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Utility and Gratuitousness of Metaphysics:
Avicenna, Ilāhiyyāt I, 3

"I read the Metaphysics of Aristotle but did not understand what it contained and was confused about the author’s purpose to the point that I reread it forty times and consequently memorized it [...] One afternoon I was at the booksellers’ quarter when a crier came up holding a volume which he was hawking for sale. He offered it to me but I refused it in vexation, believing that there was no use [lā fā’ida] in this science [...]" 1.

The question of the definition and status of metaphysics as a science takes up most of the initial remarks of the Ilāhiyyāt of the Kitāb al-Ṣifā’, the Metaphysics of the Book of Healing2. The first three sections (or “chapters”) of the work are devoted to metaphysics as a discipline, while the fourth outlines the various questions that metaphysics – which is described at the outset as the “divine science” (al-‘ilm al-ilāhî) – and hence Avicenna’s own work – is called upon to deal with. In particular, in Ilāhiyyāt, I, 1 and I, 2, Avicenna discusses the subject matter of this science, i.e. the existent qua existent (al-mawjūd bi-mâ huwa mawjūd), and its field of inquiry; thus he grapples with their definition (if metaphysical inquiry concerns what happens to the existent as such, it must also include the First Principle’s being and hence the Principle itself)3 and he explains the distinction


3 Ibn Sīnā, Ilāhî, I, 2, 14. The leading to Avicenna’s definition of metaphysics as a science can be
between the various “parts” into which this discipline is necessarily divided (ḥāda al-ʾilm yanqasimu darūratan ilā ʾazza). Then, before starting upon an examination of the principles and essential notions of his ontology (the first concepts of the mind, namely the notions of ‘existent’, ‘thing’, ‘necessary’ or ‘obligatory’, and then the notions of ‘necessary existence’ and ‘possible existence’ and of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’, which in their turn involve an examination of the basic logical principles), Avicenna, in Ilāh, I, 3, considers three fundamental epistemo-

schematically outlined: starting with the division of theoretical and practical sciences proposed in Logic, Avicenna deals first with the subject matter of divine science, i.e. the science of that “the subsistence of which has no connection with sensible realities” (al-mahfitsats; Ilāh, I, 1, 12,11). Metaphysics is hence first defined as the science of things separate from matter, of causes and of God himself, in that God is the “causer of causes”; that is to say what makes causes causes (Ilāh, I, 1, 4,14-17). Having postulated these premises, Avicenna tries to harmonize the definition of divine science with the framework of the Posterior or Analytics and with the definition of “true philosophy” and the “first” or “true wisdom” (see, e.g., Arist., Metaph., IV (f), 2, 1004a5-6; “first wisdom” in IV, (f), 2, 1005b35 ff). Wisdom gives validity to the principles of the various sciences or confirms them. He then identifies the existent as the subject matter of metaphysics, and God and separate causes as its subject or field of inquiry (Ilāh, I, 1, 5-6). On the subject matter of metaphysics in Avicenna, see M. Fakhry, The Subject-Matter of Metaphysics: Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā, in M. Marmura (ed.), Islamic Theology and Philosophy, Studies in Honor of G. F. Hourani, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York 1984, 137-147 [reprinted in M. Fakhry, Philosophy, Dogma, and the Impact of Greek Thought in Islam, Saratoga, Aldershot, Hampshire 1994]; H.A. Davidson, Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1987 (particularly 234-238, where Davidson also takes into account the question of the metaphysical proof of the existence of God); A. Hasnaoui [also as Hasnawi], Aspects de la synthèse avicennienne, in M.A. Sinaceur (éd.), Penser avec Aristote, Eres, Toulouse 1991, 235-240 (for the whole article, 227-244); G. Roccardo, Il soggetto della scienza prima. Ibn Sīnā, Avī-Sīnāʾ, Al-Bīḥāṣīyīl, I,1-2, «Giornale di Metafisica», 16 (1994), 45-82 (particularly 69-82); R. Ramón Guerrero, Sobre el objeto de la metafísica según Avicena, «Cuadernos de Pensamiento», 10 (1996), 59-75. See also the analyses by D. Gutas (Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition cit., especially 238-254) and A. Bertolacci, From al-Kindī to al-Fārābī: Avicenna’s Progressive Knowledge of Aristotle’s Metaphysics according to his Autobiography, “Arabic Sciences and Philosophy”, 11 (2001), 257-295 and the remarks of M. Cruz Hernández, El concepto de Metafísica de Avicena, in J. Janssen / D. de Smet (eds.), Avicenna and His Heritage, Acts of the International Colloquium, Leuven-Louvain-la-Neuve (September 8 - September 11, 1999), Leuven University Press, Leuven 2002, 47-56.

For the “parts” of metaphysics, see Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh, I, 2, 38,14.

The subjects under discussion in the last four sections are: I, 5: the primary notions or intentions (‘existent’, ‘thing’ and ‘obligatory’); I, 6, and I, 7: what is necessary and what is possible, and hence the necessary existent, the possibly existent and the unity and unicity of what is necessarily existent; I, 8: truth or reality (al-haqq) and truthfulness (al-sīd) and the first logical principles; see Arist., Metaph., II (a), 1 and IV (f), 4-7. Primary notions, together with primary propositions (non-contradiction and the principle of the excluded middle, which Avicenna presents as a unit) are principles of metaphysics. Besides the rather brief presentation of Fakhry (The Subject-Matter of Metaphysics cit.), two scholars have recently proposed an interpretation of the structure of Avicenna’s Metaphysics as a whole (and particularly of Ilāh, I); R.E. House, Let Them Suffer into the Truth: Avicenna’s Remedy for those Denying the Axioms of Thought, “American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly”, 73 (1999), 107-133 (by the same author see also, The Place of the First Principle of Demonstration in Avicennian Metaphysics, “Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conferences”, 6[1981], 117-134); A. Bertolacci, The Structure of Metaphysical Science in the Ilāhīyīl (Divine Science) of Avicenna’s Kitāb al-Sīnāʾ (Book of the Cure), «Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale», 13 (2002), 1-49. For a survey of the structure of Avicenna’s work in relation to Aristotle, see also P. Porro’s preface to Avicenna, Metaphysica cit., xxv-xxvi.
logical questions (which are announced in the title of this section): what sort of utility (manfa’i) can be attributed to the divine science, what is its rank (ma’tarab-ahu) and what is its name (ism). It is on this core of questions, and most particularly on the passage devoted to the discussion of the utility of metaphysics, that I intend to concentrate here. In devoting the first section of his Ilahiyyat to disciplinary questions (the subject matter, purpose, utility, rank, name and parts of metaphysics), Avicenna is following the normal practice of late Aristotelian commentary6. Nevertheless, his discussion cannot be explained by virtue of this

6 See Ibn Sinâ, Ilahî, I, 3, 3: fit manfa’ati hadâ al-‘ilmi wa martabat-hi wa ismi-hi; the Latin (Liber de philosoph. prima, 18, 33-34) has “capitulum de utilitate huius scientiae et ordine eius et nomine”.

7 It is precisely in Ilahî, I, 3 that Avicenna presents “metaphysics” as maa ba’ da al-tahî’ah (“what is after or behind nature”), a location which is also, in some passages, used to refer to Aristotle’s Metaphysics. The goal or purpose of metaphysics is generally indicated as matâtîh; here it is al-maqasid, literally “the object of intention”, that is to say the “aim”; see also Bertolacci, The Structure cit., 3, n. 6 and 22, n. 62 (and for the other names of metaphysics, see supra, n. 3). For the goal of metaphysics in Aristotle, see Arist., Metaph. I (A), 2, 983a21-23.

8 This has recently been pointed out by Bertolacci (The Structure cit., 22 and n. 60). With a careful analysis of the structure of Ilahiyyat, and of its first treatise, in relation to both its Greek and Arabic sources, as well as to Avicenna’s other works, Bertolacci illustrates how, in the Ilahiyyat, Avicenna applies, at least in part, the characteristic pattern of late Aristotelian commentaries, in which a few fundamental questions serve as an introduction to the exegesis of the books of Aristotle, i.e. 1) the goal (al-maqasid) of the book; 2) its utility (ma’tarabahu); 3) authorship (ta’wilahu); 4) position in the order of learning (tadawwdiq); 5) title or reason for the title (al-maqasid); 6) division into chapters (al-muwaqat wa’idwiyat). Thus, according to Bertolacci, Ilahî, I, 1-2 is devoted to the “goal” or purpose of metaphysics; the science of metaphysics must contain three parts: theology or divine science (as we have already seen, the names vary); the universal science of the properties of existents (PE) and the First Philosophy, which is the universal science of the species of existents (SE). So in Ilahî, I, 3 Avicenna investigates the utility, the rank and the name of metaphysics, while in Ilahî, I, 4 he presents the division into chapters of his work. In Ilahî, I, 5-7 the discussion is focused on the primary concepts of the mind (derived directly from Book I of Aristotle’s Metaphysics), and Ilahî, I, 8 is devoted to the first principles (see also Houser, Let Them Suffer into the Truth cit., 111). Also other studies by Bertolacci can be consulted on this topic: on the relation of Avicenna’s Metaphysics to late Aristotelian tradition, see the article printed in that same volume; on its relation to Aristotelian metaphysics, see Idem, La ricezione del libro I della Metafisica nell’Ilahiyyat del K. al-Sifâ’ di Avicenna, in V. Celluprica / C. D’Ancona (a cura di), Aristotele e i suoi esegesi neoplatonici. Logica e ontologia nelle interpretazioni greche e arabe, Atti del Convegno internazionale (Roma, 19-20 ottobre 2001), CNR – Bibliopolis, Roma 2004, 175-210. For a first application of the introductory questions to the Arabic-Islamic context, see Al-Farabi, Ma‘ jin-bayt an yuqaddama qabla ta’alum al-falsafa [anche falsafat Aris†º, in F. Dieterici, Alfarabi’s philosophische Abhandlungen aus londoner, leidener und berliner Handschriften, Brill, Leiden 1890, 49-55 [reprint Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main 1982]. D. Gutas, Paul the Persian on the Classification of the Parts of Aristotle’s Philosophy: A Milestone Between Alexandria and Baghdad, «Der Islam», 60 (1983), 231-267 [reprinted in google, Greek Philosophers in the Arabic Tradition, Variorum, Aldershot 2000, IX]. The bibliography on the curriculum scientiarum of late Aristotelianism and its harmonization of Plato and Aristotle is considerable; here we note only L.G. Westerink, The Alexandrian Commentators and the Introductions to Their Commentaries, in R. Sorabji (ed.), Aristotle Transformed. The Ancient Commentators and Their Influence, Duckworth, London 1990, 325-348; I. Haidot, Les introductions aux commentaires exégétiques chez les auteurs neoplatoniciens et les auteurs chrétiens, in M. Tarbé (ed.), Les règles de l’interprétation, Cerf, Paris 1987, 99-122; I. Haidot, The Role of the Commentaries on Aristotle in the Teaching of Philosophy according to the Prefaces of the Neoplatonic Commentaries on the Categories, in J. Anna (ed.), Oxford Studies in
tradition alone. A close examination of the text shows how Avicenna applies to the question of the utility of metaphysics – and hence the question of its definition – the general categories of his own system: in particular, he goes so far as to ascribe a utility to metaphysics by means of a redefinition of “useful”, which, while it reestablishes the literal sense of nāfī (“which brings advantage or benefit”, “beneficial”), in fact transforms the common meaning of the word. Such a redefinition is made possible by reference to some of the staples of the Avicennian system, and concerns not so much the discipline itself as the object of its inquiry. What interests Avicenna, in fact, more than predicating the utility of metaphysics, is removing metaphysics, as well as its aim or object of inquiry (fara≈; mablºb; mabÌºÚ ‘an-hu10, from the realm of the useful (or at least from what is generally understood to be useful)11, and hence also, indirectly, so removing its very subject matter (mawż’)12, insofar as it coincides with the Principle of caused being or existing things13. Hence Ilæh. I, 3 is interesting not on-

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9 Before it suggests “utility”, the root n-f-’ conveys the idea of a benefit; see E.W. LANE, An Arabic-English Lexicon Derived from the Best and the Most Copious Eastern Sources [...], ed. by Stanley Lane-Poole, Williams Norgate, London 1863-1893, VIII vols., vol. I, 8, Suppl., 3036c: «manfa’a: a cause or means, of advantage, profit, utility; or benefit and simply advantage, profit, or profitableness; utility, use, usefulness; or benefit» (the term, which is listed only in the Supplement, is not the object of particularly thorough analysis). The term al-nâfi’ is one of the ninety-nine divine names, The root n-f-’, used in the Qur’an, together with d-r-r, to describe the action of idols, which are as incapable of helping man as of harming him (see: Qur., V, 76; VI, 71; X, 18 and 106; XXV, 3 etc.), is employed in theology to convey the idea of divine reward (as d-r-r for divine punishment); in this sense, God, in contradistinction to idols, is “the One Who is beneficient” (al-nâfi’) and “the One Who harms” (al-žrr) in so far as He punishes man; see D. GIMARET, Les noms divins en Islam, Cerf, Paris 1988, 75 and 331-333; for the usage of the term in al-Gazālī, see, for instance, Al-Ghâzalî, The Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God (al-MaqÒad al-asnæ fî ‡arÌ asmæ’ Allæh al-ahuÒnæ), translated with Notes by D.B. Burrell and N. Daher, The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge 1995, 144-145. For the term used in philosophy with the sense of “useful”, see infra, notes 14-16, 29.

10 Avicenna uses matlúb in Ilæh., 5, 17; matlúb in I, 5, 4 (aïyâ’ biya al-matlûba: “the things that are to be investigated” in I, 1, 5,4 which correspond to what Avicenna calls baht or al-mabbûth ‘an-hu before he makes any reference to Posterior Analytics); masâ’il in Ilæh., 1, 2, 15,7; al-amûr al-mabbûth ‘an-hu in Ilæh., 1, 2, 15,17-18; see also I, 1, 5,19: yubîa ‘an; masâ’il is also employed in Kitæb al-Burhæn, 6, 6; see al-Sjâî’. Al-Man†iq. K. al-Burhæn, ed. Abî l-‘Alî Alî-fit, al-Mab’î a-al-amîriyya, al-Qâhîra [Cairo] 1375 h. i/1556 [hereafter K. al-Burhæn], 153,4-12 and II, 7, 162 (English translation in BERTOLACCI, The Structure cit., 45-46).


