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Wuğūd-Mawğūd/Existence-Existent
in Avicenna
A key ontological notion of Arabic philosophy*

In order to analyze the notion of existence in the Arabic-Islamic context, with any sort of thoroughness, one would have to investigate many often mutually contradictory elements. An exploration of the meaning of the terms implicit in this notion would need to take into account the difference between the existential and the predicative function of the verb “to be” as well as the theory first found in Arabic philosophy (falsafa) concerning the distinction between essence and existence. At the same time one could not afford to ignore the contribution of theology, in the form of the Qur’an itself1 and the discussions about the meaning of the term “thing” in the Mu’tazilite and the Aš’arite schools; one would also have to include Sufism and the mystical branch of Islamic philosophy, particularly the concept of “unity of existence” (wahdat al-wuğūd)2. In this brief article we shall, without pretending to be exhaustive, examine only the basic elements, starting with terminological questions (and perhaps exposing problems rather than of-

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1 See e.g. Cor. II, 117; III, 47; VI, 72-73; XVI, 40; XIX, 35; XXXVI, 82; XL, 68.

ferring solutions), of the doctrine of existence as it has evolved in philosophy, chiefly in Alfarabi (al-Farābī, m. 950/339ca.) and Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, m. 1037/428 ca.)³.

The most important philosophical terms for our investigation⁴ are, first and foremost, wuğūd; this is the term we shall for the most part be considering in this article; anniyya or inniyya (for which many derivations have been suggested)⁵; aysa, ays and aysiyya (with their corresponding negative laysa, lays and

³ For Avicenna I will refer mostly to the Cairo edition of the *Metaphysics*: Ibn Sīnā, al-Shīfā’, Al-Ilāhiyyāt (La Métaphysique), t. I, traités I-V, éd. par G.C. Anawati et S. Zayed, révision et introduction par I. Madkour; t. II, traités VI-X, texte établi et édité par M.Y. Mousa, S. Dunya, S. Zayed, revu et précédé d’une introduction par le dr. I. Madkour, à l’occasion du millénaire d’Avicenne, Ministère de la Culture et de l’Orientation, Le Caire 1960/1380 h. (hereafter *Avicenna, Metafisica*, Introduzione, traduzione italiana, note e apparati di O. Lizzini, prefazione, revisione del testo latino e cura editoriale di P. Porro, Bompiani, Milano 2002. In this article I have revised and corrected the lexical appendix of this last work (which was unfortunately printed with several mistakes) as regards the terminology for existence.


⁵ The term anniyya (or inniyya : Latin anitas “whether-ness” or esse “being”) can be rendered as “being”, “proper being”, “existence”, sometimes even “essence”. In the Kitāb fi l-bayr al-mahd the First Principle is called anniyya faqat, i.e. “only being” or “pure being”, and its causality is bi-anniyyatī-bi faqat; on this topic see C. D’Ancona Costa, Recherches sur le Liber de Causis, Vrin, Paris 1995 and E.A.D., *L’influence du vocabulaire arabe : causa prima est esse tantum*, in J. Hamesse / C. Steel (eds.), *L’élaboration du vocabulaire philosophique au Moyen Âge*. Actes du Colloque international de Louvain-la-Neuve et Leuven 12-14 septembre 1998 organisé par la SIEPM, Brepols, Turnhout 2000, 51-98. Avicenna uses the term, like wuğūd, to indicate the being or existence of God (see Ilāh, I, 1.5, 7, 13); he uses it together with māhiyya “quiddity”, of which it is the opposite, to express the essence-existence distinction in created beings and their non-distinction in God (see Ilāh, VIII, 4, 346). Many origins have been suggested for this term; in addition to the hypothesis of a Syriac derivation there is the hypothesis of a transcription of τιτων (or other Greek terms), of which anniyya is often the translation, and also that of the formation of an abstract noun from some Arabic terms (the particles in-inna or an-anna, and, for some authors, the pronoun anā). Even the vocalization of the term is uncertain: inniyya, anniyya or unniyya; see Thillet, *La formation du vocabulaire cit.*, 45-47; R.M. Frank, *The origin of the Arabic Philosophical Term anniyya*, in Cahiers de Byrsa, 6 (1956), 181-201; G. Endress, *Proclus Arabus. Zwanzig Abschnitte aus der Institutio Theologica in arabischer Übersetzung*, Franz Steiner, Wiesbaden-Beirut 1973, 80-109; D. Gutas / G. Endress (eds.), *A Greek Arabic Lexicon* (GALex). *Materials for a Dictionary of the Mediaeval Translations from Greek into Arabic*, I, Brill, Leiden-New York-Köln 2002, 428-436; see also S. Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1964, 94-97; M.T. D’Alverny, Annîyya-anîtas, in *Mélanges offerts à Étienne Gilson*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto – Vrin, Paris 1959, 59-91 (also in E.A.D., *Avicenne en Occident*. Recueil d’articles de Marie-Thérèse d’Alverny réunis en hommage à l’auteur. Avant-propos de D. Jacquart, Vrin, Paris 1993); G. Serra, *Due studi arabo-latini I. Note in margine a anniyya-anîtas*, «Medioevo», 19 (1993), 27-51. On the usage of the term in Avicenna, see also, s.v. annîyya, A-M. Goichon, *Lexique de la langue philosophique d’Ibn Sînâ (Avicenne)*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1938, 9-12 (repr. Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main 1999); M. Alonso Alonso, *La al-anniyya de Avicena y el problema de la esencia y existencia (fuentes literarias)*, «Pensamiento», 14 (1958), 311-346; Id., *La al-anniyya y el al-wuyūd de Avicena en el problema de esencia y existencia. La esencialidad de la al-anniyya*, «Pensamiento», 15
laysiyya); kawn, which generally means “being” or “becoming” (when opposed to fasād, “corruption”, al-kawn also means “generation”), and some other terms that share the same root k-w-n?; huwiyya, “being” and also “identity”, which seems like the abstract noun of huwa but probably comes from the Syriac hāwīya. The Arabic philosophical vocabulary is in any case very rich in expressions for “being” and/or “existence” (and also for its opposite, “non-being”/“non-existence”) as well as for the act of “instauration” or “causing to be”.

6 The original terms, from which the abstract forms derive, are ayya and laysa “being” or “to be” and “non-being” or “to not be” (see Ibn Sinā, Ilāhīyāt VIII, 3 p. 342); also from ayya is taʾyīs: “causing to be” or “bringing to be”, see Ilāhīyāt, VIII, 3; see also Avicenne, Le livre des définitions (Kitāb al-Hudūd), éd. par A. M. Goichon, Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, Le Caire 1963, 42-43 Arabic text (taʾyīs is given by four manuscripts; see also, J.L. Janssens, Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sinā, “Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale”, 8, 1997, 471 and note 58; Janssens renders the term as “existentialization”). The use of this term, like that of laysa and/or lays, “non-being”, and ayya and/or ayy, “being”, is generally considered characteristic of the first periods of falsafa (al-Kindī and his circle; see Endress, Proclus Arabus cit., 104-105); the initial lam of laysa “non-being” appears as the negation of ayya, but the origin of the term is still moot; see Thillet, La formation du vocabulaire philosophique arabe cit., 43-45; Afnan, Philosophical Terminology cit., 97-98; Barth, Die Etymologie von arab. in, nicht, laysa, nicht sein, “Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft”, 68 (1914), 360-364; M. Canard, Layasa, ayya etc., “Bulletin des Études Arabes. Intermédiaire des arabisants” [Alger], 38 (1948), 114-116. On the philosophical usage of the terms in Avicenna and his sources, see J.L. Janssens, Ibn Sinā’s Ideas of Ultimate Realities, Neoplatonism and the Qur’an as Problem-Solving Paradigms in the Avicennan System, “Ultimate Reality and Meaning”, 10, 4 (1987), 265-266; ibid., Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sinā cit., 471-476. For al-Kindī and Neoplatonic texts, see F. Adamson, Before Essence and Existence: al-Kindī’s Conception of Being, “Journal of the History of Philosophy”, 40 (2002), 297-312.


8 Huwiyya is sometimes used as the opposite of māhiyya. An entire chapter of Averroes’ Great Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle is dedicated to al-huwiyya which renders tō ʾāw in the translation of the Metaphysics attributed to Usūl and generally in the philosophical translations or re-workings of al-Kindī’s circle. According to some scholars it could be an abstract form of the pronom huwa, meaning “identity” (this was also the explanation given, for instance, by al-Fārābī in his Book of Letters, ed. Mahdi, 112 and 114-115); other scholars had considered it a translation of the Greek einai (see Goichon, Lexique cit., n. 735 411-413; Afna, Philosophical Terminology cit., 121-124). The most probable hypothesis derives the term from the Syriac hāwīyā, a translation of tō ʾāw with the sense of “being”, “existent” or “proper being”; see Frank, The origin of the Arabic Philosophical Term cit. For the term in translation, see Endress, Proclus Arabus cit., 80-83. For a detailed analysis of the use of the term in the Metaphysics of Avicenna, see A. Bertolucci, Some Texts of Aristotle’s Metaphysics in the Ilāhiyyat of Avicenna’s Kitāb aš-Šifā’, in D.C. Reisman / A.H. Al-Rahim (eds.), Before and After Avicenna: Proceedings of the First Conference of the Avicenna Study Group, Yale University, March 2001, Brill, Leiden-New York 2003, 25-47. Bertolucci excludes any sense of “identity” for the term in the Ilāhiyyat of the Kitāb al-Šifā’. The terminology for “bringing to be” or “producing being” is very rich and can be traced to the theological tradition as well as Greek philosophy; for a doctrinal analysis of the principal terms in Avicenna and his sources, see Janssens, Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sinā cit., 455-477; J. Jolivet, Le vo-
The constant struggle on the part of authors and translators to find an ever more precise and unambiguous way to express the concept of being (and existence) would seem to be manifested by their continuously resorting to new terminology, a practice that was encouraged - perhaps even complicated - by the root-based structure of Arabic.

