University, Institute of Social Sciences, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2012), 25; Avicenna, *al-Risāla al-'arshiyya fī tawhīdihī ta'ālā wa-ṣifātihī* (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1934), 6-7. Griffel argues that the text now known as *al-Risāla al-'Arshiyya* was most likely not authored by Ibn Sīnā but rather composed by one of his followers in the mid-sixth/twelfth century. Nevertheless, he points out that the text largely and faithfully reflects Ibn Sīnā's philosophical views and provides an extremely useful introduction to his theology. Frank Griffel, "On the Authenticity of the Throne Epistle (al-Risāla al-'Arshiyya) Ascribed to Avicenna", *Penser avec Avicenne: De l'héritage grec à la réception latine*, ed. Daniel De Smet - Meryem Sebtı (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2022), 193-229.

and essence. The precise relation between will and knowledge, however, requires further clarification and will be examined in the following section.¹²

3. The Cognitive Structure of Divine Will

The distinctive feature of Avicenna's divine will is that it is not an independent principle of specification among possibles, but belongs to an order operating with knowledge, providence, and approval. God knows His own essence and thereby the entire order of being of which He is the principle. Unlike human knowing, this knowledge is not a later representation produced by its object. It is foundational knowledge on which the order of being depends, and therefore the metaphysical ground of being's realization in goodness and order.¹³

In Avicenna's system, providence does not mean God's external intervention in the world within time; it means that the order of being is contained within the perfection of divine knowledge. Divine knowledge is not a passive knowing that allows possible beings to arise randomly or without order. Rather, the hierarchy, order, goodness, and purposiveness within being are related to the providential dimension of divine knowledge. Without providence, emanation could be misunderstood as natural overflow. But because emanation is joined with providence in Avicenna's system, it is not an unconscious flow; it is the ontological manifestation of divine knowledge.¹⁴ Providence, therefore, is not a substitute for will, but one of the key concepts showing the ground on which will must be understood in Avicennian metaphysics.

Approval is another complementary concept that must be considered together with knowledge and providence. God's approval of His act does not mean that He later approves a result He did not previously know or that He acquires a new state in relation to His act. Approval expresses the complete harmony between the order of goodness contained in divine knowledge and God's essential perfection. It shows that God's act is neither arbitrary nor accidental nor the result of external compulsion, but is realized in accordance with knowledge and wisdom. Thus knowledge, providence, approval, and will are not separate processes; they are concepts that explain the simple and indivisible structure of divine action from different angles.¹⁵

This framework differs sharply from the kalām theory of preference. In kalām, will specifies one possibility among the possibles that knowledge alone does not determine. In Avicenna, will is not a determining principle detached from knowledge and wisdom. If it were wholly independent of knowledge, preference would become arbitrary and the reason for preferring one option would remain unexplained. Divine will is therefore the requirement of knowledge and wisdom: God knows the good, and the existence of the good accords with His essential perfection; this accord is not the absence of will, but its most perfect form.¹⁶ The question is whether a will so closely linked to knowledge can still be called will. If human willing is the measure, the question is natural, since knowing, willing, and acting are separable in us. In God, however, no such separation can be conceived. Divine knowledge is not passive knowledge dependent on the order of being, but comprehensive knowledge that is the principle

¹² Avicenna, *al-Ta'liqāt*, 18; Avicenna, *al-Risāla al-'arshiyya*, 7; Averroes, *al-Kashf 'an manāhij al-adilla* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 1998), 129.

¹³ Avicenna, *Dānišnāma-i 'Alā* 7, trans. Murat Demirkol (Istanbul: TYEKB Yay., 2013), 242 (58b), 262 (63a); Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, 2/359, 363-364.

¹⁴ Avicenna, *al-Ta'liqāt*, 18, 103; Avicenna, *al-Risāla al-'arshiyya*, 9-10.

¹⁵ Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/133; Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, 2/402-403.

¹⁶ Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, 2/363, 403; Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/134.

of that order.¹⁷ Will is therefore not a second mechanism beside knowledge; it is divine knowledge turned toward act through providence and approval.