12 On the derivation of mawdûd from Aristotle (το γενος, το ουρωκεμενον), see again BERTOLACCI, The Structure cit., 47, n. 164.

13 See in particular Ilæh., 1, 2, 10-14 and 14: the principles – and hence the fact of being the First Principle – are (essential) accidents of the subject matter of metaphysics, which is being qua being: «to be a principle is in fact neither a constituent of being nor something impossible for it». The Principle is necessarily only for a part of being, since being or existence as a whole cannot have a principle. It is in

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ly in disciplinal terms (for its definition of metaphysics, by virtue of which Avicenna determines – in addition to its utility – its rank and its name), but also doctrinally, in the qualifications it implicitly ascribes to the First Principle.

I. Iläh., I, 3, 17-18: Presentation of the question: the utility of metaphysics

«For [grasping] the utility of this science, you have to have understood in the sciences that precede it what difference there is between the useful and the good and what difference there is between what is harmful and evil; that the useful is the cause that per se lets [one] reach the good, whereas by utility one means that which allows [one] to get from what is worse to what is better [or from evil to good]. And once that is established, you will know that all the sciences have in common the same utility, i.e. the fact of bringing about the perfection of the human soul, in actu, preparing it for the happiness of the hereafter. Nevertheless if, in the opening parts of [various] books, one seeks to discover what the utility of the [various] sciences is, [one finds that in them] one is not steered towards this sense [of utility], but rather towards the support that the [sciences] give one another, in such a way that the utility of a given science consists in the fact that starting with it one can succeed in instituting another science, different from it. And when utility is [understood] in this way, one can say it in an absolute [sense] and in a proper sense. In an absolute [sense], the useful leads to instituting another science, whatever it may be; in the proper sense, on the other hand, the useful leads to something that is higher than itself and is like its purpose; it [the useful] is, in fact, in consideration [of the purpose], and not vice versa. Now, if we take utility in the absolute sense, this science has its utility; but if we take utility in the proper sense, it is too high to be useful to a science different from itself: rather would all the other sciences be useful to it» 14.

this sense, moreover, that metaphysics, which in so far as it is the ‘first philosophy’ is scientia universalis, can be conceived of as scientia specialis. As the ‘divine science’, it investigates a part of being. Hence the existent in so far as it is existent includes, in the end, the field of inquiry of metaphysics: qua existent, God – the supreme cause – is part of the subject matter of divine science, although, qua principle of the caused existent, God is the goal of metaphysical inquiry. One can inquire into neither the quiddity of the existent qua existent (what it may be: mæhiyya), nor a demonstration of its existence (iÚbæt); being or existence is, in fact (see Ibn Sīnā, Iläh., I, 2, 13,8 - the end), the most general reality (and in this sense also metaphysics is the “first philosophy”); being or existence is, hence, the starting point of every philosophical investigation. One must instead investigate the caused existent and its causes, thus ultimately furnishing a demonstration of the existence of God. Starting from these distinctions, Avicenna identifies the different parts (afizæ') of metaphysics and their various names. The whole structure of metaphysics depends on the relation that is established, on the one hand, between its “subject matter” (mawż') and its “object of inquiry” or “goal” and, on the other hand, between its “subject matter” and what is necessarily its concomitant and can be considered, depending on the context, a “state”, a “species” or a “proper accident” of being (the terms Avicenna employs here come from the roots: ‘r-d, l-z-m, and l-h-q; he also uses the words hál and naw').

14 Ibn Sīnā, K. al-IllāhyyaT, I, 3, 17,4-18,2; Liber de philos. prima cit., 18,35-19,54: «Debes meminisse
Avicenna’s argument – the passage in question is the incipit of Ilāhiyyāt, I, 3 – is based on an examination of the meanings of “useful” (al-naḥī) and “utility” (al-manfa‘a)15 when used in relation to the sciences. One immediately encounters a differentiation of meanings: utility must be understood as distinct from the good (bāyār), and is defined as what allows one to get from a state of evil or of lesser good (evil in the relative sense, or the “worse”) to a state of greater good (good in the relative sense, or the “better”). Thus the useful is in general that which lets one get to the good or to the better: given that the final end and the good coincide, the useful is what is done or is for the sake of the good16. Once he has es-

15 The root n-f-‘ has been used to translate the Greek θεραπείαν (see supra, note 8, on disciplinary questions); it is, however, neither the only possible correspondence nor the only one actually recorded; in Abd al-Latif al-Badædî’s Bearbeitung von Buch Lambda der aristotelischen Metaphysik, Steiner, Wiesbaden 1976, 262). For the Arabic translations of Avicenna’s argument – the passage in question is the incipit of Ilāhiyyāt, I, 3 – is based on an examination of the meanings of “useful” (al-naḥī) and “utility” (al-manfa‘a)15 when used in relation to the sciences. One immediately encounters a differentiation of meanings: utility must be understood as distinct from the good (bāyār), and is defined as what allows one to get from a state of evil or of lesser good (evil in the relative sense, or the “worse”) to a state of greater good (good in the relative sense, or the “better”). Thus the useful is in general that which lets one get to the good or to the better: given that the final end and the good coincide, the useful is what is done or is for the sake of the good16. Once he has es-

16 See also Ilāh, VIII, 3, 341. In the Ilāhiyyāt of K. al-Ωifæ, Avicenna uses the root n-f-‘ chiefly in treatise I, in dealing with the relations between sciences, and in Ilāh, X, where he discusses the utility (or more literally the “benefit”) the human species derives from the religious observances and institutions (see the title of Ilāh, X, 3 itself). Prophecy, which establishes and safeguards the laws of human association, is the basis of such utility or benefits: thus it is more than useful; it is necessary or required for the permanence of the human species. The need for prophecy is «stronger than the need for the fact that [fine short] hair grows on the eyelids and on the eyebrows or that the soles of the feet are concave [...]» (Ilāh, 442). I here correct the translation I provided in Avicenna, Metafisica cit., 1015: instead of “lips” – which was also Anawati’s interpretation (see AVICENNA, La Métaphysique du Shifa‘, II, Livres de VI à X, Vrin, Paris 1985, 176) – asifār clearly means “eyelashes”; see AVICENNA, Libro de filosofía prima cit., 732 and particularly ARIST., De part. an. II, 15, 508b14-25; for the Arabic edition, see D.R. KRIK (ed.), Aristotelis Semita-
tablished this definition, which clearly recapitulates the essential points of the Aristotelian definition of the useful and of purpose\(^{17}\). Avicenna examines the senses in which one commonly, or else specifically, speaks of utility as regards the sciences.

The sciences are all “useful” (they have in common the same utility or, more precisely, “a same utility” – kullu-hä taṣhtariku fi manfa’a wâhida), in that they make it possible to bring about “the perfection of the human soul, in actù” in such a way that it is thus prepared for the “happiness of the hereafter”\(^{19}\). This is the utility of the sciences, taken in its most general sense: the sciences bring about (or contribute to bringing about) the perfection of the soul and in that sense they prepare man for the intellectual bliss or pleasure which is eminently celestial\(^{19}\); metaphysics in particular, the “divine science”\(^{20}\) – as is expressly stated in oth-

relation to the discussion of causality. In Ilâhî, X, 1, 439,2 it occurs in relation to the parts of the body, which are parts not by chance, but by virtue of the finality of providence (see also infra, note 78 on De usu partium). In De anima the root occurs not only in generic contexts with the sense of conferring a benefit or advantage, but also in the specific sense of the utility that the different parts of the body and the different potencies or faculties of the soul have; see Ibn Sînä, Physique, al-Sîfî, al-Tabî’îyyat, 6. al-Na‘fûs (De anima), ed. G.C. Anawati / S. Zayed, preface and revision by I. Madkour, al-Hay‘a al-miṣriyya al-‘ānma li-l-kitâb, al-Qâhîra [Cairo] 1395/1975, I, 5, 41,17; I, 1, 45,13; II, 2, 55,10; II, 4, 64,3; IV, 3, 126,16; V, 3, 197,2 (see AVICENNA LATINUS, Liber de anima seu Sextus de naturalibus, I-III, critical ed. of the medieval Latin translation by S. Van Riet, intr. by G. Verbeke, Peeters, Louvain / Brill, Leiden 1972: I, 5, 102,13; II, 1, 104,22; II, 2, 126,11; II, 4, 143,74; IV, 3, 36,10; V, 3, 102,95.

17 The useful (τὸ χρήσιμον) is defined by Aristotle as what is good in the category of relation (ἐν τῷ πρόξε τι: Eth. Nic., I, 6, 1096a26); thus it is in contrast to the good considered in itself; the useful is included among the “instrumental goods”, which must be distinguished from the “goods per se” (see Eth. Nic., I, 6, 1096b15). On the correspondence of the goal (τὸ τέλος τοῦ οὐ ξένου) and the good (or good per se or what is in itself good – καθ’ αὑτό) , see, e.g., ARIST., Metaph., III (B), 996a25 and ff.; Eth. Nic., I, 1, 1094a1-18; I, 7, 1097a19-20 (τι σὸν ἀκόσμως χάγιαθω, ἢ ὀν γάρ να τὸ λοιπα πρότερον); 1097a25-35.


19 The perfection of the human or rational soul (al-na‘fûs al-nâtiqâ) lies in the intellectualization of the whole and that intellectione coincides with becoming an “intelligible” or “intellectual” world analogous to the world in its entirety (see Ibn Sînä, Ilâhî., IX, 7, 425,13-426,4; for other references, see AVICENNA, Metaphysica cit., 1255, n. 332). Although the practical part of the soul contributes to the realization of its perfection (its role is fundamental in the case of prophecy; see, e.g., Ibn Sînä, Ilâhî., X, 1, 435), Avicenna clearly assigns first place to intellectual perfection, in discussing both the good (the intellectual good, which corresponds to that of the celestial principles, is authentic or real: Ibn Sînä, Ilâhî., VI, 5, 294-298 e IX, 6), and intellelction (see, e. g., al-Na‘fûs. De anima cit., V, 6, 217-220).

20 In Ibn Sînä, Ilâhî., I, 1, 4 “divine science” is introduced in the naming of the individual theoretical sciences (physics, mathematics, divine science; see ARIST., Metaph., VI, E, 1); before making this distinction, Avicenna had spoken of wisdom (ḥikma) – see ṣûfûk in ARIST., I, (A), 1-2 passim and also II (B), 2, 906d9; XI (K), 1, 1069a18-34; 2, 1060a1; 4, 1061b33; XII (A), 10, 1075b20; see also BERTOLACCI, The Structure cit., 6, n. 12. However, after this distinction (I, 2, 15), he also uses the names “first philosophy”
er passages – realizes man’s divine nature and prepares him for celestial happiness, because it represents the full realization of the intellectual dimension which constitutes true human nature and in which, consequently, true happiness and the true good are to be found.

Nevertheless Avicenna, once he has established this general sense of striving towards the good and perfection, cannot just rest on his oars. As in the neo-Platonic (or late Aristotelian) tradition from which – as has already been amply indicated – Arabic thought derives the orientation of its course of inquiry, so too for Avicenna the sciences – into which philosophy is divided – are not arranged next to one another so as to form a series, but are generated one by another and thus constitute a system. The utility of the sciences is therefore an expression of the relations that the various disciplines – whether general or particular – set up amongst themselves. Thus Avicenna presents, first of all, an absolute or in-
determinate sense of utility (al-manfa’a bi-hađđa l-ma’nâ yuqâlu [or tuqâlu] qawlan muθâqan), by virtue of which a science is useful in that it makes it possible to arrive at some other branch of knowledge and to broaden the range of knowledge itself (takun manfa’atu ’ilmin mä hiya ma’nân yatawaθâsatu min-hu ilâ taθâqqqi ‘ilmin aھara ɣayri-hi)24 and, secondly, a proper sense of utility (al-manfa’a bi-hađđa l-ma’nâ yuqâlu qawlan muθaθâsân), (which is an immediate specification of the first sense), whose raison d’être lies in the idea of a genetic and systematic relationship among the sciences, and which proves itself by the fact that starting with one science one can always build up a different and higher one25. For Avicenna, moreover, – once again in the wake of neo-Platonism – the relations between the sciences mirror the structural links that bind the things of the world to one another. In other words, the notion of utility connects one science to another, building up knowledge organically, because it has its own basis in reality, or rather in what functions as subject matter in the various disciplines26. If one science is inferior or subordinate to another, it is so because its subject matter is inferior or subordinate to what functions as the subject matter of the other science, which is, in relation to the first, “superior”. And this is, once again, according to the two senses that neo-Platonic thought places side by side. It is, namely, first of all, because things as such – and consequently the subjects of the various sciences – when considered on the basis of a criterion of worth, are connected hierarchically according to anteriority and posteriority; thus, for example, if among the theoretical sciences (al-’ulûm al-naθarîyya) physics is subordinate to metaphysics, the divine science, this comes about because physical beings, which are mobile, not separate, and corruptible, are subordinate to beings which are immobile (or for Avicenna mobile “not through natural motion”), separate and eternal27 – and also because (and here we have the second

24 IBN SI-NA-, Ilæh., I, 3, 17,11.
26 On this subject see GUTAS, Paul the Persian cit., 256-260; MARMURA, Avicenna on the Divisions of the Sciences cit.
27 See IBN SI-NA-, Ilæh., I, 1, 4-7-17. On Avicenna’s physics and its subordination to the first philosophy, see A. HASSAOU, La Physique du Ωifæ: aperçus sur sa structure et son contenu, in JANSSENS / DE SMET...
sense) what are evaluated and hence connected hierarchically are the universality and the particularity of the subject matters, or rather of the things that come to be defined in the sciences. Thus if physics is subordinate to metaphysics qua “first philosophy”, it is because the existent qua existent, the subject matter of the science of being, is a more universal notion than that of the body (in motion and at rest), which is the subject matter of the science of nature.

