

II  
ОНТОЛОГИЯ  
И ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЯ

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ONTOLOGY AND  
EPISTEMOLOGY

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**IBN SĪNĀ'S ONTOLOGY  
AND THE QUESTION OF BEING**

**I. The Ontological Modalities: An Overview**

Like all great metaphysicians, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna; d. 428 AH /1037 CE) laid down the foundations of his naturalized causal ontology in terms of logical investigations of the question of *being* (*wujūd*). In the logic divisions of his voluminous *Kitāb al-Shifā'* (*Book of Healing*) and the *Kitāb al-Najāt* (*Book of Deliverance*), Ibn Sīnā posited three modalities: necessity (*wujūb*), contingency *qua* possibility (*imkān*), and impossibility (*imtīnā', istiḥāla*),<sup>1</sup> which entailed the following ontological-logical propositions:

- 1) The *necessary* (*al-wājib*) cannot but be; it is impossible for it not to be; and affirming its non-being is a contradiction.
- 2) The *impossible* (*al-muḥāl*, *al-mumtani'*) cannot be; it necessarily does not exist; and affirming its being entails a contradiction.
- 3) The contingent *qua* possible (*al-mumkin*) can either be or not be; its being or non-being is neither necessary nor impossible; it is ontologically neutral as a pure potentiality to exist or not to exist; and affirming its existence or nonexistence does not result in a contradiction.

While the case of the *necessary* and the *impossible* offer clearer entailments in terms of their existential or privative bearings, the *contingent/possible* does not have anything in its essence that gives precedence to its existence over its non-existence. The contingent is in need of something other than itself to bring it

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibn Sīnā*. *Kitāb al-Shifā'*: Metaphysics II. Ed. G. Anawati, I. Madkour, and S. Zayed. Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'āmma li-'l-kitāb, 1975. P. 35; *Ibn Sīnā*. *Kitāb al-Najāt*: Metaphysics I. Ed. M. Fakhry. Beirut: *Dār al-āfāq al-jadīda*, 1985. P. 255.

from non-being to *being*; since it is mere potentiality *due-to-itself* (*bi-dhātihi*), and exists necessarily in actuality only *due to something other than itself* (*bi-ghayrihi*).

A reflection on *being* in terms of necessity results in two differential ontological-logical modes of existing: that of the *Necessary Existent due-to-itself* (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*), and that of the *necessary existent due-to-something-other-than-itself* (*wājib al-wujūd bi-ghayrihi*); the latter being an *actualized contingent* that has been brought into existence as an effect of an existential cause ('*illa wujūdiyya*) that is prior to it, and is external to its essence. Ultimately, the *necessary existent due-to-something-other-than-itself* is brought into actualized existence by way of a continuous, finite, hierarchical grand chain of causation that connects it with the *Necessary Existent due-to-itself*. In an onto-theological *prima facie* account, one may precipitately hold that the *Necessary Existent due-to-itself* is conceptually derivable from a contemplation of the question of Divinity. When *being* is accounted for in terms of necessity *per se*, that which “necessarily *is*” gets posited *ontologically* (from a perspective on *being/existing*) as “necessary *being*” *qua* “necessary existing”; yet, *ontically* (from a perspective on *beings/existents*) it is grasped as “A Necessary Existent.” However, this “Necessity of *being/existing*,” or this “Necessary Existent,” is ultimately self-sustained *cum* self-derived; in the sense that it *necessarily exists due-to-itself*. Consequently, the “Necessary” *per se* (*al-wājib*) is necessitated in a radically different ontological mode than the manner the contingent becomes necessary due to what is other than itself; namely, by being brought into existence by what is *other*, and continues to exist, or ceases to be, because of *otherness* (and due also to its inherent corruptive nature [*fasād*] as a generated being [*muhdath*]). The metaphysical structure of a contingent is that of borrowed-granted *being*, which does not sustain the reasons of existence in its quiddity *qua* essence;<sup>2</sup> it is *mumkin* in itself, *wājib* through-another.

## II. Logical and Existential Impossibilities

Although Ibn Sīnā affirmed that the impossible cannot by necessity exist, it is nonetheless plausible to partially account for “impossibility” in conceptual and linguistic terms by way of evoking eclectic composites, which are akin to actual existents or mathematical postulated entities. For instance, a “round square” is an impossible existent that cannot be pictured, represented, or actualized; and yet, we could still comment on it from the standpoint of analytic *a priori* statements about “roundness” or “squares,” which consequently lead us to reconfirm the conclusion that it is “impossible”! A “round square” has incommensurable prop-

<sup>2</sup> *Avicenna Latinus*. Liber de Philosophia prima sive Scientia divina I–IV. Ed. S. Van Riet, introduction G. Verbeke. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977. P. 72\*.

erties that are respectively found in round and squared figures that are inherently incompatible in terms of the three-dimensional structure of (geometric and physical) solids, and are furthermore un-describable by way of perceptual determinants or geometric projections. And yet, an impossible, like a “round square,” in its very privative existential absence and non-realization, may still point to some sort of *presence*, though as a negating indeterminateness. It therefore points to “naming” a counter-analytic “non-entity,” which refers to incongruent properties, whose existence in a unified structure cannot be affirmed by its very definition. This impossible being may still be addressed, or quasi-qualified, in terms of certain incoherent linguistic expressions, and borrowed incommensurable predicates, to refer to a “contradiction in terms.” The “round square” is an impossible being in the logical-analytic sense of impossibility.