1. The literal meaning of \textit{wug\text{"}ud}, from wa\text{"}ada “to find”, is in the passive form “the fact of being found” (hence “the fact of being there”) and the term is consequently employed, even in non-philosophical Arabic, to mean “existence” or “to exist”\textsuperscript{10}, in distinct opposition to \textit{'adam}, i.e. “lack” and hence “absence”, “non-existence”\textsuperscript{11}. A further contrast in philosophical usage is that between \textit{wug\text{"}ud} (and related terms) and \textit{mæhiyya} (and its related terms), which designates the “quiddity” (i.e. “whatness”) or “reality” of a thing. The specific “existential” dimension of the term \textit{wug\text{"}ud} seems to be supported by its grammatical function: generally speaking, the verb from the root \textit{w-g\text{"}d} has neither an auxiliary nor a copulative function. Nevertheless, despite its specific meaning, \textit{wug\text{"}ud} is not a univocal term, as is also the case with the Greek \textit{to \varepsilon\iota \varepsilon\iota\iota}\textit{nai}, of which it is often the translation\textsuperscript{12}. In fact, from the very beginning of \textit{falsafa}, apart from some characteristic syntactical structures of Arabic and the pronoun \textit{huwa}, what translators and authors employed as an equivalent of the Greek \textit{estin} and of the Persian \textit{hast}\textsuperscript{13} in the sense of the copulative “is”, was \textit{al-maw\text{"}ud}, which literally means...
“what is found” or “what is there” and therefore “what exists”\(^{14}\). Thus, the word \(\text{wuqūd} –\) from the same root as \(\text{mawqūd} –\) means, with a certain ambiguity, not only “to be found (there)” and hence “to exist” or “to be”, but also “to be found in a certain way” or “to be in a certain way”. The expression \(\text{al-mawqūd bi-mā huwa mawqūd} –\) “the existent qua existent” or “being qua being” is among the most important way of designating the subject matter of metaphysics, and the term \(\text{wuqūd} –\) can signify not only “existence” (\(\text{al-wuqūd al-multaq} –\) pure existence or pure “being”, without any determination) but also the more general “being” which includes “being some thing”, i.e. “being in a determined or accidental way”. Finally, from the theological tradition comes the sense of “to be known” and to be known in a given way. In fact, in theology \(\text{mawqūd} –\) is understood in two different ways: in the absolute sense (\(\text{al-mawqūd al-multaq} –\) and it is then synonymous with \(\text{ṭābit} –\) (“stable”, “affirmative”) or \(\text{kā’in} –\) (a “being”) – and in relation to a \(\text{waqīd} –\) i.e. to someone who finds or knows, and in the latter case \(\text{mawqūd} –\) means “known”. Both meanings are ascribed to God\(^{15}\).

An example of the term \(\text{mawqūd} –\) as an equivalent of the Greek \(\tauο\) \(\dot{ο}ν\) can be found in a text of \(\text{Yahyā ibn ’Adī} –\) (m. 972-4/362-4). There one finds a clear distinction between the logical-gnoseological sense (“significant terms” refer to the categorial being) and the metaphysical, indeed the ontological sense, according to which “being” is first of all substance and hence genus of every thing that is:

«[...] Aristotle renders being (\(\text{al-mawqūd} –\)) in logical questions as a common name [a noun] in which all ten categories share; in fact, his discussion concerns the categories and the categories to which he refers there are the significant terms\(^{16}\). [...] In the \(\text{Metaphysics} –\) where his discussion concerns the things that really exist (\(\text{al-umūr al-mawqūda bi-l-haqqā} –\)) and not the names that signify them, he called it ‘genus’. What really is (\(\text{al-mawqūd bi-l-haqqā} –\))\(^{17}\) is that to which being really [belongs] (\(\text{huwa allaḏī al-wuqūdu la hu bi-l-haqqā} –\)), it is the nature of being and [that nature] is one and the same in all beings; therefore, it is also a genus, since it is a nature existing in every thing below it»\(^{10}\).


\(^{15}\) On this topic see D. Gimaret, Les noms divins en Islam, Cerf, Paris 1988, 133-136; Frank, The As’ārite Ontology cit., 165.

\(^{16}\) For the translation of these terms, see Langleade, Du Coran à la philosophie cit., 313, note 3 and G. Endress, The Works of Yahyā ibn ‘Adī. An Analytical Inventory, Reichert, Wiesbaden 1977, 46 and 91.

\(^{17}\) That is to say “substance”.

2. The question of the term and the concept of being/existence has often been linked with the discussion of the absence in Arabic of a verb for “to be” which includes a copulative function. The translation of the Greek verb το ι ειναι, with its two different usages (copulative and existential) has always seemed problematic in a language, like Arabic, in which the two functions generally appear in separate forms19. Although Arabic obviously has the «necessary linguistic equipment» for the formation of a philosophical term that is like το ο ιν20, one does find occasionally extreme positions, such as the one according to which Arabic philosophers transformed Aristotle into a «philosopher who talks sometimes about existence, sometimes about quiddity, never about being»21.

2a. Probably the most famous contribution to this question, which in fact interested Arabic authors and thereafter scholars, is that of al-Farābī, who comes to grips with it in his Kitāb al-hurūf (Book of Letters). Al-Farābī takes into account the Aristotelian categories, but he also considers the peculiarity of the Arabic language which lacks a term that unequivocally refers both to “every thing” and to “the connection [or relation] between a piece of information (ḥabar) and the thing to which the information refers”22. Al-Farābī’s analysis, which deals first

19 There is, however, also an existential meaning of kāna and, as we have seen, a copulative function of wujūd (see e.g. SHEHADI, Arabic and ‘to be’ cit., 115-116 and ST.B. ABED, Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Alfarabi, State University of New York Press, Albany 1991, 122-126).


with the idea of “the existent” (al-mawgūd : chapter or section XV) and then with that of “the thing” (al-shay‘: XVI), is relevant to the notion of existence for two reasons, among others: firstly, because, in his discussion about quiddity, he suggests the distinction between quiddity and existence which Avicenna later explored exhaustively; secondly, because he there distinguishes between two different kinds of existence: extra-mental existence (that is, the existence of what is outside the soul – ḥārīg al-nafs –, i.e. in re), which is what al-Fārābī considers existence in the proper sense (only what has a quiddity outside the soul can be called mawgūd), and mental existence (in intellectu), the existence al-Fārābī ascribes to every “thing” that has a quiddity, whether outside or within the soul. It is noteworthy that al-Fārābī includes the term “thing” (shay‘), the background of which is theological, in his philosophical terminology. For him, as for the Mu‘tazilites, the term is much more inclusive than mawgūd: “thing” is broader in extension than “existent”, as it comprehends even possible non-existent things, whereas, according to the Aš’arites, “thing” indicates everything that exists (and is hence a synonym of mawgūd).

2b. In Avicenna, even more decidedly than in al-Fārābī, the analysis of the concept of existence (and/or being) involves many levels. To the elements derived directly from the Aristotelian tradition (“being” as the subject matter of metaphysics, categorial being and the analysis of the so-called “states” or “affections” of being), he adds or superposes a modal level – existence is, at least apparently, “possible” and “necessary” – and a theological level, which is, however, already implied by the modal level (the definition of a necessary existence is ipso facto the definition of the divine being). Finally, at the logico-metaphysical level, Avicenna must deal with the question of the above-mentioned

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23 Al-Fārābī deals with the translatability of the Greek ἐίναι as an equivalent of to ò év he also mentions huwa (whence he maintains the term huwiyya derives) – and then, following Aristotle, he discusses the definition of being, the identity between one and being and between being and being true, and the pairs of opposites related to being (actuality-potentiality; being-non-being; essence-accident). Only after examining “being” as the connection between subject and predicate (in his interpretation the proposition “Zayd is just” does not have any existential import), does al-Fārābī briefly consider the meaning of the term “thing” (The Book of Letters cit., chapter XVI, 128-129).


25 Necessary existence can only be one: see Ilah., I, 7.
distinction between essence and existence and the thereby implied question of the logical and metaphysical status of quiddity in the doctrine of the universals.