How, then, in this context, are we to understand the meaning of utility? Up to this point Avicenna has distinguished three senses of the utility of a science: the general or common meaning, according to which a science realizes the good or the perfection of the soul; the absolute meaning, according to which, starting with one science it is possible to acquire another (without specification of its rank or grade); and the “proper” sense, according to which a science is useful in that it enables one to reach a branch of knowledge superior to itself. And this last, as Avicenna maintains in the Ilâhiyyât and in his version of the Posterior Analytics (the Book of Demonstration), happens most notably when the princi-

(eds.), Avicenna and His Heritage cit., 67-80. For the Aristotelian (and Platonic) background of this distinction, see ARIST., Metaph., VI (E), 1, 1026,10-32; see also I, (A) 982a26 and HADOT, Les divisions des parties de la philosophie cit., 203 [in the reprint, 128]: «Cette classification, qui résulte de l’application de la méthode de division, constitue une hiérarchie des sciences qui se fonde sur la hiérarchie de leurs objets formels, c’est à dire sur la hiérarchie des modes d’être que l’esprit découvre dans la réalité. A cette hiérarchie des objets correspond aussi une hiérarchie des méthodes: les sciences les plus hautes utilisent une méthode plus exacte que les sciences inférieures». On the question of the subject matter of Aristotle’s physics and metaphysics as First Philosophy, see the recent contribution of P. L. DONINI, Il libro Lambda della Metafisica e la nascita della filosofia prima, «Rivista di storia della filosofia», 2 (2002), 181-200.

28 For this articulation see Ibn Sînâ, K. al-Burhân, II, 7, 162-168; in discussing the relations between the various sciences, Avicenna here makes a clear distinction between specification (when one science is more specific than another, as if it were a part of it) and subordination (here a science, in a way which is analogous to the subalternatio of the Latin tradition, is, together with its subject matter, separate from and subordinate to the more general science). Avicenna then considers the status of generality (‘umûm) of the existent and the one. These are the most general notions, that is to say the notions that are common to every existent thing; therefore the science which deals with them has every science under its sway: thus every science is subordinate to metaphysics (which is, however, not so named at this point). The science of being and of the one is also the science in which one studies or considers (na‘ara fî) the principle of the caused existent which, as such, cannot be the subject matter of a particular science; in fact, it necessarily establishes a relation with every existent thing (every existent thing is indeed a thing it causes) without exception (see also Ibn Sînâ, Ilâhî., VIII, 4, 344,2-3). The science that studies being and the one, since it is the “first philosophy”, also has the task of verifying the principles of the particular sciences; from a certain point of view, the latter are all sustained by conditional propositions that have their basis in what only metaphysics can demonstrate. On the correspondence between superiority in the hierarchy and generality, see also I. HADOT, The Role of the Commentaries on Aristotle cit., 179.

29 In the subsequent part of the passage Avicenna employs the term nâfî, “useful”, in a non-technical sense as well, to indicate something which, while good in a general way, does not exactly make possible the transition from one science to another: music, mathematics, ethics and politics are all “useful” (nawâfî) in this latter sense, because they are not “obligatory” for proceeding to metaphysics; in other words, they are not a requisite quod nos for acquiring the divine science (see Ibn Sînâ, Ilâhî., I, 3, 19).

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...ples of one science (which is more specific and in that sense inferior) become *quaesita* for another science (which is more general and in that sense superior)\(^{31}\). The only compatible meaning is thus the third sense of the utility of a science, the “proper” one. It justifies a propaedeutic based on a hierarchy\(^{32}\); «in the proper sense the useful leads to something that is higher than itself and is like its purpose [...]»\(^{33}\); and thus it also supports the striving for the good and for perfection which is expressed by the general meaning of the term; in this system every science is viewed as an element in a vertical order, to reach the summit of which, as a proper goal, every student aspires.

Once this third and “proper” sense has been established, it does, however, reveal a problem: if one stops here, metaphysics cannot be called “useful”. It cannot if it is considered in its role as the science of the whole\(^{34}\). The subject matter (*mawzُ*) of metaphysics is being or the existent as a whole and there is certainly no more general being of which being might represent the specification and to which it could therefore be subordinate; besides, the existent qua existent also contains, as such, the “noblest” (*ašraf mā fi-hī*) separate (*mubāyyin*) and divine being, and from that point of view as well metaphysics cannot be below another science; even less, therefore, can metaphysics be called useful if it is taken to be the highest form of knowledge, since it is the science of the causes of being, or – according to the definitions given in *Ilāh*, I, 2\(^{35}\) – the “first philosophy” or the “divine science”\(^{36}\). In addition, if its subject matter cannot be

\(^{31}\) For the relations between metaphysics and the other sciences, see *Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh.*, I, 2, 14-15: «And since the principles of a more specific science are always questions for the more elevated science – as the principles of medicine [are questions] for the natural [science], and [those of the science] of surface areas are for geometry – so it happens that in this science [sci. divine science] one clarifies the principles of these particular sciences which investigate the [various] states of particular existent things». Instead of “more elevated”, Bertolauci, *The Structure* cit., 5: reads al-a‘amm “more general” which is, in fact, a well supported lectio. Actually, al-a‘amm seems to be preferable to al-a‘læ because of its correspondence to al-ahāl; nevertheless, “more elevated” can also be considered a consistent reading: the superior science is more general; see also *The Metaphysics of the Healing* cit., 11; for the discussion in *K. al-Burhān*, II, 7, 168,1-7, *infra*).

\(^{32}\) Hierarchy can be reduced to propedeutics in the sense that, in the relation between man and the world (*quoad nos*), one always proceeds from the bottom to the top; propedeutics is therefore the path of the system of sciences in reverse: what comes *before* in relation to us *comes after* in itself, and viceversa. And – as we shall see – this is the very principle Avicenna employs in discussing the rank and name of the divine science. Thus Avicenna seems to combine the two classificatory patterns that P. Hadot distinguishes, see *Les divisions des parties de la philosophie* cit., 213-214 [in the reprint, 140-141]. Among the many passages in which Aristotle expresses the distinction between ‘in relation to us’ and ‘in itself’, see *Arist., Metaph.*, II (66), 993b5-12, where one finds the famous example of noctules; see also *An. Post.*, I, 2, 72a1-5; *Phys.*, I, 1, 184a16.


\(^{34}\) *Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh.*, I, 2, 13,12-14,14.

\(^{35}\) *Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh.*, I, 2, 15,12 e 15,14.

\(^{36}\) According to Avicenna metaphysics is the “first philosophy” in that it is the science of the prima-
considered subordinate to any existent, neither can its “object of inquiry” be considered subordinate to anything, since that object is the summit of inquiry itself, with which, as we have seen, the very subject matter of metaphysics in part coincides37.

To deal with the problem thus revealed – if metaphysics cannot be considered useful, we must clarify how we are to interpret the negation of its utility – Avicenna, starting with the absolute sense we have just considered, distinguishes a further three ways in which it is possible to predicate the utility of something, not only of a science. The semantic field of the term manfa’a – “that from which one has some profit” or “benefit” and of which, accordingly, it is as well to make use or of which one in fact does make use – which at first was used to refer only to science, here reacquires its general sense: rather than being “useless” or “without benefit”, the “divine science” or the science that studies “the existent qua existent” will be, namely, “other than useful” or “more than useful”.

II. The three senses of absolute utility

“Nevertheless, if we divide absolute utility into the [various senses] into which it can be divided, we have three cases: one in which the starting point leads to something superior to itself; one in which it leads to something equivalent to itself; one, lastly, in which it leads to something inferior to itself, causing the acquisition of a perfection beneath its own essence. And if one were to seek an appropriate name for this last [case], the most fitting would be causing to flow, causing to acquire, providing for, being at the head of or something similar [...]”38.
In a first sense, a thing is useful in that it leads to something superior to itself (ilā ma'nan aqlia min-hu); in this case, the advantage to be got from what is useful is that of climbing up a step or, literally, of “progressing” in a given scale of values. This first sense corresponds to what Avicenna has already presented as the proper sense, in which the advantage or utility of a science is to be found. In a second sense, a thing is useful in that it leads to something equal or equivalent (ilā ma'nan musāwın la-hu); in an epistemological context, this sec-

und der dritte darin, dass es zu einem ihm untergeordnete hinleitet, indem es zu einer geringeren Vol-

kommenheit beiträgt, als es selbst besitzt. Will man diesen Begriff mit einem besonderen Namen beze-

ichnen, so wäre die beste Bezeichnung 'das Mitteilen', ‘das Verleihen', von Vollkommenheiten, 'die Sorge' um ein anderes, die (geistige) 'Leitung' eines anderen oder eine ähnliche. Wenn du die richtigen Be-

zeichnungen dieses Gedankens als innerlich verwandt ansehst, dann hast du den richtigen Gedanken verstanden; see Die Metaphysik Avicennas, Metaphysik enthaltend die Metaphysik, Theologie, Kosmo-

ologie und Ethik, transl. by M. von Horten, Rudolf Haupt, Halle 1907, 29-30 [reprint Institute for the Hi-

story of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main 1999]. And

now see also The Metaphysics of the Healing cit., 14.

39 The term ma'na has a semantical spectrum sufficiently broad to include both the very vague sense of “thing”, “reality”, “fact”,يقظى, and the technical and specific sense of “intention” (in Latin it is also aliquid; intellectus; intentio). Derived from the root ‘n-y (the same as that of ’ayya “providence”), the term, in its proper sense, means “what is intended” and hence corresponds to the conceptual intention or meaning of a word. It is, however, one of the most polysemous terms in Arabic and has vastly different meanings even within the theological vocabulary, as well as in the philosophical one. In Avicenna’s Meta-

physics, ma’na plays a fundamental role in the fifth treatise (Ilahi, V, 1-2) because it is the term on which the whole doctrine of the universal is based (known as the doctrine of intentio, from the Latin term which is its most frequent translation). In his psychological discourse, Avicenna uses the term to express non-sensible content grasped by the estimative faculty (the lamb perceives that the wolf is to be run away from; see Ibn Sina, al-Nafis (De anima) cit., 1, 5, 33-11; AVICENNA LATINUS, Liber de anima cit., 86, 99-6 and 89, 30). However, in Avicenna too the term can have the general sense of “thing” or, more liter-

ally, “meaning”; on this topic see S. Afnan, Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian, Brill, Leid-

en 1964, 115; A. GOICHON, Lexique de la langue philosophique d’Ibn Sina (Avicenne), Desclée de Brouw-

er, Paris 1938; [reprinted by the Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolf-

gang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main 1999], 253-255 n. 469; for the history of the term, see M. Horten, Was bedeutet ma’na als philosophischen Terminus? Eine Studie zur Geschichte der islamischen Philosophie, «Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft», 64 (1910), 391-396; R. Frank, Al-ma’nâ: Some Reflections on the Technical Meaning of the Term in the Kalām and its Use in the Phys-


lum», 46 (1971), 32-38; on the philosophical use of يقظى, see P. Hadot, Sur divers sens du mot prag-

ma dans la tradition philosophique grecque, in P. Aubenque (éd. ), Concepts et catégories dans la pensée an-


the notes].

40 One should think of the literal meaning of gradior, gressus sum, gradus: “to advance”, “to move for-

ward”; and gradus, as “step”, “degree”, to which the Arabic darağâ corresponds; this last word is fre-

quently associated with martaba “rank”, which Avicenna here uses for metaphysics itself (see Ibn Sina, Ilahi, I, 3, 19,1). The terms darağâ and martaba are not recorded in Goichon’s Lexique cit. For darağâ in Avicenna’s Ilahiyyat, see IX, 4, 404,11; IX, 7, 432,17; X, 1,435-436; for martaba, which is generally used apropos of the celestial hierarchies, see, e.g., IX, 2, 391,18; IX, 4, 408,10; IX, 6, 418,10 for existence and the good; IX, 7, 424,4 for the potencies or faculties of the soul; IX, 7, 426,5 for intellectual perfection; X, 1 435,6f., where, when speaking of existence as a whole, Avicenna uses both “rank” (martaba) and “de-

gree” (darağâ).
ond meaning characterizes a discipline as “useful” if it makes it possible to pass on to acquire another one, whatever that may be, since the scale of values either is not considered or is not to be considered, and the sciences are located, therefore, on the same level. Thus this second sense coincides, in the end, with what Avicenna has presented as the general or absolute sense of the useful in relation to a science, and beside it we can place the analysis that, in his Book of Demonstration, Avicenna proposes of the relation between geometry – al-handasa – and calculus – (al-hisāb); independently of their respective generality or particularity, they have something in common in their subject matter. Lastly, we qualify as useful that which enables us to get to something inferior (ilā ma’nan dūna-hu), “causing [one] to acquire a perfection beneath one’s own essence” (wa huwa an yu fid ji kamālin [or ma’nā kamālin] dūna dāti-hi).

Of the three different “parts” or “divisions” (aqsām) of the concept of utility taken in the absolute or indeterminate sense, Avicenna can, obviously, accept for metaphysics only the third, according to which one gets to something inferior to that, the utility of which is to be determined (ilā ma’nān dūna-hu). One cannot admit the possibility of either a science superior to metaphysics or a science which is its equal. Otherwise, as we have noted, the structure of reality, let alone that of knowledge, would be in disarray. The final distinction, nevertheless, represents a solution which is in many ways paradoxical: there is no longer an ascent or progression, as prescribed by the definition of the useful that requires that it lead to a goal; instead there is descent and degradation.