A “unicorn” is another nonexistent, which belongs to a class of impossible beings that share some family resemblance with actual existents. The unicorn, which is pictured as a horse that has wings and a horn, does not exist in actuality, though, as fictional being, it is imaginable and can be represented, while also believing that it is a nonexistent based on what we know about existents by experience, habit, reflection, definition, and available natural and exact sciences. Nevertheless, in case a distinction can be drawn herein, we could assume that a “unicorn” is not a “*logical impossible*,” like a “round square,” but is rather an “*existential impossible*.” Even though it is implausible, and, at best, most improbable, that a “unicorn” may ever exist (given that its very existence may violate the most probable of the biological laws), its *being* would not entail a *logical* impossibility. From the viewpoint of “possible-worlds” semantics, a unicorn may exist in spite of what is concretely the case in the actual life-world, without violating the principles of logic. However, an analytic impossibility, like that of the “round square,” goes against the rules of logic and mathematics due to the definitions we have of the circle and the square. In this sense, impossibility may be a *logical* impossibility or an *existential* one; and this distinction is itself respectively paralleled by the fundamental difference between the laws of logic from one side, and the most probable empirical generalizations we make about the patterns of nature, on the other side. In spite of all of these dimensions, which we confront when addressing the modality of impossibility, we assert that the impossible is what cannot exist by way of logical determinations or existential attestations.

### III. Causation in Ontology

Rethinking Ibn Sīnā’s modalities of *being* leads us to account for the workings of the principle of causation in his ontology. Unlike necessary *being* and impossible *being*, which are not united with a cause, contingents depend on causation in being brought forth into existence and in continuing to be sustained

within it.<sup>3</sup> We may in this context establish a nuance between *generation* and *preservation*; namely between what causes something to exist, and what sustains it in existence.<sup>4</sup> What is generated and brought into existence, by virtue of something else other than itself, is also in need of *another* in order to subsist in its own being, which is essentially marked by becoming, and destined to corruption. In actualization, the realizing external cause is itself brought from a state of potentiality into a state of actuality by way of bringing forth its receptive effect. Any existing entity, for which existence is not intrinsically necessary, is contingent in itself;<sup>5</sup> and a contingent would not exist in actuality unless it gets realized as a necessary effect of an existential cause that is other than itself. This is the case, given that the cause of an existent entity is that which is other than it; and a cause *qua* cause is *what it is* by virtue of letting an effect emerge out of it by necessity. However, a stress on the necessary connection between an effect and its cause invites the positing of Occasionalist counterarguments with regard to creation, as well as enabling a skeptical penchant concerning induction,<sup>6</sup> along with the assertion of dependency conceptions in reference to an ever-sustaining emanation (*al-suđūr*; *al-fayq*). A conception of contingency in relation to causality relies on the continual intervention on the part of causes to support the actualization of their effects. Ultimately, something is always dependent on what is other than itself in order for it to be or not to be. In this sense, Ibn Sīnā posited “The Necessary Existent due-to-Itself” (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*) as the sustaining ontological-cosmological source, ground, and *telos* for all existents, which reflects a causal nexus of analogical gradation in the intensity of the participation in *being* and reality.<sup>7</sup> This relationship between the One and the many (unity and manifoldness) does not necessarily entail that *being* is the common denominator of all beings as their overarching genus, or that the meaning of “*being*” is equivocal. *Being* is one, and it applies to the Aristotelian categories, to substance, and, in a posterior analogical order, to accidents.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibn Sīnā*. Dāniš Nāmeh (Metaphysica of Ibn Sīnā). Trans. Parviz Morewedge. New York: Columbia University Press, 1973. P. 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibn Sīnā*. Dāniš Nāmeh. P. 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibn Sīnā*. Dāniš Nāmeh. P. 48.

<sup>6</sup> This matter is best exemplified in the critique that al-Ghazālī advanced in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> discussion of the physical sciences part, which centered on doubts raised in reference to the necessary connection between causes and effects that is reminiscent of what we attest centuries later with David Hume’s interrogation of the justification of induction. See: *al-Ghazālī*. *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*). Trans. Michael Marmura. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000. P. 166–177.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibn Sīnā*. Dāniš Nāmeh. P. 76.

<sup>8</sup> *Goichon A.-M.* La philosophie d’Avicenne et son influence en Europe médiévale. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1984. P. 24–27.

#### IV. Actuality and the Metaphysics of Production

Based on Ibn Sīnā's causal explications, it can be claimed that the quiddities of existents are unworthy of *being*, if and only if abstracted from the Necessary Existent due-to-Itself. Accordingly, a quiddity (*māhiyya*) that is separated from its relation with the Necessary deserves "non-being";<sup>9</sup> a contingent removed from the *existential causal chain* would not be; given that, in-itself, a contingent has an indeterminate relation to being or non-being. Existing is thus actualized against the horizon of production in terms of a causal metaphysics of presence *qua* actuality. Existence is thus external to the substantial structure of beings, and their essence is not inclusive of their *being*. Existence is an *event* that happens to the essence of a thing, while this happening *cum* eventuality gets elucidated in cognitive and intellective terms by way of causal naturalized explanations. Yet, there cannot be a cause of a cause *ad infinitum*;<sup>10</sup> given that the causal nexus is not circular and self-referential due to its inherent complexity. The One is thus posited in cosmological terms as the Primary Principle of the All!<sup>11</sup>

