From the necessary existent to God

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If one were asked to name Avicenna's greatest contribution to the history of philosophy, one might reasonably choose his proof of God's existence. The proof shows that there must be a "necessary existent" (*wājib al-wujūd*), an entity which subsists through itself and requires no external cause in order to exist. It is, quite simply, an entity which cannot *not* exist. This conception of God, and the proof that goes with it, ranks among his most influential ideas. It was taken up, usually with approval (if also with modification), by Jewish philosophers like Maimonides, Christian philosophers like Duns Scotus, and generations of Muslim philosophers and theologians.[1] Our admiration for Avicenna's achievement should not, however, blind us to the fact that proving the existence of a necessary existent is different from proving the existence of God.

Avicenna was fully aware of this, as is clear from the version of the proof in the *Salvation*.[2] In this and other versions, he asks us to consider all the contingent entities together as an aggregate. Avicenna is heading for the idea that there must be a cause outside of this aggregate which explains the existence of contingent things: the necessary existent. He thus has to contend with an alternative possibility, namely, that the aggregate of contingent things is somehow self-caused, rather than caused by something external. He dismisses this as impossible, and then adds, "[even] if it is correct, it is in a certain way the very thing that is sought. For anything that is sufficient to necessitate itself is something existing necessarily."[3] In other words, as soon as his opponent admits that something necessary exists, Avicenna can declare victory: this is what the proof aims to show. But of course, what the opponent would admit here is not the existence of *God*. Rather, he would say or imply that the aggregate of contingent things – which we may as well call "the universe" – is itself a necessary existent.

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[1] See, for instance, Davidson 1987; Druart 2002, and the final chapters in the present volume.
[2] Trans. McGinnis and Reisman 2007: 214–16.   [3] Trans. McGinnis and Reisman 2007.

This should alert us to a fundamental limitation of Avicenna's proof: if successful, it shows the existence of a necessary existent, without showing why we should identify the necessary existent with God. An atheist might agree with Avicenna that there is a necessary existent, yet insist that this existent is the universe itself, or perhaps something else. Suppose that Platonic Forms or numbers necessarily exist. Then there will be many (perhaps infinitely many) necessary existents, none of which is God. So what would it take to show that the necessary existent is God? For Avicenna, it means showing that a range of traditional divine attributes are implied by the fundamental trait of necessity. In numerous texts, he shows that the necessary existent not only exists, but is unique, immaterial, intellective, powerful, generous, and so on. Avicenna lavishes a good deal of attention on this project. He saw clearly that his proof of the necessary existent was in fact only the first step in a long chain of argument, which would finally yield a philosophical account of the God of Islam.

One might usefully compare Avicenna's strategy to that of Anselm in the *Proslogion*. There has been a good deal of debate about whether Avicenna's proof is "ontological" in nature, that is, whether it tries to prove God's existence through sheer conceptual analysis or by invoking a factive or empirical premise (e.g. "contingent things exist").[4] I will not enter into that debate here. But there is certainly a parallel between Anselm and Avicenna, insofar as Anselm, too, begins from a schematic description of God, in his case "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." In the short part of the *Proslogion* that people usually bother to read, he argues that this description must be satisfied by something that exists in reality, not only in the mind. But the *Proslogion* has only just begun. Anselm goes on to derive the divine attributes from this same schematic description (for instance, it is less perfect to be material than to be immaterial, so "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" is immaterial). Broadly, Avicenna's strategy is the same: prove that X exists (here X is "necessary existent" instead of "that than which . . . "), then show that X has the divine attributes.[5]

In what follows, I will first (section I) suggest that the notion of the necessary existent as it emerges from the proof implies two primary routes for deriving attributes, both of which are exploited by Avicenna. In section II of the chapter, I will consider how Avicenna derives a few specific divine attributes, by way of illustration. I will need to be selective, because

[4] See, e.g., Marmura 1980; Davidson 1987: 28–310; and Mayer 2001 with further references.
[5] My thanks to Dag Nikolaus Hasse for prompting me to consider this parallel.

Avicenna considers a large number of attributes and often gives intricate arguments for them. I will also be selective in terms of texts, focusing on the *Cure* and *Pointers*, with occasional forays into the *Salvation*.[6] (A complete consideration of Avicenna's derivation of all the attributes across his entire corpus would need a book-length study.[7]) In conclusion (section III), I will briefly consider the implications for Avicenna's later critics and defenders.

I AVICENNA'S STRATEGY

Thus far I have described the task before Avicenna as a simple one. Having shown that there is an existent that is necessary, he must now show that the trait of necessity implies certain other traits God should possess, like goodness or knowledge. This will establish that the necessary existent is God. The task would be similar to that facing an Aristotelian biologist who, having grasped that frogs are amphibians, seeks to relate this demonstratively to other traits. For instance, he might explain frogs' laying their eggs in water on the grounds that this is implied by being amphibious. But in fact, things are more complicated. For what Avicenna has shown is not merely that there is a necessary existent. He has shown that there is a necessary existent that is the cause for the existence of contingent things. After all, we discover that there is a necessary existent by showing that there must be a cause for the aggregate of contingent existents.[8]

This means that Avicenna has two resources on which he can draw in deriving the divine attributes. On the one hand, of course, there is the necessary existent's "intrinsic" trait of necessity. On the other hand, there is its "extrinsic" trait of being a cause for all other things. To put it another way, the necessary existent is an "uncaused cause," so a given attribute might be implied by its being uncaused, by its being a cause, or both. That second way of putting the point already suggests why it is so