In order to justify this third and last mode (qism) of the useful, Avicenna in fact has recourse to terms which, rather than involving the sphere of ascent, of the useful or of advantage, concern that of descent, of the good and of gratuitousness. These are the same terms that characterize the discussions about the flow of existence, or the flowing of being (of forms, of intellect), with which Avicenna generally expresses the mode of being of the First Principle in the act of originating the world, and the mode of being of the intelligences, up to the very last one, in the act of informing it. If properly designated, absolute utility taken in this (third) sense is – Avicenna asserts – “a causing to flow” (ifāda), “a causing to acquire” (ifāda), “a providing for” (ināya) and “a being at the head of” (ri‘āsa). Each of these terms, because of the fundamental value Avicenna as-

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41 See Ibn Sīnā, K. al-Burhān, II, 7, 162,5-6; 168,4-7.
42 Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh., I, 3, 186-6; AVICENNA, Metafisica cit., 47 and 1061, n. 84. The Latin text has: «Cum autem utilitas absoluta dividitur in suas divisiones, necessario dividitur in tria: quorum unum est id ex quo provenit alius melius eo, alid ex quo provenit alius sibi aequale, alid vero ex quo provenit alius inferiorius eo, et hoc tertium prodest perfectioni eius quod est infra se».
43 Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh., I, 3, 196-7 (see the passage cited above).
signs it in his writings, could constitute the object of an analysis in itself\footnote{On the terminology of Avicennian emanatism, see A. \textsc{Hasnawi}, s.v. \textit{Fayd}, in \textit{Encyclopédie Philosophique Universelle. II: Les Notions philosophiques. Dictionnaire}, tome 1, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1990, 966-972; J. \textsc{Janssens}, \textit{Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sīnā}, «Documenti e Studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale»., 8 (1997), 455-477. I provided a terminological analysis in my doctoral thesis, see O. \textsc{Lizzini}, \textit{La dottrina del flusso emanativo: ricerca sui fondamenti dell’ontologia di Avicenna}, D.Phil. diss., Università ‘La Sapienza’, Roma 2000.}. In the notions of flow, acquisition or donation, provision and hierarchy there are, clearly, the basic elements of the Avicennian doctrine of the emanative flow which, starting with the idea of the necessity of causative action (a necessity that Avicenna is at pains to distinguish from the automatic unawareness of natural action)\footnote{Avicenna excludes it explicitly in, e.g., \textit{Ilāhīyyāt}. VIII, 7, 363.}, establishes the unicity of what is caused and, hence, as an immediate consequence, the continual degradation of being. In these notions we find a reflection of what Ahmed Hasnawi has called the two rules or “regulating” principles of the Avicennian system: if the \textit{raison d’être} of the notions of “flow” and “hierarchy” are to be found in the principle of the unicity of the first caused being, those of donation and providence must be connected, although not without difficulty, to the principle that states that what is superior neither is nor ever acts in consideration of what is inferior\footnote{Hasnawi refers to the two principles (“les deux règles”) in these very terms, see \textit{Fayd} cit., 967. For the first principle in Avicenna, see \textit{Ilāhīyyāt}, IX, 4, 405: «[...] from the one in that it is one there exists only the one» (al-wāḥid min haytā l-ahād innam wāḥid an-hu waḥid); see also IX, 5, 411. In the tenth \textit{mīmar} of the pseudo-Aristotelian \textit{Theology} this principle seems to be mentioned but not fully formulated; a clear formulation is not to be found in al-Fārābī, who seems at times to disregard it, in that he ascribes a doubleness to the first caused thing. This principle is among the propositions condemned in 1277 (on this topic, see particularly, A. \textsc{De Libera}, Ex uno non fit nisi unum. \textit{La lettre sur le Principe de l’Univers et les condamnations parisiiennes de 1277}, in B. \textsc{Monsch / O. Pluta} [eds.], \textit{Historia Philosophiae Medii Aevi. Mélanges offerts à K. Flasch}, Grüner, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, 543-560). On the second principle, according to which the superior can have no purpose as regards what is inferior, see, e.g., \textit{Ilāhīyyāt}, IX, 3, 396; \textit{Liber de philosophia prima cit.}, 466-467; and also Avicenna’s \textit{Glosses} to the pseudo-Aristotelian \textit{Theology} (see A. \textsc{Badawi}, \textit{Aristi’t ‘inda l’-Arab. Aristoteles apud Arabes. Dirasāt wa-nsa‘īt ġayr manštārī, Wukā‘āl al-mabū‘āt, al-Kuwayt [Kuwait City] 1978, 60, 9 [1st ed. Mabā’i bi-Misr, al-Qâhirah [Cairo] 1947]; fa-in-na al-q̲ā‘al lā yaktān li-ajjīl l-abass “that the more noble is not for the more vile”; G. \textsc{Vaida}, \textit{Les notes d’Avicenne sur la Théologie d’Aristote}, «Revue Thomiste», 51, 2 [1951], 384 [for the whole article, 346-406]. The second principle has, as F. \textsc{Lucchetta} has observed in his discussion of al-Fārābī, Aristotelian roots; see \textsc{Arist.}, \textit{Metaph.}, XII, 9, 1074b25-26, 33-34 and al-Fārābī, \textit{Epistola sull’intelletto}, ed. F. \textsc{Lucchetta}, Antenore, Padova 1974, 73 and 135, n. 241.}. Hence it seems appropriate at this point to consider, however briefly, the essential constituents of the abovementioned terminology, which should help us to understand what meaning to assign to these various terms in the context of a “redefinition” of utility. This redefinitional manoeuvre is not, moreover, an isolated incident in Avicenna, and it more than once takes on the function of a speculative tool. When a concept, if understood traditionally, reveals itself to be resistant to incorporation in his system, Avicenna invests it with a new meaning, mak-
ing it consistent with his own theoretical framework. Notable examples are the discussion of the movement of the heavens — which is movement “by nature” only if this locution is redefined — and the discussion of the meaning of *ibda’, “instauration”, “absolute generation” or “creation ex nihilo”, which, for Avicenna, is true elimination of nothingness only if conceived of in terms of emanation outside of time.

III. The third sense of utility: the terms of the definition

1. The first word Avicenna cites — *ifāda — a verbal noun (*maṣdar) from the same root as *fayād, “flow” — has, given the causative sense of the IV form, the meaning “to make flow”: *fayād, like its related terms, is used in various contexts (ontological, gnosceologico-prophetic, religious) but indicates, technically, the flow or emanation of being from the cause.


49 For the terms to which *fayād* and *afād* correspond in the Arabic paraphrase of the *Enneads* and in the *Liber de Causis*, see D’Ancona Costa, *La casa della sapienza* cit., 129, n. 77; see also J.H. Sleeman / G. Pollet (eds.), *Lexicon Plotinianum*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 1980; on the use of the term in Avicenna and in his sources, see Hasnawi, *Fayād* cit.

50 In addition to *fayād* and *ifāda*, the intensive form *fayyādan* should be mentioned; *ṣudūr*, *saryān* and *ṣajjāl* are also related to these terms, but derived from different roots; see Janssen, *Creation and Emanation* cit.


52 The term *ṣudūr* appears, for example, in the title of the ninth treatise of the *Hādiyyāt* (“On the emanation of things from the First Government and on the return to It”) and in the ninth treatise itself; it also has the general meaning of “coming from”; see the incipit of *De anima* (Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Nafs - De anima* cit., I, 1, 5, 6,7), where Avicenna speaks of the soul as the principle from which the different actions “emanate” or “come” (*tāṣdura*). On this term see also Goichon, *Lexique* cit., 175-176, n. 355, 356; Afzani, *Philosophical Terminology* cit., 108.
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ing and of acting of the intelligence which “follows us closely”\textsuperscript{53}. A passage from the \textit{Kitāb al-Ta’liqāt} (The Book of Annotations) specifies, moreover, that \textit{fayd} has the technical sense of “flow” “reserved for the Creator and the intelligences”:

«[...] The flow is used only apropos of the Creator (\textit{al-Bāri'}) and the Intelligences, not for anything other. In fact since the deriving (\textit{sudīr})\textsuperscript{54} of existents from Him is according to the [necessary] consequence and is not [due to] [an act of] will which follows upon chance, but [follows] His essence\textsuperscript{55}, and [since] the deriving of [existents] from Him is continuous, without impediment and without a cost (\textit{kulfa}) that is concomitant on it, it is more appropriate for it to be called ‘flow’»\textsuperscript{56}.

An essential point about the technical use of the root – which is recognizable in al-Fārābī (or Alfarabi) as well – is unquestionably its use in conjunction with roots that convey the idea of “donation” or “acquisition” (of forms and hence of existence). The association between the idea of flowing or emanating and that of donating is so marked that often the image of flow is in the end replaced by that of donation. Obvious examples are the use of the root \textit{w-h-b} (“to donate”, “to bestow”) in the locutions \textit{wâhib al-Òuwwar} and \textit{wâhib al-‘aql}\textsuperscript{57}, and that of the root \textit{f-y-d}, which occurs, in fact, in this same passage \textsuperscript{58}. Besides, the association of the image of flow with similes and terms for donation is confirmed in this passage not only by the word introduced immediately thereafter – \textit{ifāda} – , but also by the subsequent one, which expresses the idea of care or provision.

\textsuperscript{53} For this expression, see, e.g., Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Ilāh}, IX, 5, 410,15.
\textsuperscript{54} Or “emanation”, although the meaning here seems to be the more general “coming from”.
\textsuperscript{55} Or also “it is per se”.
\textsuperscript{57} For \textit{al-mabda’ al-wâhib li-l-Òuwwar} “the principle giver of intellect”, see Ibn Sīnā, \textit{al-Nafs (De anima)} cit., V, 6, 218,12; for \textit{wâhib al-Òuwwar} in the \textit{Ilāhīyyāt}, see IX, 5, 411,9 (in the plural: \textit{al-awwâ’il al-wâhiyya} ) and IX, 5, 413,11.
\textsuperscript{58} For the use of the root in \textit{al-Fārābī}, see, e.g. the \textit{Book of the Harmony between the Opinions of the Two Philosophers, the Divine Plato and Aristotle (Kitāb al-’jam’ bayn ra’yay al-hakimayn Aflāṭūn al-Illāhī wa Aristīlī)}, for the text, see \textit{al-Fārābī}, \textit{L’harmonie entre les opinions de Platon et d’Aristote}, Arabic text and translation by F.M. Najjar / D. Mallet, Institut Français de Damas, Damas 1999, 151 (150 of French translation) where \textit{ifāda} «causing to acquire» is associated with \textit{ifāda} «causing to flow». In Avicenna, the root is used, to name only a few relevant instances, in the definition of the efficient cause (Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Ilāh}, VI, 1, 257); in the definition of the term \textit{halq}, “creation” (see Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Le livre des définitions, K. al-Hudūd} cit., 43 Arabic text), in defining the intellect or intelligence of the whole (see Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Le livre des définitions, K. al-Hudūd} cit., 15 Arabic text) and in discussing the multiplicity inherent in the effect (Ibn Sīnā, \textit{K. al-Ta’liqāt} cit., 100.29-101.5); see also Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Ilāh}, VI, 2, 265,4, where the “giver of forms”, the cause that brings about the conjoined existence of matter and form (\textit{iğtimā’}), is literally “the cause that causes to acquire the forms” (\textit{al-sabab al-mufīd li-l-Òuwwar}; the transcription in \textit{AVICENNA, Metafisica} cit., 589 should be corrected). For a passage where the idea of donation is explicitely linked to that of emanation (\textit{sudīr}) in the sense of creation or instantiation (\textit{ibdā’}), see Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Ilāh}, VI, 2, 267,7.
2. If, in fact, *ifāda*, “to cause to acquire”, is one of the most important terms Avicenna uses to express the idea of donation (and of the donation of being), the word *’ināya*, “providence”, is among those that are closely correlated to it. Flow is the mode of being with which the First Principle reaches that which is inferior to It: there is, indeed, no effusion or flow without descent\(^59\). A consequence of the assumption of the unicity of what is caused is the impossibility of a multiplicity which is not at the same time a hierarchy\(^60\), and donation and flow should hence be understood not so much as a “giving” or “causing to acquire”, as, instead, a “giving” or “causing to acquire” addressed to something inferior. This is actually the very concept that forms the groundwork of the passage with which we started out\(^61\).

3. Hence it is only because *causing to flow* is directed towards something inferior that, together with the idea of flow, Avicenna can now introduce the idea of providence (*’ināya*), establishing, in fact, a basic equivalence between it and the divine flow. This equivalence also permeates Avicenna’s treatment of emanation, although it does give rise to a basic problem. The idea of a caring for the world on the part of the First Principle (or of the principles) indeed clashes perforce, first of all, with the strict self-referentiality which must be ascribed to the divine being and, secondly, with the intentionality of each of the intelligences that come after it. It is, namely, in conflict with one of the two axioms referred to above: the principle that the superior never either is or acts in consideration of the inferior\(^62\). In this sense “providing for” means taking care of something even, so to speak, “beyond” one’s own intentions. And to account for this apparent dissonance, Avicenna makes use, as we shall see below, of the distinction between “the good” and “generosity”\(^63\).

\(^{59}\) In Plotinus there is no generation without decrease, see PLOT., *Enn.*. V, 3 (49), 15.

\(^{60}\) The celestial multiplicity is arranged in ranks, and every being corresponds to a species; only in the sublunary world does Avicenna introduce a multiplicity in which a horizontal level, i.e. that of numerical multiplicity (many beings appear in one and the same species), is added to the vertical level of the hierarchy of beings. But the origin of this multiplicity cannot be accounted for altogether by the emanational schema; in fact, the occurrence of multiplicity in the sublunary world implies the mechanism of celestial movement and, not without some difficulties, the causal interactions of the sublunary world itself; see, e.g., Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāh.*, X, 1, 436-437.

\(^{61}\) The third meaning is, in fact, causing something inferior to acquire a perfection (Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāh.*, I, 3, 18).

\(^{62}\) See supra and note 45 the reference to HASNAOUI, *Fayd* cit.

Lastly, it is worth devoting a separate comment to the term ri'āsā, which is translated here as “being at the head of”, and which, as is evident in this passage, is generally associated with the idea of “service” (ḥidma)\(^6\). The term ri'āsā involves different levels: it belongs to the vocabularies of politics, scholastic training and medicine and it also forms part of the vocabulary of the classification of the sciences. Sovereignty and service are also indispensable to the definition of the essential anteriority of the cause\(^6\). Hence it seems appropriate to examine some examples.

III.1. The concept of ri'āsā

The first meaning of the root r-'-s\(^6\) is “to be the head of”; ra's is “head” or “top” in a literal sense, and thus ra'īs is the leader in the sense of the head of something, frequently as opposed – as we have just seen – to a servant (ḥādim)\(^6\). The first context for the use of the term is politics. In political language ri'āsā (or riyyāsā) generally indicates the quality and title of the leader, without any religious connotation\(^6\). This same use accounts for the instances of the r-'-s root found in paraphrases and translations of Greek texts: Aristotle’s Politics, for example, or the Compendium to the Book of Laws (Gawami’ kitāb nawamīs li-Aflāṭūn)\(^6\). And so, it is probably for its non religious connotation, that ra'īs is

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\(^6\) See Ibn Sīnā, Ilāhiyyāt, I, 3, 18 (and infra, the cited passage).


\(^6\) For the root r-'-s, see LANE, An Arabic-English Lexicon cit., III, 1867,995-996; the first meaning is “head”, hence “chief”: «he was, or became, head, chief, commander, governor, ruler, lord, master, prince or king, of, or over, the people [...] He was or became high in rank or condition» (1995).

\(^6\) For the root h¯-d-m, see LANE, An Arabic-English Lexicon cit., II, 1865,711-712: ḥ̄adāma: «he served him, did service for him» (711).

