



## Avicenna's View on the Greek Philosophical Thought

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### Abstract

Continuing the path of Neo-Platonic philosophers and Farabi, while accepting the framework of the Greek thought in reaching the truth of the beings in the universe through the rational knowledge in the framework of Aristotelian logics, Avicenna has attempted to present a certain interpretation of some fundamental concepts of the Greek thought and offer a metaphysics with quite rational and argumentative results as well as a rational interpretation for some of the principal concepts of the Quranic thought in the Islamic world, a metaphysics that can be called the essential Greek-Islamic rational system. The present article attempts to use an analytical-explanatory method to prove that, firstly, Avicenna accepts the Greek rational thinking method in reaching the truth of the beings, calling it the certitude wisdom and knowledge. And – in line with Aristotle – he introduces the man's sensory faculty as the starting point for the path of acquiring certitude knowledge, through which he reaches the rational knowledge of the beings. Secondly, it states the most important axes of Avicenna's philosophy in his legal reasoning reading of principles of Aristotelian thought.

### Keywords

Avicenna, Greek thought, philosophical thought, certitude, reason, existence, essence, distinction.

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## Introduction

Regarding Avicenna's metaphysical effect, Etienne Gilson says, "In all philosophical languages, including Greek and Latin, the word 'essence' has hardly been cut off from its root, i.e. 'being'. When a Greek philosopher said something is *ousia*, he meant that it is real. When a Latin philosopher said something is *stantia*, he would also refer to its reality. This is, however, not the case. When we speak of a reality, the first denotation of the word that comes to our mind is that what it denotes may exist, just as it may not exist" (Gilson, 1952, p. 82). These statements show Avicenna's historical effect on metaphysics, an effect that could present a new understanding of 'essence' and 'existence' as the most important Greek metaphysical concepts to the world. The fundamental effects of Avicenna's rational thought are not restricted to the Western philosophy (especially the Christian philosophy); rather, it has more deeply affected the Islamic philosophy and wisdom, theology and other subsidiary sciences like principles of jurisprudence. Explanation of the nature of his view compared to the Greek thought not only reveals his innovations and principles more, but also plays an important role in understanding the identity of philosophy in Islamic world and understanding the performance of Avicenna's successors in the Islamic and Christian worlds.

Regarding the relationship between Avicenna's metaphysics and the Greek and Plato's philosophy, some authors such as Ibn Rushd, in many of his works, especially in *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, and Etienne Gilson and others have written; but there are not many works in Persian and in the sphere of Avicenna's general look at the Greek philosophical thought. Here, the writer tries to explore and revise one of the most fundamental philosophical evolutions in the

Islamic period (i.e. the metaphysical distinction between existence and essence) developed by Avicenna and turned into the foundation for the Islamic philosophical thought, and even the Islamic theology.

### 1. Philosophy and ‘Inquiry of Truth’

Philosophy as acquisition of the certain and essential knowledge in Avicenna’s language is wisdom. He considers it inquiry of truth in proportion to human’s ability (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, p. 5). He believes that the man has the ability to reach the truth of the beings in the universe, and the way to achieve that truth is through philosophical thought (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 1, p. 12). Achieving the rational knowledge of the beings in the universe is the highest virtue for the man, and acquiring the knowledge of philosophy is the perfection of human’s soul and the way to achieve felicity (Avicenna, 1980, p. 30). In the entry of logics in *Shifā*, Avicenna asserts that whatever I bring from the principles in this book have been proved for me, and I consider them as truths. In explaining his own researches, he adds that principles on which we peripatetic philosophers have researched are principles and rules that have been in philosophical sciences, the principles and rules that have been based on the thought organized on the basis of logical order and whose results have been signed by the logics. He emphasizes that the thought signed by logics is right and true, and its principles have been realized (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 1, p. 10).

Avicenna maintains that the realized philosophical principles are inferred from the ancient philosophers’ principles produced and fixed by the intellectual consensus and much work and efforts. He regards himself as sharing the Greek scholars’ intellectual consensus. In his view, the role of all Greek and Alexanderian philosophers are not equal in fixing the realized philosophical principles, and

considers Aristotle as the teacher, the rule (*dastūr*) and the great figure of the Greek philosophy (Avicenna, 1383 SH, p. 111). In his view, Aristotle is the researcher of the fundamental principles of philosophy, and the philosophers before him, like Plato, have little to say in philosophy (Sheikh of Illumination, 1375 SH, vol. 2, p. 30)<sup>1</sup> and play mostly the role of preparing the ground for researching on the principles of philosophy by Aristotle.