[6] All references to *Pointers* are to the *Metaphysics* section of that work.
[7] For a comparable project, see Koutzarova 2009.
[8] One might worry that this causes problems: I have suggested above that Avicenna would "declare victory" in his proof if his opponent conceded that the aggregate of contingent things is itself necessary. But if some of the divine attributes are shown on the basis that the necessary existent is a cause, then doesn't he need to insist not only that there is a necessary existent, but that it is a cause? The answer is yes, and of course he does argue for this. But it should be noted that when the opponent says the universe is itself necessary, Avicenna takes this as meaning that the universe somehow necessitates itself, so that it is self-causing. This is absurd, but also "in a certain way the very thing that is sought," because it concedes a necessary existent which is a cause for all contingent things. In any case, divine attributes like "one" and "intellective" are shown on the basis of being uncaused, not on the basis of being a cause, as we'll see below. These attributes would suffice to rule out the notion that the universe is the necessary existent.

important to think of the necessary existent as a cause, as well as thinking of it as necessary. "Being uncaused" looks like a fairly unpromising basis for deriving attributes, since it is a negation. As we will see, Avicenna is able to wring a good deal out of this "negative" feature. But he would not be able to show, for instance, that God is generous or powerful simply on this basis. Rather, if the necessary existent's being "necessary" is actually a concealed negation – meaning simply "uncaused" – then it seems all the *positive* divine attributes will need to be derived from its relational trait of being a cause.

That would sit well with a rule Avicenna lays down regarding divine attributes:

Cure: *Metaphysics* VIII.7.12: The primary attribute (*al-ṣifa al-ūlā*) of the necessary existent is the fact that it is, and is existent (*anna-hu innun wa-mawjūdun*). Then, some of the other attributes combine in their concept this existence together with a relation, while others are this existence together with a negation.

According to this general rule, there are three kinds of thing we can say about the necessary existent. First, that there is indeed a necessary exist-ent; second, that this existence *lacks* certain features; third, that this exis-tence enters into certain relations with its effects. Avicenna gives examples (VIII.7.13): the necessary existent's being a "substance" (*jawhar*) is nothing but existence plus the negation of "being in a subject," whereas its being "powerful" refers to the necessary existent's being related to everything else such that these things are from it. Some attributes involve both a negation and a relation, in addition to existence. For instance, intellec-tion means negation of mixture with matter, plus a certain unspecified relation (for more on divine intellection, see below, the section Ineffa-bility). But this does not compromise the basic rule, it just makes the application of the rule a bit more complicated than one might have expected.

Avicenna's determination to follow the rule is shown nicely by his han-dling of the attribute just mentioned, "substance." In both the *Cure* and the *Pointers*, he raises an objection against his own claim that the necessary existent lacks a genus. (He has a variety of philosophical and historical rea-sons for insisting on this, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that membership in a genus would be neither sheer existence, nor a negation, nor a relation to effects, so it would violate the rule.) The objection is that if the First does not subsist in a subject, then He is a substance, and thus falls under the genus "substance" (VIII.4.17). Avicenna replies that the First is not a substance in the way that, for instance, an actual human is,

because He lacks any quiddity (*māhiyya*).[9] Rather, the First's "not being in
a subject" is purely a "negation which adds nothing to existence, apart from
the relation of being distinct," which I take to mean the relation of being
distinct from things that *are* in subjects (VIII.4.18). Avicenna raises the same
worry in *Pointers* (IV.25) and again replies that the First has no quiddity
that would put him in the genus of substance. He adds a clever argument
to distinguish existence from substancehood: merely *possible* things (like
possible humans) may fail to exist, and nevertheless belong to the genus of
substance (*Pointers* IV.25, *Cure*: *Metaphysics* VIII.4.19).

Avicenna's rule is meant to accommodate divine simplicity – such that
there is no multiplicity of real attributes in God, and no quiddity that would
be predicated of Him – while also allowing for substantive theological
predication. As he says in *Cure*: *Metaphysics* VIII.4.2, it is impossible that
any existent be so ineffable that it is immune even to negation and relation.
So we can "describe" (*waṣafa*) God, but only by "negating features of Him
that would be shared in common [with something else], and affirming
relations of Him" (VIII.5.14). With this in mind, we can suggest a neat
equivalence between the two features of the necessary existent and the
types of "attributes" recognized by Avicenna's rule:

necessity (intrinsic trait): basis for negations
cause (extrinsic trait): basis for relations

On this interpretation, Avicenna would be treating the First's intrinsic
necessity as amounting simply to His being uncaused, and basing the
negative part of his theology (the non-relational part) on this lack of cause.
There is some basis for such a reading in the *Cure*. At VIII.4.12–13, he
remarks that "everything that has a quiddity is caused," and adds that since
the necessary existent is uncaused, it "is nothing but existence, with the
condition of negating both non-being and all other descriptions of Him
(*bi-sharṭ salb al-ʿadam wa-sāʾir al-awṣāf ʿan-hu*)." The rationale for this
is that what is uncaused cannot involve composition (*tarkīb*: see further
below, on divine simplicity, the section on Simplicity), and the possession
of positive attributes would involve composition.

To this we can add the fact that later authors who react to Avicenna
sometimes treat necessity as a concealed negation. A prominent example
is al-Ghazālī, who argues in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* that calling
something necessary simply means denying that it needs a cause to exist.[10]
A similarly negative treatment of necessity can be found in Fakhr al-Dīn

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[9] On this claim, see Macierowski 1988, and further below for the sense in which God may be said to
    have a quiddity.
[10] al-Ghazālī 2002: 4.18, 5.1, 5.5–7.

al-Rāzī.[11] Of course, this might also make us nervous about ascribing such a view to Avicenna himself, since both theologians mean this as a criticism and not a point of agreement. Indeed, we should be nervous: it would be wrong to think that necessity is a purely negative notion for Avicenna.