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\(^6\) See C.E. BOWEN, ra'īs, in E.L., VIII, new ed. 1995, 402-403, where the term is defined as ‘chief’ or ‘leader’ of a group. The term ra'ās, and the plural ra'aṣ are qur'anic (see J. PENRICE, A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran, Libraire du Liban, Beyrouth 1873, 54: “ra'asa: to be the head of”), but they are never used to indicate God directly (ra'īs does not appear among the terms which traditionally convey the idea of divine sovereignty, see GIMARET, Les noms divins cit., 313-326).

the word al-Fārābī uses to designate the absolute head appointed to govern his “Excellent City”⁷⁰. Furthermore in the Epistle on the Division of the Intellectual Sciences, which is clearly only one of many possible examples, Avicenna presents politics (ṣiyyāsā) as the science that studies all kinds of governments and “authorities” (aṣnāf al-siyyāsā wa l-riʿāsā), in addition to good and bad forms of association (al-īgīmāʿāt al-madāniyya al-fādīla wa l-raddīya).⁷¹

To the political use the scholastic must be added: riʿās or riyyāsā is also the authority one can obtain in a given discipline⁷² and raʾīs is the name commonly given, for example, to the head of a school or to anyone excellent in a given field of knowledge.⁷³ Avicenna himself had the title of al-ṣayḥ al-raʾīs⁷⁴. The image of


⁷⁰ For al-Fārābī, see, e.g., al-Madīna al-Fādiḥa: the opening sentence of XXVIII: faḥādī huwa al-rawāṣu alladī āl yarʿasu-ha [for yarʿasu-ha] insānun āṣāf al-ṣiyāsā wa huwa al-raʾīs al-awwalu li-l-madīna al-fādīla wa huwa raʾīs al-ummati al-fādīla wa raʾīs al-maʿūra al-kulli-hu; see also al-Fārābī, Idées des habitants de la Cité vertueuse, the Nader edition of the Arabic text and French transl., by Y. Karam / J. Chlala / A. Jaussen, Commission Libanaise pour la Traduction des Chefs d’œuvre, Beyrouth / IFAO, Le Caire, 1986 [1st ed. 1980], 111; al-Fārābī, Al-Farabī on the Perfect State cit., 246. According to R. Walzer, al-Fārābī’s choice of raʾīs is due precisely to its non-religious connotation, see Al-Farabī on the Perfect State cit., 436. «The ruler is mostly called raʾīs (archon), a term which, in general, does not appear to be sed in mediaeval Arabic for the supreme ruler. [...] It thus presents itself as a welcome neutral term for al-Fārābī, who prefers throughout to avoid specifically Muslim terms in this book; he puts forward views which are supposed to be universally valid and may be applied to non-Muslim communities as well. He also uses the old Arabic word malik [...]».

⁷¹ Ibn Sīnā, R. fi qaṣīm al-ʿulamʿ al-aʿqīlīya cit., 107,16-17.


⁷³ Raʾīs al-iṭībāh was the title of the person in charge of the physicians at the Abbasid court, see, e.g., H.H. BIESTERFELDT, La professione medica, in RASHED (a cura di), La civiltà islamica cit., 822. For Aristotle himself described as raʾīs, see Miskawayh cited by Walzer in Al-Farabī on the Perfect State cit., 43, n. 625.

⁷⁴ According to Walzer (Al-Farabī on the Perfect State cit., 436 n. 624), as well as Gardet (La pensée religieuse d’Avicenne cit., 17, n. 1) and Van Riet (ed. of Liber de anima cit., IV-V), this title had political value; but on the title in its scholastic sense and on its implications in Western iconography, see D.N. HAS-

commanding (and serving) is also used in classificatory language: the branches of learning are divided into serving (or servant: *ḥādima*) and commanding (*raʾısa*; or being served: *maḥdūma*). In al-Fārābī’s *Book of the Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Excellent City* (*Kitāb fi mabādīʾ arāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*), even such an art as the military art (*al-ṣināʾa al-ḥarbīyya*), which is needed for governing a city, is divided into “commanding” (*raʾısa*) and “serving” (*ḥādima*) parts. However, in this last context, the meaning ascribed each time it arises, to command and to service is not always the same: the commanding discipline is, in fact, according to the point of view adopted, either the one placed at the apex of a hierarchy of merit or, instead, the one the study of which precedes that of the others. In the passage in Avicenna that interests us here, the term *riʿās* is used to refer to metaphysics and clearly fits the first possibility, but in other contexts dominion and sovereignty are applied to logic: the study of logic should precede that of all the other sciences and thus, in a sense, should be at the head of them.

Like the system of knowledge, the system of the different potencies or faculties of man can be expressed in terms of command (or, conversely, of service). The image of political dominion (*siyāsā*; *riʿās* or *riyās*; *istiʿlā*) is used to explain the dominant position that the soul has been given over the body and to connote the relations between the various capacities or faculties of the soul (for instance in al-Fārābī’s *Excellent City*, and in Avicenna’s *De anima*). It is, in fact,


76. For another example of the term *raʾıs* used to refer to a discipline because of merit, see al-Fārābī’s *Book of Letters* (*Kitāb al-ʿurūf*): Commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, ed. M. Mahdi, Dār el-Machreq, Beirut 1969 [2nd ed. 1990], 132, 7-11: philosophy (*al-falsafa*) precedes religion (*al-milla*), which precedes theology (*al-kalām*) and jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*) «as the master who gives work to the servant precedes him or as he who uses an instrument precedes the instrument».

77. For logic as *raʾıs al-ʿulūm* in this sense, see F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Brill, Leiden 1970, 204; he refers to the *Miftāḥ al-saʿāda* of Ṭabḵūṯūzādeh: for some theologians, learning logic was a duty for every Muslim since it provides the proof necessary to the knowledge of God.


in medical language that the analogy of “command” and “service” is employed most significantly. It serves to explain human physiology. In the Arabic reworking of Greek medicine, in which Aristotelian teachings are for the most part brought into harmony with those of Galen, the three cardinal organs (brain, heart and liver) are supported by assisting organs and special organs; a hierarchy is thus established and the faculties, and then the parts of the body, are also divided into commanding or “served” ones (mahdîma) and, correspondingly, those that are “serving” (bâdima) or “servants”80. This context is highly relevant to a discussion in al-Fârâbî’s text which is of great interest in general because of the philosophical use of the root r-‘-s (and of the root h-d-m) and, in particular, because of the use Avicenna makes of it in the passage we started with. In discussing the role of the person who has been placed at the head of the city, the “second master” – al-Fârâbî – uses, in fact, precisely the image of the commanding organ, thus joining the political use of the term to the medical one and both of them to the metaphysical and to the classificatory ones. The theory that forms the background for this analogy, in which physiology, politics and metaphysics all make an appearance, is the cardiocentric one favoured by Aristotle81: “at the head” of all the organs is the heart, whereas the brain – which is at the heart’s service, in that it cools it down – is at the head of the parts of the body secondarily to the heart. Thus, just as the heart is the perfect and commanding organ, so the head of the excellent city is perfect and in command and, finally,

opment of the Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and Galenic Theories, in J. McGINNIS (ed.) with the Assistance of D. REISMAN, Interpreting Avicenna. Proceedings of the Second Conference of the Avicenna Study Group, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2004, 83 (for the whole article 62-86). In addition to this usage there is the usage in Ibn ‘Arabî, who ascribes to the soul the love for riÿâsâ (al-Futûhât al-makkiyya, Beinut s.d. [reprint of Cairo ed. 1329], II, 606, l. 9); other uses, not always referring to the soul, can be found in al-Futûhât al-makkiyya cit., II, 652; III, 15; III, 176; III, 302; IV, 455 (for these instances I wish to thank Samuela Pagani, who kindly drew my attention to appearances of the term in the mystical texts; see also S. PAGANI, Il rinnova-
mento mistico dell’Islam. Un commento di ‘Abî al-Guni al-Nabulisi a Ahmad Sirhindî, Università degli Stu-

80 On this topic, see TJ. DE BOER / R. ARNALDEZ, s.v. Èuwwa, in E.I., V, new ed., 576-579, particularly 577; U. WEISSER, Le cose naturali. Struttura e funzioni del corpo umano, in RASHED (a cura di), La civiltà islamica cit., 754; M. ULLMANN, Die Medizin im Islam, Brill, Leiden-Kölnc 1972. The same term ‘utility’ belongs to medical vocabulary; see Kitâb fi manâﬁ’ al-‘adâ’, “The book on the utility of the parts [of the body]”, Arabic translation of the Peri χρησις μορφων (De usu partium) of Galen (and see also Ilâh., X, I, 439,2: li’l manâﬁ’ al-‘adâ’ il-hayawanât wa-l-nabîyat); for Arabic translations of Galen, see G. BERGSTÄSSER, Hun-
ain ibn Ishâq über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-Übersetzungen, Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, Leipzig 1925; id., Neue Materialien zu Hunain ibn Ishâq’s Galen-Bibliographie, Deutsche Morgen-
ländische Gesellschaft, Leipzig 1932 and, for terminology, ULLMANN, Wörterbuch zu den griechisch-arab-
schen cit. An analogy between the servant-master relationship and that of the parts of the body can also be found in The Cream of Knowledge of Bar-Hebraeus; see M. ZONTA, Fonti greche e orientali dell’Economi-

81 See e.g. ARIST., De part. an., III, 656a26-28 and chiefly 666a-b and ff.; see Aristoteles Semitico-Lat-
inus cit., 46 and 71 ff.
so, indeed, is the First Principle; and just as, firstly, the brain, which is at its service, and then, gradually, all of the parts of the body follow the heart, so the celestial and human orders of the city are arranged according to a hierarchy which is metaphysical before it is political:

«The ruling organ (al-'adā al-ra’îs) in the body is by nature the most perfect and most complete of the organs in itself and in its specific qualification, and it also has the best of everything on which another organ has a share as well; beneath it, in turn, are other organs which rule over organs inferior to them (a’dā’ ufrā’ ra’îsa li-mūt dīna-hā), their rule [or sovereignty: ri’āsa] being lower in rank than the rule [or sovereignty: ri’āsa] of the first and indeed subordinate to the rule of the first; they rule and are ruled (tar’usū wa tur’asū). In the same way, the ruler of the city is the most perfect part of the city in his specific qualification and has the best of everything which anybody else shares with him; beneath him are people who are ruled by him and rule others. [...] This applies also to all existents. For the relation of the First Cause (al-sabab al-awwal) to the other existents is like the relation of the king of the excellent city (malik al-madîna al-fādila) to its other parts. [...] Some of the arts rule certain (other) arts while serving others at the same time, whereas there are other arts which, not ruling anything at all, only serve. Therefore the art of ruling the excellent city (sinâ’atu rī’āsati al-madîna al-fādila) cannot just be any chance art, nor due to any chance habit whatever. For just as the first ruler in a genus cannot be ruled by anything in that genus – for instance the ruler of the limbs cannot be ruled by any other limb, and this holds good or any ruler of any composite whole – so the art of the ruler in the excellent city of necessity cannot be a serving art at all and cannot be ruled by any other art, but his art must be an art towards the aim of which all the other arts tend, and for which they strive in all the actions of the excellent city»82.

In this passage from al-Fārābî the association of the two roots r-‘s and h-d-m serves not only to clarify the hierarchies of the human body, the city and reality itself, but also to illuminate the structure of knowledge: one art alone, the one that is at the head of all the others and is not dominated by any of them, can be the art of whoever is at the head of the city; it is an art “towards the aim of which all the other arts tend, and for which they strive in all the actions of the excellent city”. Just as the commanding organ of the body and the First Principle of

82 See AL-FÆRÆBî, al-Madîna al-Fæ≈ila, XXVII; Idées des habitants cit., 105-107 (89-91 for the French translation); for the English translation by Walzer, see Al-Farabi on the Perfect State cit., 235-241; for the heart as dominant or ruling organ, see also XXI: Idées des habitants cit., 81 (65-66 for the French translation); Al-Farabi on the Perfect State cit., 175: «The heart is the ruling organ [al-’adā al-ra’îs] which is not ruled by any other organ of the body. It is followed in rank by the brain, which is also a ruling organ [’adun mā ra’îs], its supremacy [ri’āsa], however, not being primary but secondary: it is ruled by the heart, and rules over all the other organs and limbs. For it is itself subordinate to the heart [or: it serves the heart: yahdim], whereas all the other organs and limbs are subordinate to it [or: serve it: yahdim], in accordance with the natural aim [maqsūd] of the heart. It may be compared to the steward in a household [šähb dâr.
existents cannot be at the service of anything or anyone, the dominating art, the art of the ra'îs, cannot be at the service of any other art or discipline. Here then, as in ihāth, I, 3, a discipline is presented which, being “at the head of” all the other arts, cannot be “useful” to any. Nevertheless, while in Avicenna the reference is certainly to metaphysics, the sovereign art to which al-Fārābī refers should be politics. If we consider al-Fārābī’s epistemology, we find that at the head of the city is ‘civil science’ (al-‘ilm al-madani) which, placed at the summit of knowledge in his Enumeration of the Sciences, is equivalent to the polītikē which Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics I, 2, defines as the most “architectonic” science. In this sense, politics or civil science is the art or discipline (sinā‘a) “to the aim of which” all the others tend, in that it includes the knowledge of the aims of the different actions of the city (al-ṣayāt allātī li-aqīl-hā ta‘f’alu [al-af’āl]). Despite their differences (if the discipline described as the highest is not the same), it is interesting to compare the passage from al-Fārābī with the one from Avicenna. They reveal not only a common terminology and a similar image, but also the fact that both al-Fārābī and Avicenna seem to be clearly inspired by Aristotle. In fact, to the passage of Nicomachean Ethics already cited (I, 2, 1094a27-b2), where μαντική λόγος is politics, one should add Metaph. A 982b4–7, where Aristotle presents the science which is at the head of the others: ἀρχικοστέττε ὑπὸ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν, καὶ ἐπέλλα ἀρχική τῆς ὑποτευνόγος. This science is defined, on the one hand, as the science that studies the aim for which everything should be done and, on the other, as the science that studies that which is the best in all nature (τὸ ἀριστὸν ἐν τῇ φύσει πάση). So, while in the

al-insānī; for the steward himself is subordinate [yiḥdim] to the master, whereas the other members of the house are subordinate [yiḥdim] to him, in accordance with the aim [maqṣūd] of the master in both matters. On the neo-Pythagorean origin of the analogy between the members of the city and the parts of the body, see also Al-Farabi on the Perfect State cit., 435; in L’Harmonie entre les opinions de Platon et d’Aristote cit., 30–31, Mallet (who points out a similar image in al-Fārābī’s K. al-Ta‘lîl) cites as sources: Plat., Politicus, 274a ff. (for the analogy between the king and God); Rep., II, 369c ff. (for the origin of the city in relation to human needs). For another use of ṣīrā to mean “sovereignty”, see, e.g., GUTAS, s.v. Fārābī, in Encyclopaedia Iranica, ed. F. Najjar, Dar al-mašriq, Bayrūt 1964, 61; 73, 79.