Presenting Avicenna's theory as a mere reduction of will to knowledge fails to reflect its conceptual depth. The language of reduction suggests that will loses its meaning or is dissolved into another concept. Avicenna's move is different: he relocates will from the model of human preference to the axis of divine knowledge, providence, and approval. Will is no longer the choice of an agent undecided among alternatives; it becomes the actual appearance of the good order known by God and approved by Him. Divine will, then, is not a power opposed to knowledge, but the practical meaning that knowledge acquires together with providence and approval.¹⁸

4. Emanation and Necessity

One source of the later characterization of Avicenna's God as *mūjib bi-l-dhāt* is the necessity associated with emanation (*ḥayd*). Avicenna, however, distinguishes between two modes of necessity (*luḏūm*). The first characterizes natural effects, such as light proceeding from what is luminous or heat proceeding from what is hot; the second characterizes an effect that follows from an agent's knowledge of itself and of what proceeds from it. He explicitly assigns divine causality to the latter mode. The relevant distinction, therefore, is not simply between necessity and will, but between a causality blind to its effect and one grounded in self-knowledge. Emanation should accordingly be understood within this second form of necessity rather than assimilated to the causality of natural agents.¹⁹

This distinction also clarifies the meaning of necessity in emanation. The first form is necessity understood as external pressure, passivity, or natural causality, as when fire burns or a stone falls, where the so-called agent does not know its act. The second is necessity as the Necessary Existent's actuality by virtue of essential perfection, without being forced into act by another principle. This necessity corresponds to perfection rather than the absence of freedom. Just as God's necessary existence does not mean that He is forced to exist, the fact that His act proceeds from His perfection does not mean that He is will-less or passive. Avicenna's emanation involves essential, not natural, necessity.²⁰

Within the theory of emanation, the procession of the world from God is understood not as an unconscious overflow but as an absolutely independent and perfect act of bestowing existence. God's act does not begin with an external prompting, a desire to remove deficiency, or a newly formed decision. In this respect, emanation differs from the *kalām* idea of temporal creation; yet it cannot be reduced to the unconscious effect of natural agents. Fire and the sun do not know the heat or light they produce, but God knows Himself and the order that proceeds from Him.²¹ The necessary effect of a cause devoid of knowledge and the action of an agent possessed of absolute knowledge and wisdom cannot be placed in the same category.

Avicenna's emphasis on generosity and love in connection with emanation also shows that he understands necessity not as natural determination but as the actualization of divine perfection. Generosity means bestowing existence without expecting return and without seeking to repair a deficiency. Emanation therefore points not to a compulsory overflow

¹⁷ Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/106; Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, 2/366; Özdemir, *Gazzālī'nin Tehāfūtü'l-Felâsife Adlı Eserinde "Üç Mesele"nin Ele Alınışı*, 189.

¹⁸ Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, Critical ed. M. 'Ābid al-Jābirī (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 2008), 140-142.

¹⁹ Avicenna, *al-Ta'liqāt*, 16-17, 103; Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, 223-226; Koca, "Revisiting the Concepts of Necessity and Freedom in Ibn Sina (Avicenna)", 702-703.

²⁰ Avicenna, *al-Ta'liqāt*, 16-20.

²¹ Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/133.

independent of divine will, but to an expression of divine generosity grounded in God's absolute perfection. God's act should accordingly be understood not as the result of external necessity or need, but as the transcendent manifestation of His own essential perfection.²²

Reducing the necessity of emanation to natural necessity distorts the metaphysical relation between God's knowledge and His act. In Avicenna's metaphysics, God does not first know the world and then create it through a separate will; nor can He be the cause of the world in ignorance and without will. Knowledge, will, providence, and emanation cannot be separated because of divine simplicity. To theologians, this inseparability may look like the exclusion of will; for Avicenna, it shows that composition and sequence do not exist in God. God's act is neither an ignorant overflow nor the result of a later decision. It is the actual manifestation of essential knowledge and wisdom.²³

Averroes likewise stressed this point against al-Ghazālī's criticisms. To say that the philosophers regarded God's action as a natural and will-less process is to miss their conceptual framework and semantic context. Divine agency cannot be reduced either to the unconscious and will-less causality of natural agents or to the deficient and temporal preference of human will. God is the agent who brings existence from non-existence, sustains the continuity of beings, and acts in a mode superior to all agents in the world. Such agency must be considered in a framework that surpasses the traditional kalām binary.²⁴

5. Divine Freedom: Freedom from External Determination and Essential Perfection

Avicenna's conception of divine freedom requires a clear distinction between human freedom and divine freedom. Human freedom gains its meaning within limited knowledge, changing desire, pre-act possibility, preference among alternatives, and post-act responsibility. A human being can perform or not perform an act; often there is separation and tension between knowledge and desire, desire and decision, decision and act. Human freedom therefore concerns the capacity for preference possessed by a limited and deficient being situated within a field of possibilities.²⁵

For Avicenna, divine freedom cannot be treated within the same framework. It contains no comparison among possibilities, pre-act indecision, or later inclination, since these imply mutability and potentiality incompatible with the Necessary Existent. Divine freedom means that action proceeds from knowledge, wisdom, and absolute perfection without external determination or an extra-essential aim. God's essential necessity is not coercive; it secures the perfection and independence of the divine agent. At its center stands not the ability to choose otherwise, but freedom from determination by another.²⁶ The former may imply dependence; the latter indicates essential perfection and absolute independence.