Among the many possible starting points for a discussion of this topic, a passage in the *Metaphysics* of the Kitāb al-Šifā’ (Ilāh. I, 5) stands out. Summing up the different meanings of being (or existence), and hence also of similar or related expressions – such as “thing” (šay’), “obligatory” i.e. necessary in the logical sense (darūrī)26, “whatever” (mā), “that which” (al-laḍī) and “that which is given” or “realized” (al-muḥaṣṣal) and “that which is established or affirmed” (al-muṭbat) – Avicenna makes a two-fold distinction. On the one hand, he discusses the terms “being” and “thing” as primary notions: they both indicate “being” (and/or existence) as a primary idea or intention of the mind, i.e. as the idea on which all knowledge is based and which, qua primary notion, cannot be known or defined by anything other than itself; on the other hand, he specifies that the term “thing” (šay’) – which he identifies as that which can be the subject of a predication – can indicate “the reality by virtue of which every thing (amr) is what it is”27. In order to differentiate the use of wuṭād in the strong sense of affirmation of existence, from the use which indicates the “essence” of something, Avicenna distinguishes al-wuṭād al-ṯabātī and al-wuṭād al-ḥaṣṣ. He uses the first expression to designate “affirmative existence”, that is, existence affirmed or established as such; this existence can be conceived of as belonging to the level of concrete reality (in re) as well as to the level of knowledge (in intellectu); in fact, for Avicenna existence in intellectu is not less “real” than concrete existence and, in this sense, “existent” is a synonym of “that which has been established” or “affirmed” (al-muṭbat) and “that which is given” or “realized” (al-muḥaṣṣal). In the second expression – “proper” or “special existence” – Avicenna finds instead the “reality”, “nature”, “essence” (al-ḥaqīqa; al-ṭabi’; al-ḏāt) of the thing, and hence, its “quiddity” (māḥiyya) or “thingness” (šay’īyya)

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27 For this discussion, see Ilāh. I, 5, 29-33; this celebrated passage from Avicenna’s *Metaphysics* is taken up by Thomas Aquinas (on this topic, see D.L. BLACK, Mental Existence in Thomas Aquinas and Avicenna, «Medieval Studies», 61, 1999, 45-79, particularly 47-51). For an analysis of the notion of “thing” (šay’) and “thingness” (šay’īyya) in Avicenna, see J. JOLIVET, Aux origines de l’ontologie d’Ibn Sīnā, in J. JOLIVET, Philosophie médiévale arabe et latine, Vrin, Paris 1995, 221-236 (originally in J. JOLIVET / R. RASHED [éd. par.], Études sur Avicenne, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1984, 11-28); DRUART, Shay’ or Res cit., 124-142; WISNOVSKY, Notes on Avicenna’s Concept cit., 181-221 (this text with alterations can be now found in Id., Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context cit., 153-180). In partial opposition to JOLIVET (Aux origines cit.), Wisnovsky suggests that Avicenna could have arrived at the notion of “thingness” in order to explain the priority of the Aristotelian final cause. A similar hypothesis is found in DRUART, Shay’ or Res cit., 139-142.
which, since it cannot as such have any existential import, has the character of 

a conceptual (or intentional) element independent of existence, which however – as the first meaning of existence implies – is a necessary concomitant of essence.28

Hence the meaning of “thing” should be understood in this context as a nature existing either in the mind (fî l-wahm or fî l-`aql) or in reality (fî l-`ayæn); nevertheless, what we indicate when we speak about things is their nature or essence, setting apart the question of their existence.29 Implicitly, however, Avicenna here introduces the main question of the relation between possibility and existence: if a thing existing only in the intellect is an existent thing, one might wonder whether the relation between possibility and existence comes down to the relation between what is existent in intellectu and what is existent in re, with specific consequences for the idea of creation, which could be understood only as the transition from existence in the divine mind (or, more precisely, the divine intellectual universe) to existence in re.

3. As will already have become clear, a discussion of the meaning of existence is, in this context, inseparable from the question of the being of the thing as such, i.e. from the question of essence. In keeping with the Aristotelian distinction between the different meanings of being, Avicenna, and perhaps, at least to some extent, al-Fārābī before him, worked out the so-called doctrine of the distinction between essence and existence, according to which not only must the conceptual determinations that define the being proper of something be distinguished from the affirmation of the existence of that thing (this is the purely logical or gnoseological level), but also the very existence that is affirmed or established for a thing must be distinguished from its peculiar being or essence (this is the metaphysical level). The only case in which existence can be considered co-essential to the thing (and therefore coincident with its essence) is the case of the divine, necessary Principle.30 And although this theory appears to be remi-

28 On this question, see Ilæh., I, 5, 31. Several problems are involved here: the question of the identity (or non-identity) between quiddity (according to genus and difference) and essence, and between quiddity and form, which, for example, does not subsist in the case of compound substances (see Ilæh. V, 8, 245).

29 Ilæh., I, 5, 32. Cf. D. Black, Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings, «Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale», 8 (1997), 450: «To call any object a ‘thing’ is to recognize it as having a quiddity or essence».

30 For a passage in al-Fārābī where the non-distinction between essence and existence in God is suggested, see the incipit of the fifth section (or “chapter” – fasîl) of the Kitāb Arā` ah al-madîna al-fâjdîla (for the English translation see Al-Farabi on the Perfect State. Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī’s Mahādî’ Arā` ah al-madîna al-fâjdîla. A revised Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary by R. Walzer, Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford 1985 [reprint: Kazi Publications, Chicago 1997]). For this question in Avicenna, see e.g. Ilæh., I, 5, 31-32.
niscent of the distinction made in *Posterior Analytics* (II, 7, 92 b 10: the question “what is the thing” is different from the question which asks “if the thing exists”)\(^3\), the development of this doctrine in metaphysics was in fact made possible by the original framework – both metaphysical and theological – constructed by mediaeval Arabic thinkers. Aristotle, moreover, (nor could it have been otherwise) deals only with the relation between our knowledge of the essence of a thing and our knowledge of its existence.

3a. Analysis of the question does, however, reveal a paradox: although essence and existence are to be conceived of as “distinct” and therefore responsible for compositeness in existent things, they prove to be inseparable from each other and hence resistant to any attempt to consider them separately\(^3\). Existence, in fact, is always characterized modally, but its modal nature derives from the modal nature of essence: it is in this way that we should understand Avicenna’s formulations of the “possibly” and “necessarily existent” (*mumkin al-wuğûd* and *wâgif al-wuğûd*): what is “possible” is not the existence of the thing, but the thing itself, i.e. its essence (which is possible precisely because it can “exist”); similarly, it is not so much the existence of the First Principle that is necessary, as its essence that must necessarily exist\(^3\). Besides, modality always refers to one and the same object, i.e. the “thing” (*šay‘*); discussing essence or existence means, for Avicenna, discussing the essence or the existence of some “thing”, that is to say something existent\(^3\). This paradox does allow us to draw at least one conclusion: beyond the inherent problems – and thus beyond the

\(^{3}\) See Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Burhān*, ed. Abū l-ʿAlā l-ʿAfīfī, al-Maṭbaʿa al-amiriyya, al-Qāhirah [Cairo], 1375/1956, 1, 5, 65-69. Avicenna defines three questions: “what” (*ma*); “whether” (*hal*); “why” (*li-ma*). The first refers either to the meaning of the name of the thing or to the very reality of the thing (*haqiqa al-dār*); the second can be simple or composite; if it is simple, it consists of the question about the existence of a thing (*hal al-šay‘ mawǧūd al-li-lāq*); if it is composite, it concerns the being of the thing (whether the thing is or is not in a certain way – *hal al-šay‘ mawǧūd kaḏā av layṣa mawǧūdan kaḏā*); in this case the term “being” (*mawǧūd*) is a copula and not a predicate (*raβṭa la maθmūlan*). The question “why” is also of two kinds: if it does not concern the reason for the very existence of the thing, it is required by the logical argument (*al-qawl*) in order to reach the middle term. All questions about “how”, “how much”, “where” and “when” can be reduced to the question “whether” (*hal*) in the composite sense.


\(^{34}\) *Iḥā. VIII*, 4, 346-347. According to Th.A. Dhu’Ait (*Shay‘ or Res* cit., 132-133), “thing” and “existent” in Avicenna have two distinct meanings, although existence is a necessary concomitant of “thing”; according to Wisnovsky (*Notes on Avicenna’s Concept* cit., 197), the two terms in this passage have different meanings, but are coimplied.
various ways in which it has been interpreted – the doctrine of the essence-existence distinction cannot be reduced to the idea, which would sound absurd, of a pre-existent essence: instead, the doctrine involves the ineluctable distinction (logical first of all, and then, perhaps, metaphysical) between two levels in everything that is not the First Principle. The compositeness of essence and existence must not be seen as a compositeness of two elements (as if it were a physical compositeness), because in that case each of the two would already have the very existence that their compositeness is meant to explain.

