"Where Does Avicenna Demonstrate the Existence of God?"*

Abstract:

This study examines a number of different answers to the question: where does Avicenna demonstrate the existence of God within the *Metaphysics of the Healing*? Many interpreters have contended that there is an argument for God's existence in *Metaphysics of the Healing* I.6–7. In this study I show that such views are incorrect and that the only argument for God's existence in the *Metaphysics of the Healing* is found in VIII.1–3. My own interpretation relies upon a careful consideration of the scientific order and first principles of the *Metaphysics of the Healing*, paying attention to Avicenna's own explicit statements concerning the goals and intentions of different books and chapters, and a close analysis of the structure of the different arguments found in the relevant texts of the *Metaphysics of the Healing*. I conclude that Avicenna's explicit goal in I.6–7 is to establish the properties that belong to necessary existence and possible existence, which consists, not in a demonstration of God's existence, but in a dialectical treatment of the first principles of metaphysics.

My aim in this study is to establish where Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, 980–1037) presents a formal demonstration for the existence of God within the *Metaphysics of the Healing* (*al-Ilāhiyyāt aš-Šifā'*).[1] I shall argue that Avicenna only formally demonstrates the existence of God in book VIII of the *Ilāhiyyāt*. A formal demonstration is distinct

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[1] Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, M.E. Marmura, ed. and trans. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005) (Henceforth: *Ilāhiyyāt*). Avicenna, *Al-Shifā': Al-Ilāhiyyāt*, 2 vols., ed. G. Anawati, M. Y. Moussa, S. Dunyā, S. Zāyed (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a l-Amīriyya, 1960). All citations and references will be to Marmura's English translation unless noted otherwise. For the Latin translation of the Arabic, see Avicenna Latinus, *Liber de philosophia prima sive Scientia divina*, ed. S. Van Riet, 3 vols. (Leiden and Louvain, 1977–83) (Henceforth: *Scientia divina*). Citations will include book, chapter, and Marmura's paragraph numbers, followed by the corresponding page references to the Cairo edition in square brackets, along with references to the page and line numbers of the *Scientia divina* in parentheses. For example, *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 5, 9 [31] (*Scientia divina*, 34: 54–61). I have slightly modified many quotations from Marmura, especially his translation of *wājib al-wujūd* as "Necessary Existent." This term has been altered to the more literal, "the necessary of existence" or just "necessary existence." Marmura's translation unnecessarily saddles the text with a theological interpretation in contexts where Avicenna gives us no indication that "the necessary of existence" must have theological implications. For a careful study of Avicenna's arguments for the identification of the necessary existence in itself with God, see Peter Adamson, "From the necessary existent to God," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, Peter Adamson, ed., (Cambridge: 2013), ch. 9, pp. 170–189.

from a material demonstration in two important respects. First, for a formal demonstration Avicenna must intend within a particular passage to demonstrate God's existence by a series of ordered propositions, arguments, enthymemes, or syllogisms. Second, and as a necessary corollary to his intention, Avicenna must at least assume he has adequately supplied the relevant arguments that sufficiently support the premises employed within a formal demonstration for God's existence. A material demonstration consists in any variety of the necessary conditions for the proof, but is without the sufficient condition of being ordered to the end of demonstrating God's existence. For example, simply developing an argument that shows the notion "necessary existence in itself" cannot be caused is not sufficient to generate a formal demonstration for God's existence, or even for the existence of a first cause that is necessary existence in itself. There are many reasons for proving such contentions, and one would undoubtedly use similar arguments if one were presenting a formal demonstration for God's existence, but the cross-pollination of rational strategies or patterns of argumentation do not produce the same conclusions. Material arguments could be fortified and contextualized appropriately to become formal demonstrations, and perhaps the author does this in other passages, but we cannot infer that similar premises and arguments in one context necessarily provide us with formally the same conclusions in a very different context. As we will see, the failure to consider the intentions of Avicenna within a particular context has led many scholars to misinterpret where Avicenna has presented a formal demonstration for the existence of God in the *Ilāhiyyāt*.

Those familiar with the scholarship on Thomas Aquinas will recognize a similar set of exegetical confusions have arisen for those who read into the *De ente et essentia*

IV[2] or *Summa contra gentiles* I.15 arguments for God's existence because similar premises are employed elsewhere in formal demonstrations for God's existence, like in the third way of the *Summa theologiae*, to take the latter case.[3] I suggest, but will not investigate here, that a similar transposition of a material to a formal demonstration might be found in Avicenna, from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 to the *Kitāb an-Najāt, Ilāhiyyāt*, II.12, as well as in other earlier and later works.[4] It should also go without saying that just because later authors like al-Ghazālī, Maimonides, Averroes, Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and Duns Scotus may have taken such materials from Avicenna for their own formal

[2] See Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia* IV (Leonine, 43. 377:127–146). There are many different interpretations of this passage from Aquinas. Representative positions are found in articles and books by Etienne Gilson, Joseph Owens, Armand Maurer, John Wippel, Lawrence Dewan, Scott MacDonald, Rollen Houser, David Twetten, to mention a few, which range from the position that this text is an argument for God's existence, to this passage provides nothing more than a dialectical conceptual clarification. For a bibliography of the secondary literature as well as a comparison of this text from Aquinas with its Avicennian source, see R.E. Houser, "The Real Distinction and the Principles of Metaphysics: Avicenna and Aquinas," in *Laudemus viros gloriosos: Essays in Honor of Armand Maurer CSB*, ed. R.E. Houser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 75–108 (Henceforth: "Real Distinction"). For a similar interpretation of Aquinas, see Armand Maurer, "Dialectic in the *De ente et essentia* of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Roma, magistra mundi. Itineraria culturae medievalis. Mélanges offerts au Père Boyle à l'occasion de son 75e anniversaire*, Jaqueline Hamesse, ed. (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1998), 573-583.

[3] See Thomas Aquinas *Summa Contra* II. 15 and the third way in *Summa theologiae* I.2.3. For example, Norman Kretzmann, albeit self-consciously, attempts a similar sort of construction in Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa contra gentiles I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 95–112.

[4] Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb an-Najāt,* ed. M. T. Dānishpazhūh (Dānišgāh Tehran, Tehran, 1985). For a Latin translation, see N. Carame, *Avicennae Metaphysices Compendium* (Rome, 1926). For English translations of the relevant passages on possibility and necessity and the demonstration of God's existence, see George F. Hourani, "Ibn Sīnā on Necessary and Possible Existence," *Philosophical Forum* 4 (1972): 74–86, (esp. 81–2); Michael E. Marmura, "Avicenna's Proof from Contingency for God's Existence in the Metaphysics of the *Shifa'*," *Medieval Studies* 42 (1980): 337–352, (esp. 350) (Henceforth: "Avicenna's Proof from Contingency"), which also contains proofs from the *al-Risāla al-'Arshiyya* and the *Ishārāt*; Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, eds. *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2007), 214–5. For an analysis of the argument from the *Najāt*, see Jon McGinnis, "The Ultimate Why Question: Avicenna on why God is absolutely necessary," in *The Ultimate Why Question: Why is There Anything at All Rather Than Nothing Whatsoever?* John Wippel, ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 65–83. A detailed historical analysis of Avicenna's sources and of his various presentations of the distinction between necessary existence and possible existence can be found in Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), chs. 11–14.

demonstrations, or criticisms thereof, we cannot necessarily read their interpretations back into Avicenna.

I shall argue that the formal demonstration for the existence of a first cause that is identified with God is found only in the *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.1–3, and that the substance of the dense and numerous arguments about the necessary existence in itself found in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 constitute, at best, nothing more than a material demonstration. In other words, Avicenna has very different intentions in I.6–7, which this paper will attempt to make transparent in structure, though not in detail.

1. Legions of Interpretations of Avicenna's Arguments for God's Existence

A brief examination of the wild variety of opinions on *where* and *what* kind of demonstrations for God's existence are attributed to the *Ilāhiyyāt*, makes clear how controversial this problem is in contemporary scholarship on Avicenna. No one seems to dispute that book eight presents a formal demonstration for God's existence, and since we do not wish to be the first among the assemblage of the undiscerning, we will follow suit. Disagreement resides around those controversial passages in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 where Avicenna distinguishes and analyzes at length the properties that belong to possible and necessary existence. This same battery of materials is also deployed in Avicenna's *Najāt* to initiate what appears to most scholars to be a genuine formal demonstration. So what is the difference between the two? The diversity of both historical and recent interpretations on the significance of these passages is legion.

It has been argued by some that this passage from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 is merely a sort of conceptual consideration or dialectical investigation into the properties that belong to the notions necessary existence in itself and possible existence in itself. Consequently,

such interpreters rule out the thesis that there is formal demonstration to be found in this text from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7.[5] A larger contingent has held that *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 does in fact present a cosmological style formal demonstration or, at least, it provides some of the premises to a formal demonstration that is scattered throughout the whole of the *Ilāhiyyāt*.[6] Some have been inventive enough to contend that this is an ontological or

[5] For scholars who hold that *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 contains only a strictly conceptual consideration, semantic analysis, or dialectical investigation into the properties that belong to the notions necessary existence and possible existence *and* that there is no proof for God's existence from possibility in the *Ilāhiyyāt*, see Amos Bertolacci, "Avicenna and Averroes on The Proofs of God's Existence and The Subject Matter of Metaphysics" *Medioevo: Rivista di Storia della Filosofia Medievale* 32 (2007): 61–98, (esp. 78–80) (Henceforth: "Proofs of God's Existence"); Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity: Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (New York, 1987), 281–310 (Henceforth: *Proofs for Eternity*); idem, "Avicenna's Proof of the Existence of God as a Necessary Existent Being," in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, P. Morewedge, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979): 165–187; Houser, "Real Distinction;" Olga Lizzini, "Utility and Gratuitousness of Metaphysics: Avicenna, *Ilāhiyyāt* I.3," *Quaestio* 5 (2005): 287–305, (esp. 341) (Henceforth: *Utility*); Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna, Great Medieval Thinkers* Series (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 164 (Henceforth: *Avicenna*). Davidson is certainly correct to point out that "Avicenna has not given an ontological proof, for although his proof depends on an analysis of the concept *necessary existent by reason of itself*, the analysis alone is not intended to show that anything exists in the external world corresponding to the concept." "Only the derivation of actual existence from a concept gives an ontological proof …" On the basis of Avicenna's analysis of "the concept *necessarily existence by reason of itself*; he derives a set of attributes from the concept, but does not pretend to derive actual existence from it." Davidson, "Avicenna's Proof of the Existence of God as a Necessary Existent Being," 180. "Avicenna does not regard the analysis of the concept *necessary existent by virtue of itself* as sufficient to establish the existence of anything in the external world. He does not, in other words, wish to offer an *a priori* or ontological proof of the existence of God, but rather a new form of the cosmological argument." Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity*, 298. See also *ibid.* 214, 391–395, *in passim*.