This ontological distinction also shapes how the divine attribute of will is understood. As Acar points out, al-Ghazālī retains choice between alternatives as a constitutive feature of divine will, whereas Avicenna interprets this attribute in a way compatible with the distinctive ontological conditions of the Necessary Existent. Their disagreement, therefore, concerns not only the nature of divine freedom but also the nature and function of will as a divine attribute.

²² Avicenna, *Aşkın Mahiyeti Hakkında Risâle: Risâle fî Mâhiyeti'l-Işk*, trans. Ahmed Ateş (Istanbul: Büyüyenay Yayınları, 2017), 171; Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, 225-226.

²³ Avicenna, *Dānišnāma-i 'Alā'ī*, 262 (63a); Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, 439.

²⁴ Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, 223-226.

²⁵ Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, 2/386-387; Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/120-121.

²⁶ Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, 2/363-366; Avicenna, *al-Najāt*, 2/106.

The difference in their accounts of divine will thus reflects, rather than replaces, their deeper disagreement over the ontological structure of divine agency.²⁷

In the context of emanation, necessity and freedom are not mutually exclusive. Necessity negates freedom when it means external pressure or determination. But with respect to God, necessity means acting without dependence on any external principle, aim, need, or cause. That God's act proceeds from His essence does not mean that He is compelled to act; it indicates His absolute independence.

The question "Could God have created otherwise?" cannot be answered by Avicenna in the kalām manner. For theologians, it emphasizes God's power and will over alternative orders. For Avicenna, the issue is how divine action relates to absolute knowledge and perfection. If "otherwise" means a deficient, disorderly, or unwise order, God's not willing it is perfection, not weakness. If it means an equally good and wise order, Avicenna would not explain it through preference-indeterminacy, for God's knowledge encompasses the whole order of existence simply and eternally.²⁸

6. Reassessing al-Ghazālī's Criticisms

Al-Ghazālī's criticisms matter because they reveal where the Peripatetic system diverges from kalām creation doctrine. Avicenna's views on the eternity of the world, emanation, divine simplicity, and essence-attribute relations do not fully coincide with theological arguments. Their assessment therefore requires more than a superficial reading and must include determining whether they target Avicenna's own statements or conclusions produced by rereading them through kalām premises.

According to al-Ghazālī, a real agent is one who performs an act through will and choice, and will requires preferring one possible alternative over others. Philosophers who claim that the world proceeds eternally and necessarily from God leave no room for such preference and therefore do not regard God as a real agent. Their statement that "God is the agent and creator of the world, and the world is His work and act" is not used in its true sense; they remove God from the status of a willing agent and reduce Him to the condition of a natural being. If the world proceeds naturally and necessarily from God, this negates divine will. The negation of will, in turn, means that God does not know the world; for according to the theologians, will is established through the world's temporal origination, and knowledge is established through will.²⁹

This criticism is coherent within al-Ghazālī's premises, but it does not fully reflect Avicenna's account of will. Because al-Ghazālī conceives divine will as an independent attribute specifying one possible alternative, he treats every account that fails this criterion as a denial of will. Avicenna rejects will as pre-act indeterminacy, later decision, or preference among alternatives, yet he also refuses to make divine action a natural necessity detached from knowledge, wisdom, providence, and approval. Al-Ghazālī therefore shows not that will is absent in Avicenna, but that Avicenna's will is incompatible with kalām specification. The

²⁷ Rahim Acar, "The Problem of Theological Language as the Major Factor in the Making of Medieval Islamic Thought", *Din ve Felsefe Araştırmaları* 6/2 (2024), 104, 106-107.

²⁸ Avicenna, *al-Ta'liqāt*, 102-103; Avicenna, *al-Risāla al-'Arshiyya*, 18.

²⁹ al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, 119-120.

problem is not lack of divine agency, but a different ontological grounding of agency. This divergence does not by itself entail that Avicenna denies divine will and freedom.³⁰

Averroes also noted that the claim that Avicenna denied the divine attribute of will is inaccurate. Avicenna's purpose was not to strip God's act entirely of will, power, and choice, but to show that when these qualities are predicated of God, their human meanings must be purified and understood within the principles of divine simplicity and necessity. In Aristotle's and Plotinus's systems, the relation between God and the world may allow interpretations in which God appears passive or functionless with respect to the world; yet Avicenna's metaphysics provides no theoretical ground for such an inference. Al-Ghazālī criticizes Avicenna as though he had simply adopted the views of Plotinus or Aristotle in unchanged form.³¹

At the center of al-Ghazālī's criticism lies a circular grounding of will and knowledge: he bases will on temporal creation and knowledge on will, then argues that defenders of the world's eternity cannot prove either attribute.³² But the argument works only if one accepts his premise that will and knowledge can be established only through temporal origination. In Avicenna, divine knowledge, will, and creation are not temporally ordered; they are joined by a necessary ontological relation. God knows His essence, and from this knowing, which includes the highest good order, existence emanates.