Ibn Sīnā's line in thinking seems to be determined within the horizon of an Aristotelian conception of the movement of ἐνέργεια (*energeia*; actuality); as implied by the Arabic *fi'l*, with the thrust of its transmission and transmutation into Latin as *actus* or *actualitas*. In parallel, the sense of δύναμις (*dunamis*; potentiality), the Arabic *quwwa*, is metamorphosed into the Latin *potentia*. Furthermore, φύσις (*phusis*; nature), the Arabic *tab'* or *tabī'a*, as movement from δύναμις into ἐνέργεια (from potentiality into actuality), is assimilated in Latin as *natura*; namely, as a mode of realizing a presence by way of turning a mere aptitude into an activity, which facilitates the onto-theological converging of *being* with the Divine.

#### V. The Eternity of the World?

Thinking about the subtle existential entailments of necessity, the Arabic expression "*wājib al-wujūd*" is usually rendered (*ontically*) as "A Necessary Existent," and, occasionally it is ambivalently interpreted (*ontologically*) as "Necessary *Being* [Existing]"; whilst literally meaning: "that whose existence [or *being*] is necessary." However, rather than merely entailing the existence of an Absolute Deity, the appellation "*wājib al-wujūd*" points also to a *neuter* uncanny sense of "*being*" (*wujūd*) that is ontologically different from that of "a *being*" (*mawjūd*).

In cognitive terms, Ibn Sīnā's "Necessary Existent due-to-Itself" (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*) is not prior to *being* nor is it beyond it! The Necessary rather figures in an epistemic anteriority with respect to *being* and to *necessity*,

<sup>9</sup> Avicenna Latinus. P. 73\*-74\*; Goichon. La philosophie d'Avicenne. P. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Sīnā. Kitāb al-Shifā': Metaphysics II. P. 327-328, 340.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Sīnā. Dānish Nāmeh. P. 59.

as a modal derivative. This view preserves to *being* its logical, ontological, and epistemic priority *cum* principality as what is encountered in the mind with immediacy; given that the notion of a “Necessary Existent” is not self-evident, but is rather derived from the *necessity of being*.<sup>12</sup> Metaphysics does not thus begin with the “Necessary Existent due-to-Itself” *modality* as its primitive term, rather this appellation, and what it entails, both get unveiled in the course of an ontological inquiry.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this does not simply imply that we exclusively undertake demonstrative proofs with respect to the “Necessary Existent due-to-Itself”; nor does this entail that a refutation of the *ontological idea* of a “Necessary Existent” results in a rejection of the notion of “Divinity.”<sup>14</sup>

From a cosmological perspective, the “Necessary Existent due-to-Itself” entails the existence of the world by way of undiminished emanation, insofar as its conception (as “Necessary Existent”) essentially contains the concept of the world.<sup>15</sup> Ibn Sīnā’s onto-theology and theosophy is thus characterized by “naturalness.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike the dialectical systemic theologians, *al-mutakallimūn* (the exponents of *Kalām*), who tacitly influenced some aspects of his “thesis of contingency,” Ibn Sīnā did not reach a point where he would sacrifice the idea of “nature” in view of positing a purely creationist theory *ex nihilo*. It is therefore the case that the existence of the world is implied in the existence of “the Necessary”; albeit, by way of the causal dialectical structure of emanation, wherein the world and all inner-worldly beings are contingents in themselves and necessary due to what is other than themselves. In onto-theological terms, Ibn Sīnā seems to have indeed established a successful isomorphic synthesis between what may be referred to as the Neo-Platonized (quasi-Aristotelian) “metaphysics of necessity” and a *Kalām* “theology of contingency.”<sup>17</sup> The eternalist-emanationist “thesis of necessity” implies natural determinism, while thinking that the nonexistence of the world is conceivable without entailing self-contradiction belongs to a creationist “thesis of contingency”. Ibn Sīnā upheld both positions, with isomorphism, by way of grasping the world as co-eternal with the One, due to the inevitability of the processional effusing nature of emanation, while affirming that the world was *contingent-in-itself / necessary-through-another*. Conse-

<sup>12</sup> Refer to Michael Marmura’s contribution to the *Metaphysics* section under “Ibn Sīnā” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Vol. III. Ed. E. Yarshater. London: Routledge, 1989. P. 75.

<sup>13</sup> Morewedge P. Islamic Philosophical Theology. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979. P. 191–192.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Sīnā. *Kitāb al-Shifā’*: Metaphysics II. P. 354. Regarding Ibn Sīnā’s version of the ontological argument, and the scholarly debates around it, along with his cosmological proofs, see: Goodman L.E. Avicenna. London: Routledge, 1992. P. 64; Morewedge. Islamic Philosophical Theology. P. 188–222.

<sup>15</sup> Morewedge. Islamic Philosophical Theology. P. 210–211.

<sup>16</sup> Houben J.J. Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism. Calcutta: Commemoration Publication 1956. P. 207, 217–221.