[6] It is difficult to categorize the positions of different scholars because many tend to generalize the attributions of formal demonstrations to Avicenna by drawing on a wide range of texts and works without distinguishing what is drawn from where. In short, for many of these interpreters of Avicenna I am unable to pinpoint how they understand Avicenna's aims in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7. For those who hold some variation of the thesis that there is a cosmological formal demonstration of God's existence in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 or who do not make precise the difference between the latter passage and the *Najāt* or other works, see Lenn Goodman, *Avicenna* (London, 1992), 75–77. It is unclear if George Hourani intends to treat *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6 as a demonstration for God's existence by including it within his collation of translations on necessary and possible existence, see Hourani, "Ibn Sīnā on Necessary and Possible Existence," 74. Ömer Mahir Alper, "Avicenna's Argument for the Existence of God: Was He Really Influenced by the *Mutakallimūn*?" in *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, Jon McGinnis, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), ch. 7, 129–141. Ömer Alper has to supply the opening existential premise of the *Najāt* in order to make his presentation consistent, and gives no indication that this premise, among others, is missing in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 (*ibid*, 134–5). He also fails to observe Davidson's and Lizzini's distinctions between the text of the *Najāt* II.12 and the *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6, (*ibid*, 134). Next is the influential interpretation of Marmura, see Michael Marmura, "Avicenna's Proof from Contingency," 337 ff.; idem, "The Metaphysics of Efficient Causality in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) in *Islamic Theology and Philosophy: Studies in Honor of George F. Hourani*, Michael E. Marmura, ed. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1984): 172–87; idem, "Avicenna on Causal Priority," in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, Parviz Morewedge, ed. (Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1981): 65–83; idem, "Avicenna's Metaphysics, *Encyclopedia Iranica*," in Michael E. Marmura,

proto-Anselmian styled *a priori* formal demonstration. A few outliers, not satisfied with making a decision one way or the other, have even contended it is either a genuine cosmological formal demonstration, which has notes proper to the bouquet of ontological

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Probing in Islamic Philosophy: Studies in the Philosophies of Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī and Other Major Muslim Thinkers (Binghamton, NY: Global Academic Publishing, 2005), 17–32 (Henceforth *Encyclopedia Iranica*). In his article on "Avicenna's Proof from Contingency," Michael Marmura contends that I.6 introduces the first of many premises scattered across the *Ilāhiyyāt*, and offers to "reconstruct" Avicenna's cosmological argument from contingency as it is distributed across *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6; IV.1; VI.2; and VIII.1–3. Marmura does describe the arguments from I.6–7 as *a priori* and rationalistic and contends they do not appeal to sensation (Marmura, "Efficient Causality in Avicenna," 179 ff). Though not stated explicitly, Druart seems at least to agree with Marmura's assessment that there is a cosmological argument spread throughout the *Ilāhiyyāt*, see Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Avicenna's Influence on Duns Scotus' Proof for the Existence of God in the *Lectura*," in *Avicenna and His Heritage. Acts of the International Colloquium*), Jules Janssens and Daniel De Smet, eds. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002): 253–266 (esp. 254) (Henceforth: "Avicenna and Scotus"). Jon McGinnis appears to hold a view that is similar to Marmura's contention that the formal demonstration is developed throughout the *Ilāhiyyāt*, but McGinnis clearly rejects that there is an ontological argument in I.6–7, see McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 164. "Before considering his analysis, I should say that I find nothing like an Anselmian ontological-style argument for the existence of God in Avicenna. Consequently, I think that the question of whether there is anything necessary through itself is for Avicenna genuinely open one. At this point of his inquiry [i.e., at *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7], he is merely considering the various conceptual divisions of existence, and it could turn out that one of those conceptual divisions, such as the necessary through itself, is empty." (ibid., 272, n. 20) McGinnis does take Avicenna's doctrine in *Najāt* II.12 to be a cosmological argument, but does not clarify whether he thinks *Ilāhiyyāt* might also offer a cosmological argument from possibility and necessity (ibid., 163–168; McGinnis, "The Ultimate Why Question," 72–75). Marmura also concedes that I.6 is only addressing necessary existence at the level of a conceptual consideration; however, he does hold that this is a step towards developing a formal argument for God's existence (Marmura, "Efficient Causality in Avicenna," 344–5). Stephen Menn also suggests that there is a "proof" for "the existence and unicity of an 'essentially necessary existent'," albeit, "briefly in I.6–7 and more fully in Book VIII," see Stephen Menn, "Avicenna's Metaphysics," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, Peter Adamson, ed., (Cambridge: 2013), ch. 10, pp. 143–169; p. 149, n. 14. Robert Wisnovsky's position is not entirely clear (Wisnvosky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*, 256–63). He seems to suggest there is an ontological argument for God's existence in I.6 or at least an "ontological argument for the uncausedness of the necessary of existence in itself which appears in *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.6 …" which he takes to be "merely an adjunct" to the arguments of *Ilāhiyyāt* 8 (ibid., 259). Wisnovsky also appears to be mistaken about Davidson's interpretation. He writes that according to Davidson, "In the *Shifā'* and *Dānishnāma*, the distinction between necessary and possible existence is a rather redundant supplement to what is a more purely cosmological argument for God's existence. In the *Najāt* and *Ishārāt*, however, the distinction between necessary and possible existence is crucial to what amounts to a combined ontological and cosmological argument for God's existence." (ibid., 260). But this is not Davidson's position. Davidson distinguishes between two cosmological style arguments, one of which he contends has a superfluous stage concerned with demonstrating the impossibility of an infinite regress (Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity*, 350–2; 362–3). As for the *Najāt* and *Išārāt* containing a hybrid ontological-cosmological argument, Davidson rejects this contention. "A cosmological argument attempting to establish the existence of God as necessary in the logical sense of the term would compound the dubiousness of the ontological proof. It would not merely reason from a concept to reality. It would reason from reality to the affirmation that there is a concept with the unusual virtue of allowing one to reason back therefrom to reality. Yet we find that, despite its problematic character, a cosmological proof of the type described was proposed by philosophers of the modern period. Neither Avicenna nor the other medieval philosophers … contemplated anything of the kind." (ibid., 391).

arguments, or that what we have here is simultaneously both a cosmological and ontological formal demonstration for God's existence.[7]

[7] For authors who suggest it is some version of an ontological argument, see Fazlur Rahman, "Ibn Sīnā" in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 2 vols. M. M. Sharif, ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963): 480–506. Rahman seems to suggest it is an ontological argument on 482–483, but he does not provide sufficient references to determine if he is referring to the *Najāt*, the *Šifā'*, or both. Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen, "The Proof of the Sincere," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 1, 1, (2005): 44-61, regards Avicenna's so-called "Proof of the Sincere" from the *Išārāt* as an earlier formulation of the ontological argument. Legenhausen even contrasts it with the ontological arguments of Anselm and Descartes and provides a brief survey of its treatment by various Muslim philosophers. Allan Bäck suggests that there might be an *a priori* argument in Avicenna, but treats the argument in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 to be *a posteriori*, see Allan Bäck, "Avicenna's Conception of the Modalities," *Vivarium* 30 (1992): 217–55, esp., 241–46. See also Parviz Morewedge, "Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Malcolm and the Ontological Argument, *The Monist* 54, no. 2, (1970): 234–49; idem, "A Third Version of the Ontological Argument in the Ibn Sinian Metaphysics," in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, P. Morewedge, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), 188–222, esp. 193–4; 202–15. Morewedge, on the basis of Norman Malcom's work, distinguishes between two kinds of ontological arguments: one that takes existence as a perfection, and another that takes necessary existence as a perfection. In the first article he proposes to show how a number of statements of Avicenna's reveal he held the second kind of ontological argument. As far as I can tell, there is no argument provided to show that Avicenna held any kind of ontological argument; rather, Morewedge just assumes it is an ontological argument on the basis of his own interpretation of the *Dānishnāma* (ibid., 237–9). His second essay briefly summarizes Avicenna's commitment to the second kind of ontological argument and rehearses its problems; it then moves on to develop a third kind of ontological argument on the basis of an intuitive desire to know oneself and God. Morewedge summarizes this approach as follows, "we explored the possibility of constructing an argument which takes account of the phenomena felt to be significant by those taking a religious perspective, but can be aligned, at the same time, with a systematic philosophical perspective. Accordingly, we depicted a third version of the ontological argument and clarified its premises by drawing on the works of well-known philosophers [such as Augustine, Descartes, and Spinoza] who have addressed themselves to the issues in question. We demonstrated, moreover, that ibn Sīnā's metaphysical system contains doctrines of great consequence to the depiction of the premises of the argument under consideration." (ibid., 214–5). Morewedge's articles are not particularly concerned with the works of Avicenna; rather they are more focused on making somewhat tenuous connections between philosophers, mystics, and statements of Avicenna to the end of exploring "the possibility of constructing an argument" that he calls ontological. There are other readers of Avicenna who consider his proofs to be cosmological arguments for God's existence that also have noteworthy implicit ontological argument-like features, see Steven A. Johnson, "A Fourth Ontological Argument in Ibn Sīnā's Metaphysics," *Muslim World* 74 (3–4) (1984): 161–71. Like Morewedge, Johnson seems to be more concerned with producing his own approach to the existence of God instead of closely examining the arguments of Avicenna. More recently, Toby Mayer has described Avicenna's argument as simultaneously ontological and cosmological, see Toby Mayer, "Ibn Sīnā's 'Burhān al-Ṣiddīqīn'" *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12 (2001): 18–39. Towards the end of his detailed study Mayer writes, "The complete argument can now be evaluated. Morewedge and Davidson are both correct in that the proof as a whole is simultaneously ontological and cosmological." (ibid., 35) For Mayer's final evaluation and justification of this confluence, see ibid., 35–9. It should be noted that Mayer's analysis is almost entirely dedicated to the *Najāt* and the *Išārāt*, and so the *Ilāhiyyāt* is rarely discussed. However, he does seem to suggest that there is a proof in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 (ibid., 33, n. 52). Mayer's unconventional conceptions of cosmological and ontological arguments (p. 37, n. 46) combined with his application of them to Avicenna seems to distract him from drawing on Avicenna's own distinction between demonstrations *that* and *why*, which, for better or for worse, is the common the historical point of departure for distinguishing between the contemporary division between cosmological and ontological arguments. With respect to the various ontological argument interpretations of Avicenna, Davidson aptly writes, "One of the proofs associated with the Aristotelian tradition might, if read carelessly, be misinterpreted as an ontological rather than a cosmological argument. Central to Avicenna's