A passage in Avicenna’s *Glosses* to the so-called *Theology* of Aristotle, which has already attracted the attention of a few scholars, may be of help in understanding the question. Having examined the notion of quiddity in the emanational process and the duality it implies, Avicenna considers the notion of existence (wa ammā ġānīb al-wugūd ...). He then imagines a possible objection: if the existence of quiddity is possible in itself but necessary in that it proceeds from the First Principle, one might have to resort, inadmissibly, to an infinite regression (tasalsul ilā ġayr al-nihāya): the possible aspect of existence should, in its turn, “exist”, and so forth. But «the existence of a given quiddity – states Avicenna – is nothing other than existence and it is not something to which existence belongs. [...] In itself it is existence and is more general (a’amm) than the existence of possibility (wuğūd al-imkān) and the existence of necessity (wuğūd

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35 On the absurdity of this thesis for Avicenna, see Ilāk. I, 5, 31-33, particularly the discussion of the status of the existent and the non-existent. All attempts that try to equate the notion of essence with Frege’s “third realm” or Meinong’s “pure objects theory” consequently must take this question into account; on this topic, see De Libera, L’Art des généralités cit., 577-607 and P. Porro, Universaux et esse essentiae: Avicenne, Henri de Gand et le ‘troisième Reich’, in Le réalisme des universaux, «Cahiers de Philosophie de l’Université de Caen», 38-39 (2002), 9-51. An original interpretation of this topic can be found in S. Pessin, Procelean Remaanne and Avicenna on Existence as Accident, Neoplatonic Methodology and a Defense of Pre-Existing essences’, in J. Inglis (ed.), Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity, Curzon, London 2002, 151-168.


37 Badawi, Aristi‘ā cit., 61: bal wugūd tilka al-māhiyyat laysa illa nafsā al-wugūd; see Vajda, Les Notes cit., 386 (in the French translation there is certainly a misprint: «L’être de cette quiddité n’est pas l’être lui-même [...]»; in any case, see later in the French text: «il est l’être en lui-même et il est plus général que l’être [...].».
Thus existence belongs – or does not belong – to a thing (i.e. a thing can be or not be existent) and it is this fact that can be judged in terms of possibility and necessity, not existence itself. Possibility is not a division (or a subdivision) of existence, but rather – as Vajda put it – a «modality of the quiddity» (hālūn lâzimatum li-tilik al-mâhiyya)\(^{38}\), and existence qua existence is only existence and nothing else\(^{39}\).

4. Setting aside the different interpretations given to the Avicennian doctrine of the essence-existence distinction (they range, essentially, between the two poles of “logical” or “conceptual” and “real” distinction\(^{40}\)), we are left with some aspects that specifically concern the notion of existence.

4a. Firstly, the essence-existence distinction is a conceptual tool the value of which is tenable only in a theologically oriented universe: it enables us to express the “ontological difference”\(^{41}\) between the First Principle and «everything that is other than the First Principle» and it is precisely in this sense that it is a “composition”: essence can be (thought of as) distinct from existence in every-

\(^{37}\) \(\text{al-wuḡūb}\)\)

\(^{38}\) BADAWI, Aristū cit., 61, 19; VAJDA, Les Notes d’Avicenne cit., 386.

\(^{39}\) In order to explain the meaning of this “more general” being and/or existence, Louis Gardet referred to the two fundamental elements of the notion of being in Avicenna (\(\text{En l’honneur}\) cit., 335-337) and defined Avicenna’s position as an “essentialisme” (\(\text{En l’honneur}\) cit., 336); according to Gardet, in every being that is not the First Principle Avicenna distinguishes “trois éléments d’explication”: 1) «son être en tant qu’être, référent à rien d’autre qu’à l’être et comme tel univoque, ‘plus général que l’être contingent et l’Être nécessaire’ […] 2) puis son être en tant que procédant de l’Être premier et référent à lui: son acte d’être, donc, et comme tel nécessaire par autrui. Ce n’est pas encore à ce plan d’explication que peut se justifier le caractère de contingence. Que restera-t-il donc? 3) À considérer l’être de la chose existante en tant que celui de sa quiddité (mâhiyya), de son principe intelligible de définition, et qu’Ibn Sīnā distingue soigneusement de l’essence (dā’īt). C’est comme tel, et comme tel seulement, qu’il est contingent. Au terme de cette analyse tripartite, les Gloses nous disent que la contingence ‘n’est pas une partie de cet être […] mais une modalité concomitante de la quiddité même dont il s’agit’» (\(\text{En l’honneur}\) cit., 336-337).


\(^{41}\) On the destiny and fortune of the Heideggerian formulations in mediaeval philosophical historiography, see P. PORRO, Heidegger, la filosofia medievale, la medievalistica contemporanea, «Quaestio», 1 (2001) [Heidegger e i Medievali], 431-462.

\(^{42}\) On the distinction between the First Principle and everything which is not the First Principle, see
thing except God. Moreover, while the distinction serves to differentiate God from the world because it has to do with the world, it also involves God’s effability, since it is useful for ascribing attributes (ṣifāt) to the divine Principle. For Avicenna all divine attributes can be reduced to the absence of the essence-existence distinction in God. This is self-evident as regards the negative attributes: the First Principle has no quiddity and as quiddity and possibility are equivalent, it has no possibility either; finally, since the absence of possibility is the same as the absence of a “why”, it also has no “why”. But even for the positive attributes it is fairly clear: the absence of quiddity (or the fact that its quiddity coincides with its existence) allows us to assert the pure oneness of the First Principle’s existence, and also to assert its “stable” or “affirmative” quiddity, i.e. a quiddity that does not need to pass from possibility to necessity (tābit can be a synonym of mawgūd). The question about the First Principle has no other answer than the First Principle itself or, more precisely, than its one unique existence (al-wuġūd al-wāhidu).

4b. Secondly, existence is good (so that true Existence is true and pure Good), and non-existence (which is only in a relative sense since no predication can be given of an absolute non-existence) is evil. Avicenna’s Neoplatonic orientation is here again manifested: existence is pure good and pure perfection, while non-existence is evil and lack. The First Principle, the Necessary Existent, is hence also purely good (ḥayr māḥd) and purely perfect (or even “above perfection”), while all things, which are possible in themselves, are not purely good because they bear in a sense non-existence. Nevertheless, the only relative good has its


Ilāh., VIII, 4, 347; also for the other negative attributes (the First Principle has no genus, no why, no definition, etc.), see Ilāh., VIII, 3, 347-348.


Ilāh. VIII, 4, 348. As we have seen, Avicenna seems to use certain expressions ambiguously: not only does the First Principle have no quiddity, but it also has a “stable quiddity”; it is not a substance, but is “an immutable substance” (see e.g. Ilāh., VIII, 7, 363).

Ilāh., VIII, 4, 350: «[...] the reality of the Necessary Being is the unique existence only».

47 For evil as always relative, see Ilāh. IX, 6, 416, 7: there can be no predication of an absolute non-existence, i.e. of an absolute evil (I here read: [...] wa lâ ḥabarā ‘an ‘adāmin mutlaqin). Since Avicenna defines the “thing” as what can bear a predication (on this topic see the discussion above on Ilāh. I, 5, 32), nothing is not a “thing”.

own necessity: in fact, the good which the sublunary world represents (and hence the evil which is connected with it) must be realized in so far as it is possible, since the “principle of plenitude”, which is the guide principle for the Avicennian system as a whole, requires it. In this sense, the true “absolute” good does not correspond to the celestial universe as such (and to its Necessary Principle), but to the realization of the possible that universe implies; and hence “absolute good” entails the imperfect world under the sphere of the moon, as well as the perfect celestial world. Emanation is thus a principle which allows Avicenna to legitimate, on the ethical level as well, every rank of being.

4c. Thirdly, and once again from a theological point of view, a problem emerges. The essence-existence distinction does not by itself suffice to answer the question of origin. In other words, the doctrine of the distinction seems rather to indicate than to resolve the difficulty inherent in a philosophical conception of “creation”.

The crux of the matter is the notion of modality. As we mentioned earlier, essence is possible in itself and, because it is possible, existence can be “given” to it by the First Principle, so that what Avicenna calls a “thing” becomes «necessary by virtue of some other thing»⁴⁹. Thus not only existence does seem to “arrive” at essence, but also essence seems to have a two-fold character: it presents itself not only as the cornerstone of the ontological difference between God and the world (the essence of God is necessary, while every other essence is only possible), but also as a kind of “lump of being”, inaccessible to divine causality (it is the essence of the thing that is possible and hence able to be necessitated by the First Principle). In any case, a theological perspective, which must encompass an explanation of the meaning of creation – because this is Avicenna’s perspective here, since his aim is to explain the absolute instauration (ibdā’) of the world⁵⁰ – should not resort to the notions of potentiality and actuality⁵¹: the very origin of things cannot be the same as the transition from one state (possibility) to another (necessity or existence). If the modal component of essence is, in relation to divine causality, already taken for granted, almost as if the former were a precondition of the latter, the distinction between possible essence and necessary existence does not go very far in explaining absolute origin. And although the meaning of “possible” seems at times to coincide with the meaning of the existent in intellectu – as some passages appear to suggest – this does not solve the problem: if the possible is what exists in the divine intellect

⁴⁹ On the flow of existence on possible “quiddities”, see Ilāh., VIII, 4, 347, 10 ff.
⁵⁰ On emanation as true “creation”, see Ilāh., VIII, 3, 342-343.
⁵¹ This topic has been analysed by E. Gilson, see for instance L’être et l’essence, Vrin, Paris 2000 (1 ed. 1948), 124-143.
– or what exists in the intellectual dimension of the celestial world, intelligence after intelligence, as Avicenna describes the emanation in \textit{Ilâh}. IX, 4 – “creation” becomes nothing but a transition from the possible (or intellectual existence) to the real (i.e. concrete existence), a transition that does not suffice to explain the origin of the possible itself in so far as, properly speaking, creation is no longer a \textit{creatio ex nihilo} but a \textit{creatio ex possibili}.

