The Nature and Knowability of God for Avicenna

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Avicenna's God exists necessarily and essentially. All that is necessary through another finds its existence in another, and ultimately relies on that which is necessary through itself. This can only be through one existent, which is necessary, universal, and unchanging. The existence and essence of the world is an accident with a cause, that is – it happens, and the creation of this essence is not from nothing. This aspect of essence allows for the world to be knowable and predictable, and further – to be our starting point in knowing God. Avicenna's philosophy somewhat differs from the cosmology of Aristotle, and contrasts with that of many after him; namely, al-Ghazali and Maimonides. Such philosophers take stances that are far more theological in method, which give rise to faults not evident in Avicenna.

There are degrees of what can be thought, those being the necessary, the impossible, and that which is between full potentiality and full actuality; the possible. Anything that exists necessarily must exist, for an absurdity would result otherwise. That which is possible can be posited to either exist or not exist without an absurdity.[1] Among the necessary, there is that which is necessary through itself and necessary through another[2]. The latter exists possibly in itself, that is, it is possible always for it exists necessarily through another. If it did not exist possibly in itself, it would be unintelligible, unnecessary, and impossible since it is not necessary in itself. The converse is also true, where whatever is possible in itself exists necessarily through another; thus we know that necessity implies existence through a biconditional. That which exists possibly through itself is in reality necessarily, and if possible through another it exists alongside a cause, since the only other case (existing in a caused state alongside its uncaused state) violates the principle of non-contradiction.

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[1] Avicenna. The Salvation, trans. Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, in Philosophy in the Middle Ages (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 244.
[2] Ibid.

There can be only one existent necessary through itself.[3] If there were two or more, their existence would have to be a totality of being necessary through each other, and none of them could be essential if they were not the same. However, this is impossible because they would be possible in themselves, which necessitate a cause prior to them; but none of these proposed necessary existents are prior to each other. Thus, there can be no multiplicity in that which is necessary through itself. The Necessary Existent is one, an essential property.

What exists necessarily through itself "is not a body, nor any matter of a body, nor a form of a body, nor an intelligible matter of an intelligible form, nor an intelligible form in an intelligible matter, nor divisible […] in quantity, principles or account."[4] This is the simple, which cannot come to be and owes nothing to another. If the simple had a multiplicity in attributes such as quantity or principle, it would fall into the aforementioned category of conflicting causes, since the composite of attributes would be dependent upon the causation of the attributes which cannot be anything but The Necessary Existent alone.

Such is how The Necessary Existent is postulated, having been defined. The proof of the existence of The Necessary Existent assumes existence to be in being, and relies on the principle of non-contradiction.[5] Furthermore, all existence is either necessary or possible as previously outlined. Necessary existence would be sufficient for a necessary existent, so it must be shown that all possible existence relies on one that is necessary.[6] This is so because for anything there cannot possibly be a cause which relies on another possible cause and so on to infinity, through their own essences. They cannot explain their own existence within such a scheme, because they are essentially possible in themselves. Something must give them their existence, because their

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[3] Ibid., 245.
[4] Ibid., 246.
[5] Ibid.
[6] There's an argument targeting Aristotelians here that I've chosen to omit, about the infinity of the world needing a necessary existent to give continuous existence under this scheme; otherwise everything is purely possible.

existence is not in itself; as there are many and only one thing may exist necessarily through itself. If they exist, then they exist necessarily, even if only accidentally. This cause may exist eternally through the sequence of affected causes, causing each one continuously because of the fact that they exist.

The Necessary Existent continuously causes existence, necessarily and eternally.[7] This is creation, and it is done so eternally; the world is eternal. Though The Necessary Existent continuously and eternally creates the world, it cannot know anything but itself. For the Necessary Existent cannot intellect things by way of things, otherwise it would be dependent upon things and introduce contingency that violates the simplicity of that which is necessary through itself.[8] Change also introduces contingency, as the one would change with the changing object, becoming more than one account.

The Necessary Existent has only one act of intellecting, done universally to all things. This means that all things are known in terms of single universal, like our knowledge of solar eclipses from an observance of a single eclipse but applied to all existence. Individual existence, and essence, are not known: "the First knows the causes and the things coinciding with them and so necessarily knows what they result in, the times between them, and their recurrences. Since it cannot know this or that, it is aware of particular things insofar as they are universal."[9] The Necessary Existent does not know the distinct essence of particulars, nor of their existence; but knows what is universal to them, and their universal nature in terms of an emanating process.[10]

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Avicenna. The Salvation, trans. Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, in Philosophy in the Middle Ages (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 247.
[9] Ibid., 248.
[10] It is easy to see this as being their fundamental components, such as atomic structure. But that would be an undue attribution.