84 ARIST., Eth. Nic., I, 2, 1094a27-b2.

first definition one can recognize politics, as in *Eth. Nic.*, I, 2, 1094b2-10, in the second it is clearly to metaphysical wisdom that Aristotle is referring. Actually, the terminology and the imagery Avicenna and al-Farabi use are the same as Aristotle’s. The relations of disciplines are indeed already expressed by Aristotle in terms of serving and commanding. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 2, politics “uses” (χρούμενη) the different disciplines – and in the *Metaphysics*, A, 2, wisdom (οὐσία) predominates: every discipline is its “servant” or “ancilla” (ὑπηρετοῦσ; an image which is, incidentally, reminiscent of the scholastic image of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*).

And in the Arabic tradition, at least in the tradition to which ’Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s (d. 1231) paraphrase belongs, it is precisely the roots ʿ-r-s and ḥ-d-m that provide the Arabic translation, respectively, of the preeminence of wisdom (οὐσία *hikma*) and the ancillarity of the sciences:

«the wisdom [hikma; i.e. the knowledge of him who is a philosopher] is the most perfect in wisdom and in sovereignty (akmala hikmatan wa rī’ūṣatan) and every wisdom [or knowledge: hikma] different from it is poor in respect to it (fāqīra ilay-hā) in that from it it obtains its own principles and is its servant (wa ḥādima la-hā).»

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86 This difficulty (for which see also *Eth. Nic.*, VI, 13, 1145a2) is remarked on by Ross (ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary by W.D. Ross, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997 [c. Oxford University Press, 1924], 121-122). For Alexander of Aphrodisias οὐσία is the predominant branch of knowledge; since it makes it possible to know the aim or goal of everything, which is the good, it is never a servant or ancilla of the other sciences; see ALEXANDRI APHRODISIENSIS, *In Aristotelis Metaphysicorum Commentaria*, ed. M. Hayduck, CAG I, typis et impensis Georgii Reimeri, Berlin 1891, 14,3-15,15; Alexander refers also to *Eth. Nic.*, see *ibid.* 14,10-11: πάσα κρηστή καὶ πάσα μετάθεσι, ὁμοιοῦ δὲ πρόεξετε καὶ προικέρης κύρους τοὺς ἐφεσθεῖκ δόκει.

87 See ARIST., *Metaph.*, A, 2, 982b4-7; also A, 2, 982a16-17; *Eth. Nic.*, IV, 3, 1124b18: the first meaning of ὑπηρετεῖον is “to serve as oarsman”, hence “to serve”, “be an instrument to”, “be subordinate to”, “be obedient to” etc.; for the vocabulary of utilization or use (χρηστοκ) and of “being at the head of” (κύρος), see also *Eth. Nic.*, VI, 7, 1145a5 ff. In *Metaph.*, I, 3 Aristotle further assigns to the science of being the study of principles; he refers to this question again in *E*., 1. To the examples of the analogy between utility and service, in so far as the Latin tradition is concerned, one could add the scholastic image of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* (which used, in fact, to be traced back to Aristotle). On the history of the image, the first known example of which is found in Philo of Alexandria, and which appears in Clemens of Alexandria and in Origen, see E. GILSON, *La servante de la théologie*, in *Etudes de philosophie médiévale*, Commission des publications de la Faculté de Lettres, Strasbourg 1921, 29-30; P. BAUDOUX, *Philosophia Ancilla Theologiae*. *Antoniamum*, 12 (1937), 293-326; both are recorded also in P. HADOT, *Che cos’è la filosofia antica?*, Einaudi, Torino 1996, 244 and n. 5 [original title: *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, Gallimard, Paris 1995]. BAUDOUX (Philosophia ‘Ancilla Theologian’ cit., 294-295) referred, however marginally, to Aristotle as a possible source of the metaphor; the hypothesis of an Aristotelian origin was supported by G. SANSEVERINO, *Philosophia christianus cum antiqna et nova comparata*, Biblioteca Catholica Scriptorum, Napoli 1878, I, 101.

88 *wa hikmatu-hu [scil. al-ḥakīm] takūnu akmala hikmatan wa rī’ūṣatan wa kullu hikmatan savā-hā faqīra ilay-hā bi-ʿabd maḥbādī ‘īn-hā wa ḥādima la-hā*: see A. NEUWIRTH, *Neue Materialien zur Arabischen Tradition der beiden ersten Metaphysik-Bücher*, «Die Welt des Islams», 18 (1977-78), 97,30-31 (for the whole article, see 84-100). The paraphrase by ’Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (d. 1231) of *Metaph.*, α, where there is a
Another passage, this time one by Avicenna himself (Metaphysics) further clarifies the one under examination. Sovereignty appears, in fact, in the analysis of anteriority based on Aristotle (Metaph., Δ, 11) which Avicenna proposes in Ilāhiyyāt IV 89. With an intention similar to the one noted above for the notion of “utility”, Avicenna achieves a redefinition which is consistent with his emanational system. We must now take a moment to examine it.

First of all, Avicenna defines anteriority, in a general but ambiguous (bi-l-taškīk) way, as the notion, related to that of posteriority, with which one signifies as “anterior”, in a given series, any one element to which we attribute something more than we attribute to anything that can be described as a posterior element 90. Then, according to the principle selected at the outset (place, time, merit...) and to the sphere of the series under consideration (nature, art, chance), he differentiates between the various types or senses of anteriority (and of posteriority): in addition to the universally accepted “before” (qabla) and “after” (ba’da), namely the senses of anteriority of place and time, there appear the abstract – and then actually philosophic – meanings, which indicate what is “superior” (al-fā’iq), what is “excellent” (or “eminent”, “noble”, “virtuous”: al-fāqīl) and also what “precedes” (al-sābiq). In this same context Avicenna again evokes the notion of “being at the head of” (and implicitly also the notion which we have seen is complementary to it, i.e. of service): preceding or anterior in this abstract sense, in which the principle is precisely the fact of forming a series (the notion itself), applies also to “that which” or “the one who is served” (al-mahdūm) and the head (al-ra’īs); the principle according to which it is established which way the order (tartīb) is oriented is in fact the head (or leader) (al-ra’īs), not that which or the one who is headed (or led) (al-mar’ūs ‘alay-hi); and if it is the one who is led who moves, this is perforce contingent upon the leader. The same notions of ri’āsa (and of ḥidma) that formed the framework of the passage from al-Fārābī mentioned above thus serve here to interpret the Aristotelian sense of anteriority or priority according to power (κατὰ δινόμαιν), the principle of which is
the choice or will (προνοίας) of that which, being more powerful (δυνατότερον), is anterior or prior (πρότερον): it is because the head is more powerful that there is movement by his choice or will\(^91\). But in the same context, another element is noteworthy. Avicenna gives a definition of anteriority in relation to existence (bi-l-qiyās ilā l-wuğūd) which makes it possible to identify, as a property of the cause, essential anteriority, namely the anteriority that is related to obtaining existence (huṣūl al-wuğūd) and according to which a thing is anterior to another because, being necessary (in itself or by virtue of some other thing), it gives the other the necessary existence (by virtue of some other thing) which, for this other, being still only possible, cannot but be lacking\(^92\). Thus Avicenna starts with these same distinctions to arrive, on the one hand, at defining anteriority— and hence hierarchy— which are genuinely that in the philosophical sense (those of order, power and existence) and, on the other hand, at defining the relations between (and the utility of) the branches of knowledge. The idea Avicenna has to justify in all these different contexts is the same idea of a teleologically oriented hierarchy. The anteriority relevant to the doctrine about the classification of the sciences, and hence metaphysics as the supreme science, is, in fact, not unlike the one that is fundamental to the emanative flow, the anteriority which is not temporally determined. Since it makes possible the predication of a distinction between two elements (which are described indeed as one anterior and the other posterior) without any temporal connotation, essential anteriority can serve both to legitimate a relation of causality within contemporaneity (and hence within co-eternity, as in the case of the metaphysical relation between the First Principle and the world\(^93\)), and also to predicate the preeminence of one element in regard to another, in a context which is in itself absolutely atemporal, such as the ranking of knowledge. The anteriority of metaphysics to the other sciences is, obviously, not the temporal one, but is precisely the one that is essential, or in and of itself, which is attributed to the cause: in a temporal sense,\(^90\)

\(^91\) See Arist., Metaph., V (Δ), 11, 1018b22-25: τά δὲ κατὰ δύναμιν (τὸ γάρ ὑπερίχον τῇ δυνάμει πρότερον, καὶ τὸ δυνατότερον τοιοῦτον δ’ ἵστιν ὅ ὅ κατὰ τὴν προνοίαν αἰνάγχη ἀκολουθεῖν θάτερον καὶ τὸ ὑστερον, ὅστε μὴ κινοῦντος τῇ ἐκείνου μὴ κινεῖται καὶ κινοῦντος κινεῖται δὲ προνοίας ὑπῆρη. The same terms (“to be at the head of” or “to be the leader of” and “to be led by”) are found in Averroës, Tafsîr ma ba’d at-™abî’at, ed. M. Bouyges, Dār el-Machreq, 1938-1948, II, 568 (T) and 572 (C16). For Avicenna, see Ilâh., IV, 1, 164,6-11; in Liber de philosophia prima cit., 185-186 the terms once again indicate ruling and serving: […] Et de hac maneria posuerunt prium eum cui servitut et gubernatorum; voluntas enim accidit gubernatori et non gubernato, nec accidit gubernato nisi postquam acciderit gubernator; movetur igitur voluntate gubernatoris».

\(^92\) See the whole discussion in Ilâh., IV, 1, from 164,12 to the end (169); see also VIII, 1 and 3, where, following Arist., Metaph., II (ατ.), 994a5-10 ff., Avicenna expounds a causal hierarchy (cause – intermediate – effect) which is fundamental for emanation. Essential anteriority is in fact the sovereignty of the Principle; from a different point of view see also Ilâh., VIII, 7, 364-366 (rubūbiyya).
by contrast, in agreement with the Aristotelian formulation according to which what is anterior “by essence” is posterior “for us”, metaphysics is posterior to the other disciplines, because its study is subsequent. (“At the head” of the sciences in the sense of anteriority in study is, in fact, – as we have seen – logic). This anteriority is explained by Avicenna in, for example, the K. al-Burhān:

« [...] And since being [the existent] and the one are common (’ammān) to all subjects, it is necessary that all the other sciences be subordinate to the science that studies them. And since there is no subject that is more general (q’ām) than they, it cannot be that the science that studies them is subordinate to another science. And since what is not the principle of existence of some existents and not of others, but is instead the principle of the entire caused existent, cannot possibly be studied in one of the particular sciences nor can it be in itself the subject of a particular science – it, in fact, requires a relation (nīsba) with every existent96 – and [since, furthermore] it is not the subject of the universal and general science either, because it is not something universal and general, it is accordingly necessary for the science of it to be a part of this science97.»

93 On the status of the world, eternal but caused to be, see Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh., VIII, 3.
94 The term hikma “wisdom” indicates metaphysics in the opening section of the text of the Ilāḥiyāt (I, 1, 3,9-10: al-mā‘ānī al-hikmiyya); see also I, 1, 5,8-12; 2, 15,11; VI, 5, 300,8; X, 2, 443,12 (al-baḥṭ al-hikmī); X, 5, 455,3 al-hikma al-nazariyya. In IX, 6, 421,4 e X, 3, 446,10 al-hikma al-nazariyya indicates divine wisdom and hence providence, or the divine design or project. The term has been interpreted in this very same sense in X, 2, 443,2 (see Liber de philosophia prima, 534 and G.C. Anawati: AVICENNE, La Métaphysique du Shifa’ cit., 177); although in IX, 7, 423,10 al-hukamā al-ilāḥiyān clearly indicates those who devote themselves to metaphysics. Thus one could also read it as metaphysics in X, 2, 443,2 (see AVICENNA, Metafisica cit., 1019 and 1270, n. 73 and The Metaphysics of the Healing cit., 360). Other references in BERTOLACCI, The Structure cit., 7 n. 13.
95 The Aristotelian idea of what comes “after in relation to us” but “before in itself”, which we associated with propositetics above, can, in fact, be translated respectively into temporal (after in time) and essential (before in itself) terms; on the temporal determination of the pedagogical classification of the sciences, see again HADOT, Les divisions des parties de la philosophie cit., 213-214 [139-140 in the reprint].
To the question of the order of the disciplines we should add the question of their history (see GUTAS, Paul the Persian cit., 256-260); for Avicenna, see Ilāh., VII, 2; Ilāh., VII, 2, 310,11-314,7 (Gutas, 259, n. 70 emends gilat in Ilāh., VII, 2, 310,11-13 and reads muqālatā, i.e. “sophistic”, instead of “error”; error seems however to be indicated throughout this section with the same term); see also The Metaphysics of the Healing cit. On this topic, see also al-Fārābī’s Book of Letters (Kitāb al-ḥurūf) cit., 132,6-7: dialectic and sophistic precedes demonstrative philosophy (al-falsafa al-burhāniyya). A remark on the hierarchical sense as regards the internal parts of metaphysics (with theology at their summit), in BERTOLACCI, The Structure cit., 9: “The tripartition of metaphysics witnessed by Text 1 (Theology, Universal Science/PE, First Philosophy/Universal Science SE) does not reflect the order of human knowledge; it rather corresponds to the degree of importance of the things investigated in these three parts. Theology is surely the most important part of metaphysics in Avicenna’s mind”.
96 See also Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh., VIII, 4, 344,1-3: “Of every existent many different modes of existence are negated and every existent [thing] has a sort of relation and connection with [other] existent [things], and specially the one from which every existence flows”.
97 I.e. of the science that studies the being (and the one); for the passage, Ibn Sīnā, K. al-Burhān, II, 7, 165,5-10.
IV. Getting beyond utility: towards gratuitousness or generosity