We can see why if we recall that in his rule on attributes, he actually recognizes *three* acceptable kinds of attribute for the First: not only nega-tions and relations, but also sheer existence. Indeed, this was identified as the First's "primary attribute." Now, in the argument against God's having a quiddity, Avicenna says that "everything that has a quiddity which is not being (*anniyya*) is caused" (*Cure: Metaphysics* VIII.4.11), which echoes a previous remark that "the First has no quiddity apart from being (*anniyya*)" (VIII.4.3). So it seems God *does* have a quiddity, but just lacks any quiddity beyond His sheer existence. When we describe the First as "necessary," without adding anything about causal relations, we are not only denying that the First is caused. We are also affirming God's quiddity: existence. This more "positive" understanding of necessity is anticipated in the first book of the *Metaphysics* of the *Cure*, where Avicenna writes that "the true nature (*ḥaqīqa*) of necessity of existence is nothing but the very guarantee of existence (*nafs taʾakkud al-wujūd*)" (I.7.6).

Yet we can still relate the rule on attributes to the two aspects of the necessary existent, as follows. The First's necessity implies both sheer exis-tence and a range of negations (including the denial of relations such as "equal to"). In addition, the First's status as a cause and principle implies a range of (positive) relations to other existents. Thus:

necessity (intrinsic trait): "guarantee of existence"; basis for negations
cause (extrinsic trait): basis for relations

This allows Avicenna to treat some "positive" attributes as following imme-diately from the necessity of the First. For instance, at *Pointers* IV.9 he designates the necessary existent as "the self-subsistent" (*al-qayyūm*), which is a Qurʾānic epithet of God (2:255, 3:2, 20:111). Avicenna provides only a brief rationale for this: "every existent, if you look at it in itself . . . is either such that existence is necessary for it in itself, or it is not. If [its existence] is necessary then it is God in Himself, the necessary existent in itself, namely the self-subsistent (*al-qayyūm*)."[12] This would be a rather deflationary account of the divine name if "necessity" were nothing more than a concealed negation. But Avicenna is treating "self-subsistence," in effect, as a synonym of what he has identified as God's "primary attribute,"

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[11] See Mayer 2003: 210.   [12] Translation from Mayer 2001: 22, with discussion at 23.

namely, *mawjūd*, "existent." Negation enters into the picture only insofar as we deny that this attribute is caused by something else.

Still, most of the divine attributes are established either by appealing to the fact that the necessary existent is uncaused, or the fact that the necessary existent is the cause of all other things. And for good reason: it is simply implausible to claim that when we say "God is knowing" or "God is powerful," this refers to His sheer existence, however guaranteed this existence might be. So the point still stands that we need to invoke the necessary existent's causal features (His lack of a cause, and the causation He exercises on other things) if we are to make much headway in showing that the necessary existent is God. As we turn our attention to Avicenna's arguments for specific divine attributes, we will see him doing precisely this. We will also see that to a surprisingly large extent, Avicenna is able to rely on God's being uncaused, without needing to appeal to His being a cause.

II THE ATTRIBUTES

Avicenna's reliance on the First's causal features may lie behind a curious, and much remarked-upon, feature of the *Metaphyiscs* of the *Cure*. He notoriously fails to set out with any clarity his own distinctive proof for the necessary existent, as he does in the *Salvation* (II.12) and *Pointers* (IV.9–15). At best, as Marmura has argued,[13] he scatters elements of the proof throughout the *Metaphysics*. But at the outset of Book VIII, he sets out explicitly to show "that the causes are in all respects finite, that in each of their classes there is a first principle, that the principle (*mabda'*) of them all is one, that it differs from all [other] existents, that it alone is the necessary existent, and that the existence of every other existent has its beginning from it" (VIII.1.2). As Avicenna himself points out (VIII.2.1), he is here following the strategy of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book *Alpha Elatton*, which treats the first principle as the terminus of a causal regress.

This gives him a foundation for the rest of Book VIII (and the beginning of IX), the part of the *Metaphysics* in which most of the divine attributes are derived. Certainly, as shown by the quote just cited, Avicenna identifies the necessary existent with the "first principle" demonstrated by the *Elatton*-style proof. Still, the *Elatton* strategy focuses our attention on the First's status as *first*, rather than as *necessary*. That is, it focuses our attention on its being both uncaused and the cause of other things, rather than its

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[13] Marmura 1980.

trait of guaranteed existence. Avicenna then proceeds in three stages. First, he proves that there is a unique first cause, which he identifies with the necessary existent (VIII.3.5). Then, in VIII.4–5, he explores the range of negations that apply to the necessary existent: it has no genus, no quiddity, and so on. This part of Book VIII depends principally on the fact that the necessary existent is uncaused. Finally, at VIII.6, he begins to exploit the positive implication of the necessary existent's status as first cause, deriving attributes such as "goodness" and "generosity." In this section of the chapter, I will follow Avicenna's lead in this part of the *Cure* (while drawing on other texts as well) and discuss a selection of attributes in roughly the order chosen by him: uniqueness, simplicity, ineffability, intellection, and goodness.

Uniqueness

Among the attributes derived by Avicenna, none is more pivotal than "one (*wāḥid*)." It almost goes without saying that in his discussion of this attribute, Avicenna is giving a philosophical account of the Islamic doctrine of *tawḥīd*. In the first instance, this refers to the "oneness" of God not in the sense of "simplicity" (though as we will see in the next section, Avicenna also uses the word *wāḥid* to mean "simple"), but in the sense of "uniqueness." To say that God is one is to say that there is only one God, that He has no "peer" (*nidd*; see, e.g., *Cure: Metaphysics* VIII.5.2, *Pointers* IV.27). By prioritizing this divine attribute, Avicenna signals the relation between his project and Islamic conceptions of God. But philosophical considerations also make it pressing to show that there is only one necessary existent. As I pointed out above, one can imagine rival conceptions of necessary existence, including conceptions according to which there would be a multiplicity or even infinity of such entities (such as numbers, or Platonic Forms). Establishing this attribute will be crucial in excluding such rival conceptions.