The existence of all things in the world is an accident. Though the cause may be essential, the happening itself is contingent and accidental. It is through essence itself that we know the existence of it; for its existence is determined by the essence indicating existence continuously bestowed upon it by some other thing.[11] Thus, the world is continuously created, eternally and essentially by pure necessity; and that which is created can know also that which is created, and through such things can know that which created it.

Al-Ghazali denies such knowledge of God to be true knowledge of God as God. Rather, what Avicenna describes is knowledge about God, not of him. The knowledge outlined is indirect knowledge, as we only know our initial premises from the essence of the world as it appears.[12] The only way to know God is directly and immediately, and this can only be known through practicing Sufism alongside an intellectual element leading us to the ascetic practice of controlling desire and passion. We can separate cause and effect, and this ultimately means that God is the cause of everything. Because of this, we can only know God through miraculous and inexpressible acts like the practice of Sufism.

There are no necessary properties within the essence of a thing, the world is not knowable beyond the past and present. Essence bears no role in causation; God is the only cause.[13] This separation of cause and effect is possible, and thus not necessary. All observations of cause and effect are baseless: "observation only proves that one occurs together with the other, but it does not prove that one occurs through the agency of the other."[14] We are then left in the hands of

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[11] Avicenna. The Cure, trans. Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, in Philosophy in the Middle Ages (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 253.

[12] Al-Ghazali. Deliverance from Error., in-class handout, paragraph 12. Knowing definitions and reasoning a conclusion about God is not direct knowledge of God.

[13] Worth mentioning here is a separation of the logical and causal domains, p. 274 "On The Eternity of the world". Though there exists logical necessity, it bears no necessary relation to the world.

[14] Al-Ghazali. The Incoherence of the Philosophers, Concerning the Natural Sciences, trans. Arthur Hyman, ed., M. Bouyges, S.J., in Philosophy in the Middle Ages (Indianapolis:
Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 278.

God, and Sufism is said to be the way – based upon personal experience that anyone can see if they were to dedicate themselves to both the theory and practice.

There are two flaws in this argument. To say that Avicenna's position does not lead to direct knowledge of God, while accepting his premises, misunderstands his paradigm. Within that system, all that exists is accidental. However, these acts are necessary and thus carry with them the very reality of what God is: pure necessity, though not essentially necessity. This supposedly indirect knowledge about God is what God is to us, as the accidental existence of multiplicity is what God is essentially. However simple this may be, it is rather profound on its own. If we are to follow Avicenna, we know God completely and fully as the accidental existence of our world. All ideas of how that which exists comes into being turns into a question of creation. This is admittedly al-Ghazali's focus, but ought to be approached with such reasoning in mind.

Avicenna's essence is potentiality; everything is potential until it exists accidentally. However, the potential has to be conceivable, not impossible. When Avicenna speaks of that which is possible, he means the forms, definitions; that which is conceivable.[15] Al-Ghazali makes the mistake of taking imagination as potential rather than impossible, which he uses to separate cause and effect.[16] This breaks, on a false premise, Avicenna's proof of God as necessity.

This misunderstanding highlights the importance of precise language when inquiring into the nature of God. For Maimonides, this entailed using language that preserved essential properties of God, such as unity and perfection. God for Maimonides must know particulars in so

[15] The Cure., 252-253. Implicit in this discussion of what is brought into existence is that existent things hold in their essence that which made them possible evident by their existence itself. In conjunction with the definition of impossible, we know that the intellecting of existent things applies only to that which took hold from the possible.
[16] I have heard that this is an argument that Maimonides makes as well, and it has been reiterated many times by Dr. Sweeney.

far as miracles can be performed so that the Jewish law may be upheld.[17] That is, though essences dictate the world's workings and we may know the world by them, such behavior can be prevented by God's will. Thus, God is not contingent and may even break any essential necessity by way of preventing necessities arising from an essence[18]. We must use language about God that preserves these properties so that we may investigate scripture through philosophy for the purpose of knowing God more fully.