Clearly enough the first problem that confronts us has little to do with Avicenna's text, but with this tangled web of contemporary interpretations. What do each of these interpretations mean by terms like cosmological, ontological, *a priori*, and *a posteriori*? Some scholars seem to employ these terms in the conventional ways found in contemporary philosophy of religion, yet others seem to use them in entirely idiosyncratic ways. Avicenna of course never used any of these terms, and since it would be beyond the scope of this paper to categorize and evaluate all the arguments laid out by each of these interpretations, I will stay close to the terminology of Avicenna who thinks in terms of demonstrations *that* and *why* (*burhān inna* and *burhān lima*, respectively). My arguments aim to show that many of these contemporary debates about different kinds of arguments for God's existence in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 completely miss the point, because, as I shall demonstrate, there is no formal argument for God's existence in this passage. It will be shown that Avicenna's analysis of necessary and possible existence in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 could not be a formal demonstration for God's existence since these chapters are oriented towards providing us with insights into the proper first principles of metaphysics.[8] These principles will then be employed throughout Avicenna's metaphysical investigations

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proof of the existence of a being necessarily existent by virtue of itself is the analysis of the critical concept, the concept *necessarily existent by virtue of itself*. And a superficial reading might lead to the misapprehension that the existence of a being corresponding to the concept is derived by Avicenna solely from an analysis of the concept. The error might, moreover, be abetted by the presence in European philosophy of ontological arguments for the existence of God which do consist exclusively in the analysis of a similar concept, that of *necessary being*. Avicenna's proof, it turns out, does not arrive at the existence of a being necessarily existent by virtue of itself solely through analyzing a concept, and his proof is unambiguously cosmological." *Proofs for Eternity*, pp. 214–5 (see pp. 298, 303–4, 403–5). I agree with Davidson's, Druart's, and McGinnis's critical assessment of interpretations that claim to find an ontological argument in Avicenna's *Ilāhiyyāt*. See Druart "Avicenna and Scotus," 254, n. 9.

[8] See R.E. Houser, "The Real Distinction;" idem, "The Place of the First Principle of Demonstration in Avicennian Metaphysics," in *Proceedings of the Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance (PMR) Conference. Vol. 6* (Villanova: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1981): 117–134; idem, "Let Them Suffer into the Truth: Avicenna's Remedy for Those Denying the Axioms of Thought," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1999): 107–133.

concerning this science's objects of inquiry, one of the last being the formal demonstration of God's existence in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.1–3.

2. The Subject of Avicenna's Metaphysical Science

Before looking at the disputed texts themselves we must first address the context of these passages, and their place within Avicenna's innovative organization of the Aristotelian science of metaphysics. Observing the systematic order of Avicenna's approach to philosophical problems can often be as insightful as what he has to say about these problems themselves. This will especially prove to be true for the problems considered in this paper.

We will begin our exegetical investigation with the opening chapters of the *Ilāhiyyāt* where Avicenna establishes the subject and objects of inquiry sought in his metaphysical science. Since Aristotle's doctrine of a demonstrative science plays a central controlling role in his *Ilāhiyyāt*,[9] it is not surprising that he introduces metaphysics by first considering the subject (*mawḍū'*) of the science. What is required at the start of any science, however, is more than just its subject; we also need principles (*mabādi'*) that are admitted (*musallama*), foundations upon which we can derive vis-à-vis our subject that third feature of every Aristotelian science, namely, its demonstrated conclusions or proper attributes, that is, the objects of inquiry (*maṭālib*) or things which are sought after (*'ašyā' hiya al-maṭlūba*).[10]

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[9] Michael E. Marmura "Avicenna on the Division of the Sciences in the *Isagoge* of his *Shifa'*," *Journal for the History of Arabic Science* 4 (1980): 239–251 (Henceforth: "Avicenna on the Division of the Sciences"). Amos Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's* Metaphysics *in Avicenna's* Kitâb al-Shifâ'*: A Milestone of Western Metaphysical Thought* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006) (Henceforth: *Reception*); idem, "Proofs of God's Existence," *in passim*.

[10] *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.1.8 [5] (*Scientia divina* 3: 37–40). See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.2, 72a15–24; 1.10, 76a33–77a4; Avicenna, *al-Burhān min kitāb al-šifā'* (*Book of Demonstration of the Healing*), ed. 'A. Badawī. 2nd ed. (Cairo: Maktaba al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1966), II.6 [155: 4–12] (English trans., in Bertolacci, *Reception*, 134; see also *Reception*, 193–6); idem, *Avicenna's Treatise on Logic: Part One of*

But what is the subject of Avicenna's metaphysical science? This is the central question of the early chapters of book one. Within these chapters Avicenna will consider three alternatives for the subject of metaphysics: is it an ontology, aitiology, or theology? Many misinterpretations of Avicenna's analysis of necessary and possible existence in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 fail to consider the significance of his account of the subject of metaphysics in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.1–4. Avicenna's treatment of necessary and possible existence follows his presentation of the subject of metaphysics; however, the analysis of necessary and possible existence is also distinct from the objects of inquiry sought by the science of metaphysics; these objects of inquiry begin with substance in *Ilāhiyyāt* II. We must observe closely Avicenna's division of metaphysics into its subject (*Ilāhiyyāt* I.1–4), principles (*Ilāhiyyāt* I.5–8), and objects of inquiry (*Ilāhiyyāt* II-X). The key for unlocking our problem will be found in properly understanding the unity of topics addressed in the first book of the *Ilāhiyyāt*.

Aristotelian philosophers are at odds about the subject of metaphysics. If Avicenna were to take God as the subject of metaphysics, that is, if Aristotelian first philosophy were principally a divine science, because it took God as its initial point of departure, then nothing would make more sense than to begin metaphysics with demonstrations that prove God exists. Whether or not this is the proper Aristotelian procedure does not concern us, for it certainly is not the approach of Avicenna.

Danesh-Name Alai, trans., Farhang Zabeeh (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), 43–4; idem, *Avicenna's Deliverance: Logic*, trans., Asad Q. Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), sect., 119–35; idem, *Remarks and Admonitions. Part one: Logic*, trans., Shams Constantine Inati (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), m. 9, c. 3–4. See also Michael E. Marmura "Avicenna on the Division of the Sciences;" Bertolacci, *The Reception*; R.E. Houser, "The Real Distinction;" Riccardo Strobino, "Avicenna on the Indemonstrability of Definition," *Documenti e Studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale*, 21 (2010), 113–63; idem, "Principles of Scientific Knowledge and the Psychology of (their) Intellection in Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Burhān*," in J. Biard (ed), *Savoir et démonstration. Les commentaires médiévaux sur les* Seconds Analytiques, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 31–45 (Henceforth: "Scientific Principles of Knowledge").

In *Ilāhiyyāt* I.1–2 we quickly learn that this science of metaphysics is the only science that presents demonstrations for the existence of God,[11] that God's existence "is neither self-evident, nor something one despairs of demonstrating" for, as Avicenna tells us, "there is a proof for" God's existence.[12] But since no science demonstrates the existence of its own subject, and God's existence must be demonstrated, and the science of metaphysics alone can demonstrate it, then we must conclude that the study of God's existence and attributes cannot be identified with the subject of metaphysics.[13] After a number of additional arguments in chapter one, Avicenna draws the further conclusion that neither God nor the ultimate four causes are the *subject* of metaphysics; rather, they are among its *objects of inquiry*.[14] In short, the aitiological and theological investigations of metaphysics are not identified with the subject of first philosophy but with the objects of inquiry the science will ultimately investigate. The conclusions of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.1 make it perfectly clear: the primary subject of metaphysics cannot be God or the ultimate causes, since the existence of both must be demonstrated later, along with the many other objects of inquiry proper to metaphysics.[15] *Ilāhiyyāt* I.2–3 establishes that the subject of

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[11] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 1, 11 [5–6] (*Scientia divina*, 4–5); *Shifā', aṭ-Ṭabī'īyā* (*Physics of the Healing*) I.2, 8–11 and I.3, *in passim*. Hence, Ömer Mahir Alper and others are mistaken who take the arguments of Avicenna's *Physics* of the *Šifā'* to have established the existence of God, and not just a first mover (Alper "Avicenna's Argument for the Existence of God: Was He Really Influenced by the *Mutakallimūn*?" 133, n. 15). Davidson, Gutas, Bertolacci, and McGinnis are all especially clear about the distinction between physical and metaphysical proofs, see Davidson, "Avicenna's Proof of the Existence of God as a Necessary Existent Being," 180 ff.; Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 296–300 [1st ed., 261–5] (Henceforth: *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*); Bertolacci, "Proofs of God's Existence," 75–8; McGinnis, "The Ultimate Why Question," 65–6, *in passim*.

[12] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 1, 11 [6] (*Scientia divina*, 4–5). For a detailed study of Avicenna's account of the subject of metaphysics, see Bertolacci, *Reception*; idem, "Proofs of God's Existence."

[13] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 1, 12 [6–7] (*Scientia divina*, 5–6).

[14] See, R.E. Houser "Aristotle and Two Medieval Aristotelians on the Nature of God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 51, 3 (2011): 355–75. Houser compares three themes in Aristotle, Avicenna, and Aquinas. "The themes are: 1) conclusions drawn about the nature of God; 2) the order the author uses in presenting his conclusions; and 3) the influence of the author's demonstrative metaphysical principles on the conclusions drawn about the nature of God." 355.

[15] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 1, 17 [9] (*Scientia divina*, 8).

metaphysics is being inasmuch as it is being and clarifies further the distinction between the subject of metaphysics and its objects of inquiry, that is, those things sought in this science as quasi-species and quasi-accidents of being.[16]

Given these early contentions about the subject of metaphysics and its objects of inquiry in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.1–3, it would be unusual, to say the least, for Avicenna to provide us with a formal demonstration for God's existence in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7. Avicenna has just identified, not God, but being *qua* being as the subject of metaphysics, and he has identified the demonstrations for God's existence among the *ultimate* objects of inquiry. Up to this point in his metaphysics Avicenna has not given any indication that he intends *immediately* to present a formal demonstration for the existence of God in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 prior to addressing the other objects of inquiry proper to metaphysics. Rather, Avicenna has given us every reason to think that arguments for God's existence will not be addressed until the last books of the *Ilāhiyyāt*.[17]

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[16] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 2, 12–13 [13–14] (*Scientia divina*, 12–13: 30–46).