4c1. A solution to this problem can perhaps be found in an \textit{a posteriori} consideration of the distinction. There is, as we have seen, no pre-existent essence somehow separated from the very existence it should already have in order to pre-exist: in the Avicennian world there are only things (i.e. existing things), in which essence and existence must be (thought of as) distinct. Hence, we can say, the doctrine of the essence-existence distinction can define the First Cause as a cause of existence only if things as such are the object of consideration, i.e. starting with existing things. In themselves, apart from their relation with the First Cause, (existent) things are nothing at all. That is to say, in itself, nothing is except God, and if something is, it is because God causes it to be: to the extent that the distinction reveals that “possible” implies “non-existent” and shows the consequent ineluctability of the relation of the possible with a cause, the distinction can serve to arrive at the idea of God as “creator”. However, it is in this way that the distinction reveals that Avicenna’s First Cause really differs from Aristotle’s: since it is nothing but the Prime Mover, the Aristotelian First Cause can explain only the world as such or the movement of things and not their origin. The departure from Aristotle’s view of the Cause as a cause of movement is, in fact, recognized as such in Avicenna’s theory of the efficient cause, which is a cause that gives existence, i.e. “a giver of existence”: the terminology sug-

\textsuperscript{52} Many passages suggest, at least in so far as the celestial emanation is concerned, a metaphysical dimension where the possible is (problematically) a condition of creation, see e.g. the Glosses of Avicenna to the pseudo-Aristotelian \textit{Theology} in \textit{BADAWI, Aristoi cit.}, 60-61; \textit{Ilâh}. VIII, 4, 347 and IX, 4, 406, in which Avicenna affirms that the multiplicity of the effect «[...] does not come from the First [Principle]: the possibility of its existence is in fact something which belongs \textit{per se} to it, not by virtue of the First Principle»; see also \textit{Kitâb al-Ta’liqât}, ed. A. Badawi, al-Hay’a l-miṣriyya al-’āmma li-l-kitâb, al-Qâhirâ [Cairo] 1973, 100, 22-101, 5. Related to the question of possibility is the question of (divine) power and of potentiality, which cannot be prior to actuality (see \textit{Ilâh}. IV, 2).

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ilâh}. VIII, 3, 342. An extreme interpretation of this theme has been given by \textsc{Izutsu} (The Concept and Reality of Existence cit., 95-99); the essence-existence distinction and the possibility of essence are, in his words, a «dramatization» or an «artificial dramatic presentation of a state of affairs which is already there», actualized» (see also 123).

\textsuperscript{54} \textsc{Gilson}, \textit{l’être et l’essence} cit., 65: «s’il [i.e. le Premier Moteur immobile d’Aristote] est cause de ce que le monde est, il ne l’est pas que le monde soit».

\textsuperscript{55} See among the most important studies on this topic, E. \textsc{Gilson}, \textit{Avicenne et la notion de cause efficiente}, in \textit{Atti del XII Congresso internazionale di Filosofia}, Sansoni, Firenze 1960, 121-130; Id., Notes
gestive of a gift or donation is used to convey a “new” kind of causality which is specifically devised for metaphysics (or for metaphysics as theology):

«[We understand] by “agent” (fā’il), the cause that gives an existence (waqūd) which is distinct from its own essence [...] In fact, the philosophers [who deal with] the divine science do not understand by “agent” only the principle of motion – as natural philosophers do – but rather the Principle of existence and that which gives it, as the Creator of the world».

4c2. It is in any case the meaning given to the modality of essence that can justify this new kind of causality as really different from the causality of movement, which last is responsible for the transition from potentiality to actuality. In other words, the question is whether the notion of possible essence can really manage not to boil down simply to the Aristotelian notion of potency: if possibility (essence) is non-existence, its first realization is a “creation”; if instead possibility (essence) is a potency (that is to say: if it is possible to exist and possible to not exist), divine causality cannot be properly an act of creation, i.e. it cannot explain absolute origination. Thus, the doctrine of the essence-existence distinction could explain the separation between “what is” in an absolute sense (i.e. God) and “what is created” (or produced), by the non-distinction of the former and the compositeness of the latter, but it would not resolve the question of origination. In fact, the question is to understand if the two meanings Avicenna ascribes to the possible – “possible to ...” and “possible to not ...”, on the one hand, and “non-existent”, on the other hand, could, in a sense, coincide: “non-existent” could be the “thing” which is already and always existent in the divine intellectual universe and which can or cannot be in re. However, Avicenna tries to save the idea of an absolute beginning in his Metaphysics virtually on two levels. First, the intellectual level, on which divine emanation is depicted as the act
by which the First Principle gives existence to things just as the artist gives existence to his “creations”. The First Principle originates the first effect and hence the world by means of thought (but here too we run into the problem of the possible in the “divine mind”)

Second, the level of absolute atemporality, by virtue of which emanation can be called a *creatio ex nihilo* (to convey his idea of emanation Avicenna uses terms like *ibdâ*, “instauration”, and *ta’yîs*, “causing to be”); only if it is outside time can the First Principle be conceived of as a cause that truly gets rid of nothingness: only a cause that continually causes to be (i.e. a cause that has never been a non-causing cause) is properly speaking an efficient cause and can hence be called the Author (*al-Šâni*) of the world

5. Apart from its problematic complexity, the existential meaning of the term *wuğûd* is clearly of great importance in Avicenna’s emanative conception: the concept of existence is the cornerstone supporting the very idea of creation. In this sense, despite the fundamental ambiguity of the term (or terms) that expresses it, existence is a univocal concept. This is true not only because all things are the same, in that they exist in the world, they have all received existence (i.e. they are all *aşyâ* “things”, or, depending on how the terms are interpreted, *mawğûdât* “existents”, “beings”), but it is also true from the First Principle’s point of view: the relation with the First Principle can be reduced, for

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60 In this sense, the First Necessary Principle is different from the beings of the world in an essential way, that is to say in what it is, and not because or in so far as it is: in fact, existence is the first attribute of the First Principle, see *Ilâh*. VIII, 7, 367: “[...] the first attribute of the Necessary Existent is that it is (*inn*) and that it is existent (*mawğûd*). It is perhaps worthy mentioning that existence (or being) is, for the Mû`ázîlîte school, a univocal concept, see e.g. FRANK, *al-Ma`dûm wal-mawğûd* cit., 191-193. On the relation between Avicenna and the Kâlâm, see JOLIVET, *Aux origines de l’ontologie d’Ibn Sînâ* cit.; DE LIBERA, *L’Art des généralités* cit., 580-590; WISNOVSKY, *Notes on Avicenna’s Concept of Thingness* cit.; ID., *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* cit.; for this relation in so far as it regards the demonstration of the existence of God, see U. RUDOLPH, *Ibn Sîna et le Kâlâm*, «Bulletin d’Etudes Orientales», 48 (1996), 131-136; ID., *La preuve de l’existence de Dieu chez Avicenne et dans la théologie musulmane*, in A. DE LIBERA / A. ELAMRANI-JAMAL / A. GALDEMÉR (éd. par), *Langages et Philosophie*. Hommage à Jean Jolivet, Vrin, Paris 1997, 339-346.
every thing, to that of the donation of existence, the same existence that belongs to the First Principle – and only to it – unconditionally and freely, and also so abundantly as to be able to generate a creative flow (fayd; fluxus) that proceeds from the First Principle and continues beyond it. The so-called “ontological difference”, i.e. the discriminating notion by virtue of which things are not all the same (by virtue of which they are not God) – the notion that excludes pantheism or absolute univocity – consists in the character of this same existence which can be either necessary in itself or possible in itself (which brings us back to the modality of essence). The absolute necessity of existence – i.e. that existence (or that essence) which, unable not to exist, has neither a cause nor a “why” (as Avicenna explicitly says of the Necessary Existent) – belongs only to the First Principle; conditioned necessity, relative to the First Principle, which is its condition, is instead proper to the things of the world, which, as they are only possible, exist by virtue of a cause. Because it is the origin of things, the existence of the First Necessary Principle – which perforce coincides with the First Principle itself – is the terminal point of the metaphysical question: since it is the cause (‘illa), the reason (sabab) and the final principle (Ḥāya – ‘illa tamāmiyya) of the world, the Necessary Existent is “what makes causes the causes [of the world]” (musabbib al-asbāb) and it originates a chain of being for which it is at once, problematically, the founding Principle, the first element and the ultimate term. Since it is caused, every thing in the world – i.e. every thing that is not the First Principle exists without containing within itself the reason for its existence: every existent thing can exist or not exist in itself, without the question of its existence being incongruous.