Avicenna first takes up the attribute of uniqueness in the *Cure: Metaphysics* at 1.6.7–13, giving a complicated argument which resonates with *Pointers* IV.16–20.[14] In both versions, Avicenna aims to show that something uncaused must be unique.[15] His strategy is a *reductio*: he supposes that there are two necessary existents, and shows that a contradiction follows. In the *Pointers* he focuses on the problem of what would "individuate" the

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[14] The *Pointers* version has been well studied by Mayer 2003.

[15] Thus, it is not entirely implausible for al-Rāzī to describe uniqueness, along with necessity, as a negative (*salbī*) trait; see Mayer 2003: 210.

two necessary existents – call them A and B. His argument is complex, but the basic idea is that if A is distinct from B as a result of something that follows from necessity of existence, then B would share that feature (after all, it, too, is necessarily existent) and the two would not be distinguished after all. But if A is distinct from B as a result of something not implied by necessity of existence, then this individuating factor will be a cause for A (since it makes A exist separately from B), and this will compromise the necessity of A. Let us call Avicenna's reasoning here the "individuation argument." We will see it again in the next section.

In the *Cure*, he takes a rather different tack. Again, the argument is complex and I will simplify to some extent: suppose for the sake of *reductio* that there are two necessary existents, A and B, which exist together, neither causing the other, and both being necessary. This time, we ask not what makes A and B distinct from one another, as in the *Pointers*, but what accounts for their being together (*ma'a*) in necessary existence. If either A or B is the reason for this, then it causes the other to be together with it – which violates the assumption that both are uncaused. If something other than A or B is the cause, this is even worse: both A and B will be caused. This seems to leave open an obvious reply, which is that there is no cause for their being together. Why, then, are they together? Perhaps it just happens to be so – there is no reason why. But then it would be possible that they are not together, so that their actually being together is likewise in itself merely possible. Of course, in that case, something needs to bring about that this possible togetherness is realized, and again, the supposedly necessary existents are caused.

Whatever we make of this argument, it calls attention to a fundamental assumption of Avicenna's: if an existent is necessary, then *everything* about it must be necessary. A necessary existent cannot "just happen" to have an equal partner, or, indeed, "just happen" to have any other trait. For it would be possible that this trait is not realized, and then some cause would be needed to explain why the trait is in fact realized, meaning that the supposedly necessary existent is caused. To put it another way, all of the necessary existent's features must flow inevitably from its "true nature" (*ḥaqīqa*), that is, from its necessary existence. This means that the second type of divine attributes, the ones that arise because the necessary existent is a cause, are just as necessary as the attributes that arise from its being uncaused. As Avicenna puts it, "if multiple positive and negative relations follow on Him, these are concomitants of the essence, caused by the essence" (VIII.4.2). I will return briefly to this consequence of his view in the Conclusion of this chapter.

Avicenna returns to the topic of uniqueness in Book VIII of the *Metaphysics* of the *Cure*. He has already shown, following Aristotle in *Alpha Elatton*, that all causal sequences are finite. Now he states, "if we say [that something is] a first agent principle, that is, a principle that is absolutely first, then it must necessarily be one (*wāḥid*)" (VIII.3.5). At first glance, the idea here seems to be that whatever initiates a causal series must be unique. But a moment's thought will cast doubt on this notion: why couldn't there be multiple causal chains, initiated by distinct, uncaused causes? Avicenna has had at least a moment's thought about this, and decided that there can indeed be multiple first causes in the case of material and formal causal chains. But the case of efficient causation is different:

Cure: *Metaphysics* VIII.3.5: If, however, we say it is a first material cause, or a first formal cause, and so on, then it need not be one, the way this is necessary for the necessary existent. For not a single one of these is an absolutely (*muṭlaqan*) first principle, because (*li-anna*) the necessary existent is one, and falls under the class of agent principle. So the one, the necessary existent, is also a principle and a cause of those first [causes, i.e. formal and final].

There are, I believe, two ways to read this passage. One reading would emphasize the word "absolutely" and suppose that Avicenna assumes an unstated premise, for instance, that in the case of efficient causal chains multiple uncaused causes could be only relatively "first," needing to be ordered under some absolutely first cause. But that looks question-begging, and would have all the work being done by the unstated premise. In any case, it ignores the fact that Avicenna says it is *because* only the first efficient cause is a necessary existent, that only the first efficient cause needs to be unique. In the next paragraph, he adds, "it has been shown from this, and from the account we gave previously, that the necessary existent is one in number" (VIII.3.6). The backwards reference, I take it, is to *Cure*: *Metaphysics* I.6. If so, Avicenna is telling us that the uniqueness of the First is after all established by its being uncaused, and not its being a cause. Remarkably, Avicenna does not bother to *argue* for his identification of the first efficient cause with the necessary existent. But it is not hard to see why he would think the point obvious: the first efficient cause can terminate the series of cause and effect only if it is uncaused, and an uncaused existent is a necessary existent.

Simplicity

Avicenna's arguments for divine simplicity are closely linked to his arguments for divine uniqueness, and likewise proceed on the basis of God's

being uncaused. This is evident in *Pointers*, where Avicenna follows his demonstration of God's uniqueness with the following:

IV.21: If the essence (*dhāt*) of the necessary existent were composed of two or more things that came together, it would be necessary through them. Then one of them, or all of them, would be prior to the necessary existent, and would give rise to it. Thus, the necessary existent is divided neither in concept (*maʿnā*) nor in quantity.