[17] *Ilāhiyyāt* I.3 contains a cryptic passage that has been the source of numerous misinterpretations about where and in what way Avicenna demonstrates God's existence. To address adequately this difficult passage and the numerous interpretations it has inspired would require a study of its own. Let me briefly note why this passage presents no difficulties to this study's thesis. In this short passage Avicenna abruptly notes that "later" (*ba'd*) he will provide a "pointer" (*išāra*) for a way to demonstrate—from universal intelligible premises and from causes to effects—God's existence, essence, and the emanation of creatures from God. Strangely enough, Avicenna then immediately remarks that despite such a pointer, humans cannot demonstrate God's existence and essence in this way, namely from causes to effects, due to the weakness of our mode of understanding (see *Ilāhiyyāt* I.3, 11 [21] (*Scientia divina*, 23–24: 30–41). For an alternative translation, see Bertolacci, "Proofs of God's Existence," 80, text 5). Debates have centered on whether this "later" refers to *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 or VIII–IX, and the question: does Avicenna intend to provide a kind of ontological argument for God's existence? I agree with Marmura, Lizzini, and Bertolacci who connect the reference in I.3 to I.6–7, (see Marmura, "Proof from Contingency," 339–341; Bertolacci, "Structure," 24, n. 70; idem, *Reception*, 171, n. 63; Lizzini, "Utility," 341). More recently, however, Bertolacci has argued that the reference in I.3 is to VIII–IX, (see Bertolacci, "Proofs of God's Existence," 78–84), which I think is mistaken. Like Davidson, Houser, Bertolacci, and Lizzini I also hold that there is not an ontological argument for God's existence presented in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7. In addition to this general consensus, let me note the following points that also support this my interpretation. First, the term "pointer" (*išāra*) seems to be used in Avicenna's technical sense, which means that "later" on Avicenna does not intend to provide all the premises of a demonstration, but only its principles. This eliminates the fully articulated demonstrations in VIII–IX as a possible reference to the pointer promised in I.3 (For a detailed treatment of Avicenna's distinction between a pointer (*išāra*) and a demonstration (*burhān*), see Gutas,

3. The Scientific Order of the *Ilāhiyyāt*

In *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4, Avicenna sets forth the general order of his metaphysical science, that is, all the topics to be treated from this chapter to the end of the *Ilāhiyyāt*. The significance of this scientific order should be central to any interpretation concerning where Avicenna's formally demonstrates the existence of God, for it is here in I.4 that he explicitly states what philosophical topics he intends to treat and where he intends to treat them.

Avicenna begins this table of contents in I.4 with the topics to be addressed in the next chapter of book I, that is, *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5. He says we must begin with a consideration of being and thing and their relation to the categories. Following the treatment of being and thing Avicenna promises to investigate necessary and possible existence, and the distinction between truth and falsity, which corresponds to the topics addressed in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 and I.8, respectively.[18] This exhausts the contents of topics taken up in *Ilāhiyyāt* I and there is no reference to any proofs for God's existence up to this point in Avicenna's table of contents.

Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, 346–358 [1st ed., 307–318]; Bertolacci, *Reception*, 170–2; 221, n. 27). Second, it is also important to recognize that Avicenna explicitly states humans cannot demonstrate God's existence and nature by arguing from causes to effects, which eliminates that the formal demonstrations-*that* found in VIII–IX from being the reference of I.3, and it also reveals that there is no ontological formal demonstration for God's existence from causes to effects in I.6–7. Third, once all the claims of this cryptic passage from I.3 are disambiguated, it turns out that it just restates in a convoluted way what Avicenna said in *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 1, 11–12 [5–7] (*Scientia divina*, 4–6), namely, that God's existence is not self-evident and that it can only be demonstrated by arguing from effects to causes. All of these claims are completely consistent with the thesis of this study. See also *Ilāhiyyāt* III. 8, 9 [143–4] (*Scientia divina*, 161–3: 21–44). Finally, I wish to note that Thomas Aquinas was also interested in this passage from Avicenna and assimilated it into his own account of the science of metaphysics, an account that rejects ontological arguments for God's existence, see John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas and Avicenna on the Relationship between First Philosophy and Other Theoretical Sciences: A Note on Thomas's *Commentary on Boethius's De Trinitate*, Q. 5, art. 1, ad 9" in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas I,* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), ch. 2, pp. 37-53.

[18] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 4, 1 [25] (*Scientia divina*, 27–28: 15–22).

Avicenna spends the rest of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4 surveying the long list of objects of inquiry to be addressed in the other nine books of the *Ilāhiyyāt*, which consists in the quasi-species of being, namely, substance (II) and accidents (III), as well as the many quasi-properties of being like the prior and posterior (IV), universals and particulars (V), causality (VI), and the one and many and beliefs about various pseudo-ultimate causes (VII).[19] Only after this series of objects of inquiry, which summarizes the contents of the *Ilāhiyyāt* from books I–VII, does Avicenna state that his metaphysical science will finally reach the highest object sought. In short, "We will prove the existence of the First Principle and show that He is one, truth, omnipotent and all other divine attributes."[20] And this is precisely what he does in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. Nowhere else in this summary of topics from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4 does Avicenna even hint that he might intend to demonstrate the existence of God prior to *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.

Hence, it should be clear that Avicenna's own explicit intentions in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4 present a serious problem for those interpretations that contend that *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 includes a formal demonstrations for God's existence. Avicenna has just spent four chapters declaring that God is neither the *subject* nor among the *principles* of metaphysics—the problems Avicenna addresses in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.1–8—but God's existence is among the *ultimate ends* of his metaphysical science. Not only is the demonstration of God's existence among the many *objects of inquiry*, the actual demonstration itself, according to Avicenna, will follow nearly the whole sundry of objects of inquiry addressed in his metaphysics. Further, the statements made here in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4 about *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5–7 suggest that the inquiry into necessary and possible existence is intended

[19] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 4, 1–6 [25–27] (*Scientia divina*, 27–30: 15–74).
[20] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 4, 7 [27] (*Scientia divina*, 30: 75–77).

to be nothing more than an investigation of these notions, along with the relation of being and thing to the categories. In short, Avicenna gives us no reason to think he intends to present a demonstration for God's existence in the first book of his *Ilāhiyyāt*, and all interpretations to the contrary must deal with the fact that their view directly contradicts Avicenna's numerous explicit statements and completely ignores the scientific order of Avicenna's metaphysical science.

4. Avicenna's Metaphysical First Principles

Let us turn to a closer analysis of the remaining chapters of book one so as to make clearer Avicenna's intentions in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5–8. As we have seen, the first four chapters of book one are dedicated to distinguishing the subject of metaphysics from its many objects of inquiry. But Avicenna has not yet discussed that third element which he noted in chapter one also belongs to every demonstrative science. Every science has "something which is a subject; things that are searched after; and principles, [universally] admitted, from which demonstrations are constructed."[21] Where are the metaphysical *principles* he promised us? This is the task of the final four chapters of book one. According to Aristotle principles are admitted at the outset of any science; they are divided into proper and common principles, and proper principles subdivide into notions and hypotheses. Common principles are those axioms adopted by every science but are properly treated in the universal science of metaphysics, for example, that there is no middle between affirmation and negation, which Avicenna introduces after a brief analysis of the nature of truth in the final chapter of the first book. Avicenna appropriated this division of first principles into his own account of the two noetic acts of

[21] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 1, 8 [5]. "... et quod in ceteris scientiis est aliquid quod est subiectum, et quod aliqua sunt quae inquiruntur in eis, et quod principia aliqua conceduntur in eis ex quibus componitur demonstratio." (*Scientia divina*, 3: 37–40).

conceptualization (*taṣawwur*) and assent (*taṣdīq*). Concepts and assents are either primary, or they acquired through other concepts and assents that are more fundamental. The ultimate primary concepts and assents in any science provide the principles of conceptualization (*madādi' al-taṣawwur*) and the principles of assent (*madādi' al-taṣdīq*).[22] Accordingly, a science will employ both the principles of assent common to all sciences, as well as the primary principles of conceptualization and assent that are proper to its own subject.

Not only does Avicenna bring to his Aristotelian metaphysics a precise account of the threefold division of scientific first principles into primary notions of conceptualization and primary hypotheses and axioms of assent, but he also does so by integrating three of Aristotle's four senses of being into this threefold division of the first principles of metaphysics. Throughout the *Metaphysics* Aristotle distinguishes the various senses of being into being *per accidens*, being *per se*, which is analogically found in all ten categories, being as divided into act and potency, and being as the truth of propositions.[23] Avicenna synthesizes his own novel appropriation of Aristotle's fourfold division of being into the threefold division of the first principles of metaphysics. This appropriation is made particularly clear in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4's announcement of the topics to be addressed in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5–8.

> We must, in this art, know the state of the relation of thing and being to the categories—the state of nonexistence, the state of necessity (that is, necessary existence and its

[22] See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.2.72a15–24; 10.76a33–77a4; Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Burhān* (*Book of Demonstration of the Healing*) I.1; I.6; II. 6, 8–10; idem, *Treatise on Logic: Part One of Danesh-Name Alai*, 40–44; idem, *Avicenna's Deliverance: Logic*, sect., 102, 111–112, 122, 128–9. idem, *Remarks and Admonitions: Part One: Logic*, m. 9, c. 3 [476–477], 152–153. See also, Strobino, "Avicenna on the Indemonstrability of Definition;" idem, "Scientific Principles of Knowledge;" Heidrun Eichner, "Al-Fârâbî and Ibn Sînâ on 'Universal Science' and the System of Sciences: Evidence of the Arabic Tradition of the *Posterior Analytics*," *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale*, 21 (2010): 71–95.

[23] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics Δ* (V). 7, 1017a23–35; *E* (VI). 2, 1026a35–b3; *Θ* (IX). 1, 1045b28–35; *Θ* (IX). 10, 1051a35–b2ff; *K* (XI). 8, 1065a 21–25; *K* (XI). 9, 1065b5–15; *N* (XIV). 2, 1089a1–31.

> conditions), and the state of possibility and its true nature (and this is in itself the theoretical investigation of potentiality and actuality). [We must also] examine the state of what is in itself and what is accidental; the true and the false …[24]

Here Avicenna subtly represents his own version of Aristotle's four senses of being. Let us begin with Avicenna's integration of Aristotle's doctrine into the primary notions treated in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5.

One of the four senses of being for Aristotle involved a comparison of being to the categories. Aristotle argued that both being and one are primary notions that pervade all of the categories of being *per se* and cannot be contained by any one genus.[25] In *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5 Avicenna correlates the sense of being that transcends all the categories with the primary notions of metaphysics, that is, the first principles as primary notions. Avicenna goes beyond Aristotle and extends this attribution of primacy and transcendence to the metaphysical notions thing and the necessary. This is seen most clearly in the opening lines of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5, where we are told that:

> [The] notions of "being," "thing," and "necessary" are impressed in the soul in a primary way. This impression does not require better known things to bring it about. [This is similar] to what obtains in the domain of assent, where there are primary principles found to be true in themselves, causing [in turn] assent to the truths of other [propositions].[26]

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[24] *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.4.1 [25] (mod. trans., Marmura). "Oportet nos in hoc magisterio scire dispositionem comparationis rei et entis ad praedicamenta et dispositionem privationis, et dispositionem necessitatis in esse necessario et eius condiciones, et dispositionem possibilitatis et eius certitudinem et quia ipsamet est speculatio de potentia et effectu, et ut consideremus dispositionem eius quod est per essentiam et eius quod est per accidens, et de veritate et falsitate ..." *Scientia divina* 1.4 (27–8: 16–22). Bertolacci notes the parallel between this passage from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4 and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but does not examine its significance, so far as I know. See Amos Bertolacci, "The Structure of Metaphysical Science in the *Ilāhiyyāt* (*Divine Science*) of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Šifā'* (*Book of the Cure*)," *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 13 (2002): 1–69, p. 25, n. 77 (Henceforth: "Structure"). N.B. In his brief synopsis of this passage from I.4, Bertolacci omits its connection to Aristotle's four senses of being in *Reception*, p. 162, n. 40.