The preceding survey should have demonstrated how much, from among the specific connotations of the emanational doctrine, is relevant to Ilāh., I, 3. The concepts of descent, degradation and donation downwards, and that of sovereignty or essential anteriority are, as is clear, consciously evoked. Thus Avicenna proposes an analogy between the relation that the First Principle establishes with beings (namely emanation or flow) and the relation that the divine science, later clearly called “metaphysics” (Ilāh., I, 3, 21,12), establishes with the various branches of learning. This analogy is reminiscent of the one posited by al-Fārābī in his Book of the Principles of the Inhabitants of the Excellent City, and which, suggested at first only linguistically, is later, as we shall see, clearly defined in the text⁹⁸. The images referred to gradually assume more distinct outlines:

«Now, utility in its proper sense is a sort of service (qariba min al-h¯ idma), while “causing to acquire”, which proceeds from the more noble to [or in] the more ignoble, does not resemble service; and yet you know that he who performs a service is useful to him for whom the service is performed; but that also he for whom the service is performed is useful to him who performs the service; and here I mean utility if you consider it in its absolute sense [...]. Thus the utility of this science – and in what way we have already made clear – is that of causing to acquire the certainty of the principles of the particular sciences and to determine what it is that they have in common, even if this is not a question of principles. And this is the utility of the leader in relation to him who is led, and that of him who receives a service in terms of him who performs a service [...].»⁹⁹

If metaphysics “serves”, it is not in the sense of “service” (normally associated with the idea of advantage or of something useful) which, in contrast to sovereignty, can be attributed only to the subordinate elements of a hierarchy¹⁰⁰, “Causing to acquire” is a movement which, as Avicenna makes clear, proceeds “from the more noble to the more vile” (or “from the superior to the inferior”), and cannot therefore be identified with service (it “does not resemble service”: laysa tu‡bih al-h¯ idma)¹⁰¹. The idea suggested by the term manfa’a as it relates to

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⁹⁸ IBN SI-NA-, Ilāh., 18,14-17; Liber de philosophia prima, I, 3,19-20, see infra.
⁹⁹ IBN SI-NA-, Ilāh., I, 3, 18,9-14.
¹⁰⁰ See again the passages mentioned above corresponding to ARIST., Metaph., I, (A), 1, 982a16-19; V, (A), 11, 1018a22-25.
¹⁰¹ IBN SI-NA-, Ilāh., I, 3, 18,9-10. One should bear in mind the above-mentioned principle: the superior or more noble (al-afdal) neither is nor acts in consideration of the inferior or more vile (al-ahus). The term “more noble” (al-afdal) is also used by Avicenna in Ilāh., IX, 4 in relation to the procession of intelligences; al-afdal “the more noble” or “the better” is also metaphysics (like its subject matter; ma’lim) in Ilāh., I, 1, 5,9.
metaphysics is instead the literal one, i.e. of benefit: if utility in its proper sense
is a sort of service (or rather is close or comparable to that) because “useful” is
that which causes (one) to reach the good or the better, in the case of meta-
physics, which is the summit of learning and provides the principles of the oth-
er sciences, the context is no longer that of the useful, but rather that of the good
(whose purpose and the good coincide). And the good, moreover, constitutes
the basis for the use of the term in theology as well, where God Himself is de-
scribed as nāfī' in that He is “of use” or “does good” to man102.

But then, in such a context, what is left of the usual or general meaning of
utility? It is no longer utility or advantage that Avicenna refers to, but rather a
category different from and superior to utility, a category most appropriately
called gratuitousness (ifāda and ifādā) and generosity or liberality (gūd). It is in
these concepts that Avicenna's use of these terms is most fully explained. To clar-
ify the meaning of the passage with which we started – and the sense of this
rather singular “utility” – one must turn, in fact, to the discussion in Ilāh., VI, 5
where, in the context of a comprehensive survey of purpose (and of the good that
coincides with it), Avicenna discusses the meaning of the good and differenti-
ates between the “good” or “goodness” (ḥayr; ḥayriyya) on the one hand and
“generosity” (gūd) on the other:

«As regards how generosity and the good are, one must know that one same thing has
a relationship with that which receives and that by virtue of it improves, and a rela-
tionship with [the agent] from which it comes. When its relationship with the agent
from which it comes is such that the agent is not obliged to be acted upon – [whether
it be a question] of this [thing] or of another thing that may follow upon it – then its re-
lationship with the agent is ‘generosity’ and [its relationship] with the passive [element]
is ‘good’. The term ‘generosity’ and those that have their same function have been
placed in languages [to indicate] first of all ‘the fact, on the part of him who causes to
acquire a benefit, of causing it to be acquired by something different from himself with-
out asking for anything in exchange’ [...]103.

On the basis of his articulation of “points of view”, which is, moreover, re-
current in his system104, Avicenna assigns to the two concepts he inherited from
earlier theoreticians and which are present in theological tradition105, distinct

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102 Similarly, God is described as dāir, to the extent that He harms man, in order to punish him; see
Gimaret, Les noms divins cit., 331-333, where he mentions the term as it is found in 8th-9th century tradi-
tional lists of divine names; see also supra (note 9) about the Qur’anic passages which are the basis for
such an interpretation.

103 Ibn Sīnā, Ilāh., VI, 5, 296.6-10.

104 On this distinction, see Michot, La destinée de l’homme cit., 62, n. 18.

105 These terms have a long philosophical history. For “good” (ḥayr), suffice it to mention the Arabic
but complementary meanings. The distinction between the “good” and “generosity” is based on the distinction which could be said to form the framework for the entire Avicennian system, i.e. between donating (f-y-d; w-h-b) and receiving (q-b-l): the flow which is in itself generosity, namely a gratuitous gift of being, is, in relation to other than itself, a good or a providing, because the gratuitous gift of being cannot but be received by the world, which is inferior to the First Principle, as a “good”.

The “good” and “generosity” thus coincide (or, more precisely, generosity coincides with at least one of the senses in which one can use the term “good”) in that they are two aspects of the same relationship, which is that of the gift; but they differ precisely in that they indicate different aspects, sides, perspectives or “points of view” of one and the same reality; when the action of donating is considered in relation to the receiver it is a “good” because it is in fact such as to cause the latter to improve; when instead it is considered in relation to the donor (who thereby causes improvement), if it has been carried out without anything coming back in exchange, it is “generosity”. The aspect considered in this latter case is that of the agent, which is really such only in that it bestows without being at the same time the passive referent of an action (the agent – as Avicenna asserts – is not “obliged to be acted upon” because it does not receive anything in return).

Thus it becomes clear how the terms for generosity (and for the good) are to be applied (or at least can be applied) to the question of the relation between metaphysics and the other sciences: the latter receive its principles without its taking anything in exchange. If, indeed, something does come to metaphysics, it is in relation to us, not to itself. Thus to the traditional sense of utility, connected with the idea of progression in learning, Avicenna joins the unusual sense of “gratuitousness” or “generosity”. Just as the First Principle is “generous” because, in its absolute independence, it bestows existence, which is good, on the world without receiving anything in return.

title of De Causis: K al-idāḥ fi al-ḥayr al-maḥd “The book of the clarification of pure good”; “generosity”, “liberality” or “gratuitous goodness” (ġūdā) is also a translation for ṣayyāḥā in Proclus; following Proclus, “generosity” or “gratuitous goodness” (ġūdā) is, for instance, one of the divine attributes (together with power and wisdom) in Yahyā ibn ‘Adi (Treatise on Unity, 310, n. 242, ed. Samir) and in al-Farābī (al- Madīna al-Fādīla, IX). For the theological tradition, see Girardet, Les noms divins cit., 395, 402-404. For a lexicographic survey, see Lane, An Arabic-English Lexicon cit., I, 2, 1865,828-831 (for ḥayr: 829-830) and 481-483 (ġūdā). 106 If evil can be expressed in many ways (since there are many forms of privation), relative good is also variously indicated: the forms of perfection are numerous as well. Only absolute good, the good of the First Principle and of divine flow, is unique, and there is no corresponding absolute evil, because absolute non-existence cannot be predicated; see Ibn Sīnā, Ḥūd, VI, 5, 296,5-10.

107 Ibn Sīnā, Ḥūd, VI, 5, 296,5-10.
hence nāfiʿa, “beneficent” or “useful”, because it gives all the other sciences the certainty or verification of their principles\(^{108}\) without there being any return; Avicenna maintains this not only in his *Metaphysics*, but also in his *Logic*:

«Since we have established that among the principles of the sciences there are some that are not self-evident, it is necessary that these be made evident in another science, whether it be particular, like the former, or more general, until ending with the most general of the sciences. And so that is why it is necessary for the principles of all the other sciences to be verified in this science […]»\(^{109}\).

Every hierarchy can, in fact, be traversed in either direction. The descending direction expresses *in reality* both the relation between the First Principle and the world in the hierarchy of beings, and the relation between the first philosophy and the other sciences. The ascending direction indicates a change of perspective: one no longer considers the reality of things, the First Principle and the derivation of the world, but instead man, his knowledge of the world, and the path which by virtue of this he must follow\(^{110}\). The ascending direction is therefore valid “for us”; it is *in knowledge* that we progress, or rather we ascend from one step to the next; it is in regard to knowledge that one speaks of utility:

«[...] Or again: something that is a principle in a given science is a question in another, and this in two ways: either both the sciences differ in subject matter in terms of generality and particularity, so that a thing will be made clear in a superior science and will be taken as a principle in an inferior science, and this is a true principle (mabdaʿ haqiqa); or else, a thing will be made clear in an inferior science and will be taken as a principle in the superior science, and this is a principle in relation to us (bi-l-qiyas ilay-nā). Or else, the two sciences will not differ in generality or particularity, but will be like calculus and geometry and then the questions of one of the two will be principles for the questions of the other […]»\(^{111}\).

\(^{108}\) This is, however, a fundamental concept not only for Avicenna’s epistemology, but for his whole system; see GUTAN, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian cit.*


\(^{110}\) For a description of the hierarchical order of the world, see IBN SI-NĀ, *Ilāh.*, X, 1, 435-436,3; *Liber de philos. prima cit.*, 522-523; *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 338, with emendation of the text. This passage is only apparently in conflict: if the description of the emanation of the sublunar world is given in ascending terms (see IBN SI-NĀ, *Ilāh.*, X, 1, 435,11-12; 436,1-3) this is, it would seem, because it implies the reverse direction. Avicenna explains this in, e.g., the *Épître sur la quiddité des prières*: having begun with one intelligence, the process of creation concludes with another intelligence (man’s); see IBN SI-NĀ, *Traités mystiques. Traité sur la nature de la Prière cit.*, 29-30 (16-17 for the French translation).

\(^{111}\) IBN SI-NĀ, *K. al-Burhān*, II, 7, 160,1-5. In an ascending direction: one passes from one science to
If, in other words, the “proper” sense of “useful” is that of progression, the proper sense of a hierarchy is that of descent or degradation. And only metaphysics, placed at the summit of philosophic inquiry, can be called “useful” in this authentic descending sense. In fact, after accounting for the peculiar sense in which one can speak of the utility of metaphysics, Avicenna elucidates the analogy between the object of study and its branch of learning: he brings into play, on the one hand, metaphysics and the relation it establishes with the other branches of learning and, on the other, the First Principle and its relation with beings; he thus clarifies the analogy itself, which he had initially only suggested. Here too, one seems to hear an echo in Avicenna of the passage from al-Fārābī mentioned above, and hence of Aristotle’s words which seemed to explain it.

«the relation of this science to the particular sciences, in fact, is the relation of the thing, the knowledge of which is intended in this science, to the things, the knowledge of which is intended in those sciences: just as the thing is the principle of the existence of those, so the science of it is the principle of the actualization (or validation) of the science of those».

V. The consistency of the image: rank, name and autonomy of metaphysics

In the following part of Ilāhīyyāt I, 3, just after what we have considered up to now, Avicenna establishes the “rank” and “name” of the science of which he is speaking, but he clearly indicates at this point that with metaphysics (and with its object of inquiry) one has left behind the dimension of the relatively useful and of another in that the one provides for the other either the questions on which its inquiry will be focused, or the principles themselves, which are, in any case, principles of the “what”, and not of the “wherefore”; hence they are principles only in relation to us, and not in themselves. Moreover, the distinction between the subject (being) and the object of inquiry (God) of metaphysics is linked to this question as well.

112 By maqād Avicenna means what is normally called mašāb, i.e. the “object of inquiry” or “goal”.

113 Ibn Sīnā, Ilāhīyyāt I, 3, 18,14-18; the Latin version provides an explication by translating somewhat differently; Liber de philosophia prima cit., I, 3, 19-20: «quoniam comparatio huius scientiae ad alias scientias particulares est sicut comparatio eius cuius cognitio inquiritur in hac scientia ad id cuius cognitio inquiritur in aliis scientiis. Sicut enim haec scientia* [dālīka] est principium essendi illas, sic scientia huius est principium certitudinis scientii illae»; see also The Metaphysics of the Healing cit., 14. On the relation of this passage to the passage from the Excellent City quoted above, it should be remembered that, while al-Fārābī’s analogy is based on the idea of the First Principle as final cause, Avicenna here stresses the First Principle as efficient cause (i.e. “principle of realization”; metaphysics is, in fact, referred to here as the provider of principles). Hence, for al-Fārābī the ruling discipline seems to be politics (which knows the ultimate goal and sees to the supreme goal of general happiness) and not metaphysics (see Anśūr., Eth. Nic., I, 2, 1094b2 and supra, n. 82). Another example of the analogy between the First Principle and the First Science can be found in Ilāhīyyāt VI, 3, 278,5-8.
relative advantage, to enter the absolute dimension of the good and of the ultimate aim which Aristotle, moreover, already associated with “wisdom”\textsuperscript{114}. The rank (\textit{martaba}) of metaphysics is, in fact, posterior to that of physics and the other disciplines in terms of learning; considered in itself, metaphysics is, nevertheless, superior to every other science, so that, regarded by itself, it should be called “that which is before nature” (\textit{ma\'a qabla al-\textsuperscript{t}abi\'a}), because, more truly than in mathematics, what one studies in it is, because of its essence (the divine being) and because of its generality (the existent and its conditions) “before nature”. Yet again an Alexandrian theme has been taken up and introduced into the characteristic relations of the Avicennian system. One studies metaphysics indeed after the other disciplines (the physical and mathematical sciences), and in this sense its rank is subsequent to theirs, but this happens not because it uses as principles what has come from them, but instead because, in relation “to us”, or rather propaedeutically, and hence in a sense that is opposite to that of the hierarchy of things considered in themselves, one gets to it after having acquired those other disciplines\textsuperscript{115}. It is Avicenna himself, then, who, in positioning metaphysics as an “antephysics”, uses the distinction, justified in the \textit{Kit\={a}b al-Burh\={a}n}, between what it is in relation to us and what it is in itself\textsuperscript{116}.