6. Despite their “contingency”, in so far as they exist, all things are necessary. Existence and necessity – and this aspect binds the doctrine of the essence-existence distinction to the question of determinism – appear to be indistinguishable. While the two realms of being can be distinguished on the basis of their conceivability – one is the realm whose inexistence, once posited (Avicenna uses the term fard, “hypothesis” or “supposition”)⁶¹, results in an impossibility, the other is the realm from which no logical impossibility can emerge, whether it is posited as existent or non-existent⁶² –, they can both be reduced to the realm of necessity. What permits the transition from the purely “quidditative” (and logical) sphere of the “possible” and the “necessary” to what could be called their ontological (or existential) application is the development of the two modal no-

⁶² Naɡâh cit., ed. Fakhry, 261.
tions: that is, no longer the simple notions of possible and necessary, but their counterparts in the pair of expressions “necessary in itself” and “necessary by virtue of some other thing”. A passage in the *Kitāb al-Naḡāt* (*Book of Salvation*) illustrates this perfectly. Having posited the two realms of possible being and necessary being – both terms are defined in relation to existence – Avicenna presents the two divisions of the necessary: what is “necessary in itself” and what is “necessary by virtue of some other thing”, although the latter is clearly the same as the possible when it is considered not in itself but in relation to the cause (i.e. emphasizing its relation with the cause). In fact, positing causes implies a transition from the realm of the possible – in so far as it is defined as “that of which the existence (as well as the non-existence) can be admitted”, it seems to be confined to logical discourse (or to a purely intellectual existence) – to the realm of what is necessary by virtue of some other thing, whereas causes indicate the sphere of existence (either *in intellectu* or *in re*). Thus, setting apart the question of the coincidence between possibility and existence *in intellectu*, there are no possible existents (or possible beings), but only necessary existents (or beings): some are necessary in themselves (there can be only one such being), others are necessary by virtue of some other thing (the world of “everything other than the Necessary Existent”). In this sense, not only does possibility not constitute a contradictory sphere of pre-existence, but also necessity and existence coincide. Avicenna distinguishes the non-existent (which is absolutely non-existent and of which nothing can be said) from what exists only in the mind and therefore, as we have seen, has a kind of existence, much as what exists in concrete reality does. The distinction between what is possible in itself and what is necessary (in itself or by virtue of some other thing) concerns only the character of the quiddity of the thing, and the relation between what is nec-

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63 Causes are e.g. the agent of combustion and the combustible or the number two for the number four (see *İlāh.*, IV, 1, 164; *İlāh.*, VI, 5, 292); on this last example, already used by al-ʻAmīrī, see WISNOVSKY, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* cit., 239-240). In the first case, Avicenna repeats Aristotle’s example of irrational potencies (see ARIST., *Phys.*, VIII, 4, 255 a 33-b 7; on this topic, see S. KNUUTILA, *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy*, Routledge, London 1993, 19-31).

64 On the unique being of the Necessary Existent, see *İlāh.*, VIII, 5, 349-354. For a triple being – necessary in itself, necessary by virtue of some other thing (the superlunary world), and possible in itself (the sublunary world), see E.L. FACKENHEIM, *The possibility of the universe in al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Maimonides*, in A. HYMAN (ed.), *Essays in Medieval Jewish and Islamic Philosophy*, Ktav Publishing House, New York 1977, 303-334 (reprint of an article of 1947).

65 See above notes 47 and 57.

ecessary (al-wāgīb) and what is existent (al-mawğūd) must be defined in terms of coincidence:

«[...] Everything that is necessarily existent by virtue of some other [thing] (bi-ğayri-hi), is possibly existent in itself; in fact, the necessity of the existence of that which is necessarily existent by virtue of some other [thing] (bi-ğayri-hi) is consequent (iābī') to a relation (nisba) or connection (iḏāfa) and the consideration of the relation or connection is different from the consideration of the very essence of the thing to which a relation or connection [belongs]. Necessity of existence is affirmed only by virtue of the consideration of such a relation; thus, essence, when it is considered only in itself requires either 1) the necessity of existence, or 2) the possibility of existence, or 3) the impossibility of existence. It cannot require the impossibility of existence, because everything whose existence is impossible in itself does not exist even by virtue of some other thing [...]. If it is existent [and] requires the necessity of existence, we have already said that of that whose existence is necessary in itself, necessity by virtue of some other thing is impossible; what remains [to be affirmed] is, then, that it is possibly existent, in consideration of its essence, and necessarily existent, in consideration of the fact that the relation with such an other thing is given. In consideration of the interruption of the relation with such an other [thing], it is instead impossibly existent, even if the essence of the thing, in itself [and] without [any] condition, is possibly existent».

7. We can perhaps at this point sum up the question by differentiating two separate levels: one level which, as it concerns the quiddity of the thing, involves only its essence, and one level which, as it depends on the connections between existent things, does not simply involve the essence of the thing, but involves more precisely the essence of the thing in so far as it is in relation with other things. The first level, where necessity and possibility are distinct (impossibility is nothing but the negative form of necessity), is in fact a logical level (it includes even what cannot exist, like the impossible, and that of whose existence we are ignorant, like the possible, which can exist or not exist); the second is chiefly ontological: it is determined by the relation or connection (nisba or iḏāfa) that the thing has with “something other than itself” and is always concerned with existence (either in intellectu or in re). While what is necessary in itself does not depend on a thing other than itself and is always existent, what is possible is not immediately concerned with existence – i.e. with necessity – but is

66 Nagṣūr cit., ed. Fakhry, 262.
67 An analysis of the idea of relation or connection in this context can be found also in Wisnovsky, Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context cit., 254-255. Wisnovsky analyses also the text of Kitāb al-Mabda’ wa l-Ma’ād.
so concerned only in relation with something other than itself, i.e. with its own cause (its necessity is by virtue of some other thing). The unrealized possible is the idea of something defined on the basis of the two extremes of an alternative (it can exist or not exist) and which, in order to exist, can no longer be “possible” but must become necessary by virtue of some other thing. Thus, if we consider the possible in its connection with something other than itself, we have something existent; if, on the contrary, we consider it without this connection, we have something non-existent and/or something impossible, that is, something which, even if it is possible in itself, cannot exist for want of a cause. This two-fold consideration (concerning essence or quiddity and existence) also engenders two different “impossibles”: what is impossible in itself and what is impossible by virtue of some other thing; the latter is the same as the possible, when it lacks a connection with its own cause. Here, once again, necessity and existence coincide. So, necessity and existence are nothing but two different ways of considering essence – the logical level, which is concerned with the need (or absence of need) to establish a connection with something other than the thing which is in question, and the ontological level, which is concerned with a “realized” relation. In the Kitāb al-Naḡūt (Book of Salvation) – in fact just after the above-mentioned passage – Avicenna explains that what is not necessary (that is to say what has not been rendered necessary by its cause) does not exist, and thus, by implication, he asserts that only what is necessary exists. The expression “what is not necessary” should be understood to indicate the unrealized possible, i.e. that possible which, having no reason to tend towards existence, simply does not exist (in re):

«It has thus become evident that every [thing] which is necessarily existent by virtue of some other [thing] is possibly existent in itself. And that is reversible: in fact, every [thing] which is possibly existent in itself, if its existence is realized, is necessarily existent by virtue of some other [thing]. In fact, inevitably: either 1) it is correct [to affirm] an actual existence for such a [thing] or 2) it is not correct [to affirm] an actual existence which is necessarily existent by virtue of some other [thing]. And that is reversible: in fact, every [thing] which is possibly existent in itself, if its existence is realized, is necessarily existent by virtue of some other [thing]. In fact, inevitably: either 1) it is correct [to affirm] an actual existence for such a [thing] or 2) it is not correct [to affirm] an actual existence which is necessarily existent by virtue of some other [thing].

70 For al-Fārābī the true meaning of “possible” is “what is non-existent at present but is apt to exist, and apt not to exist”; see al-Fārābī, Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione, transl. by F. Zimmermann, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981, 247.

71 There are clearly two meanings for the term “impossible”, since, as is the case for the other two modal categories, Avicenna must also distinguish between two aspects or points of view concerning what is impossible (mumtaṭi’). The first meaning is “what is impossible in itself” (per se), it is what necessarily does not exist; in this sense, impossibility is the same as negative necessity (obligatory – ādārī – is a term that can serve to legitimate even what necessarily does not exist). The second meaning is what is impossible in so far as its cause does not exist; it depends on the “absence”, the “end” or the “interruption” of its “relation with the cause”; this meaning is a kind of negative necessity by virtue of some other thing (per aliud).

72 For the connection between necessity and existence, see also Ilāh. IX, 2, 385, 12: «And everything that is not necessary by its own cause, is not, as you already know» and Ilāh., 1, 7, 95, 7 and ss.
existence for it. But it cannot be not correct to [affirm] an actual existence for such a thing because it would be an impossible [thing] as regards existence. Thus it is correct to [affirm] an actual existence of it, so that either 1) its existence is necessary, or 2) its existence is not necessary. But the existence of that whose existence is not necessary, because it is still possibly existent, is not distinguishable from its non-existence [...].\(^{73}\)

8. This leaves us with some unresolved questions: that of the existential status of quiddity as such, that of the identity between quiddity and so-called “common nature”\(^{74}\) and finally the question of existence in the divine mind, which, as we have seen, eventually involves the status of the Avicennian possible and of its relation with existence. We will limit ourselves here to a brief consideration of some of these problems. The fundamental text for understanding the Avicennian theory of universals is \textit{Ilæhiyyæt} V, 1-2, in which Avicenna outlines the famous theory which is called the theory of the “indifference of essence”: in itself quiddity is only quiddity (this is the celebrated formula: \textit{equinitas est equinitas tantum}); its existence (either \textit{in intellectu} or \textit{in re}) is accompanied by a quantitative determination upon which either universality or particularity depends, but \textit{in itself} quiddity is nothing but quiddity. When it is considered with a quantitative determination (in the universal concept or in the individual), quiddity is thus no longer considered as it is \textit{in itself}. Many important studies have been written about this question recently and this theory has been analyzed from a logical point of view as well as from a historical perspective. Islamic theological sources (see the above-mentioned distinction between “thing” and “existent” in the Mu‘tazila) as well as Greek Aristotelian origins (e.g. the distinction between το ἱον and το ὄν in Alexander of Aphrodisias) have emerged, although the debate about the real weight of these sources and Avicenna’s actual position cannot be considered definitively closed\(^{75}\). The main element of Avicenna’s the-

\(^{73}\) Nağı\textit{t} cit., ed. Fakhry, 262; a corresponding passage can be found in \textit{Kitāb al-Mahda’ wa l-ma‘ād} (ed. A. Nourani, McGill University, Tehran 1984, 15; see also AVICENNE, \textit{Livre de la Génèse et du Retour}, version exploratoire de Y. Michot, Bruxelles 1994, 7).