<sup>17</sup> Refer to: Goodman. Ibn Sīnā. P. 61–83.

quently, the nonexistence of a *contingent-in-itself / necessary-through-another* is conceivable without entailing a contradiction. This is the case insofar as the One is conceived as being the ever-sustaining cause of the existence of all existents, not just as what generates them, but as what also lets them subsist in *existence*, and calls for their return by way of effecting their potential self-perfection in the intensification of their participation in *being*. In this sense, there is an ontological difference between what we might call: *necessity-due-to-itself/absolute necessity*, and the derived *necessity-due-to-another/relative necessity*. Even if everything is contingent, the patterns of nature are not arbitrary, rather necessary through their causal connections.

## VI. Necessary Being

Ibn Sīnā clearly asserted that the Necessary Existent due-to-Itself is “One and Only” (*wāhid ahad*), and he argued that there cannot be more than one “Necessary Existent due to Itself” without having *differentia* (*faṣl*) that allows one *Existent* to be distinguished from another. In case there is more than one Necessary Existent that is Necessary due-to-Itself, then these proclaimed *Necessary Existents* would need to be separated by what is external to them as *differentia*. And yet, this entails that they would not be necessary due to themselves, given that they depend on *differentia* to separate them from each other. Each will then be necessary-due-to-itself and necessary-due-to-another, which does not hold following the logic of non-contradiction. We perhaps could then argue that this problem may be resolved through dialectical methods that account for what is *determined in itself* as contrasted with what is *determined by what is other than itself*. Yet, even a dialectical account does not allow for the simultaneous occurrence of the determination of something due to itself with a concurrent determination of that thing due to what is other than itself. After all, it is logically problematic to assert something while at the same time refuting it ( $p \wedge \sim p$ ), unless we adopt the quasi-logic of ambiguity, which does not obey the logic of non-contradiction, and yet, its utterances would not be within the provenance of *logos* but are rather inscribable within the narratives of *mythos*! Moreover, there cannot be more than one Necessary Existent due to Itself; given that the Necessary Existent due-to-Itself cannot be accounted for in terms of a talk of genus, species, *differentia*, substance, accident, description, or definition. The ontological truth of the Necessary Existent is that it is: “*What Necessarily Exists due-to-Itself*,” and is not united with anything other than *Itself*. Furthermore, in its Oneness and Unity, the Necessary Existent is not “One” as a number since it is beyond the arithmetic of numbers; and in this, *its necessity of being* is only for Itself and not shared with anything other than Itself. Unlike all beings, it is not conditioned by time nor does it have temporality as its ontological horizon. After all, every *necessary existent due to something other than itself* is temporal in the sense that it

exists “during a certain time” and “not in another.”<sup>18</sup> As for the Necessary Existent *per se*, it is beyond this determination; it is perfect and simple,<sup>19</sup> while its unity is presupposed in reality and in conception in the mind. Ultimately, the necessity of being of the “Necessary” self-shows *existing* as being an advantageous happening.<sup>20</sup> “Everything that exists desires its perfection” through the unfurling of an “ontological love” (*un amour ontologique*),<sup>21</sup> by virtue of which every being exists for its source and tends to return to it. With this turn in thinking, Ibn Sīnā’s account of the question of *being* moves away from the domain of *metaphysica* to that of a mystical inclination in *philosophizing* that perhaps starts to leave the Peripatetic Greek tradition behind.<sup>22</sup>

## VII. Essence and Existence: Overcoming “Ousiology”

Being that which has no quiddity/essence (*lā māhiyya lahu*), Ibn Sīnā’s “*wā-jib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*” overcomes Aristotle’s *oὐσία* (*ousia*; *substantia/essentia*; *jawhar*). His metaphysics thus moves away from an *oὐσία*-based ontology (namely, “*ousiology*”), whilst also diverting from the essentialist lines in thinking. With Ibn Sīnā, *being* is not reduced into something other than itself, be it substance or essence. After all, that which has no essence other than existence is not a substance (*jawhar*; *oὐσία*), and whatever possesses an essence other than existence, namely every contingent existent, may be a substance.

If it were the case that existence is external to the essence of the [Aristotelian] categories, then the Necessary Existent *per se* is not any category, and this is asserted as such in terms of saying that the *Essence* of the Necessary Existent is its *Existence*. In a *prima facie* account of Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics, and based on some dominant modern commentaries on his ontology, it is polemically held that the Existence of the Necessary Existent due-to-Itself is simply none other than its Essence, and that its Essence is its Existence.<sup>23</sup> Such interpretation contributes to the construal of Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics as being that of essentialism (classically,

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Sīnā. Dāniš Nāmeh. P. 43–47.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Sīnā. Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa ’l-tanbīhāt. Vol. III. Ed. S. Dunya. Cairo: Dār al-ma’ārif, 1960. P. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Sīnā. Livre des directives et remarques. Ed. and trans. A.-M. Goichon. Paris: Vrin, 1951. P. 353.

<sup>21</sup> Gardet L. La connaissance mystique chez Ibn Sīnā et ses présupposés philosophiques. Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1952. P. 37, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Sīnā. Risāla fi ’l-’ishq // Mehren M. (ed.). Traité mystiques d’Avicenne. Leiden: Brill, 1894. P. 2–3.