7. Avicenna's Conception of Agency

In Avicenna's metaphysics, God's agency has an original ontological ground that cannot be confined within the categorical distinction between the freely choosing agent and the essentially necessitating cause. His conception of God cannot be described as *fā'il mukhtār* in the sense intended by the theologians. At the same time, since God's act proceeds through knowledge, wisdom, and approval rather than through natural necessity, He cannot be described as *mūjib bi-l-dhāt* in the naturalistic sense either. God's act occurs through a will whose mode surpasses human comprehension and differs in kind from human willing.³³ A more comprehensive conceptualization is therefore needed. On this basis, God may be described as the absolutely perfect agent.³⁴

This conceptual frame preserves Avicenna's doctrines of divine simplicity and necessity while preventing divine action from being reduced to an external cause, external aim, or will-less necessity. It emphasizes that knowledge and will are united on the same ontological ground, yet this unity does not mean that will disappears into knowledge. Will appears as the actual and wisdom-conforming aspect of knowledge. God's knowing is His knowing of the good order; His knowing of the good order means that its coming into being is consonant with divine wisdom; this consonance constitutes the meaning of will on the divine plane.³⁵

The question at the center of divine freedom in Avicenna is the ontological ground from which divine action proceeds. As an absolutely perfect agent, God does not act through an external or subsequently emerging element of will; rather, divine action proceeds directly from

³⁰ Hasan Tanrıverdi, *Meşşâi Felsefede Tanrı'nın Bilgisi Meselesi: Din Felsefesi Açısından Bir Değerlendirme* (Ankara: Gece Kitaplığı, 2023), 30-31; Acar, "Avicenna's Position Concerning the Basis of the Divine Creative Action", 75-76; Ruffus - McGinnis, "Willful Understanding", 177-180.

³¹ Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, 449.

³² al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, 203-204.

³³ Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, 224.

³⁴ Kara Richardson, "Causation in Arabic and Islamic Thought (Avicenna)", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Access 25 April 2026).

³⁵ Avicenna, *Dānišnāma-i 'Alā'ī*, 260 (63a)-262 (63b).

essential perfection. It is therefore not a result added to divine perfection, but the metaphysical manifestation of that perfection in relation to the order of being.

The designation “absolutely perfect agent” is not a conciliatory attempt to move Avicenna closer to kalām creation doctrine. It is a conceptual proposal that better expresses how divine action is grounded in his metaphysics. It stresses that God’s act must be understood through rational order, ontological completeness, and the giving of being. Al-Ghazālī’s criticism is therefore not invalidated, but its target is clarified: Avicenna does not deny divine agency; he does not ground it on the theologians’ plane of temporal origination and specification.

Conclusion

The widespread view that Avicenna regards God as *mūjib bi-l-dhāt* and thereby denies divine will arises from treating the kalām conception of will as normative. This article concludes that Avicenna does not negate will in God; he reinterprets it by purifying it from human preference, pre-act indeterminacy, later decision, and hesitation among alternatives. Avicenna’s God can be reduced neither to a temporally choosing *fā’il mukhtār* in the kalām sense nor to an unconscious natural cause.

Al-Ghazālī’s criticism remains important because it exposes the divergence between the Peripatetic system and kalām doctrines of creation, temporal origination, and specification. Yet, though strong within its own premises, it is limited when Avicenna’s will, knowledge, providence, approval, and necessity are read in their own metaphysical context. For al-Ghazālī, will specifies one possible alternative; for Avicenna, divine will is a principle of action identical with essential knowledge, wisdom, and perfection. The central question is therefore not merely whether will is attributed to God, but what ontological meaning the term bears.

The expression “absolutely perfect agent” provides a more adequate characterization of Avicenna’s account without reducing it to the kalām model of preference or to natural necessity. Divine action is neither ignorant overflow imposed by external necessity nor a human-like later choice. By knowing His essence, God knows the order of being that proceeds from Him. Read together with providence, approval, and wisdom, this knowledge allows divine action to be grasped as the manifestation of essential perfection rather than unconscious necessity. In Avicenna, necessity is not coercion, and freedom is not indecision among alternatives: necessity expresses God’s essential perfection, and freedom expresses His independence from every external determination.

Evaluating Avicenna’s agency within his own metaphysics preserves the historical and conceptual force of al-Ghazālī’s criticisms while avoiding the reduction of Avicenna to a doctrine of necessity devoid of will and consciousness. Divine will and freedom in Avicenna do not coincide point by point with kalām criteria; nevertheless, within their own metaphysical integrity, they form an original account of divine agency grounded in knowledge, wisdom, providence, and essential perfection.

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