Avicenna's reasoning here is straightforward, at least by the standards of the *Pointers*. He presupposes that anything made up of parts is in some sense an effect of those parts. Since the necessary existent is uncaused, it cannot have parts. In the *Cure*, he follows the same procedure of first showing that the necessary existent is "one" in the sense of being unique (1.6.7–13), and then showing that it is "one" in the sense of being simple.[16] His argument for the latter takes up *Cure: Metaphysics* 1.7.1–13 and is considerably more elaborate than *Pointers* IV.21.

Avicenna again deploys a *reductio*. Suppose that the necessary existent is not simple, but "a multiplicity (*kathra*)." In that case, we would have a number of elements of the composite necessary existent, which would stand in need of differentiation from one another. This seems right: a minimum requirement, if something is to have multiple parts, is for its parts to be non-identical. But if the internal parts of the necessary existent are themselves necessary[17] and non-identical, then there must be some feature that individuates them (a "specification," *takhṣīṣ*). But this individuating feature cannot derive simply from the necessity of the part that it individuates, since otherwise it would be possessed by each of the necessary parts. Nor can it be merely accidental to the part that it individuates, since it would belong to the part contingently and hence require an outside cause. Then the supposedly necessary, uncaused part would receive its individuation from a cause: a contradiction (*Cure: Metaphysics* 1.7.2). More generally, Avicenna argues, we can rule out that necessary existence is like a genus with multiple differentiae, like "animal" which receives differentiating features such as "rational." This is not only because necessity means nothing but "guarantee of existence" (1.7.6), but also because it would mean that the

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[16] Avicenna recognizes this double meaning of "one" at *Cure: Metaphysics* VIII.7.13, where he writes that the necessary existent is called "one, as meaning nothing but this existence itself, or as denying of it division through either quantity or discourse [i.e. simplicity], or as denying of it a partner (*sharīk*) [i.e. uniqueness]." See IX.1.1 for a similar remark distinguishing two senses of "one."

[17] Avicenna does not seem to consider the possibility that the necessary existent is composed of *non-necessary* parts. But it is perhaps obvious that this could not be the case, since if it were, its parts would exist through a cause, and then so would the whole.

various necessary existents are in some sense caused by their differentiating features (I.7.7–8).

Of course, we have seen this argument before: it is the "individuation argument" from *Pointers* IV.16–20 (see the preceding section), but used to prove simplicity rather than uniqueness. Evidently, these two notions are closely allied. Avicenna expresses both with the same attribute, "one" (*wāḥid*), and he uses the individuation argument to establish both. Indeed, if we turn ahead to *Cure: Metaphysics* VIII.5, we can see Avicenna using the individuation argument to establish uniqueness rather than simplicity ("the true nature of the First exists for the First and for nothing else" (*ḥaqīqat al-awwal mawjūda al-awwal dūna ghayrihi*), VIII.5.1, "the First has no peer," VIII.5.2). That is, he argues that if there were several necessary existents then something would need to individuate them, and this would compromise their necessity by serving as a cause for them. This contrasts with the strategy for proving uniqueness in *Cure: Metaphysics* I.6, which proceeded by inquiring into the "togetherness" of the supposedly multiple necessary existents. But all these passages have something in common: Avicenna argues from the premise that the necessary existent is uncaused. So in general, we can say that the attribute "one" is derived from this premise, whether this attribute is taken to mean uniqueness or simplicity. Uncaused existence suffices for *tawḥīd*.

Ineffability

At *Cure: Metaphysics* VIII.4.3–4, Avicenna makes an Aristotelian-style "fresh start" (*min ra's*). He has, since the start of Book VIII, been considering the *Elatton*-style proof of the First as the terminus of the series of efficient causes. But now, he proposes that we consider the First "just as the necessary existent itself (*nafs*)." One might wonder whether the quiddity (*māhiyya*) of the necessary existent "is, for instance, man, or some other substance." He compares this puzzle to the situation faced by the Pre-Socratics, who believed that there was some single principle for natural things, but failed to reach a consensus about the identity of this "one": is it water, air, fire, or something else (VIII.4.6)? I take Avicenna to be articulating the puzzle I raised at the outset of this chapter: it is one thing to say there is a necessary existent, and another to say what that necessary existent is *like*. The extent to which Avicenna is starting afresh, at least for the sake of the following argument, is shown by the fact that he is entertaining possibilities such as man being the necessary existent, something clearly ruled out by the arguments for uniqueness and simplicity in *Cure*:

Metaphysics Book I, which were just recalled in the previous chapter, at VIII.3.5–6.

Nonetheless, the First's simplicity is again at stake in the following argument. Avicenna says that "the necessary existent cannot have an attribute (*sifa*) that would involve composition (*tarkīb*), such that there would be here some quiddity, and this quiddity would be necessary of existence, so that this quiddity would have a notion (*maʿnā*) which is not its true nature (*ḥaqīqa*), but 'necessary of existence'" (VIII.4.7). This is not exactly crystal clear, but Avicenna helpfully provides an example. Suppose the necessary existent were a man. Then it would have a quiddity distinct from its necessity, since it is one thing to be a man, another to be necessary. (This is not question-begging: even if a man were, according to the hypothesis, a necessary existent, it would not follow that what it is to be a man and what it is to be necessary are one and the same.) But then, necessity would need to attach somehow to this quiddity, and that would require a cause. There follow the conclusions already mentioned above: "the necessary existent has no quiddity apart from its being the necessary existent, which is being (*anniyya*)" (VIII.4.9), and "everything that has a quiddity is caused" (VIII.4.11).