<sup>23</sup> I argued elsewhere that Ibn Sīnā’s ontology does not amount to being an essentialist ontology. See: El-Bizri N. Avicenna and Essentialism // *Review of Metaphysics* 54 (2001). P. 753–778.

as an “*ousiology*”), which implies that his thought reduces *being* into something other than itself as *essence* or *substance*. However, a more careful reading shows that the “Necessary Existential due-to-Itself” has no quiddity/essence and that *it is what it is due to Its-Self* (*dhātihi*), and due to nothing else other than Its-Self. Being that which has no quiddity or essence, we would not simply say that *The Necessary Existential due-to-Itself has no essence but existence*; for, the Necessary Existential due-to-Itself is what it is due to its-Self (its-*dhātihi*). Based on this, Ibn Sīnā’s thought about *being* does not get readily reduced to the order of “essentialism” that transmutes *being* into essence, and would consequently be oblivious of the fundamentality of the question of *being*.

Ibn Sīnā held that *being* qua *being* (*al-wujūd bi-mā huwa wujūd*) reflects the most general encounter in the mind, without definition (*hadd*) or description (*rasm*), and that it cannot be readily accounted for in terms of quiddity *qua* essence (*māhiyya*), given that it is neither genus (*jins*) nor *differentia* (*faṣl*). Consequently, *being* and beings were not posited by him as being different species that are subsumed under an overarching genus.

Ibn Sīnā’s thought about *being* overcomes the unfolding of Aristotle’s *ousiology* within the course of development of history of mediaeval metaphysics. This matter becomes clearer by addressing Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and the way it advanced ontology as an inquiry into *being* qua *being*: ὅν οὐ ὁν [on hē on]. And yet, despite investigating ὅν οὐ ὁν (*being* qua *being*), an *onto-theological* turn is already attested with Aristotle’s conception of *metaphysics* as *theology*. Nonetheless, a new foundational phase in metaphysical thinking arises with Ibn Sīnā’s systemic conferral of autonomy to ontology from the determinants of theology-theosophy in investigating the question of *being*.

Aristotle enunciated that the dealing with “beings in the primary sense” leads any inquiry to what “all other beings are referred back to,” namely *oύσια* (substance).<sup>24</sup> Based on this reading, everything that *is* (namely, all that is assumed under the categories) shows that “first being” is *oύσια*; and what “*is*” in the primary sense is *oύσια* (*Metaphysics*, 1028a 13ff.). For, substance is herein said to be primary in definition, knowledge, and time. The longstanding metaphysical question: “what *is* that which *is*?” namely “what is *being*?” is thusly reducible to the question: “what is substance?”<sup>25</sup> This is the case, even though the distinction between essence and existence is hinted at with ambivalence in the Aristotelian tradition in terms of thinking about what is intended from the saying: τόδε τί (*tode ti*; the “thisness” of a present extant thing, as “singularity in identity”),<sup>26</sup> in

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger M. Aristotle’s Metaphysics, IX 1–3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force. Trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warneck. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. P. 2; Aristotle. Metaphysics. Ed. W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle. Metaphysics. 1028b 2–4.

<sup>26</sup> John Duns Scotus coins the term “*haecceitas*” (*Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 2, n. 48) as a Latin rendition of the Greek: “*tode ti*,” and in contrast with the expression *quidditas*; namely, *thisness* versus *whatness*.

contrast with the vague and hard to apprehend concept: τὸ τι ἦν εἶναι (*to ti ēn einai*; “what it was for something to be the thing it is!”). Aristotle’s doctrine of *being* (developed in its historical unfolding as a “doctrine of substance”), carries two determinations: it answers the question about the essence of something, while also positing that thing as an individual (*Metaphysics*, 1028a 10). In addition, given the manifoldness of beings, and, consequently, that *being* has many meanings, these do nonetheless refer in unity to οὐσία (*Metaphysics*, 1003a 33), which acts as some sort of ὑποκείμενον (*hupokeimenon*); namely as what always already lies present at the basis of all the meanings of *being*. In this, there is some sort of a “sustaining and guiding basic meaning” upon which the other meanings “can be said.” In speaking about beings something alongside is murmured, namely *being* itself, wherein the sustaining and leading fundamental meaning of *being* (*εἶναι*, ὁν [*einai, on*]), to which all the other categories are carried back, is: οὐσία (*ousia*).

Given that Ibn Sīnā’s *wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihī* is not substance, nor is it in a subject,<sup>27</sup> the question of *being* is not reduced with him to that of οὐσία. Ibn Sīnā carefully unveils “an ontological difference between *being* and beings,” which ultimately grounds the correlative distinction he draws between existence (*wujūd*) and essence (*māhiyya*). However, this uncovering is rather subjected to concealment by way of appealing to causality, which is partly derived from the metaphysical entailments of thinking about οὐσία as what is self-same, eternal and necessary.

We noted above that Ibn Sīnā’s notion of “The Necessary Existent due-to-Itself” is not prior to *being* from an epistemic and ontological standpoint, given that it is derived from thinking about *being* under the modality of necessity, we may also further envisage that Ibn Sīnā’s “Necessary Existent due-to-Itself” is not beyond *being*, as what might be entailed by the Greek expression ὑπέρούσιος (*hyperousios*; namely as a linguistic designator derived from the combination of the appellations ὑπέρ and οὐσία). Yet, the expression ὑπέρούσιος may itself be rendered as “beyond οὐσία” and not readily as “beyond *being*.” This is the case given that οὐσία is *substance* (*jawhar*) and not *being* (*wujūd*) *per se*; in this sense, ὑπέρούσιος would be more fittingly rendered as “beyond substance.” After all, *being* is not reducible to substance, essence, or idea. Consequently, it is principally from the standpoint of *ousiology* and its metaphysical unfolding that *being* is reduced to οὐσία. In view of this classical ontological reduction, ὑπέρούσιος is rendered as “beyond *being*”; thus indirectly contributing to the oblivion of the question of *being*.

