Contrasting Models of the God-World Relation: Avicenna, Maimonides and Al-Shahrastani

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In the eighth book of his *Metaphysics of the Healing*, Avicenna considers the attributes of the Necessary Existent. In doing so, he draws on his earlier discourse wherein he demonstrates that the Necessary Existent "has no cause," so as to be necessary "in all [His] aspects."[1] As such, He is "neither changing nor multiple, and has nothing associated with His existence that is proper to Himself."[2] Although His existence is 'not dependent on relation,' Avicenna also argues that He is "the principle of the necessitation of the existence of everything" that is merely possible in itself.[3] These two aspects of the Necessary Existent are best encapsulated in Avicenna's assertion that He is above perfection as a whole "because not only does He have the existence that belongs only to Him, but every other existence also is an overflow of His existence," such that they belong to Him as emanating from Him.[4]

Avicenna's intention in his investigation is to show "that a range of traditional divine attributes are implied by the fundamental trait of necessity," thereby integrating the Necessary Existent derived from his proof into a larger "philosophical account of the God of Islam."[5] Later thinkers, including the Islamic theologian Muhammad Al-Shahrastani and the Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides, will appropriate Avicenna's classification of God as the 'Necessary Existent' in their own writings. Moreover, they will assent to his notion of God as being 'above perfection.' However, despite endorsing these principles, both thinkers conceive of God and His attributes in such a way as to stand in complete opposition to their philosophical predecessor. I contend that this divergence stems from their contrasting models of how existence is

1. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 30.

2. *ibid*.

3. *ibid*., 273.

4. *ibid*., 283.

5. Peter Adamson, "From the Necessary Existent to God," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 171.

predicated of God as necessary and the created order as contingent. Accordingly, despite the fact that all of them recognize that God's attributes cannot exist in relation to one another in such away as to indicate composition within Him, the conceptions of God's existence that they present are structured around what they take to be His most characteristic attribute, which in turn informs the nature of His other properties. These varying 'primary' attributes correspondingly suggest the meanings they assign to God's being 'above perfection.' Al-Shahrastani's model is undoubtedly far more rigorous that Maimonides' own, such that he effectively safeguards God's radical incomparability. Ultimately however, I will argue that, insofar as Avicenna approaches the issue from the metaphysical standpoint of God's necessity, he is afforded a positive philosophical understanding of His existence and attributes that is wholly lacking in the thinking of his counterparts. As a result, Avicenna is able to develop a fuller understanding of God's causal role without at all detracting from His transcendence and self-sufficiency.

For my purposes at hand, it would obviously prove impossible to completely examine the methodology each thinker employs in predicating attributes of God and the full extent of their opposition. Accordingly, for the sake of expediency and clarity, I will endeavour to encapsulate the main principles of their thinking, so as to first convey how each conceives of the existential relation between God and the created order before turning to their corresponding implied designations of God's primary attribute. Significantly, in highlighting what I believe to be each thinker's classification of God's most characteristic feature, I will not investigate each and every attribute they predicate of God, but rather intend to focus on the method they employ in deriving these attributes. Moreover, I will not present the thinkers in chronological order, but rather, after having examined Avicenna's thinking at considerable length, aim to convey how Al-Shahrastani pushes the transcendental understanding of God common to him and Maimonides to its extreme. Subsequently, I will return to Avicenna to consider how his model is able to implicitly address the criticisms levelled against it by his successors, as well as its superiority in this regard.

Returning to Avicenna's two assertions presented in the *Healing* concerning the Necessary Existent, not only do they serve as the means by which he goes about determining God's attributes, but they also indicate an important aspect of His mode of existence. Avicenna rejects "the view that 'exist' has two different senses when

applied to God and the world," firmly holding to "the univocality of existence."[6] Nonetheless, he still insists "that the original and the borrowed forms of existence can never be the same and that the contingent can never shed its contingency even while it exists."[7] A possible and necessary existent are fundamentally differentiated from one another insofar as the former, when considered in itself with respect to its essence, is "within the bound of possibility."[8] Neither its existing or not existing are logically necessary, such that it cannot be the source of its own actual existence, but rather "its existence and nonexistence are both due to a cause" external to it.[9]

To this end, Avicenna contends that "the possible in itself must become necessary through a cause and with respect to it" and, as demonstrated in his proof, these causes must ultimately terminate in the Necessary Existent as first cause.[10] This assertion is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it indicates that God as necessary and creatures as contingent exist in different modal categories and therefore can neither be said to exist nor to possess the perfections of existence identically. God's mode of having perfections is "characterized by simplicity, necessity, fullness and purity," whereas "creatures have them in a composite, accidental and limited manner."[11] However, it also suggests that, as the source and principle of all caused existence, God has a positive relation to the cosmos as a whole, whereby it exists with respect to Him.