Here, then, Avicenna is still exploring the implications of saying that the necessary existent is uncaused. I argued above (section I) that for Avicenna, the intrinsic trait of necessity implies both sheer existence and negation of any non-relational attributes. This is borne out by the present chapter, when Avicenna remarks that the First "is the existent, together with the condition of having no added composition" (VIII.4.13). In one sense, we are simply returning to the observation that if the necessary existent is uncaused, then it must be simple. But we are also learning that the possession of any positive quiddity or attribute apart from necessary existence would compromise simplicity. This allows Avicenna to exclude both genus and differentia from the necessary existent (VIII.4.14–16), which implies that it has no definition (VIII.4.16).[18] For good measure, he adds that it also has "no demonstration (*burhān*), because it has no cause" (ibid.); he later remarks that we can provide for it a *dalīl*, but not a *burhān* (VIII.5.14).[19]

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[18] Cf. *Pointers* IV.24.

[19] In his note *ad loc.* in *Cure*: *Metaphysics*: 415 n.11, Marmura refers to what I take to be a synonymous distinction between *burhān inna* and *burhān lima*; this is Aristotle's contrast between showing *that* and showing *why*.

Intellection

So far, we have learned a good deal about what the necessary existent is *not*. It is neither caused, nor multiple (either by having equals or having parts), nor does it have a genus or any quiddity apart from sheer existence. This rather negative set of findings is unsurprising. As I remarked above, so long as we appeal only to the necessary existent's guaranteed existence and the fact that it is uncaused, we seem likely to reap little in the way of positive theology. In establishing more positive attributes than he has so far, Avicenna will presumably need to exploit the fact that the necessary existent is also a cause. He will indeed go on to do this, as we will see shortly (next section). Yet one of his central "positive" claims about God derives ultimately from the "negative" premise that the necessary existent is uncaused. This is his claim that God is an intellect. He infers this from the immateriality of the necessary existent, which in turn follows from its being uncaused – since matter is a type of cause.

We see this idea at work when Avicenna discusses the question of what might individuate the necessary existents, if there were more than one of them. He says:

Cure: *Metaphysics* VIII.5.3: How can the quiddity which is separate from matter have two things that possess it (*li-dhātayni*), given that the two things would be two either in respect of concept (*bi-sabab al-maʿnā*), or in respect of what bears the concept (*bi-sabab al-ḥāmil*), in respect of position or place, or in respect of moment and time – in general, because of some cause (*ʿilla*)?

Obviously his point is that none of these individuating factors will be available in the case of the necessary existent. Let us focus on the connection he draws between such individuating factors and matter (*mādda*). It is a familiar point in the Aristotelian tradition that matter is the principle of individuation for things like men. Being individuated in this way is a way of being caused:

Pointers IV.23: If the existence of something is attached to a sensible body, it is necessitated through [the body], not through itself. Every sensible body is multiple, being divided both in respect of quantity, and conceptually, into matter and form. Furthermore, every sensible body will become another body, either of the same species or of another species, except in consideration of its corporeality [that is, it will remain body despite changing its species]. Every sensible body, and everything attached to it, is caused.

Of course, Avicenna would not wish to argue that everything either sub-
sists in matter or is the necessary existent. There are also celestial intellects,
which are both immaterial and caused. So we cannot infer necessity from
immateriality. But the reverse is, according to Avicenna, a legitimate infer-
ence: the necessary existent must be immaterial, because it is uncaused.

   It might seem uncontroversial, in Avicenna's context, that God is imma-
terial, and little more controversial that necessary existence implies imma-
teriality. After all, materiality is associated with potentiality or possibility,
a point made by Avicenna at the end of *Cure*: *Metaphysics* 1.7. The next
step he takes, however, looks more contentious. He takes immateriality to
imply intellection – indeed, self-intellection. For a concise declaration of
this inference we can turn again to the *Pointers*:

IV.28: The First is intelligible of essence (*maʿqūl al-dhāt*) and makes it [sc. its
essence] subsist. For it subsists free from attachments, lacks (ʿuhad), or materials
(*mawādd*), and anything else that would bestow an addition onto the essence. And
you know that what is like this intellects itself and is intellected by itself.

Notice that Avicenna calls on the reader to deploy previously acquired
premises here: *you already know* that what is immaterial is self-intellective.
As I have argued elsewhere, he is alluding to claims established in his
psychology, which is not what we would have expected in the midst of this
metaphysical project of describing God.[20]

   Once he admits premises from psychology, Avicenna can take it as estab-
lished that any intellect is immaterial – this much is shown in Aristotle's
De Anima and again by Avicenna, with new arguments.[21] But why suppose
that, if the necessary existent is immaterial, it engages in (self-)intellection?
Blue is a color, but not everything colored is blue. Similarly, the fact that
every intellect is immaterial does not imply that everything immaterial is an
intellect. But Avicenna affirms at *Pointers* III.22 that "whatever is such as to
become an intelligible form and is self-subsistent is also such as to intellect."
I take his reasoning to be as follows. An immaterial object is something
intelligible. Now, we know that some intelligible things are intellects. So
the question is, in fact, what would *prevent* an intelligible thing from being
an intellect? The answer is that intelligibles which subsist in something
else are not intellects. Basically this means that forms in matter are not
intellects, though Avicenna also discusses the fact that a form in my mind
does not itself think (*Pointers* III.20). So an intelligible thing which subsists
through itself, not in matter or in an intellect, will itself be an intellect.

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[20] For this and what follows, see further, Adamson 2012.
[21] On this, see Druart 2000 and Adamson 2004b.