[25] See Aristotle *Metaphysics Γ* 2, 1003b23–33.

[26] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 5, 1 [29] (mod. trans., Marmura). "Dicemus igitur quod res et ens et necesse talia sunt quod statim imprimuntur in anima prima impressione, quae non acquiritur ex aliis notioribus se, sicut credulitas quae habet prima principia, ex quibus ipsa provenit per se, et est alia ab eis, sed propter ea." (*Scientia divina*, 31–32: 2–5).

Just as there are first principles that involve assent, like primary hypotheses and axioms, so also there are first principles in the realm of notions conceived. "Similarly, in conceptual matters, there are things which are principles for conceptualization that are conceived in themselves."[27] These primary notions or first principles of conceptualization transcend the limitations of the ten genera of the categories for they are the "things that have the highest claim to be conceived in themselves {and} are those common to all entities – like, 'being,' 'thing,' 'one,' and others."[28] In short, Avicenna's treatment of primary notions in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5 is both able to extend Aristotle's sense of being to thing and the necessary, as well as incorporate these primary notions into the first division of proper principles found in his metaphysical science.

A similar correlation and innovation occurs in his treatment of primary hypotheses and axioms in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 and *Ilāhiyyāt* I.8, respectively. We have just seen that Avicenna affirms there are first principles in both the domain of conceptualization and assent. The first principles of assent *proper* to the science of metaphysics pertain to the properties of necessary and possible existence. These hypotheses of assent are established in the course of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7. In these chapters Avicenna modulates Aristotle's sense of being as act and potency by subordinating the priority of this Aristotelian division to what Avicenna takes to be the more fundamental modal disjunctive sense of being as necessary or possible. As quoted above, Avicenna

[27] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 5, 2 [29] "Similiter in imaginationibus sunt multa quae sunt principia imaginandi, quae imaginatur per se …" (*Scientia divina*, 32: 13–15).

[28] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 5, 5 [30] "Quae promptiora sunt ad imaginandum per seipsa, sunt ea quae communia sunt omnibus rebus, sicut res et ens et unum, et cetera." (*Scientia divina*, 33: 25–27). See also *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 2, 18 [15] where we are told that existence and unity are firsts in generality, and *Ilāhiyyāt* VII. 1 where the one is said to be convertible with being. Like Bertolacci, I would argue that there is no great importance to be found in the differences between the notions enumerated within these lists of primary notions that transcend the categories. See Amos Bertolacci,""Necessary" as Primary Concept in Avicenna's Metaphysics," in *Conoscenza e contingenza*, Stefano Perfetti, ed. (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2008): 31–50 (Henceforth: "The Necessary"), 36, n. 18.

tells us that the modal division between necessary and possible existence "and this is in itself the theoretical investigation of potentiality and actuality."[29] This theoretical investigation will establish the primary hypotheses of assent that belong to metaphysics, such as, possible existences are composite and caused, as well as, necessary existence in itself is uncaused, one, simple, and peerless.

Finally in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.8 Avicenna connects Aristotle's sense of being as the truth of propositions with his defense of the axiom that there is no middle between affirmation and negation, a universal truth common to all propositions. Avicenna's metaphysical examination of axioms or principles *common* to all sciences is set within his division of ontological and epistemological truth. Aristotle's sense of being as the truth of propositions is developed within Avicenna's brief account of epistemological truths. The first among epistemological truths can be found in the axiom that is the first principle of demonstration. Avicenna then supports the whole hierarchy of epistemological truths within the hierarchical edifice of ontological truths, which ultimately depend upon the first truth that is necessary existence in itself.[30]

More could be said about Avicenna's correlation of the three kinds of scientific first principles with Aristotle's senses of being, but only the second kind of proper principles is essential to the interpretation of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7. In order to defuse the common theological misinterpretations of I.6–7, we must begin with Avicenna's analysis of the necessary as primary notion in I.5, before turning to his presentation of the primary hypotheses of metaphysics in I.6–7.

5. The Necessary as a Primary Metaphysical Notion

[29] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 4, 1 [25] (mod. trans., Marmura) (*Scientia divina*, 27–28: 16–20).

[30] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 8, 1 [48] (*Scientia divina*, 55–56: 58–76). See Daniel De Haan, "Avicenna's *Healing* and the Metaphysics of Truth."

It is characteristic of the proper principles of metaphysics, the universal science of being, to be like axioms in a number of respects. Axioms are the common principles that are always present and utilized in all our assents, so much so that we often do not notice their ubiquitous deployment. This point is reiterated in the opening remarks of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5. There are two kinds of proper principles, those in the order of conceptualization and those in the order of assent. Said otherwise, there are principles that are notions and principles that are hypotheses or axioms. We would do well to observe Avicenna's distinction, and to keep these two acts of the intellect in view for what follows in his treatment of first principles.

As we have seen above, the notions that are impressed in our soul in a primary and *per se* way are being (*mawjūd*), thing (*šay'*), and necessary (*ḍarūrī / wājib*). These notions are the principal notions by which we conceive all other meanings, they are common to all other notional meanings, can be said of any other notion, and they cannot be apprehended or defined through other notions since all other meanings include these notions in their definitions. Any attempt to define these primary notions or to demonstrate them will involve one in countless confusions or circularity.[31]

[31] There is a developing body of literature on Avicenna's doctrine of the primary notions. See: Rahman Fazlur, "Essence and existence in Avicenna," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1958): 1–16. Michael E. Marmura, "Avicenna on Primary Concepts in the *Metaphysics* of his *al-Shifa*" in *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens*, Savory Roger and Agius Dionisius, eds. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 1984): 219–239; Robert Wisnovsky, "Notes on Avicenna's Concept of Thingness (šay'iyya')" *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10 (2000): 181–221; Jan Aertsen, "'Res' as Transcendental: Its Introduction and Significance" in *Le problème des transcendantaux du XIVe au XVIIe siècle*, G. Federici Vescovini ,ed. (Paris: 2002): 139–156; Thérèse-Anne Druart, "'Shay' or 'Res' as Concomitant of 'Being' in Avicenna," *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 12 (2001): 125–142; Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*, chs. 7–14; Olga Lizzini, "*Wugud-Mawgud /* Existence-Existent in Avicenna: A Key Ontological Notion in Arabic philosophy," *Quaestio* 3 (2003): 111–138; Bertolacci, "The Necessary;" Houser, "Real Distinction;" Jan Aertsen*, "Avicenna's Doctrine of the Primary Notions and its Impact* on *Medieval Philosophy*," in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages: Studies in Text, Transmission and Translation: in Honour of Hans Daiber*, Anna Akasoy and Wim Raven, eds. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 21–42; Amos Bertolacci, "The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna's Metaphysics: The Text and Its Context," in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture,*

So how do we become aware of them if they are always present but not always noticed? The substance of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5 consists in Avicenna's endeavor to awaken our minds to the metaphysical meanings being, thing, and necessary by way of various signs. Avicenna uses signs which are more known to us in order to make the metaphysically more known in itself manifest. He begins by introducing the reader to a number of signs and names that direct our attention to this metaphysical trio. His use of less common meanings or definitions, synonyms, and various dialectical arguments all aim to prepare us to go beyond that threshold of vagueness just prior to intellectual insight. We do not have the space to explicate Avicenna's use of signs, synonyms, and dialectical arguments that concern the notions being and thing, so we will turn to the end of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.5 where he treats the primary notion the necessary.[32]

Avicenna commences with a few remarks on the difficulties that the ancients had with defining the nature of the necessary.[33] As a modal notion, any definition proposed for the necessary seems to involve the possible and the impossible as much as their own definitions involve the necessary. All attempts to distinguish which modality is prior by way of definition results in endless circularity. To escape circularity Avicenna tells us we must make use of a sign (*'alāma*) in order to distinguish the necessary (*al-wājib*), the

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and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas, F. Opwis and D. C. Reisman, eds. (Brill: Leiden, 2011), 257–288; Daniel De Haan, "A Mereological Construal of the Primary Notions *Being* and *Thing* in Avicenna and Aquinas" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 88, 2 (2014): 335–360; Menn, "Avicenna's Metaphysics."

[32] See Houser, "Real Distinction;" Bertolacci, "The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna's Metaphysics;" Druart, "'Shay' or 'Res' as Concomitant of 'Being' in Avicenna;" Marmura, Avicenna on Primary Concepts in the *Metaphysics* of his *al-Shifa*;" De Haan, "A Mereological Construal of the Primary Notions *Being* and *Thing* in Avicenna and Aquinas;" Menn, "Avicenna's Metaphysics."

[33] See Allan Bäck, "Avicenna's Conception of the Modalities;" idem, "Avicenna and Averroes: Modality and Theology," in *Potentialität und Possibilität. Modalaussagen in der Geschichte der Metaphysik*, Thomas Buchheim, et al., eds. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), 125–45; Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*, chs. 11–14, 197–263; Bertolacci, *Reception*, 328–335; Bertolacci, "The Necessary;" McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 159–68; 183–208.

possible (*al-mumkin*), and the impossible *(al-mumtani'*) since they cannot be known and distinguished by way of definition (*ḥaqq*).

What is this sign? Drawing upon an insight from the Second Teacher, al-Fārābī, Avicenna reveals to us that the necessary is first because it points to the "invariance of existence" (*ta'akkud al-wujūd*).[34] Existence, that is, established existence (*wujūd iṯbātī*),[35] is known through itself and is better known than nonexistence. In fact, nonexistence is always, in some way or another, known through existence, as Aristotle noted long ago in *Metaphysics Γ* 2. Now, in a manner of speaking, the impossible and the possible signify complete or relative modes of nonexistence, respectively. Accordingly, inasmuch as the possible has existence it is known through the necessary, for its dependence on the necessary—which is the invariance or assurance of its existence—is also proportionately equivalent to its existential knowability. In short, the invariance of existence is the proper meaning of the necessary, and the impossible and possible are known through the necessary.

After providing us with this insight into the existential and cognitive priority of the necessary among modalities, Avicenna digresses from the point at hand. This new insight allows him to clear up some problems with a particular view on the resurrection held by some *Mutakallimūn*.[36] In bringing such recondite matters to a close, Avicenna also signals that he is finished with these conceptual matters concerning primary notions, and that he is moving on to the realm of principles within the domain of assent. The

[34] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 5, 24 [36] (*Scientia divina* 41: 79–82) On al-Fārābī's influence with respect to this insight in Avicenna, see Deborah Black, "Knowledge (*'ilm*) and Certitude (*yaqīn*) in al-Fārābī's Epistemology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 16 (2006): 11–45 (esp. 25–8).