Avicenna maintains that philosophy is the greatest science and that the scientific certitude is restricted to the philosophical certitude signed by the logics. In stating the reason for that claim, he emphasizes that just the philosophy needs no imitation in affirmation of its subject and its issues, and the man can achieve knowledge of its subject and issues just through assistance from his intellect (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, p. 5). If the man has certitude on a subject or the judgment on a subject while his own intellect has not reached that certitude and he has acquired that certitude through imitation, persuasion and the like, it is not – for Avicenna – a scientific certitude, and it can be readily substituted by doubt and uncertainty.

Thus, Avicenna considers philosophy as truth and philosophizing as the inquiry of philosophy; and this is alone enough for us to consider him as an Aristotelian-Greek rational thinker. Of course, he is a genuine and independent thinker who does not remain in the position of expositor, and forms his own special philosophical thought.

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1. The statement 'but the Plato is a divine person, and if his property from philosophy is what we have received from his writings and his sayings, his property from knowledge is little' has been quoted by Suhrawardi from Avicenna. It is related to the section on meanings of deduction in the book 'logics' in *Shifā*; but we did not find the abovementioned statements in *Shifā* (Sheikh of Illumination, vol. 2, p. 30).

### 1-1. Avicenna's Analysis of Philosophical Certitude

When we speak of the Greek rational thought, it is clear that any thinker who claims to follow Aristotle must firstly accept and apply his method of scientific certitude. Avicenna accepts rational certitude as the Greek-Aristotelian intellectual basis and believes that the certitude is gained through intellectual acquisition (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 51). Just like the Aristotle, he believes that human's reason, in the first place and in time of his birth, is merely a (material) potentiality, and he introduces the process whose first step is 'sense' as the only way to achieve its actuality (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 51; Avicenna, 1363 SH, p. 97; Avicenna, 1379 SH, p. 333). Thus, it is clear that non-intellectual acquisition and even the non-acquisitive rational knowledge are not consistent with Avicenna's foundations and negate the system of the potentiality and actuality of the universe. When a thinker maintains that human's reason in time of his birth is only a potentiality and its actuality begins with sensory perception, he will necessarily consider the non-acquired rational perception as meaningless. This is because until the ground is prepared for abstraction through senses, no actuality will be possible for the reason. Thus, he believes that the actuality of human's reason begins just through his epistemic faculties. Of course, this does not mean that the human's reason actualizes itself. Rather, he believes that the man, by taking sensory meanings from the beings in the universe and with the assistance from axioms that he innately considers as true (Avicenna, 1379 SH, p. 132), takes rational knowledge of beings from the Being who is the complete intellect, forming creatures and perfecting them (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 331). Up to this point, Avicenna accompanies Aristotle, but he follows Neo-Platonic philosophers and Farabi in interpreting the active intellect. In next sections, we will clarify the background of such an interpretation.

In analyzing the acquisitive nature of rational knowledge, he introduces human's soul as enjoying various faculties and maintains that the soul's rational faculty is divided – in an initial division – into theoretical and practical. The former one perceives that generalities and the theoretical truth and falsehood (the beings not at man's disposal), and the latter is related to finding the good and evil actions, and have the authority of the man's actions (the beings at the man's disposal) (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 1, p. 12). Accepting the various orders claimed by Aristotle for human's reason, he maintains that the first order is merely the potentiality of assuming different forms (material reason), and considers the actuality of material reason to be just through assuming sensory role or rational forms acquired by the human' soul through acquisition (Avicenna, 1363 SH, pp. 96-97). What is resulted from sense as the first stage of actuality of the reason is nothing except the repetition of perception of natural phenomena; that is, we human beings are continuously observing the repetition of sensory perception of the universe. Thus, if the sense is to be the starting point for general rational perception, the man has no asset, save the integration of his sensible perceptions. Accordingly, Avicenna believes that material reason achieves actuality through two ways: essential induction and argumentation (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, pp. 85-95' Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 220).<sup>1</sup> Since the general premises of the inductive arguments are also acquired through induction and studying the repetition of sensory perceptions, he says anyone who

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1. The essential induction is a kind of partial induction that leads to knowledge of the cause due to integration of hidden deduction, and leads – for Avicenna – to certainty. The hidden deduction is based on the well-known rule of 'incidental' in Aristotle's logics. That rule has been stated in Avicenna's language as 'the incidental is neither maximal nor perpetual' (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, pp. 85-95); and for Aristotle: (981a28) (982a14) (983a7-26) (1031b7-8).