\(^{74}\) This expression is reminiscent of the Latin “natura communis”, but in Arabic as well one finds \textit{tabi‘a “nature”, which Avicenna uses e.g. in \textit{Ilæh}. V, 1-2; see BLACK, \textit{Mental Existence} cit., 48 note 6; L. HONNEFELDER, \textit{Natura communis}, in J. RITTER / K. GRÜNDER (hrsg. v.), \textit{Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie}, Bd. 6, Schwabe & Co., Basel-Stuttgar, 1984, 494-504. On this concept, see also J. OWENS, \textit{Common Nature: A Point of Comparison between Thomistic and Scotistic Metaphysics}, «Mediaeval Studies», 29 (1957), 1-14.

\(^{75}\) Some of the most important studies on this subject are: WISNOVSKY, \textit{Notes on Avicenna’s Concept of Thingness} cit. (and Id., \textit{Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context} cit.); DE LIBERA, \textit{Il problema degli universali da Platone alla fine del Medioevo}, La Nuova Italia, Scandicci (Firenze) 1999 (tr. it. di R. ChiaraDonna), 184-213 [original title: \textit{La Querelle des universaux. De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age}, Éd. du Seuil, Paris 1996]; DE LIBERA, \textit{L’art des généralités} cit., 498-607; PORRO, \textit{Universaux et esses essentiae} cit.
ory is, however, the potentiality of universal predication: universal (al-kullî) is something which can be predicated of many individuals but which is not necessarily predicated in actu. Consequently, the universal concept encompasses two distinct elements: quiddity and universality ("the universal in so far as it is universal is a thing, but in so far as it is something accompanied by universality it is another thing")\(^76\). The intention (ma’nā) of quiddity corresponds to the thing in itself as expressed by its definition, whereas the intention (ma’nā) of universality is the possibility of a multiple predication (modality seems to enter in the definition of the universal as such)\(^77\). This distinction involves, of course, a question of existence. The existence of the thing in re is a particular existence (the individual as such). The intellectual existence of universality or, more precisely, of the universal thing (of quiddity and universality i.e. the thing conceived of as something we can apply to or predicate of many individuals) is equally unproblematic (it seems even paradigmatic, since universal existence is perforce intellectual); but how should the existence of the essence or quiddity in itself or of the intention of the quiddity, be understood? In a passage of his *Metaphysics* Avicenna brings up the question of the existence of the nature (tabî’a) of the thing, i.e. of quiddity as such, and describes it as “divine existence” (al-wuğûd al-ilæhî):

«[...] The animal considered together with its accidents is the physical thing, while [the animal] considered in itself is the nature, [205, 1] the existence of which is called prior — with the [same] priority that a simple [thing] has in regard to a compound [thing] - to the existence of the physical; and [such an animal considered in itself] is that the existence of which is defined as “divine existence”, since the reason for its existence in

\(^76\) *Ilæh.*, V, 1, 196, 6; on this passage, see DRUART, *Shay’ or res* cit., 136 who understands the term “thing” in a technical sense. On logical difficulties implied by the notion of quiddity in the universal, see M. MARMURA, *Quiddity and Universality in Avicenna*, in P. MOREWEDGE (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1992, 77-87.

\(^77\) The definition of universal implies multiplicity only potentially, see *Ilæh.*, V, 1, 196, 1 and ff.: “universal” is that the representation of which does not prevent its being predicated of more than one instance; according to Avicenna there are universals of singular things (the sun), of non-existent things (the heptagonal house) and even of human fictions (the phoenix or anqæ’ muƒrîb); on this topic, see *Ilæh.*, V, 1; J.R. MichOT, *L’Epitre sur la disparition des formes intelligibles vaines après la mort d’Avicenne: édition critique, traduction et index*, «Bulletin de philosophie médiévale», 29 (1987), 152-170; BÄCK, *Avicenna’s Conception of the Modalities* cit., 231-232; see also the discussion in PORRO, *Universaux et esse essentiae* cit., 12-15.

\(^78\) *Ilæh.*, V, 1, 204, 16-205, 4. An English translation of this passage can be found also in BLACK, *Mental Existence* cit., 52. For the Latin translation, see *Avicenna Latinus. Liber de Philosophia prima sive scientia divina*, ed. S. Van Riet, Peeters, Leuven 1980, 237, 22-26: «Animal ergo acceptum cum accidentibus suis est res naturalis ; acceptum vero per se est natura, de qua dicitur quod esse eius prius est quam esse naturale, sicut simplex prius est composito, et hoc est eius esse proprio dicitur divinum esse, quoniam causa sui esse ex hoc quod est animal est Dei intentione». *Intentio* generally renders the Arabic
so far as it is an animal is the Providence (‘ināya) of God, in the highest, while the fact that it [exists] with matter and with accidents, and that it is this individual, although it is by virtue of the providence of God, in the highest, is due to the particular nature»78.

Several scholars have recently drawn attention to this passage: “divine existence” seems to be a particular form of existence in intellectu, since Avicenna appears to grant quiddity an existence as such, independent of singularity (which is in re) and universality (which is in intellectu), and to situate this existence in the divine mind, rendering quiddity the exemplar of reality, in the ontological as well as in the gnoseological sphere79. Thus, quiddity, which in itself is neither universal nor particular, would be possible as regards concrete existence (in re; fi l-‘ayān), but existent in that it exists in the divine mind (creation is here the transition from the possible to the existent in re).

Some reflections are suggested by this passage and the interpretation it has received. Firstly, in order to understand the question of quiddity’s divine existence one should be take into account that for Avicenna neither real existence nor mental existence belong to quiddity when it is considered in itself. Avicenna’s “insistence that a nature in itself is neither mental nor extramental is a consequence of his distinction between essence and existence”80. About quiddity we can say hence what we have said about the thing: what we indicate when we speak about quiddity in itself is its nature, i.e. quiddity in itself, setting apart the question of its existence, which may be either mental or extramental, but does not belong to quiddity as such81. Secondly, the status of what is intelligible in the mind of God – which Avicenna considers, at least in the Metaphysics, also in so far as it concerns the divine knowledge of particulars, which are known by the First Principle “as universal” – cannot be understood without reference to the emanation theory. All things are known by the First Principle through an articulation which depends on that of emanation or, more precisely, is the same as term ma’nā; here the Arabic text has ‘ināya, “providence”, the root of which is, however, the same as that of ma’nā (‘n-y). This passage is also discussed in Porro, Universaux et esse essentiae cit., 40-41.

79 Deborah Black examines this topic in at least two articles; see Black, Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status cit., 425-453 (particularly 440-443 and 441, note 46: «[...] the only sense in which pure quiddities could be said to ‘exist’ in their own right in Avicenna would be in virtue of their eternal existence in the divine mind») and Mental Existence cit., 45-79 (particularly 51-61), in which she cites Isag. I, 1, 12, 69 (see Mental Existence cit., 53 note 30). The topic is treated also in E. Booth, Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983 (see 122-123); for Booth “divine existence” indicates the «ultimate models of all universals in God». On the same topic, see also Drumart, Shay‘ or res cit., 138-139 and Porro, Universaux et esse essentiae cit., 38-44.

80 See Marmura, Avicenna’s Chaper on Universals cit., 45 (but see also 36 and 45-46).

81 See also Back, Avicenna’s Conception of the Modalities cit., 238-239.
emanation. The First Principle is the principle “from which” and not “in which” intelligibles are. It is thanks to the mediation of the divine intelligences that the First Principle “creates” the world, and similarly, it is thanks to the mediation of the divine intelligences that it “knows”82. The Necessary Existent knows all things in so far as it is their cause: hence it knows essences in so far as it is their cause. In other words, the question of divine knowledge is an aspect of that of divine being and action, i.e. emanation. It implies the difficulties mentioned above and must come to terms with the idea of the absolute unity of the First Principle83. Thirdly, as regards quiddity itself, a further clarification seems required, because the idea of divine existence Avicenna refers to in this passage – and which is presented as dependent only on divine Providence in explicit contradistinction to what depends also on “particular nature” – clearly corresponds to the idea of a “universal nature”, which is alluded to in another passage of the *Metaphysics* (*Ilāh*. VI, 5) where, in the discussion of the aim or purpose of nature, Avicenna declares:

«[... ] The first purpose which is [sought] is permanence – for instance, of human nature, or of some different nature – or of a generic individual, not a determinate one. This is the perfective cause84 of the action of *universal nature*, and it is one. But in order to actualize it in a permanent way, this unique [cause] needs, nevertheless, individuals [followed by] individuals, with an infinite succession such that the numerical infinity of individuals is a purpose in the sense of that is obligatory [... ]85; it is not a purpose in itself86, because if it were possible to man to be permanent, as the sun and the moon are, there would be no need for generation and multiplication [realized] by reproduction=87.