Obviously the necessary existent will pass this test – it is the self-subsisting existent *par excellence* – and is therefore an intellect.[22]

In *Pointers* III.22, Avicenna immediately adds that the self-subsisting intelligible is not only an intellect, but also intellects itself. He has laid the groundwork for this already at *Pointers* III.19, where he argued that whatever thinks can also think that it is thinking. Again, it is matter which would impede self-intellection. The upshot is that, since the First is self-subsisting (He has "guaranteed existence") and immaterial (He is uncaused, and matter is a cause for what subsists in matter), the First must be not only thinking, but also self-thinking. He will be an intellect who thinks about Himself.[23] In this way, Avicenna uses materials from Aristotle's (and his own) psychology to re-establish Aristotle's claim in *Metaphysics* book *Lambda*, that God is a self-thinking mind.[24]

Unfortunately, this raises as many questions as it answers. For instance, is the First *only* thinking about Himself, or does He know about other things? Avicenna holds that He does, but that particular objects of knowledge are known "in a universal way." This is a claim which has provoked a good deal of discussion, some of it by myself.[25] I will not add more here. Rather, I simply observe that on any interpretation, Avicenna's account of God's knowledge in *Cure* VIII.6 presupposes a relation God bears towards what He creates. Whereas God's being an intellect who knows Himself – like His uniqueness, simplicity, and ineffability – is proven ultimately by His being uncaused, His knowledge of other things cannot be understood without invoking His causal relationship to those things. Of course, Avicenna holds that God knows His creatures by knowing Himself. But He does so precisely by knowing Himself *as a cause*. This is one way Avicenna exploits the second result of his proof, namely, that the necessary existent is the cause of all contingent things. We will see another example in the next section.

Goodness

Avicenna's identification of the necessary existent with "the pure good" marks a transition in his derivation of the attributes. He continues to use

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[22] One might object that although the necessary existent is self-subsistent, it is not intelligible, because of its ineffability. This objection was indeed put to Avicenna by al-Rāzī in his commentary on *Pointers*, and rebutted by al-Ṭūsī in his own commentary. I discuss this in Adamson 2012.

[23] See also *Cure*: *Metaphysics* VIII.6.6, where Avicenna affirms that the absence of matter guarantees both pure intelligibility and intellection.

[24] For the relation between Avicenna's *Cure*: *Metaphysics* and the *Metaphysics*, see further, Bertolacci 2006.

[25] Marmura 1962; Adamson 2005; see more recently, Nusseibeh 2010. For later reactions see, e.g., Eichner 2011.

the premise that the necessary existent is uncaused, but now he also invokes the fact that the necessary existent is the cause of all other things. Here is the concise version found in the *Salvation*:

Whatever necessarily exists through itself is pure good (*khayr maḥḍ*) and pure perfection (*kamāl maḥḍ*). In general, the good is that which everything desires, and that through which it is completed. Evil has no essence, but is either the absence (*ʿadam*) of substance or of some state beneficial to the substance. Thus existence is goodness. Perfection of existence is goodness of existence, the existence that is untouched by absence – whether absence of substance or absence of something that belongs to substance – rather, it is perpetually actual (*dāʾim bi-l-fiʿl*). So it is pure good. That which, through itself, is [merely] possibly existent is not pure good. For its essence does not, through itself, have existence, so that its essence in itself suffers absence. What suffers absence in any way is not entirely free of evil and deficiency. Therefore there is no pure good apart from that which necessarily exists through itself.

"Good" is also said of what is useful or supportive (*mufīd*) for the perfections of things, and we will show that the necessary existent must from itself be supportive of all existence, and of every perfection of existence. So from this point of view also, it is good, and no deficiency or evil enters into it.[26]

Much could be said about this passage, which looks back to the Neoplatonic idea of evil as absence or non-being (*ʿadam*),[27] even as it anticipates Aquinas' account of God as purely good because purely actual. For present purposes, though, I want simply to draw attention to Avicenna's explicitly twofold approach to the goodness of the necessary existent. First, pure goodness is seen to follow from necessity, in the sense of "guaranteed existence." Second, pure goodness is ascribed to the necessary existent on account of its being a source of perfections for other things.

The parallel passage in the *Cure* has the same twofold structure. Avicenna begins by affirming the necessary existent's "complete existence (*tāmm al-wujūd*)" on the basis that nothing belonging to His existence is "inadequate (*qāṣiran*)" in Him (VIII.6.1). This is in contrast to man, who lacks many perfections that he might possess.[28] The necessary existent is "pure good" and free of evil, because evil is lack or deficiency (VIII.6.3). Having established this, Avicenna reminds us that the necessary existent provides existence and perfections of existence. This, too, allows us to affirm His goodness (VIII.6.4). Here the *Cure* and *Salvation* agree almost verbatim, but as often, the *Cure* does provide further nuances. At VIII.6.2–3, Avicenna gives a

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[26] *Salvation*ᵃ: 82.2–12.   [27] On this connection, see Steel 2002.
[28] Avicenna adds that merely sharing in the species of humanity is itself a mark of imperfection, a remark that needs to be understood in light of his argument that the necessary existent has no genus.

further rationale for identifying the necessary existent with pure good, namely, that existence is an object of desire (mentioned only in passing in the *Salvation*). Thus "guaranteed existence" also makes God a final cause, a point picked up elsewhere when Avicenna describes God as an object of love for Himself (VIII.7.3).