The different modes in which created beings and God have their properties can be understood with reference to Avicenna's discussion of priority and posteriority with respect to causes and effects. He is clear that these terms are predicated in many different forms, but all unite ambiguously "in the fact that to the prior inasmuch as it is prior belongs something not possessed by the posterior."[12] Conversely, "nothing belongs to the posterior

6. Fazlur Rahman, "Ibn Sina's Theory of the God-World Relationship," in *God and Creation: an Ecumenical Symposium*, eds. David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 38.

7. *ibid*.

8. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 30.

9. *ibid*., 31.

10. *ibid*. Cf. Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 302.

11. Rahim Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation: Avicenna and Thomas Aquinas' Positions* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 34.

12. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 124.

unless it also exists for the prior."[13] Accordingly, the prior cause contains all the perfections of the posterior effects that it generates without being limited by them insofar as it contains them within the same order of measure, but at a higher degree. Significantly, Avicenna maintains that, with respect to place and time, the prior "is that which is closest to a determinate starting point."[14] Summarizing his thinking, Rahim Acar argues that, generally speaking, the same property can be predicated of different things "according to priority and posteriority depending on the distance between the thing in question and the measure or principle."[15] Correspondingly, God brings creatures into existence "either in a primary manner or through an intermediary," in such a way as to act as the cause of the existence of things that are only possible in themselves.[16] Although these effects could never actually exist except through the mediation of God's causal priority, and therefore can never attain the same degree of existence as Him, He is not restricted by this relation.[17] Rather, God is a self-subsisting existent and "fully actual without succession," so as to be neither subject to change nor "bound to time."[18]

In this respect, Avicenna's thinking here is best illustrated via his cosmology, which in turn illuminates the nature of God's causal priority. Building on his principle that the more prior a thing is the greater degree of some property it contains, he presents a four-tiered hierarchy of existence. Following the initial distinction between the Necessary Existent and contingent beings, Avicenna contends that at the highest level of pure contingency there are the eternal celestial intelligences, which move the spheres below them in their perpetual circular motion. Finally, there is the spatiotemporal world of the sublunar realm wherein everything that is generated and destroyed is "always preceded by potentiality and the carrier of potentiality, matter."[19] Whereas the lowest form of contingent existence always exists within the flow of time "in a condition of lapse and renewal," celestial being exists concurrently with time insofar as its existence is not preceded

13. *ibid*.
14. *ibid*.
15. Racim Acar, *Talking about God*, 38.
16. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 273.
17. *ibid*., 127.
18. Racim Acar, *Talking about God*, 90.
19. Rahman, "God-World Relationship," 42.

by its constitutive matter, but rather by absolute non-existence.[20] To this end, as the celestial spheres exist in a state of 'perpetuity' contained within God's own 'eternity,' His causality has existential and not temporal priority, as in the case of Avicenna's famous example: "when Zayd moved his hand, the key moved."[21] Indeed, his model of the modal terms is such that they do not have to be framed within a temporal context, but rather can examine God's causation from a metaphysical standpoint in its absolute primacy.