Nevertheless there is still an unsolved problem. Attributing “generosity” to metaphysics is in fact logically possible only if the science of being can be called independent of all the other sciences, just as the First Principle, which is entirely self-referential, is independent of beings. From one point of view the autonomy of the divine science seems obvious. Since it is the “first philosophy” it in fact provides or “causes” the various sciences “to acquire” the “certainty” (\textit{yaq\={i}n}) or the verification (\textit{tash\={i}h}) of their principles without receiving anything in exchange. If “all the other sciences are useful to it”, this is because it “receives” something (the questions which in the other sciences are starting points for inquiry, or at most the principles themselves), but only, as we have seen, in relation to propaedeutics, i.e. in relation to us, not in itself. From another point

\textsuperscript{114} See, e.g., ARIST., \textit{Metaph.}, I (A), 2, 982b5 ca.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibn Sin\={a}, \textit{Il\={a}h.}, I, 3, 19,1-22,4. On this point the variant of \textit{Kit\={a}b al-I\={a}r\={a}t wa l-tanb\={i}h\={a}} is relevant: in the Prologue to the first part the reading is “what comes before it” (i.e. before physics) in Dunya’s edition (166) and G\textsc{\textcopyright}TS’s translation (\textit{Avicenna and the Aristotelian cit.}, 55 and n. 4); in Forget’s edition, based on mss. D and F, one reads : "what comes after it"; the different readings are presented in BERTOLACCI, \textit{The Structure cit.}, 37, n. 121.

\textsuperscript{116} On the idea of “antephysics” and the use of the term, see HASNAWI, \textit{Aspects de la synth\={e}se avicennienne cit.}, 231: «Reprenant un thème de la tradition alexandrine, Avicenne insiste sur le fait que, si pour nous, la métaphysique vient après toutes les sciences, en soi elle devrait les précéder, et que sa dénomination se justifie relativement à nous, mais que, considérée en elle-même, cette science devrait s’appeller ‘antéphysique’. Dans le \textit{Daneshn\={a}me} précisément, l’exposé de la métaphysique précède l’exposé portant sur la physique». 
of view, this autonomy is less visible, if not indeed inconsistent. The autonomy of the divine science should in fact be judged also in relation to its ability to get to its own object of inquiry (establishing the existence of the First Principle) independently of the data provided by the other disciplines. And if, on the one hand, what physics says about God is only a way of arousing man’s attention to the First Principle, on the other it is not clear whether metaphysics really possesses a way (sabil) to arrive at the necessary existence of the First Principle by means of an analysis which is totally independent of the knowledge and experience that the other disciplines provide for man. Again in Ilāh, I, 3 Avicenna alludes to the possibility open to metaphysics of coming to know the First Principle, and hence its very object of inquiry, independently of every other science, referring – as some scholars have already pointed out – to the analysis in Ilāh, I, 6 and I, 7,118, in which, starting from an investigation altogether limited to the notion of existence, Avicenna describes necessary existence as being distinct from possible existence. His arguments seem, however, not to be immediately identifiable as demonstrations of the existence of the First Principle: the result they enable us to reach is a description of the First Principle or the definition of a context, the simultaneously logical and ontological context of necessary existence.119. In any case, even if one were to put aside the Book of Healing and consult instead the discussions in K. al-Išārāt or K. al-Naḡāt, which are generally considered to be the arena of Avicenna’s “ontological” proof, one would still be left with the problem of the autonomy of metaphysics. What must be justified is the passage from the logico-ontological analysis of being, which is a priori – to the sphere – partly perforce empirical and a posteriori – that proceeds from the observation of existence and hence to its qualification as existence which is necessary by virtue of some other thing. In other words, only if Avicenna with his a priori analysis of existence succeeded in demonstrating the existence of the First Principle – passing from the, as it were, horizontal plane of the division of being to the vertical one of the order of causes – would the analogy between meta-

117 Ibn Sinā, Ilāh, I, 1, 6-7.
118 Ibn Sinā, Ilāh, I, 1, 6-7.
119 A similar interpretation (and see also my own remarks in AVICENNA, Metafisica cit., 11-14) can be found in DAVIDSON (Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God cit., 289) and BERTOLACCI (The Structure cit., 24 and n. 70); cfr. MARMURA (Avicenna’s Proof from Contingency for God’s Existence in the Metaphysics of his al-Shifa’, »Medieval Studies«, 42 [1990], 337-352), who compares I,3 with I, 6-7, VI, 2 and VIII I, G. HOUHANS (Ibn Sīnā on Necessary and Possible Existence, »Philosophical Forum,« 4 [1972], 74-86); U. RUDOLPH (La preuve de l’existence de Dieu chez Avicenne et dans la théologie musulmane), in A. DE LIBERA / A. ELAMRANI-JAMAL / A. GALONNIER [eds.], Langages et Philosophie. Hommage à Jean Jolivet, Vrin, Paris 1997, 339-346), who finds in Ilāh, I, 6 an actual proof for the existence of the First Principle; see also CRUZ HERNÁNDEZ, El concepto de Metafísica de Avicena cit. and TH. A. DRUART, Avicenna’s Influence on Duns Scotus’ Proof for the Existence of God in the Lectura, in JANSSENS / DE SMET (eds.), Avicenna and His Heritage cit., 253-266.
physics and the First Principle be consistent\textsuperscript{120}. But this transition, precisely because it involves the transformation of ontology into a cosmology, cannot, it would seem, exclude the recognition of the world\textsuperscript{121}.

VI. Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, A, 2

In Avicenna’s discussion of utility various Aristotelian themes emerge. First of all there is the concept of the perfection and happiness of the soul as an intellectual happiness, which, in Arabic thought, had already been extensively explored by al-Fārābī: \( ṭābat al-khāṣṣah \) as an organized system prepares the soul for obtaining happiness (\( tāḥṣīl al-sa‘ādah \)) and this, while on the one hand a result of achieving perfection, ends up, on the other, by corresponding to it\textsuperscript{122}. Then there is precisely the theme of the utility or the uselessness of knowledge, which constitutes the underlying dominant idea of the first pages of Aristotle’s \textit{Metaphysics}: our senses are loved even apart from their utility (\( χρῆσιν: \textit{Metaph.}, A, 1, 980a3 \)); exactly those people are considered wiser who discover not (and devote themselves not to) what is useful (\textit{Metaph.}, A, 1, 981b16-20). And, most importantly, there are the questions Aristotle asks in \textit{Metaph.} A, 2 and that Avicenna seems to take up in discussing the utility of metaphysics: among the sciences wisdom (\( οὐσία \)) is the one that is an end in itself and is chosen for its own sake, rather than (\( μᾶλλον \)) one that is sought in view of the results that can be derived from it\textsuperscript{123}, just as – as we have already observed – that one is more truly (\( μᾶλλον \)) wisdom that is hierarchically superior, which is also the one that knows the purpose of all things, which is the good\textsuperscript{124}. Wisdom then is the not useful science (or it is

\textsuperscript{120} On the idea of verticality, see \textit{Išārāt}, 709, quoted in \textit{Marmura, Avicenna’s Proof from Contingency} cit., 347.

\textsuperscript{121} On this topic, see Ö.M. Alper, \textit{Avicenna’s Argument for the Existence of God. Was He Really Influenced by the Mutakallimun?}, in McGinnis (ed.) with the Assistance of Reisman, \textit{Interpreting Avicenna} cit., 133-135 (for the whole article, 129-141).


\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Arist., Metaph.}, I, (A), 982a14-16: καὶ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν δὲ τὴν αὐτής ἔνεκεν καὶ τοῦ εἰδίναι χάριν ἀρετῆς οὐσίας μᾶλλον εἰναι σοφικάν ἢ τῆς τῶν ἀνθρωπονόμων ἔνεκεν.

\textsuperscript{124} See the Aristotelian passage cited above in the Arabic version corresponding to \textit{Metaph.}, I, (A), 982a16-17 (καὶ τὴν ἄρχονταν τῆς ὑπερτόους μᾶλλον σοφικάς); see also 982b4-5 (ἡ ἄρχου-
not a useful science): men have devoted themselves to it and continue to do so only after they have taken care of their needs, because all the sciences are more necessary (ἵνα ζωήν ζήσω) than wisdom, but none is better (ἵνα μάν)\textsuperscript{125}. Knowledge, and notably philosophical knowledge, generated by a sense of wonder at things, has no regard for their utility\textsuperscript{126}.

Analogies are not wanting: metaphysics is the science of God (it is divine in both senses: 983a, 5, ca.); it is the science of what is difficult for man to comprehend (982a, 10, ca.) and hence higher in the hierarchy and in contrast to what is easier and comes first for us; it is, in fact, the science of what is most knowable (982b, 1, ca.), namely of causes and first principles (and presupposes a smaller number of principles; 982a, 28-30 ca.); it is the science of the particular as universal (982a, 22 ca.) and it is free and an end in itself (982b, 25, ca.). Lastly, as we have seen, Aristotle’s definition of wisdom as the “purpose” and the “good” of the other disciplines (\textit{Metaph.}, A, 2, 982b, 5, ca.) seems to contain, in a nutshell, the very same analogy between the First Principle and metaphysics.

As various recent studies have also emphasized, the question of whether Avicenna (and his contemporaries) knew \textit{Metaphysics} A cannot be unequivocally or definitively settled. Many indications suggest that Aristotle’s book was in circulation and known to Avicenna, but the history of A in Arabic is still in part unknown and it is impossible to establish with any certainty whether Avicenna could have been directly acquainted with it, in translation, or whether instead he drew on it indirectly, through a commentary or a paraphrase\textsuperscript{127}. This is a prob-

\textsuperscript{125} ARIST., \textit{Metaph.}, I, A, 2, 983a10.


lem to which we mean only to allude here. If, on the one hand, there is in fact a noticeable affinity between Avicenna’s discussion in Ilæh, I, 3 and Book A of Aristotle’s work, one cannot, on the other, fail to emphasize the differences between the two texts. The analogy between the First Principle and the first science that Aristotle seems to suggest does not conjure up nor could it be otherwise – the same picture as in Avicenna, where the sciences regard metaphysics as the good and as their purpose, in part because the reason for metaphysics, and its aim, consists in proving the existence of the divine being. The interest of Avicenna’s analogy between metaphysics and its object of inquiry does not lie only in the close relationship between metaphysics and reality, or gnoseology and ontology, that it establishes, but rather in the meaning that the analogy attributes to the science of divine things, interpreted here in the light of the very relations that define the fundamental principle of the Avicennian system.

128 It is interesting to consider the extant Greek commentaries on this first part of the *Metaphysics*: those of Alexander of Aphrodisias (d. 209), Sirianus (d. 437) and Ammonius (d. 517; as reported by Asclepius). On this part of the work nothing is left in Arabic (we have only some fragments of Alexander’s commentary and Tenistius’ paraphrase of Α; for a general survey, see Bertolaccio, The Structure cit., 58-61 and related notes). For Alexander of Aphrodisias in the Arabic tradition, see R. Goulet / M. Aoudad, *Alexandros d’Aphrodisias*, in Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques cit.*, I, 125-137; for the text: Alex. Aph., *In Aristotelis Metaphysica Commentaria*, ed. M. Hayduck, CAG, I, typis et impensis Georg Reimer, Berolini 1891. Alexander (*In Aristotelis Metaphysica Commentaria cit.*, 3,7-19 comm. a 931b27) asserts the anteriority of theoretical to practical (τῶν ποιητικῶν) branches of knowledge, on the basis of the fact that the former are studied not for anything useful (οὐ πρὸς χρήσην) that can be derived thereby, but for the resultant pleasure (διαγωγή) and for the sake of that knowledge itself (πρὸς αὐτῆς χάριν τῆς γνώσεως); he then discusses the absence of utility in philosophy, connecting it with the freedom of philosophy, which includes being free of what is useful: God, in fact, has no need of any sort of utility (τὸ δὲ θεῖον πάντοτε χρήσης ἄλλοις ἐλάχιστον; see 17,19-20 and generally 16,17-18,17); for οὐσία ἀρχικὴ καὶ ὑπολογικὴ πάντα ἀρχηγοῦ, see 10,17-19; 14,3-15,5. Sirianus also connects the description of οὐσία as the most architectonic science with its knowledge of the ultimate cause of the final cause and of the good; final cause is indeed the chief of all other causes, since all things come into being on account of it: in the world, in the city, in the military camp, in the house and in every one of us (see Syriani *In Metaphysica Commentaria*, ed. G. Kroll, CAG VI, typis et impensis Georgii Reimeri, Berolini 1902, 15,23-16,5 καὶ γὰρ αὐτῷ τὸ τέλος ἡγεμονικῆν ἄμαν ἔχει πρὸς τὰ ἄλλα οὐκ οὐγόρ ἕνεκα πάντα γινεται, ἀλλὰ διοικεῖ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἐν κόσμῳ καὶ ἐν πολιτείᾳ καὶ ἐν στρατεύομαι καὶ ἐν ἀόρῳ καὶ ἐν ἐπίκες ἑμῶν τοῦ δὲ σχῆμα καὶ τοῦ τέλους ἑνεκα πάντα γινεται; and cf. the passage from the *Excellent City* cited above). Acheleius (Ammonius) interprets the utility of the wisdom that lies in the study of the supreme good, as a nourishment for the human intellect (see Aselephi *In Metaphysica Commentaria*, ed. M. Hayduck, CAG VI, typis et impensis Georgii Reimeri, Berolini 1888, 2,20-3,20). On the tradition of the commentaries, see D.J. O’Meara, Le problème de la métaphysique dans l’antiquité tardive, « Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie », 33 (1960), 3-22; Westrink, *The Alexandrian Commentators and the Introductions to Their Commentaries*, in Sorabj (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed cit.*, 325-348.