A more significant difference from the *Salvation* account comes when Avicenna admits that God is not really perfect or complete (*tāmm*) but rather, "above completeness (*fawqa l-tamām*)." For God "not only has the existence that belongs to Him alone, but every [other] existence is also an overflow from His existence, belongs to Him, and emanates from Him" (VIII.6.1, Marmura trans.). It is interesting to see here how God's status as a cause, far from being the only route to establishing His perfection, in fact leads Avicenna to qualify this divine attribute. If God were merely necessarily existent, He would be perfect; but because He is also the source of all other existence, calling Him "perfect" or "complete" would be to damn with faint praise. The train of thought here is notably different from the one we find in Avicenna's source text. In the *Theology of Aristotle*, an Arabic translation and re-working of Plotinus' *Enneads*, the First Cause is likewise said to be "above completeness (*fawqa al-tamām*)."[29] But there, the reason given is that completeness or perfection is appropriate to a lower level of reality. For the author of the *Theology*, the phrase "above completeness" safeguards divine transcendence (God is not really "perfect" because He is better than what is perfect), whereas Avicenna uses the same phrase to mark God's causation in addition to his self-sufficiency (God is genuinely perfect, but also the source of perfection for other things).

"Good" is, then, a double-sided attribute. From one point of view it refers to the now familiar fact that God exists with no need for a cause. From another, it refers to God's status as the source of existence and perfection for other things. This provides a basis for further attributes, as we can see from the opening *fuṣūl* of the sixth *namaṭ* of *Pointers*. Avicenna first expounds the attribute "sufficient" or "wealthy" (*ghanī*, VI.1–2): the necessary existent is not "poor" because it has no need to "acquire" anything else (*kasb*). Then, he turns his attention to the epithets "king" and "generosity." On the one hand, these can be seen to follow from God's sufficiency or wealth: "the true king is the absolutely, true sufficient, who can do without anything's coming to be in something else from Him (*wa-lā yastaghnī ʿanhu shayʾ fī shayʾ*)"

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[29] See Adamson 2002: 119–24. The designation "pure good (*khayr maḥḍ*)" is another allusion to the Neoplatonica Arabica; the Proclus adaptation later called *Liber de Causis*, circulated in Arabic under the title *Book of the Pure Good*. For Avicenna's comments on the *Theology*, see also Adamson 2004a and b.

(vi.4). But generosity and kingship mean more than self-sufficiency, they mean giving without need. God does not need His effects, yet graciously creates these effects anyway. This licenses us to call Him "generous," an attribute which, more than any other we have examined so far, refers exclusively to God's causal activity: "the true generous is the one who pours forth gifts from himself without any desire or search after some objective, for something that would be beneficial to him" (vi.5).[30]

III CONCLUSION

One could, and ideally should, extend this discussion to take in all the attributes Avicenna discusses. Among these, one of the most contentious would be the attribute of "will (*irāda*)." At *Cure* viii.7.3 and 10–13 (cf. *Pointers* vi.5–7), Avicenna mentions this attribute several times, and is above all concerned to reaffirm that the necessary existent has no goal or purpose (*gharaḍ*) for His causal efficacy. This would imply desire, and ultimately give God a final cause. Rather, God's will is identical to His knowledge, emanation, and generosity (viii.7.12). These passages would be a red flag to any reader for whom God's will involves a degree of contingency, such that God has multiple genuine alternatives open to Him when He creates, including the option of not creating at all. For such a reader – of course, al-Ghazālī leaps to mind – only this will permit us to say that God wills and is generous. Avicenna has his rival story to tell, namely, that God's necessity makes Him entirely free of contingency, but His lack of desire and neediness nonetheless makes His creation "generous." This maneuver did not, to put it mildly, find universal favor.

That much is familiar to students of post-Avicennian philosophy. But to understand fully the history of reactions to Avicenna's philosophical theology, we need to bear in mind the structure and complexity of Avicenna's own account. One can readily accept Avicenna's identification of God with the necessary existent, and even his proof that there is such an existent, without endorsing Avicenna's understanding of the various divine attributes. As already mentioned, there were numerous criticisms

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[30] Similarly, at *Cure*: *Metaphysics* viii.7.12, Avicenna equates generosity (*jūd*) with God's emanation (*fayḍ*). Again, one can point to Graeco-Arabic inspiration here; obviously the reference to emanation evokes the Neoplatonica Arabica. But Alexander of Aphrodisias' *On Providence*, translated more than once into Arabic, would have been a non-Neoplatonic source for the claim that divine principles do not need or desire their effects. When Avicenna writes, "the higher seeks nothing for the sake of the lower, such that this would play the role of a goal (*gharaḍ*) for it" (*Pointers* vi.6), this should be compared to passages like *On Providence* §23 (in Ruland 1976), which denies that divine providence is exercised *for the sake of* mundane particulars.

of Avicenna focusing on the topic of God's will and God's knowledge of his creatures. More generally, since Avicenna argues for each attribute separately, his critics and supporters could engage in detailed dispute over each attribute. This is exactly what happened in texts like the *Pointers* commentaries of al-Rāzī and al-Ṭūsī.

There were also attempts to derail Avicenna's project at its outset. To take an example from the twelfth century, al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), author of the famous doxographical work, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, also composed a refutation of Avicenna's theology, called *The Wrestling Match* (*Kitāb al-Muṣāraʿa*). He accepts the designation of God as the "necessary existent," yet takes a radically different view of its implications, because he holds that "existence" applies to God and creatures in an entirely equivocal way.[31] That even so staunch a critic as al-Shahrastānī would accept the title *wājib al-wujūd* for God shows the deep intellectual power of associating necessity with God. This aspect of Avicenna's philosophical theology was a legacy for Muslim philosophers and theologians of all persuasions, and for Jewish and Christian thinkers, too. But when it came to determining how exactly necessary existence relates to divinity, Avicenna's treatment of the First was only the beginning.

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[31] al-Shahrastānī 2001; see Introduction, p. 10. Ironically, al-Rāzī attacks Avicenna at this same fundamental stage in the argument, and for the same purpose of preserving divine transcendence, yet from the other direction. For him existence is univocal, so God must have some essence apart from mere existence or He would, again, be insufficiently distinct from creatures. See on this, Mayer 2003: 209.