Thus, I have exhibited that God and the created order exist in what Avicenna describes as an 'ambiguous' relation to one another. Considered in His role as cause, God is the principle of contingent existence and existential properties, but contains these properties to a degree that is wholly unattainable by creatures owing to His nature as necessarily uncaused. Avicenna utilizes these two traits in order to derive His attributes. He pinpoints the former as God's "primary attribute," which consists in His being a 'that He is' and an existent.[22] In turn, it indicates that "if an existent is necessary, then everything about it must be necessary," such that its "features must flow inevitably from its true nature."[23] Accordingly, Avicenna argues that God's nature as uncaused not only conveys His absolute existence and self-subsistence, but also negatively exhibits what attributes He cannot possess and the impossibility of establishing relationships of equality to Him.[24] In addition to this 'intrinsic' consideration of the Necessary Existent, which highlights His uniqueness, simplicity and ineffability amongst other attributes, he also employs the 'extrinsic' characteristic of His being the principle 'cause' of the created order as the basis for establishing relations between necessary and contingent existence. Avicenna argues that God is deserving of the epithets 'king' and 'generous' insofar as He "gives without need," graciously imparting existence onto contingent effects without goal or purpose.[25] In certain cases, he also combines elements from both of these traits, so as to frame the Necessary Existent as the 'end' of the created order, as in the case of His goodness.[26]

20. *ibid*., 43. Cf. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 272.
21. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 126.
22. *ibid*., 296.
23. Adamson, "Necessary Existent to God," 178.
24. *ibid*., 175.
25. *ibid*., 187-188. Cf. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 295-296.
26. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 292.

Summarizing his thinking, Avicenna asserts that God has "attributes that intermix with negation," whereby in designating Him as 'one,' "he would mean only this existence itself, where either quantitative or categorical division," as well as all composition, "is negated of Him."[27] Conversely, He also contains positive attributes that are independent of negations and relations, such as his nature as an intelligible as a result of being uncaused. Nonetheless, the former has the same degree of necessity as the latter because they are "necessary concomitants of the essence," existing "after the existence of the essence."[28]

By contrast, although Maimonides affirms Avicenna's designation of God as the Necessary Existent, he accuses his philosophical predecessor of not holding to his first principles with respect to his investigation of God's attributes. Insofar as God's essence is wholly incomprehensible and his attributes are identical with His essence to the extent that He admits of no multiplicity, he decries the possibility of predicating positive attributes of God.[29] Maimonides therefore maintains that "there is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity of multiplication of notions."[30] Accordingly, he holds to an equivocality with respect to the relation between God and creatures insofar as "none of the existent things that [God] has brought into existence resemble" Him nor possess any properties in an identical manner to Him.[31] In this respect, "God's absolute dissimilarity or incomparability" is His most characteristic attribute, comprising Maimonides' conception of God's being 'above perfection' and constituting "an unfathomable abyss" for the human intellect.[32]

As a result, Maimonides restricts the predication of divine attributes to negations, which serve to "conduct the mind towards the utmost reach that man may attain in his apprehension of [God]."[33] I contend that Maimonides employs this model in order to close the space within which to predicate attributes of God in accordance

27. *ibid*., 296.

28. *ibid*., 273.

29. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 481.

30. *ibid*., 113.

31. *ibid*., 137.

32. Leo Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *The Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), xlviii-xlix.

33. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 135.

with His absolute existence and self-sufficiency. He contends that such positive affirmations inevitably imply "a deficiency in [God]," associating Him "with that which is not He."[34] As such, Maimonides does not frame God's eternal existence with reference to a positive understanding of his necessity, but rather argues that it negatively signifies that His "non-existence is impossible," such that "He has no cause that has brought Him into existence."[35] Moreover, he nullifies the possibility of predicating Avicenna's third category of attributes, whereby God, as simultaneously 'uncaused' in Himself and 'cause' of contingent existence, is the 'end' that the created order perpetually strives to achieve, but never attains. God can neither be understood positively as engaged in intellection nor as having goodness in a manner that can be understood on the same scale as that of the cosmos. Maimonides does not assent to Avicenna's thinking that God's nature as prior indicates that He contains all the properties of that which is posterior to Him within the same order at a higher degree. Rather, he places paramount importance on his predecessor's assertion that God is not limited by this causal relation to the extent that he effectively negates the created order's ability to hold any property in common with its creator.