Tautologies and negations of imperfections allow us to know essential attributes of God[19]. That is, attributions which are entirely God alone – essentially, and cannot be shared with anything else. Such attributes are God. Tautologies naturally fall under this category; God is God. Positive attributions bring God to the level of creatures by way of bringing him into the same genus. If God is good, then he is in the same genus as good things. Such relations can bring God into a genus that necessitates him to be a body and thus erasing an essential attribute of God; and this applies to other classes of attributes such as "what a thing is, those describing parts of what it is, and qualities of what it is".[20] However, negating such attributes may remove the imperfection and speak truthfully without attributing anything to God.[21] For example, "God is not not the highest" may allow us to know this negation, but not that God is highest. There is no necessary implication that must be read from any assumed semantic meaning behind such a statement.[22] These negations do not provide essential knowledge of God, as we can know that God is not not highest but also that other things may be not not highest. Though, knowing the

[17] According to one of many interpretations of The Guide for the Perplexed".
[18] Like the burning bush.
[19] Maimonides. The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Chaim Rabin, in Philosophy in the Middle Ages (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2010), 364.
[20] Ibid., 365.
[21] Ibid., 367.
[22] If all of these negations do not add up to a tautology, or some kind of positive, it seems that they are not mapped to any necessity in their own structure.

law to be true, we know this to not be the case.[23]

Accidental attributes of God can be known only through his actions[24]. God works through his own essence, and as such speaking of the acts committed directly speak of an essential property without attributing anything else, for nothing else could commit that one action as it belongs to the agent.[25] These attributes are not essential to God, and do not tell us anything more than the necessity of created and manipulated essences as they originate from God as told by scripture.

Thus, we know what we can and cannot say about God, and know that we cannot speak in a way that allows us to know God. This does not mean that we cannot know God[26], but cannot know God through language. This vastly differs from Avicenna, who believed God to be knowable through logic conveyed by semantic meaning in language. Maimonides leads us to believe that we can get infinitesimally closer to knowing God through a summation of negations[27], whereas the essential properties of existence leads us directly to Avicenna's necessary existent. It is clear[28], then, that Maimonides believes in a linguistic divide, where our mental representations in no way carry logical necessities alongside them; that is, language is not mapped to the world in an essential way. This is not the case for Avicenna.

Maimonides is closely associated with al-Ghazali in this way. Both believe philosophy[29] to not provide answers to the question of whether God may be known essentially; for al-Ghazali, we may use the reasoning within the semantics of language to arrive to indirect knowledge about

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[23] I.e., not through philosophy. We only know what we cannot say, not what to say.
[24] Ibid., 366.
[25] Whether or not creatures can act like God is out of scope, but of relatively little importance for an accident. Furthermore, one can imagine that God cannot do anything – weightlifting, for example, essentially changes the self by definition of the action pertaining to body. This may make such actions not accidental.
[26] Moses and his prophecy are unique in that they imply a direct knowledge of God above such barriers.
[27] Possibly, eventually adding up to a syllogism concluding the tautology, "God is God".
[28] This is a false statement.
[29] Here, synonymous with language.

God, but not in any way that lets us know essential qualities of God. Language is not necessarily mapped to substance in the world. Maimonides believes that the semantics of language lack necessary reasoning in regard to implication beyond the direct meaning of a proposition. That is, a double negative does not imply the positive[30], nor does the idempotent law apply to two disjunctions that may otherwise imply a positive attribute. Language, again, is not mapped to the substance of the world; we cannot trace an essence through necessity to God's essence because we cannot speak of the attributes involved except through disjoined negations. In any case where language and substance is mapped to the world, it is not applicable to God.

Avicenna provides the most coherent and complete account of our knowledge of God, though simplistic and without much to say about the matter.[31] Though concerns may be raised about emanation, or the reasoning of the ending of an infinite regress[32], the reasoning for God's existence appears solid to anyone willing to accept Aristotelian logical principles. There is not much reliance on anything outside of it, such as Islamic nor Jewish law. Further, this is supported by the demonstrable reality of anyone being able to pick up the premises and follow them to Avicenna's conclusion. Maimonides' account of language is unsatisfying; his interpretation of semantics is lacking and seems to rely too heavily on continuing his assumed premises. Al-Ghazali is much the same, though also bases his arguments against Avicenna on a false interpretation. In either case, they set up their arguments in a peculiar way because they must use the system that they are taking apart; this in itself, however, is very interesting and with more work may prove to have far more to the argument. As things stand, Avicenna provides a more coherent account within his own system.

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[30] "God is not not highest" ought to tell us that God is highest; the lack of certainty, though this is known to be true, arises from trying to preserve properties of God assumed to be true. The semantics of "highest" here really ought to just mean that there are different semantics for "highest" in their own kinds; it is equivocal.

[31] Many philosophers have commented on neo-platonic Emanation, which deserves further study.

[32] Not a huge concern because of such infinity only being applied to the domain of the possible being actualized.