lacks a sense lacks the knowledge related to that sense. Of course, as Avicenna himself has pointed out, the sense and imagination are just the starting point of rational abstraction, and they have the preparatory role for the man's rational faculty; and since the true knowledge is rational knowledge, the sensory perception itself cannot be considered alone as the knowledge of things. Thus, for Avicenna, it is true that if there is no sense, the man will lack the knowledge related to that sense, but we must not think that the sensory perception is itself knowledge of beings; rather, the sensory perception is the starting point of the man's rational faculty. Indeed, it is through the sensory perception and assistance from axioms that the human's reason changes the unknown to the known (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 224). This Avicenna's statement is quite in line with Aristotelian thought about the status of human's self-relying rational certitude as well as the special position of sensory perceptions for obtaining rational knowledge for the man.

To achieve the rational knowledge, Avicenna – just like Aristotle – analyzes the man's sensory perception, distinguishes the substantial and accidental meanings, and specifies the essentials of something that lead to the complete (total limit) or incomplete (partial limit) of it (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 52). By separating the questions on existence of something and its nature, he believes that what comes in answering the question on the nature of something is its quiddity, and what comes in answering the question on the existence of something is its being. Of course, in line with Aristotle and Farabi, he believes that the total limit of something, which comes in answering to 'what is it?' follows the 'simple limit' of that thing (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, pp. 261-262). In the section on logics in his *Dānishnāmayi 'Alā'ī*, he writes: "And the question of 'whether' is of two types: asking whether something exists, and asking whether it is

like this. And the question on 'what is it?' is of two types: one is asking what you mean. For example, someone says 'triangle' and you ask 'what is the meaning of triangle?' The other is when you say, 'what is a triangle?' And the matters on 'what' are more than 'whether' because you must first know what he says to deal with whether it exists or not. The matters on 'what' are more than 'whether' because until you know it exists, you will not ask 'what is it?' And the answer to the question on 'what' is the interpretation of a name or the limit of essence." (Avicenna, 1383 SH, pp. 154-155). This means if someone does not have knowledge of the external existence of something, his image of the essential meanings distinguishing that thing from other things is no longer a 'total limit'; rather, they are the descriptions of that name (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 262). In other words, Avicenna considers any kind of true perception of the universe in the first place as subordinate to the knowledge of its external existence; and affirming the external existence of things is prior to any kind of rational abstraction about those things. In this regard, he says, 'no reasonable idea comes only from our soul and essence; rather, they all come from outside' (Avicenna, 1404 AHa, p. 102); that is, if there was no outside, there would be no reasonable thing for the man.

Therefore, making the rational knowledge of beings dependent on their sensory reception and, accordingly, making reception of any rational knowledge of beings subordinate to outside of the man's mind, is completely Aristotle's method in acquiring rational knowledge.

### **1-2. The Position of Primary Knowledge in Acquiring Rational Certitude**

As mentioned before, Avicenna considers the human's faculty of

sense as only a preparatory factor for acquiring rational knowledge and believes that the man, from the early stages of perceiving sensible things, has perceptions with no sensory origin. He believes that when the man comes across other beings with his sensory faculty, he acquires an image of the meaning of beings. The existence of these sensory meanings leads to the origination of other knowledge for the reason that are certain for the man (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 224). These items of primary knowledge have some features: first, they are propositions; that is, they are of the type of affirmation, not mere imagination. They are affirmations acquired by the man's soul and are described as true and false, and naturally belong to something. He believes that those primary items of knowledge are true, and their truth is their agreement with the external world and is axiomatic; that is, the man innately considers them as true (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 57; Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, pp. 330-332). Thus, along with giving importance to sensory perception, Avicenna considers it as preparation for those perceptions that are not of the type of sensory imagination, are judgments, and are issued by reason.