However, in comparison to the thinking of Al-Shahrastani, I assert that Maimonides' model of the relationship between God and the created order is only one of 'weak' transcendence and equivocality. His notion of God's being above perfection highlights His incomparability with respect to His attributes, but not His being above the division of existence and non-existence itself. Put simply, although one can never speak of a thing's 'goodness' in the same way as God's own, Maimonides cannot extend this dissimilarity to encompass His existence as a whole. Indeed, I argue that his inability to widen the scope of equivocality between God and the created order is implied in the proofs for God's existence he exhibits, all of which are variations on Aristotle's cosmological argument from motion.[36] Although contingent existents do not possess properties in an identical manner to God, Maimonides must concede that a philosophical consideration of their existence can tell one something about God's existence: not 'what' He is, but at the very least 'that' He is.

34. *ibid*., 134.
35. *ibid*., 135-136.
36. *ibid*., 243-252.

Al-Shahrastani presents a far more radical understanding of what he refers to as 'pure equivocality.' To consider one example, Maimonides attributes the characteristics of 'living' and 'immaterial' to God in the sense that His "being is not like the being of the elements" insofar as He is neither dead nor a body.[37] In contrast, Al-Shahrastani argues that God "is living in the sense that He gives life and death."[38] Illustrating this principle, he contends that "contraries are litigants and variant things are legal appellants, and their Judge is not numbered among either."[39] Rather, he is 'the truth' in the sense that "he manifests the truth and establishes it" without engaging in disputation, such that the litigants would "sometimes be equal to him and at others at variance with him."[40] Accordingly, Al-Shahrastani asserts that "the relation of the universe to the Necessary of Existence is in accordance with a single judgement, in which the one and the many," as well as every other form of contrary, "are all equal," such that "He is powerful over everything."[41] However, he does not merely apply this principle of equivocality to God's attributes, but instead extends it in order to assert that "existence could be predicated of God only equivocally, as meaning that He is the giver of existence and its opposite."[42] As such, he understands God as the Necessary Existent with reference to His characteristic attribute of being 'absolutely independent.' Significantly, His independence cannot be understood as contrary to dependence, but rather He is above perfection insofar as He transcends relations entirely.[43]

In this way, Al-Shahrastani maintains that the division into necessary and contingency "does not apply to the equivocal."[44] Accordingly, these categories cannot be employed in either proving God's existence or deriving His attributes. In surpassing all categorization as the source of all contraries, he contends that "the denial of Him is a confirmation and the negation of Him is an affirmation."[45] As such, God's existence cannot "be

37. *ibid*., 135.

38. Muhammad Al-Shahrastani, *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, trans. Wilferd Madelung and Toby Mayer (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 43.

39. *ibid*.

40. *ibid*.

41. *ibid*., 59.

42. *ibid*., 10.

43. *ibid*., 55-56.

44. *ibid*., 55.

45. *ibid*.

pointed to by anything," but rather is recognized "through innate predisposition."[46] To this end, he contends that "what is mentioned in the divine scriptures [...] is more worthy of being followed than the [propositions] of the philosophers," such that God reveals Himself to the human race by way of prophecy.[47] In this way, Al-Shahrastani strips philosophy of its ability to know God independently by way of reason insofar as "He is higher than sense perception, imagination and intellect."[48] He thereby confines man's understanding of Him to what is made known through revelation, prohibiting "men from delving into the majesty of God" and "from disputing about Him and discussing His attributes" in accordance with the directives of the prophets.[49]

Despite these contrary claims, it is my opinion that Avicenna still presents the most compelling method of thinking about God's existence and attributes in relation to the created order. In answering the criticisms of Al-Shahrastani, I argue that he errs in his consideration of Avicenna's proof of God insofar as he conceives of the modal categories of 'necessity' and 'contingency' as existing in a contrasting relation to one another. He does not grasp that Avicenna conceives of these categories without the presupposition of their application to any actually existing things. In this respect, not only can they be considered separately from one another, but they also have an absolute primacy over existence generally. Indeed, prior to proving the existence of the Necessary Existent, Avicenna concedes that, although there are undoubtedly existents that, when considered with respect to their essences, are only possible in themselves, the same certainty does not conversely apply to what is necessary in itself. In this way, the sense in which necessity and contingency are properly metaphysical designations is lost on Al-Shahrastani. As a result, he groups them together with other such contraries as "knowledge and ignorance" or "life and death" without recognizing that the modal categories, as prior to these divisions, can be employed in order to consider them.[50]