Ibn Sīnā attends to the question of *being* on new ontological grounds that do not leave the question of the meaning of *being* radically un-thought nor simply reduce that meaning to something else other than itself. With him, the *ousiological* ramifications of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* are eschewed, and the intuitive

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Sīnā. Livre des Directives et Remarques. P. 367–369.

wonder about *being* is not entirely reduced to being a research-oriented philosophy that addresses the question of the meaning of *being* from the standpoint of what substance is (which would be forgetful of the fundamentality of the question of *being*).

### VIII. European Ontological Turns: Avicenna Latinus!

Ibn Sīnā's ontological reflections underpinned the mediaeval debates of European scholasticism over the *distinctio* and *compositio* between the quiddity *qua essentia* of a being and its way of being *qua existentia*. The distinction between essence and existence was expressed into a *distinctio realis* (in reality) within the tradition of Thomism (Thomas Aquinas), and it was rendered as a *distinctio formalis* or *modalis* (formal or modal) within the legacy of Scotism (Duns Scotus), and articulated as *distinctio rationis* (rational, in the mind) within the teachings of Francesco Suárez.<sup>28</sup> The scholastic ontology was structured in terms of disjunctive binaries, such as: *ens infinitum* vs. *ens finitum* (infinite vs. finite), *ens increatum* vs. *ens creatum* (uncreated vs. created); *ens necessarium* vs. *ens contingens* (necessary vs. contingent); *ens per essentiam* vs. *ens per participationem* (essential being vs. participatory being); *actus purus* vs. *ens potentiale* (actuality vs. potentiality); *ens a se* vs. *ens ab alio* (being due to self vs. being due to another), etc. Consequently, the Divine, conceived as *ens perfectissimum*, is also: *ens a se*, *ens infinitum*, *ens increatum*, *ens necessarium*, *ens per essentiam*, *actus purus!* (The Perfect essentially exists due-to-itself; as an infinite, un-created, and purely actual Existence). These Latinate notions rested on adaptations of Ibn Sīnā's reflection on the ontological difference between: *wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi* (*Necessary-Being-due-to-Its-Self*) and *wājib al-wujūd bi-ghayrihi* (*necessary-being-due-to-something-other-than-itself / contingent-being-in-itself*) — “*Wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi lā māhiyya lahu, huwa huwa bi-lā hadd wa lā rasm*”;<sup>29</sup> *Necessary-Being-due-to-Its-Self* is without quiddity, it is Itself without definition or description; its essence is *being*.

The scholastic meditations on the *distinctio* and *compositio* between the quiddity *qua essentia* of a being and its way of being *qua existentia*, which were inspired by adaptive interpretations and assimilative re-conceptualizations of Ibn Sīnā's ontology, eventually underpinned “the Kantian thesis about *being*,” which speculated about “the impossibility of having an ontological proof,” in terms of also reflecting on the transcendental dialectical inferences of pure reason. *Being*

<sup>28</sup> Respectively in Aquinas' *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, *Summa theologiae*, and *De veritate*; in Duns Scotus' *Reportata Parisiensia*; and Suárez's *Disputationes metaphysicae*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibn Sīnā*. Kitāb al-Shifā'. P. 36–39, 43–47, 350–355; *Ibn Sīnā*. Kitāb al-Najāt. P. 255, 261–265, 272–275, 283–285; *Ibn Sīnā*. Al-Ishārāt wa-'l-tanbīhāt. P. 65; *Ibn Sīnā*. Kitāb al-Hidāya. Ed. M. 'Abdū. Cairo, 1874. P. 262–263.

was not grasped as “real predicate” and it only figured as a “copulative function” (what may be termed: *wujūd rābiṭ*). Kant’s thesis read as follows: “*Being is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in-themselves. Logically, it is the copula of a judgment.*”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, the distinction between *essentia* and *existentia* does not readily correspond with the ontological difference between beings and *being*, rather it belongs to one or the other side of this binary bifurcation; hence, positing *primordial essence* as an opposite counterpart of *primordial existence*; and each instating a whole new tradition in metaphysics — namely, what in conceptual parallels found expression in history of ideas in Islam in terms of two onto-theological outlooks: one that focuses on the principality of essence, *asālat al-māhiyya*, as entailed by the illumination *ishrāqī* mysticism, and the other stresses on the priority of existence, *asālat al-wujūd*, within *al-hikma al-muta‘āliyya* theosophy.

## IX. Ontological Incongruities or Dialectics?

Despite Ibn Sīnā’s groundbreaking and foundational novel directions in philosophy (overcoming Aristotle’s *ousiology*, the reflection on the connection and distinction between essence and existence, the unveiling of the ontological difference between *being* and beings), his ontology still self-announces some profound internal tensions and unresolved incongruities in relation to the doctrine of *being*.<sup>31</sup> In view of attending to this matter to be thought, we will critically reconsider the question of *being* under the modality of “*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*.”