[35] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 5, 9–10 [31] (*Scientia divina* 34: 54–61). The confluence of necessary existence with quiddity constitutes a realized or established being, that is, a being with established existence.

[36] Cf. Michael Marmura, "Avicenna and the Kalam," in Michael E. Marmura, ed. *Probing in Islamic Philosophy*, 97-130, (esp. 114–121).

difficulty is, Avicenna has just started his treatment of the necessary. Compared to his treatment of thing and being, the primary notion necessary seems to be getting short shrift. This new insight into the necessary as the invariance of existence, however, takes us beyond the absolute consideration of notions in themselves and forces our discussion of priority within modalities to oscillate between notions and the assents that affirm existence. In short, without looking to established existence there is no way to indicate which modality is prior.

6. The Goal of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7: The Properties of Necessary and Possible Existence

Ilāhiyyāt I.6–7 returns to Avicenna's treatment of the necessary and possible. From the very beginning of these two chapters Avicenna tells us that there are properties (*ḫuwāṣṣ*) for both necessary existence and possible existence that we must now establish. We can be certain that establishing these properties is the *central goal* of both chapters six and seven, since chapter seven explicitly draws to a close with a conclusion that affirms and recapitulates the properties of necessary and possible existence that were first introduced in the opening paragraphs of chapter six.[37] It is also important to note that neither of these two chapters mentions anything about presenting a formal demonstration for the existence of God. Rather, their aims are continuous with where the previous chapter left off, that is, with an attempt to dispose us towards insights and assents into the

[37] This is further corroborated by a reference to I.6–7 found in Avicenna's division of substance in *Ilāhiyyāt* II. 1, wherein he utilizes his fundamental propositions from I.6–7 *as first principles* to determine a point about the ontological status of composite substance. This is precisely the way we should expect Avicenna to deploy these primary hypotheses, if they are in fact metaphysical first principles. "You have known from the properties belonging to the necessary of existence that the necessary of existence can only be one and that that which has parts, or that which is equivalent to the existence [of that which has parts], cannot be the necessary of existence. From this it becomes known that this compound and these parts are all, in themselves, possible in existence and that they necessarily have a cause that necessitates their existence." *Ilāhiyyāt* II. 1, 9 [60], (mod. trans., Marmura) (*Scientia divina*, 68: 70–5).

primary notions and hypotheses related to the necessary, respectively, just as Avicenna said he would do in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.4.

Avicenna continues to make good on his promise by addressing the existential significance of these modal notions. Now among those entities that enter into existence we find, he contends, a twofold division in the intellect. Note well that we are dealing with ways of intellectually considering entities that exist. The existence of the entities under consideration is either taken for granted or, more likely, hypothetical, but Avicenna is certainly not attempting to present a formal demonstration that establishes the existence of such entities. So what is the point? Avicenna's goal is to consider and establish an exhaustive division of all the beings that could exist, that is, he intends to establish the properties that belong to necessary and possible existence.

Avicenna's account proceeds as follows. Some entities, when we consider them in themselves their existence will not be necessary, yet their existence is not impossible. This is because we are dealing with entities that were supposed to enter into existence; these things then belong to the realm of possibility. In contrast to these possible existences, the existence of other entities considered in themselves is necessary.[38] Notice that this twofold division requires an initial intellectual affirmation of existence—it is either assumed or hypothetical—and then a reflexive intellectual consideration of those entities that enter existence. To include existence, is to affirm existence as established.[39] In short, Avicenna is bringing us into the realm of assent, and so we need to be attentive to the properties he will affirm (or deny) of necessary existence and possible existence that constitute the first principles of assent proper to metaphysics. What properties can we

[38] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6, 1 [37] (*Scientia divina*, 43: 7–13).

[39] "For, alongside the affirmative statement stands existence, and alongside the negative statement stands nonexistence." *Ilāhiyyāt* III. 6, 10 [129] (mod. trans., Marmura) (*Scientia divina*, 143: 89–90).

affirm regarding necessary existence and that modal notion known through necessary existence, namely, possible existence?

Avicenna spends the next two chapters establishing a series of primary assents concerning the properties that truly belong to necessary existence and possible existence. For example, the necessary existence in itself has no cause, that which is possible existence in itself has a cause and is composite, necessary existence has no equivalent and is not dependent on another, necessary existence is neither composite nor many, but is one.[40] How are these primary hypotheses of assent established? Not by demonstrations, but by deductive dialectical arguments. Axioms, like the principle of contradiction, cannot be demonstrated, but they can be taught and defended by formally deductive dialectical arguments that show denying an axiom will result in a contradiction or absurdity. These deductive arguments do not demonstrate the truth of axioms; they merely show that the denial of their truth entails falsity. Similarly, Avicenna establishes the reasonableness of assenting to these primary metaphysical hypotheses concerning the properties of necessary and possible existence by showing that their denial results in impossibilities, contradictions, and absurdities. Most of Avicenna's arguments in I.6–7 consist in formally valid *modus tollens* deductive arguments. These are negative arguments that do not demonstrate the hypotheses are true, but that their denial is false. We do not have the space to explicate fully all of Avicenna's numerous arguments in defense of his primary hypotheses,[41] or to show the way in which this account of the properties of possible and necessary existence transitions into I.8's treatment of truth and

[40] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6, 2 [37] (*Scientia divina*, 43: 14–23).
[41] For a detailed analysis of Avicenna's arguments in I.6–7, see Houser, "Real Distinction."

axioms.[42] Instead, let us briefly survey some of the arguments Avicenna marshals in defense of these primary hypotheses.

The first hypothesis established in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 is that necessary existence in itself is not caused.[43] Avicenna presents two *reductio ad absurdum* arguments that show the proposition "necessary existence in itself is caused" is false. The arguments begin with a denial of the hypothesis that necessary existence in itself is uncaused. If necessary existence in itself is caused, then necessary existence in itself is not necessary existence in itself. But this is a contradiction, and so it is false that necessary existence in itself is caused. So we should assent to the hypothesis that necessary existence in itself is not caused.

Whether there exists an uncaused necessary existence in itself is not the point here. Avicenna aims to show us that it is impossible to hold as true the proposition "necessary existence in itself is caused," so we should intelligently assent to the proposition: "necessary existence in itself is not caused." Again, *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 does not present any philosophical demonstration that there exists a necessary existence in itself that is not caused. Avicenna just wants us to grant that it would be absurd to deny this primary proposition, which is why it is a fundamental principle of metaphysics. Whether this uncaused necessary existence in itself exists is an entirely different question, and it is neither posed nor answered in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7.

The next hypothesis established in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 is that any possible existence in itself is caused.[44] Avicenna again employs two *modus tollens* arguments to show that it is impossible and absurd to deny that possible existence in itself is caused. The first

[42] See De Haan, "Avicenna's *Healing* and the Metaphysics of Truth."
[43] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6, 3 [38] (*Scientia divina*, 44: 24–37).
[44] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6, 4-6 [38–9] (*Scientia divina*, 44–6: 38–70).

argument is from the insufficiency of the possible existence's quiddity to establish its existence or nonexistence. Avicenna concludes that all possible existences in themselves must have a cause for their existence; this existential cause is other than the quiddity of the possible existence considered in itself.

The second argument goes one step further and establishes that this existential cause must necessarily cause this possible existence in itself to be necessary existence through another. Avicenna contends that a denial of the identification of the cause of necessity with the existential cause would entail an infinite regress. Avicenna concedes that he has not yet established that an infinite regress is impossible, but what is of note is that he introduces the infinite regress here in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6, not to show that there must exist some necessary existence in itself, but to show that if possible existences are not rendered necessary existence through another, then they cannot exist at all. If there is an infinite regress, then

> the existence of the possible … would not have been specified by [the cause of its existence]. As such, its existence would not have been realized. This is impossible, not only because this leads to an infinity of causes … but because no determination has been arrived at through which its existence is specified, when it has been supposed to be an existent. Hence, it has been shown to be true that whatever is possible in its existence does not exist unless rendered necessary with respect to its cause.[45]

Notice that these arguments do not establish that possible existences must have some cause that is an uncaused necessary existence in itself. Rather, Avicenna's arguments aims to show first, that possible existences in themselves are caused because their quiddities are existentially insufficient for their own existence, and second, that their existential cause renders them a necessary existence through another.

[45] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6, 6 [39] (*Scientia divina*, 45–6: 65–9).

The third and final hypothesis established in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 shows that it is false to contend that necessary existence in itself could have an equivalent, that is, that there could be more than one uncaused necessary existence in itself.[46] The arguments given here are very complex, and once again, Avicenna aims to show that a denial of this hypothesis entails a number of contradictions and impossibilities.

Ilāhiyyāt I.7 continues where I.6 left off, and attempts to establish the hypothesis that necessary existence must be one, which occupies the whole chapter up to Avicenna's recapitulation of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 at the very end of I.7. Once more Avicenna uses a series of arguments that end in contradictions, falsity, and impossibilities, none of which conclude with the existence of God. He does not demonstrate that necessary existence in itself is one, but shows us that it is absurd to deny it. Therefore, we should accept the hypothesis that necessary existence is:

> one in [its] entirety (not as species are [subsumed] under genus) and one in number (not as individuals [subsumed] under species). Rather, it is a meaning, the explication of whose term belongs only to it; and its existence is not shared by any other. We will clarify this further in another place. These are the specific properties which necessary existence is exclusively endowed.[47]

This brings us to the specific properties of possible existence that are established in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7. First, "that it necessarily needs some other thing to render it an existent in actuality. Whatever is a possible existence is always, considered in itself, a possible existence; but it may happen that its existence becomes necessary through another."[48] We have already seen that, for Avicenna, the quiddities of possible existences in themselves are existentially neutral, since their quiddities are insufficient to render them existents in actuality. This is why possible existence in itself is only rendered necessary existence

[46] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6, 7 [40–2] (*Scientia divina*, 46–8: 72–38).
[47] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 7, 13 [47] (mod. trans., Marmura) (*Scientia divina*, 54: 38–43).
[48] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 7, 14 [47] (mod. trans., Marmura) (*Scientia divina*, 54: 44–7).

through another. Second, and in contrast to the unity and simplicity of necessary existence in itself, all possible existences must be composed.