With respect to Maimonides, it is more difficult to pinpoint a single error in his reasoning. Significantly, although he contends

46. *ibid*.
47. *ibid*., 56-58.
48. *ibid*., 74.
49. *ibid*., 71.
50. *ibid*., 43.

that attributes "intended for the apprehension of His essence" signify "the negation of the privation of the attribute in question," he is willing to concede another category of what he refers to as "attributes of action."[51] As he argues in his examination of God's revelation to Moses at Exodus 33, "Moses is pushed back from an ontological revelation of God's essence towards an ethical and political revelation of His ways."[52] The 'thirteen attributes of mercy' which are revealed to Moses can be predicated of God to the extent that the created order exhibits certain knowable attributes as His creation. In this way, Maimonides is able to speak positively about God in a manner similar to Avicenna insofar as he remains self-conscious of the fact that such attributes do not reveal any aspect of His essence, but rather affirm its unknowability.[53] He therefore conceives of philosophy as posterior to revelation, functioning in a primarily exegetical and political role. It acts to uncover the rational truth underlying sacred doctrine, which can in turn be established as principles of divine emulation for the benefit of the religious community as a whole.

Nonetheless, I maintain that Avicenna's model is still superior to his Jewish counterpart's because it does not constrain philosophy in a secondary role, but rather allows it to operate in conjunction with revelation in such a way as to admit less discrepancies between them. Whereas Maimonides "starts from the acceptance of the Torah," such that the operation of his philosophical discourse is curtailed by this initial submission, Avicenna acts primarily as a philosopher and so can "suspend his assent" to the truth of revelation.[54] Accordingly, he is able to present a more logically rigorous account of God's existence and attributes. Moreover, although Maimonides derides his philosophical predecessors for abandoning their first principles in trying to formulate positive affirmations of God, I contend that he does not himself hold to the full implications of assenting to the categorization of God as the 'Necessary Existent.' As I have exhibited, Avicenna argues that 'if an existent is necessary, then everything about it must be necessary.' Maimonides' model of attributes of action is problematic insofar as it makes a distinction between God's essence and His

51. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 136.

52. Don Seeman, "Honouring the Divine as Virtue and Practice in Maimonides," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy,* vol. 16, no. 2 (2008): 228.

53. *ibid*.

54. Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," xiv.

ways. It posits relational attributes of Him such as 'knowing' and 'loving' with respect to the created order, which do not partake of His essential necessity.[55] By contrast, Avicenna is able to assert that "the Necessary Existent is an intelligible, regardless of whether or not others intellectually apprehend Him; and He is loved, regardless of whether He is loved by others or not."[56]

The discrepancies between these three thinkers is fundamentally linked to their divergent understandings of the relationship between God and the created order. Working along a spectrum from 'ambiguous' univocality to 'pure' equivocality, they all structure their approaches around what they believe to be God's most fundamentally characteristic attribute, which constitutes His nature as 'above perfection.' This designation influences God's relation between His mode of existence and His attributes, as well to the existential properties of contingent existents. Correspondingly, it also informs not only the correspondence between philosophy and revelation, but also the limits of man's intellect with respect to knowing God and His properties. As I have shown, the attacks Al-Shahrastani and Maimonides direct at Avicenna can all either be resolved within his system or miss their mark entirely as a result of misinterpreting some aspect of their predecessor's thinking. The former does not grasp that the modal categories do not have to be applied to any actually existing things to operate effectively, wrongly including them amongst the other actually existing contraries that flow forth from God's radical independence. By contrast, in endeavoring to posit a class of attributes to allow for divine emulation within the religious community, the latter wavers in his conviction to God's 'necessary' existence by distinguishing between His essence as such and His acts within the world of contingency. Peter Adamson recognizes that Avicenna's method of determining "how exactly necessary existence relates to the divinity [...] was only the beginning" of a new chapter in the history of philosophy.[57] I agree with him in this respect, but want to stress that this does not at all to suggest that Avicenna's account is in some sense primitive or poorly thought out. Rather, it is an elaborate and comprehensive model that is capable of effectively answering even the staunchest of criticisms.

55. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 136.
56. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing*, 298.
57. Adamson, "Necessary Existent to God," 189.