As noted above, the expression “*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*” literally means: “that whose existence or *being* is necessary due to itself.” In a neuter conception, this modality points to an ambiguous and uncanny necessity in existing. The first sense of “*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*” would be: “*necessary being due to itself*” or “*necessary existing due to itself*,” while the second significance of this appellation would be: “*The Necessary Existent due to Itself*” Given that with both renditions, “*wajib al-wujud bi-dhatihi*” is without quiddity, all we could confidently utter about this modality is that it designates *necessary-existing-due-to-itself*.

By rendering “*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*” as “*necessary being due to itself*,” namely as the ground from which the *hypostasis* emanates, all we might be able to say about this uncanny *presencing* is that: “there is!” (“*il y a!*”) “*es gibt*

<sup>30</sup> Kant I. Kritik der reinen Vernunft: Critique of Pure Reason A598–B626.

<sup>31</sup> I discussed some of these aspects in detail elsewhere. See: El-Bizri N. Being and Necessity: A Phenomenological Investigation of Avicenna’s Metaphysics and Cosmology // A.-T. Tyminiecka (ed.). Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology on the Perennial Issue of Microcosm and Macrocosm. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2006. P. 243–261.

*Sein!*") / "huwa!" or "hunālika!"<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, the Necessary (*al-wājib*) is not addressed as a determinate onto-theological Being *qua* Existent, but is rather posited as an immediate pure *being* that is equal to itself, namely *being-itself* as what does not need the mediation of anything other than itself for it to be. Consequently, it is indifferent to any determinateness of *being*.<sup>33</sup> As a simple self-relation that is posited *a priori*, it is *necessary*. However, when we render "*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*" as "The Necessary Existent due to Itself" we move from pure *being*, to a determinateness in *being*. The Necessary Existent due to Itself is not merely *being-itself* but is rather a self-posed *being-for-itself*, which surges by way of excluding otherness, namely *the All* as contingents. It thus maintains Itself as the One by the exclusion of the many through an act of repulsion that posits *the All* as what issues forth from Its own *coming-out-of-Itself* into otherness. In this, the One, namely *The Necessary Existent due to Itself*, remains related to what It excludes by way of attraction; wherein everything is quasi-detached and ultimately returns to the One from which it came forth. For, attraction is an integrative gathering of everything in the One. It is thus reflective of immanence, in the sense that it is akin to the Neo-Platonist consideration of all existents as being gradationally transparent beings that let the divine light shine forth through them. This is set in contrast with transcendence, which is exemplified by *creatio ex nihilo* paradigms, wherein beings are excluded and opaque, given that the divine light does not refract through them and is rather taken to be an absolutely separate beyond.

In the double movement of repulsion and attraction, of emanation and return, the "Necessary Existent due to Itself" is revealed as being the initiating ground and the final destiny (*al-mabda' wa-al-ma'ād*).<sup>34</sup> As ground, *It* is assumed as an ever-present base for all that issues forth from *It*. *It* thus acts as what always already lies present at the basis of what follows from *It*. Polemically, *It* bears the character of a ὑποκείμενον (*hypokeimenon*) like what is attested with Aristotle's οὐσία (*ousia*). In this, "The Necessary Existent due to Itself" is: (i) *being-for-self*, as what excludes *the All*, namely, repulses (emanates) the many from the One, and is also (ii) *being-for-other*, as a self-repulsion of Itself into otherness that re-gathers *the All* in attraction *qua* return.<sup>35</sup> We could say that pure *being*, as entailed by the *neuter* expression "necessary *being* due to itself," becomes a derivative determinate being *qua* existent as: *The Necessary Existent due to Itself*.

<sup>32</sup> Given that: "there is" ("il y a"), absence turns into some sort of *presence* of an impersonal "existing" (*exister*); see: Levinas E. *Le temps et l'autre*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991. P. 25–26.

<sup>33</sup> This is what Hegel attributes to Greek ontology in his *Science of Logic* (see: Hegel G.W.F. *Science of Logic*. Trans. A. V. Miller, ed. H. D. Lewis. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1996. P. 95–101).

<sup>34</sup> Hegel. *Science of Logic*. P. 170–177.

<sup>35</sup> Hegel. *Science of Logic*. P. 164–165.

Even by saying “necessary *being*,” we already let *being* show itself as determinateness, and even when uttering: “*there is*,” Ibn Sīnā’s consideration of *being* under the modality of necessity bears some form of determinateness; for it is not implying that the “*there is*” (“*il y a*”) is that of a paradoxical mode of: “existing without existent!” (“*exister sans existant*”).<sup>36</sup> Based on what has been addressed hitherto, it seems that what falls under the appellation “*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*,” bears the confusing status of appearing to be a derivational determination of what is rather indeterminate. This determinateness occurs by way of what may be described as “*sublation*,” namely, the eventuality of being *preserved and kept*, as well as being at the same time *surpassed and ended*. Something is thus *sublated* when it enters into a seemingly self-effacing unity with its opposite. However, what acts as the starting ground for a process of becoming is subsumed also within the folds of what issues forth and follows from it.<sup>37</sup> Pure *being* is thus self-*sublated* by becoming determinate *being*, even if such determinateness is not associated with quiddity. For, as what is indeterminate, it is *sublated* into what is determinate as “*The [Godhead] Necessary Existent due to Itself*” (with what this entails in terms of contemplating the divine essence and attributes). We could even say that pure *being*, as what is utterly indeterminate, is even self-*sublated* when considered as necessary “*being*,” while being moreover subjected to further determinateness by becoming “a determinate *being*,” namely the One qua *The Necessary Existent due to Itself*; in this, *pure being* lets determinate *being* appear. The determinateness of *being* in the modality of *The Necessary Existent due to Itself* is ultimately a movement from *being-itself* to *being-for-self*. It thus appears as being a self-mediated and determinate *subject* that turns Itself into *being-for-other*. With *The Necessary Existent due to Itself*, something else is posited, namely what is *other*. Through Its own Nature, through Its-Self (*dhātihi*), *The Necessary Existent due to Itself* relates to what is other than Itself. *Being-within-self* includes negation within itself as an indeterminate *being-for-other*, which ultimately becomes a determinate otherness in *the All*; namely every contingent that has turned in actuality into *a necessary existent due to something other than itself* via a hierarchical existential chain of actualizing causes.