> That whose existence is always necessitated by another is also not simple in its true nature. [This is] because what belongs to it [when] considered in itself is other than what belongs to it from another. It attains its essence in existence from both together. For this reason, nothing other than necessary existence, considered in itself, is stripped of associating with what is in potentiality and [what is within the realm of] possibility. It is the odd, and [every] other composite, even.[49]

It should be clear by now that Avicenna's intention in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 was to establish the properties of necessary and possible existence, not to demonstrate formally that God exists. The final recapitulation of I.6–7 draws the two chapters to a close by presenting the hypotheses or principles of assent proper to metaphysics, namely, that necessary existence in itself is one and simple, and that all possible existences in themselves are composed of quiddity and their existential necessity, which is received from another. None of these argument found in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 conclude with a statement like, "therefore, the necessary existence in itself exists, and this is God." Furthermore, with respect to the hypotheses Avicenna does intend to establish, none of the arguments he uses actually demonstrate the truth of these hypotheses; instead, they merely refute their denial. Why does Avicenna argue in this way? Because these are the kinds of arguments used to establish, not demonstrative conclusions, but to defend first principles of assent, that is, the sort of knowledge that cannot be demonstrated by any prior knowledge because it is the foundation for all demonstrative knowledge.[50] The truth of these metaphysical hypotheses, such as necessary existence in itself is not caused, are not demonstrated, yet Avicenna's deductive arguments in defense of these primary

[49] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 7, 14 [47] (mod. trans., Marmura) (*Scientia divina*, 55: 50–5).
[50] See *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5.1–2 [29] (*Scientia divina* 31–2: 2–19); 1.8.16 [54] (*Scientia divina* 64: 14–17).

hypotheses seek to help his readers understand the reasonableness of assenting to the truth these first principles of assent proper to metaphysics.

To summarize: thus far it has been shown that Avicenna's explicit goal in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 was not to demonstrate the existence of God, but to establish the properties that belong to possible and necessary existence. By now this much should be obvious. But in addition to our non-theological interpretation of the goal of I.6–7, I have also argued for a complementary and corroborating thesis that places I.6–7 within the scientific order of Avicenna's metaphysics. While my interpretation is easily verified by Avicenna's own words, it nevertheless only shows *that* it is so, it does not explain *why* he treats the properties of possible and necessary existence in I.6–7, in the argumentative fashion that he does, right in the middle of his overt treatment of metaphysical first principles as notions in I.5 and axioms in I.8, and all the while completely omitting any explicit mention of those metaphysical first principles that are known as hypotheses, which he himself, following Aristotle, acknowledged as among the kinds of first principles. I have contended that the most reasonable explanation of these additional facts is admirably handled by the thesis that Avicenna's account of the properties of necessary and possible existence in I.6–7 do in fact provide him with his metaphysical first principles as hypotheses, which should be treated in between his account of primary notions and axioms. Furthermore, it is also reasonable to understand *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 as presenting the hypotheses of metaphysics, since first principles of assent can only be defended dialectically, and would consist in primary propositions that affirm basic properties of simple notions such as we find in the hypothesis that the necessary existence

in itself is uncaused. Still, an extended defense of this contention merits a study of its own.[51]

In the next section of this paper I shall further defend this study's interpretation of I.6–7 by pointing out four features of these arguments from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 that would be very peculiar and problematic if Avicenna did intend to use these arguments to demonstrate God's existence. These four features, however, do not present any problems for my interpretation of I.6–7, since I reject that there is any kind of demonstration for God's existence in these chapters. The problems with our interlocutors' interpretations will be further amplified by showing that these four features do not create any tensions in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII, where Avicenna does explicitly intend to demonstrate God's existence.

7. Four Problems for Interpreting I.6–7 as Formally Demonstrating God's Existence

First, formal demonstrations for the existence of God do not include within their premises that God exists, since this is the conclusion sought by the proof. Avicenna, however, begins *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 with the assertion that the intellect is able to distinguish two different ways in which entities exist: as necessary or possible in themselves. And as we have seen, this twofold affirmation of existence is the point of departure for the rest of the two chapters. The affirmation of existence—whether real or hypothetical—is itself a further development on the previous chapter's point that the necessary is the primary

[51] Also relevant is the fact that in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.3 Avicenna not only reviews these properties of the necessary existence from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7, but also goes on to provide additional arguments in VIII.4-5 that demonstrate that God as first uncaused cause and necessary existence in itself is one, simple, and peerless. This entails that those who interpret I.6–7 as containing formal demonstrations for the existence of God and his attributes, must also hold that Avicenna repeats these arguments from I.6–7 all over again in VIII.1-5. Such an interpretation, however, does not sit well with the text and is very unreasonable. It is better to hold instead that I.6–7 is about the first principles of metaphysics, while VIII.1-5 is concerned with the existence and attributes of God, who turns out to be the necessary existence in itself. For a study of these arguments in the *Ilāhiyyāt* and other works, see Adamson, "From the necessary existent to God."

modal notion because it indicates the invariance of existence.[52] In *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 Avicenna is simply taking another step forward in his analysis of first principles by revealing for us two ways of existing by necessity: necessary existence in itself and necessary existence through another, which is possible existence in itself.

Second, if this is a formal cosmological demonstration it should begin by showing us that all possible existences are caused, and in the ultimate analysis are caused by the necessary existence in itself. But Avicenna does just the opposite. In I.6, he first shows us that necessary existence through itself does not have a cause, and then he shows us that possible existences must have causes. We should recall, that this is also the order

[52] Marmura reads this passage from *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 as providing one step towards a proof for God's existence. He recognizes the problematic point just made, but attempts to soften it by suggesting it only has the appearance of "glaring circularity." To mitigate this appearance and avoid circularity he makes a number of qualifications one of which hits precisely upon the true aim of these chapters, but Marmura nevertheless ends up with a conclusion that I think is mistaken and is the source of this apparent "glaring circularity." "[T]he discussion that follows this division should be understood as having the pattern: 'If the existents include that which in itself is necessary, then the latter would have such and such characteristics and if the existents include that which is in itself only possible, then the latter would have such and such characteristics,' Thus understood, there is no categorical assertion that both modes of existence are included among the existents. This understanding of the text absolves the proof for the circularity we have mentioned. Absolved from this circularity, the opening statement whose primary intention is to introduce a discussion of the characteristics of the two possible modes of existing things (not to give a proof of God's existence) can now be interpreted as also constituting an implicit premise for the proof as a whole." "Avicenna's Proof for God's Existence," 344–5. It is this last statement that I think is entirely foreign to the scientific order of Avicenna's metaphysics and it contributes to Marmura's mistaken interpretation of the structure of the *Ilāhiyyāt*, which then leads to his "endeavor to 'reconstruct' the proof from contingency as it occurs in the *Metaphysics*." (*Ibid*, 338–9) He admits that this proof requires a 'reconstruction,' since "…the premises of the proof in the *Metaphysics* have often to be extracted from different contexts. Hence, in the search for the proof, it is not simply a matter of tracing an argument that is constantly being interrupted. It also means isolating such premises without distorting the original intention of the discussions in which they appear. There is also ambiguity in some of Avicenna's statements. Thus, for example, in chapter 6 of book I, in the discussion of the properties of 'that which is in itself necessary', i.e., God, the existence of God seems to be asserted before the proof for this existence is completed. (Whether or not this is the case, however, depends on how we read the text.)" (*Ibid,* 338). Marmura's effort to piece together a proof for God's existence from contingency to necessity within the *Ilāhiyyāt* both fails to capture accurately how Avicenna does approach the demonstration of God's existence in the *Ilāhiyyāt*, and also "distorts" the intention of the passages he takes his syllogistic ingredients from, such as I.6–7, IV.1, VI.2, and VIII.1–3 (See also, Marmura, *Causal Priority* and *Efficient Causality*). He presents a creative construction that fails to see that, unlike the *Najāt*, there is no demonstration from contingency in the *Ilāhiyyāt* independent from aitiological investigations in the existence of a first cause.

Avicenna said he would follow at the outset in I.4, and that neither in I.6 nor in the beginning of I.4 does he even mention the prospect of demonstrating God's existence.

Third, one would expect Avicenna to eliminate the possibility of an infinite regress of caused possible existences that are necessary through another so as to terminate the causal series with that being which is an uncaused necessary existence in itself. But again, Avicenna does not do this here in I.6–7. Instead he is concerned with showing us that the possible existence has a property, such that its existential necessity is caused by another. The contradictory he argues would be impossible, yet not because an infinite regress of causes is impossible, but because no realization of existence would then be achieved for possible existences when their existence was already supposed to be realized. In short, Avicenna shows us that the actual existence of an entity that is possible existence in itself, requires that this possible existence be necessary existence through another, but he does not use this last point to show that there ultimately must be some being that is necessary existence in itself and is causally responsible for all things that are possible existence in themselves. Significantly, Avicenna never states in I.6–7 whether or not there is any causal connection between the necessary existence in itself and the multiplicity of possible existences in themselves. How could this be a formal demonstration for the existence of God when Avicenna does not even attempt to establish a causal relationship between possible existences and the necessary existence in itself? In fact, Avicenna does not make this connection explicit until the summary of points that immediately follow his formal demonstration of God's existence in VIII.3, wherein he also clarifies the notion of "creation."[53]

[53] *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. 3, 6 [342] (*Scientia divina*, 395–396: 17–35).

Fourth, what Avicenna says here in I.6 about the possibility of an infinite regress is also interesting, and for two reasons. First, Avicenna introduces the problem of an infinite regress to show, not that there must be a first cause that is necessary existence in itself, but in the context of showing that possible existences are caused by another. Second, he notes that we cannot appeal to the *impossibility* of an infinite regress because this "is still open to doubt in this place."[54] In other words, Avicenna does not yet think he has established that an infinite regress is impossible, and furthermore, that book I.6–7 is not the place where he will show us why an infinite regress is impossible.[55]

These four objections merely highlight problematic structural features for any interpretations that hold there is a formal demonstration for God's existence to be found in the arguments from I.6–7. Nevertheless, I think that a more thorough analysis of the arguments themselves, such as R.E. Houser has done, only further corroborates this paper's thesis.[56]

8. Avicenna's Formal Demonstration for God's Existence in VIII.1–3

One might still attempt to try and resolve these difficulties by saying Avicenna was unaware or has a different idea about how to conduct a proper demonstration of God's existence. But as we will see this is not the case, for all these problematic features

[54] *Ilāhiyyāt* I. 6, 6 [39] (*Scientia divina*, 45–46: 59–71).

[55] Hence, Bäck and others are simply mistaken when they locate an argument against the possibility of an infinite regress in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7, and they are doubly mistaken when they also reference I.6 as the source of Avicenna's demonstration for the existence of a being that is necessary existence in itself on the basis of the impossibility of an infinite regress of caused possible existences. See, for example, Bäck, "Avicenna's Conception of the Modalities," 242 ff. N.B. Davidson, Wisnovsky, Bertolacci, and others have drawn attention to Avicenna's development of Aristotle's arguments against an infinite regress from *Metaphysics* α (II) 2 and Λ (XII) 7 within his own demonstrations for God's existence. Since many Avicenna scholars consider the denial of an infinite regress to be one of the hallmarks of an Avicennian demonstration for God's existence, Avicenna's explicit acknowledgment of its being as yet unconfirmed here in I.6 is very telling. See Bertolacci, "Proofs of God's Existence" p. 79, n. 41.