“Universal nature” – that is to say, the divine flow (*fayḍ*) or Providence itself, (as we have seen ‘*imāya* is the term Avicenna uses in *Ilāh*. V, 1) – has its own purpose in the enduring or permanent and stable existence of substance: when for

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82 See *Ilāh*. VIII, 6, 359, 15 and ff; VIII, 7, 362, 17 and ff.; 363-366. In accordance with the definition of universality Avicenna gives in *Ilāh*. V, 1, 196, 1 ff., we can say that in God’s knowledge nothing prevents the representation of something particular from being predicated of more than one instance. On divine knowledge, see *Ilāh*. VIII, 6, 360-362; and on this topic, see M. MARMURA, *Some Aspects of Avicenna’s Theory of God’s Knowledge of Particulars*, «Journal of the American Oriental Society», 82 (1962), 290-312.

83 In so far as nothing multiple can enter in it, Avicenna’s First Principle can be compared to the One of Plotinus, see *Enn.* V, 3 (49), 15, 26-37.

84 *i.e.*, final cause; see *Ilāh*. VIII, 3, 340-341.

85 ma’na al-ḍarūrî : al-ma’na al-ḍarūrî *Ilāh.*, 290, 7. A preceding passage clarifies the relation to which Avicenna here refers; there Avicenna cites the Aristotelian example of iron and the blade: the permanence of species, in fact, can be realized thanks to numerical infinity, as the ability to cut is realized thanks to the hardness of the blade (see *Ilāh.*, 289, 1 and ff.; *Arist.*, *Phys.*, II, 9, 200 a 7-15).


87 *Ilāh.*, VI, 5, 290, 4-9; but see the whole passage 289-290.
this purpose a single instance or individual is sufficient (as in the case of the sun and all other celestial bodies), Providence does not require a succession of individuals produced by means of generation, as it does instead whenever a single individual does not suffice to ensure an enduring or permanent existence, i.e. whenever it acts in the sublunary world. The (infinite) succession of individuals, however, does not imply that the divine Providence has a specific intention regarding every single individual involved in the chain of succession, that is, regarding all the individuals in their particularity – nor does it imply that it has an intention regarding the species as such. The (infinite) succession of individuals implies that divine providence selects for its aim what can be called a “generic” or “random individual”, i.e. an individual that, whatever it is, is able to represent the species in such a way as to guarantee the permanent existence of the latter.

The notion of “generic” or “indeterminate” individual appears clearly in the Kitāb al-Sīfā’ where “universal nature” is defined as that which serves to determine the range of the divine flow\(^8\). In the sublunary world, divine providence or universal nature seeks the realization of a generic or indefinite individual\(^9\). For universal nature the succession of single individuals, and the single individuals

\(^8\) Ilāh., VI, 5, 291, 1: «By ‘particular nature’ I mean the virtue to which belongs the government of a [single] individual (al-ḥaṣṣatu al-tadbi’ bi-ṣāḥṣin wāḥidin), while by ‘universal nature’ I mean the virtue which flows in [or, according to another reading “from”] celestial substances as a unique thing; it is that which governs the universe of what is in the [world of] generation». See also Ibn Sinā, al-Ṭabi’iyyāt. Al-samā‘ al-taḥri’i’, ed. by S. Zayed / I. Madkour, al-Hay’a l-miṣriyya li-l-kitāb, al-Qahira [Cairo] 1403 h./1983; [reprint Tehran, 1403 h./1983; Beirut, 1993], 39, 1: «Nature is said in a particular [or “partial”] sense [waṣḥi gash] and in a universal sense [waṣḥi kulli]. What is said in a particular sense is the nature which is proper to every individual, while the nature that is said in a universal sense can be universal in relation to the species or in an absolute [or indeterminate] sense [...].»; for the Latin translation of this passage, see Liber primus Naturalium, Tractatus Primus de causis et principiis naturalium, édition critique de la traduction latine médiévale par S. van Riet; introduction doctrinale par G. Verbeke, Peeters, Louvain-La-Neuve – E.J. Brill, Leiden 1992, 66: «Et natura dicitur ad modum particularis et ad modum universalis. Sed quae dicitur ad modum particularis, hoc est natura propria universae individui. Sed quae dicitur ad modum universalis, fortasse aut erit universalis considerata ut species, aut erit universalis absolute [...].» On the concept of Nature and the Avicennian distinction between universal and particular nature, see A. Maierez, Natur im Mittellalter, in J. Ritter / K. Gründer (hrsg. v.), Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, Bd. 6, Schwabe & Co., Basel-Stuttgart 1984, 447-455; T. Borsche / B. Hoppe, Natura universalis/particularis, in J. Ritter / K. Gründer (hrsg. v.), Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie cit., Bd. 6, 511-518.

\(^9\) The Arabic expression for “indeterminate” or “indefinite individual” is: šaṣṣ muntāṣir “a generic individual”, that is to say one (no matter which one) among the many individuals of a species, i.e. an individual in a generic sense; the corresponding concept in logic is the Random Individual (for a discussion of this topic in Avicenna, see de Libera, L'art des généralités cit., 529-532). The Latin text has “dilatatum” (see Liber de philosophia cit., 420: species dilatata, 451; and “perpetuum”: 334) or (in Physics) “vagum”; see Avicenna Latinus, Liber Primus cit., I, 1, 12-13; al-Ṭabi’iyyāt cit., 10-11. On the implications of this concept in Latin gnoseology, see M.E. Reina, Hoc Hic et Nunc. Buridano, Marsilio di Inghen e la conoscenza del singolare, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze 2002.
themselves, represent an aim only in an accidental way, whereas “particular nature” (see also Ilāh. V, 1, 205) seeks their concrete realization (existence in re fī l-‘ayān). Thus, because only what is expressed by the quiddity as “common nature” will be instanced as such by a random or generic individual (and hence by the species it represents), the quiddity that corresponds to “common nature” has a “divine” existence and participates in the purpose of the divine flow90. “Divine existence” involves species but can also involve individuals; it is an existence in so far as it is intended by the divine flow or “universal nature” and represents the sphere of what falls under the jurisdiction and the “intentionality” of the divine Principles; in the sublunary world it corresponds to the generic existence we can ascribe to any one (and therefore every one) among the many individuals of a species; the mere physical existence – and hence single individuals as such – is instead the specific domain of a “particular nature” and, just like evils that fall under the domain of concrete and particular life, and, to some extent, like death, it does not fall under the jurisdiction of the providence of divine emanation (that is to say universal nature)91.

9. Necessity and absolute existence are thus proper to the First Principle only; necessity and existence that are relative (to a principle) are proper to everything except God. Existence is always necessary (in itself or by virtue of some other thing) and possibility, as an aspect of the quiddity of things, is not in contrast with necessity, whereas when considered in relation to existence, it is in opposition to necessity and can be reduced to non-existence. Thus the notion of existence in re is joined by the notion of existence in intellectu, which, while it complicates Avicenna’s essence–existence distinction, coincides with one of the meanings of possible (“possible to” and “possible to not”)92.

Two principles explain the world of the possible essences that become “necessaries by virtue of some other thing”; there are: 1) the principle of ex uno non fit nisi unum (Ilāh. IX, 4, 405)93 which generates a hierarchical order (tartīb) in the celestial and metaphysical world of intellectual existence (intelligences – i.e. angels in the language of revelation – are distinguished from one another on the

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90 On this topic, see also Ta’liqāt cit., 108-109 and, for the background of this argument, ARIST., Phys., II, 9, 200 a 7-15.
91 See al-Ṭabī‘iyyāt cit., 40, 4.
92 As we have seen, in Avicenna “possible” and “necessary” are not opposites, but are two aspects of the same thing. In this sense, two different schemes of modality are envisaged: what is necessary in itself is the opposite of what is possible in itself, while what is necessary by virtue of some other thing is implied in the definition of possible.
basis of their rank, on which basis they constitute different species) and 2) the principle of the union of matter and form and of the material mixture, which in the terrestrial and physical world of sublunary beings give rise to a multiplicity which is not merely a numerical succession of “the one” (after the First One Principle there is each time a celestial intelligence and a celestial sphere, in accordance with the principle ex uno non fit nisi unum), but is instead an articulation of multiplicity apart from succession (matter and form can be combined in various ways in the various individuals of a given species). The overall ruling principle is the so-called “principle of plenitude”. Existence is good and possibility (essences) must consequently be realized. The necessity of realization, i.e. absolute good or divine existence, involves individuals in the celestial world but only random exemplata in the sublunary world.

94 See Ihâh, IX, 4 e X, 1.