Based on this reading, pure *being*, as what is utterly indeterminate, is in its immediacy necessary *being* that is as such as *being-itself*. It then passes into determinateness as *a determinate being*, namely *The Necessary Existent due to Itself* that is as such as *being-for-self*. As the One, *The Necessary Existent due to Itself* turns into *being-for-other* by way of Its own self-repulsion into the manifold many *qua* otherness. Pure *being*, which is without quiddity, definition or description, and is said to be beyond the categories while being non-mediated,

<sup>36</sup> This paradoxical notion was suggested by Levinas in *Le temps et l'autre*.

<sup>37</sup> Hegel. Science of Logic. P. 70–74, 107–108.

utterly indeterminate, and only equal to itself, seems perplexingly to be also construed as *a determinate being*. Pure *being* thusly becomes *The Necessary Existent due to Itself*, which is not simply “what It is due to Itself,” but, ultimately, and by way of all existing beings, is also *being-for-other*. To translate this abstracting analysis into more specific particularities of Ibn Sīnā’s system we would say that pure *being* is reduced into *a determinate being* due to causation and the role it plays in the context of accounting for the question of *being* in terms of the modalities of necessity and contingency. The causal connection and its existential imports belong to a metaphysics that is motivated by the notion of *actualitas*, namely that which pertains to productivity and making. One could consequently hold that the question of *being* is veiled when *being* is itself accounted for as *a determinate being*. Yet, pure *being* cannot be understood as “*a Being*,” nor can *being* be defined by attributing beings to it.<sup>38</sup> Although we attest with Ibn Sīnā’s ontology a mindful attempt to unveil “the ontological difference between *being* and beings,” it paradoxically remains to be the case that what self-announces itself as an ontological difference between *being* and beings gets re-concealed by the causal character of his ontology and the philosophy of *actualitas* on which it rests. By combining the metaphysics of necessity with a theology of contingency, Ibn Sīnā’s system unveiled an ontological difference between *being* and beings, and facilitated an overcoming of *ousiology* and the encumbering aspects of essentialism; and yet, the further unfolding of this line in thinking eventually re-concealed this fundamental ontological difference.

Pure *being* qua *being-itself* and *The Necessary Existent due to Itself* qua *being-within-Itself* (as *being-for-self/being-for-other*), both describe divergent moments in Ibn Sīnā’s ontology. Pure *being* qua *being-itself* unveils the ontological difference between *being* and beings, while *The Necessary Existent due to Itself* qua *being-within-Itself* (as *being-for-self* and *being-for-other*) re-veils it. Although this state of affairs may be seen by some as being indicative of a classical tendency to cede the question of the meaning of *being* into forgetfulness, Ibn Sīnā did nonetheless raise the question of *being* anew, even if the moment of unveiling and un-concealment was unpredictably coupled with another that veiled and concealed. With this variation, which to some appears as being metaphysically unhandsome, Ibn Sīnā’s foundational ontology did creditably reveal the perennial paradox that confronts those who attentively address the subtleties of the question of *being* by way of attending to the un-concealment and concealment of the graceful sending (granting) and dramatic withdrawal of *being*. This remarkable endeavour in ontology still calls for thinking, and it resists the dominance of the oblivion of the question of *being* in metaphysics and onto-theology. Even if we claim that: “*being* is the most universal, indefinable, and self-evident,” this

<sup>38</sup> This reflects the attempt to avoid the use of the verbal “*to be*” that entails a tautological self-predication of *being*. See: Prudhomme J.O. God and Being: Heidegger’s Relation to Theology. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1997. P. 152.

may still require from us to reflect on the meaning, truth, and place of *being* and the fundamentality of this question, which impressed itself upon Ibn Sīnā, and invited him to rethink *being* qua *being* by way of raising this *question to be thought* anew. With Ibn Sīnā's consideration of the ontological modalities of *being*, one would arguably hold that philosophy was once again reattempting to reopen itself to the thought-provoking mysteries of the uncanny "self-sending" and "self-withdrawal" of *being*. What concerns us in this context, and must be thought about with mindfulness, mysteriously turns away from us! Yet, in doing so, it still draws us along nearer in the draft of its own pulling withdrawal...<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Heidegger M. Was heisst Denken? Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1954. Lecture I, Part 1; in reflection on the ontological bearings of Hölderlin's *Mnemosyne* verse.