[56] See Houser, "Real Distinction."

disappear when we turn to the place where Avicenna does formally demonstrate God's existence. Avicenna begins the eighth book of his metaphysics as follows.

> Now that we have arrived at this stage in our book, it behooves us to conclude it with [the question] of the knowledge of the First Principle of all existence – whether He exists, whether He is one (having no companion in His rank, and no equal) – and to indicate His rank in existence, the ordering of the existents and their ranks below Him, and the state of return to Him, [in all this] seeking His help.[57]

Faced with Avicenna's own words in this very clear passage, we should note two obvious problems with our interlocutors' theological interpretation of I.6–7. First, whenever Avicenna does demonstrate the existence of God, like in *al-Risāla al-'Aršiyya*, *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII, and in *Najāt* II.12, he explicitly declares it, and sometimes he even solemnly invokes divine assistance. However, such explicit statements of his intentions are not found anywhere in I.6–7 and would even be inconsistent with what he had just announced in I.4 in his summary of topics to be treated within his metaphysical science. Second, why does Avicenna think he needs to demonstrate God's existence twice, once in book one, and again in book eight, but yet also seems to be unaware that he has already demonstrated God's existence in I.6–7? This latter question, of course, rests upon an unreasonable assumption, as Avicenna clearly thinks the first time his metaphysical science arrives at its distinctively theological stage is in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. And there is no reason to think Avicenna has already provided a formal demonstration for God's existence up to this point.

We do not have the space to outline Avicenna's actual argument for the existence of God in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII; nevertheless, before we return to our four problematical features we should note one final problem for some interpretations of the *Ilāhiyyāt*. Contrary to a number of interpretations, I agree with those who hold that in the *Ilāhiyyāt* there are no

[57] *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. 1, 1 [327] (*Scientia divina*, 376: 4–9).

formal demonstrations for God's existence that involve arguments from possibility and that conclude to a necessary existence through itself. Rather, the only formal demonstrations to be found are those in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII, and they seek to do what was not accomplished in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, namely, unify all four causes into some one or more *ultimate* cause(s). Avicenna unites his aitiological inquiry into the ultimate causes and the theological inquiry into the divine cause by showing us that all four causes terminate in some first cause of a finite causal series, and that the First Efficient Cause is the cause of the existence for each of the respective first causes.[58] As Davidson and Bertolacci have both pointed out, unlike the *Najāt*, there is no formal demonstration for God's existence in the *Ilāhiyyāt* that is based solely on the distinction between possibility and necessity.[59]

In the first of the four problematic features introduced above, we noted that if I.6–7 contained an argument for the existence of a being that is necessary existence in itself, it would beg the question, for the whole argument in I.6 begins by assuming—either really or hypothetically—the existence of a being that is necessary existence in itself. In contrast to I.6–7, *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.1–3 does not assume the existence of a being that is necessary existence in itself, but endeavors to demonstrate its existence as an uncaused efficient cause. Further, instead of beginning with the uncaused necessary existence in

[58] This is finally accomplished in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. 3, 5 [342] (*Scientia divina*, 395: 12–17), see Daniel De Haan, "Why the Five Ways? Aquinas's Avicennian Solution to the Problem of Unity in the Aristotelian Metaphysics and *Sacra Doctrina*" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association: Philosophy in the Abrahamic Traditions*, Vol. 86 (2012): 141–158.

[59] This fact is interesting in itself. Why does Avicenna not have a demonstration from possibility and necessity in the *Ilāhiyyāt*? Many readers of Avicenna have pointed out that the ordered structure of the arguments found in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6 are remarkably similar to the demonstrations for God's existence in *al-Risāla al-'Aršiyya*, *Najāt* II. 12, and in *Išārāt* III.9–15. Perhaps Avicenna thinks there is something distinctive about the Aristotelian approach to aitiological and theological questions and this motivates his use of the four ultimate causes rather than his own innovative use of necessity and possibility. The question merits further study.

itself as I.6 does—which was the second of the four problematic features mentioned above—Avicenna begins *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.1–3 with effects and their *per se* causes, which then ultimately brings him to the existence of the uncaused necessary existence through itself. In short, the first two problematic features completely disappear in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.1–3.

As for the third and fourth problematic features, we do not need to appeal to what Avicenna does, as we can look to his own words.

> The first thing we ought to do in this is to show that the causes are in all respects finite, that in each of their classes there is a first principle, that the Principle of all of them is one, that He differs from all [other] beings, that He alone is necessary existence, and that in the case of every [other] being, the beginning of its existence is from Him.[60]

Evidently Avicenna does appreciate the importance of establishing the impossibility of an infinite regress, in fact, he says it is the first thing that must be done. But to get this demonstration off the ground Avicenna notes that another premise is needed, namely, "that the cause of a thing's existence coexists with it, it is [something] that has been previously presented and ascertained for you."[61] This is significant because Avicenna's sophisticated treatment of the principle of causality in terms of the coexistence of *per se* causes was not addressed until *Ilāhiyyāt* IV.1 and VI.2. Here are two crucial elements to Avicenna's formal demonstration for God's existence that he explicitly says were not available in book I.[62] This final point reveals that the last two problematic features from I.6–7 have been addressed by the time we get to the place where Avicenna explicitly intended to demonstrate God's existence. By the close of the first book of the *Ilāhiyyāt*, Avicenna had not yet introduced the additional doctrines that were required for showing

[60] *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. 1, 2 [327] (*Scientia divina*, 376: 10–15).
[61] *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. 1, 3 [327] (*Scientia divina*, 376: 16–17).
[62] "Like other cosmological proofs of the Aristotelian type, Avicenna's proof employs the principles of causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes." Davidson, "Avicenna's Proof of the Existence of God as a Necessary Existent Being,"180 ff.

the impossibility of an infinite regress. But since these doctrines were established prior to *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII, Avicenna can proceed right away in VIII.1–3 to show that there cannot be an infinite regress of possible existences that were efficiency caused by another, unless we terminate in an uncaused first efficient cause of existence that is necessary existence through itself.

9. Conclusion

For a paper entitled "Where Does Avicenna Demonstrate the Existence of God?" I have done very little to show *where Avicenna does* and more to show *where Avicenna does not* formally demonstrate the existence of God. In order to show that there is not a formal demonstration for the existence of God in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7, I provided an alternative interpretation of this text that makes clear Avicenna's true intention in I.6–7. This interpretation revealed what was false in the assumptions of those who hold I.6–7 contains a formal demonstration for the existence of God.[63] Let us conclude with three overarching contentions that this essay has employed to undermine any interpretations that take *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 to contain a formal demonstration for God's existence.

First, all theological interpretations of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 fail because they are completely inconsistent with the scientific structure of Avicenna's metaphysics whose *subject* is being *qua* being; whose primary *principles of conceptualization* are being, thing, necessary; whose fundamental *proper principles of assent* are "that necessary existence through itself is uncaused, one, and simple," and "that necessary existence through another is composite and caused;" and whose ultimate *object of inquiry*—which follows *Ilāhiyyāt* II–VII's account of the quasi-species and quasi-properties of being—is

[63] As was noted above, while I agree with Bertolacci and Davidson that the only formal demonstration for God's existence is to be found in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII.1–3, I think their final assessment of Avicenna's purpose in *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 is incomplete.

the demonstration of God's existence and attributes in *Ilāhiyyāt* VIII. In short, the essential problem with many alternative interpretations is that they confuse Avicenna's treatment of metaphysical *principles* with a demonstration of metaphysics' ultimate *object of inquiry*; a confusion that is in some respects similar to the mistake of those who regard God as the subject of metaphysics, when God is, for Avicenna, among its ultimate objects of inquiry.

Second, theological interpretations of *Ilāhiyyāt* I.6–7 disregard many of Avicenna's explicit intentions, which clearly indicate where God's existence will be demonstrated, as well as what principles and premises this formal demonstration requires, and where they are established within his metaphysical science. Third, not only do such interpretations render unintelligible both the overt goals that we find clearly stated at the beginning and end of I.6–7 along with these chapters' intrinsic relationship to I.5 and I.8, but they also fail to address adequately the four problematic features found in the arguments from I.6–7 and the resolution of these tensions in VIII.1–3. Furthermore, it was shown that if the passage in I.6–7 is not intended by Avicenna to present a formal demonstration for God's existence, then these four problematic features of the arguments in I.6–7 disappear.

In conclusion, I recognize that many of the arguments given by Avicenna do have the appearance of being either a cosmological or ontological argument when they are read outside their context. But when they are understood within their proper epistemic framework as elements in his Aristotelian demonstrative science, these problems vanish. Without any unified principle which reveals the scientific order of Avicenna's metaphysics, many readers remain vulnerable to these and other misinterpretations,

which all seem to run against Avicenna's own expressed intentions. Placing the *Ilāhiyyāt* within its Aristotelian scientific framework makes clear the problems involved in any interpretations which contend that Avicenna demonstrates the existence of the necessary existence at the beginning of his metaphysical science and yet does so again towards the end of his metaphysical science.[64]

Avicenna's *Healing* prescribes an Aristotelian dosage of four measures from the diverse studies of logic, natural philosophy, mathematics, and metaphysics. The final treatment of his metaphysical science concludes with its ultimate object of inquiry, namely, theological being. Like any inoculation, it must be administered in the proper order. Confusions and misunderstandings occur when we fail to observe the scientific order prescribed by the Vizier himself. In this study I have tried to follow his many pointers and directives with respect to the demonstration of God's existence within his conception of metaphysics as an Aristotelian science. I hope it has been shown that one can learn a lot from Avicenna by observing what he does and where he does it, rather than trying to prescribe for him how he should have affected his philosophical cure.

[64] Also mistaken is the view held by Marmura and others that there is a gradual piecemeal demonstration for God's existence developed throughout the *Ilāhiyyāt* from I.6–7, to IV.1, VI.2, and VIII.1–3. It is certainly true that all of these passages provide us with principles and conclusions that will be deployed in Avicenna's properly aitiological treatment of the ultimate four causes and properly theological treatment of God's existence and attributes. The earlier doctrines of the *Ilāhiyyāt* frequently do have remote trajectories that anticipate later points. But it is a mistake to conclude on the basis of the latter, that Avicenna intended this particular series of punctuated arguments to be ingredients in a formal demonstration for God's existence that is distributed across the *Ilāhiyyāt*. Just as it would be equally false to say the treatment of truth in I.8 or actuality in IV.2, or universals and quiddity in itself V.1–2 are all in fact major and minor premises for arguments concerning the divine attributes that do not arrive at their conclusions until VIII. This simply is not how Avicenna approaches or orders these various doctrines within the *Ilāhiyyāt*, and we would understand his own thought better if we observed the very precise order he actually does provide.