His view on determination of the origin of those primary items of knowledge is somewhat different in his writings. In the section of 'argument' in *Shifā*, he maintains that the human's reason relies on its own form, of which one is its own sensory form; and with acquisition of two sensory forms, he can find out their otherness and directly find out that the other form is not this form. Consequently, he can assess other propositions using that axiomatic proposition (the identity and impossibility of union of two contradictory propositions). In an important position, he believes that the human's soul finds that axiomatic known item in conformation to its own identical item. That is, he believes that the

axiomatic proposition is true because it is axiomatic. Of course, since he has no doubt in that judgment (axiomatic is true because it is axiomatic), he brings no argument for it, and the mere fact that an axiomatic proposition has a correspondent as well as its verity, for Avicenna, is considered axiomatic. If he is asked how the soul judges that a sensory form conforms to its correspondent, Avicenna answers that the man directly finds its correspondent; otherwise, how is it possible for the soul to judge it as correspondent (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 262; Avicenna, 1379 SH, p. 122). Thus, the appearance of his statements in section 'argument' in *Shifā* is that the soul by itself reaches the primary knowledge. By accepting the foundation that the initial tool of the human's reason in the material stage in confrontation to beings is just sensory perception, the question arises as follows: "How does the reason grant the known primary rational form to itself by merely acquiring the sensory form?" Perhaps, it is because Avicenna says something in the 'argument' section in *Shifā* showing the fact that even this axiomatic primary rational form is granted by the Active Intellect. He says, "So when one of us used the senses and the imagination in the simple ways as mentioned and not in the works, this is the reason for our recognition of its essence if it is connected with the divine grace which is inseparable from him" (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 3, p. 331).<sup>1</sup> It means whenever the man acquires the sensory form, he is connected inseparably to the divine grace and automatically affirms it. Thus, considering the basis of priority of outside over acquisition of reasonable, it is essential even for the primary rational knowledge to be emanated from outside.

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۱. فلما استفاد الواحد منا من الحس و التخیل بساطتها على النحو المذكور و لاح له تألیفها، كان ذلك سبب تصدیقنا بها لذاتها إذا كان متصلا بالفیض الإلهی الذي لا ینفصل عنه المستعد.

### 1-3. Illumination of the Active Intellect

As mentioned before, Avicenna – in explaining the way the rational knowledge is acquired – gets help from a being called active intellect that has a very important role in analyzing the rational knowledge. The assumption of the existence of a being called the active intellect (*wāhib al-ṣuwar* or ‘grantor of forms’) is not – for Avicenna – a polemic and theological assumption. Rather, in his view, Aristotle’s view necessitates firstly in assuming a motion and secondly in its explanation in the form of potentiality and actuality in regard with beings and thirdly in regard with human’s intellect, the acceptance of a being called the active intellect. Aristotle says, ‘whatever is created by the nature or the art is created from something which is potentially so and so, and by something which is actually so and so. And whatever is created is what is created from something and by something, which is typically the same as what is created’ (Avicenna, 1404 AHc, vol. 2, p. 208; Aristotle, 1991, 1049b27-29; Aristotle, 1991, 734b21-22). This is like the spike of wheat, which must emerge from the grain of wheat by the nature of wheat (actual wheat). Since Avicenna introduces the ‘intellect’ as one of human’s sensual faculties, which is initially void of any kind of knowledge and acquires rational knowledge through acquisition, he necessarily considers the intellect as a being continuously in the state of alteration and perfection. Thus, according to Aristotle’s view on any kind of change and ‘perfectional’ motion, the intellect also seeks perfection, and is liable to the ‘theory of potentiality and actuality’, and its stage of actuality must be formed by the intellect that is itself actual; and since it leads the human’s reason to actuality, it is called the active intellect. According to Avicenna, this ‘active intellect’ is full of reasonable forms and forms of things, and by granting forms to the matter of things, it leads them from potentiality to actuality, and

leads the human's faculty of intellect from potentiality to actuality through illumination. Avicenna maintains that the relationship of the active intellect to human's intellect is like the relationship of the Sun to eyesight, saying that just as our eyes do not see without the Sun and its light, our intellects also do not perceive any of the intelligible beings without the active intellect. Avicenna calls the relationship between the active intellect and human's intellect '*ishrāq*' (i.e. 'illumination'); and this is a very important point that he considers the rational form of the beings in the universe as the illumination of the active intellect to the human's intellect, not the result of the activity of the human's intellect itself.

Of course, Avicenna's analysis of the Aristotelian active intellect is not consistent with the interpretations of persons like Ibn Rushd regarding Aristotle's foundations (Ihterami, 1401 AH). Avicenna, however, is a philosopher and actively interprets Aristotle's foundations, which is – for Avicenna – an essential condition for accepting Aristotle's theory of 'potentiality' and 'actuality' regarding human's intellect.

Therefore, the important feature of rational thinking in Aristotle's view, compared to Plato's, is his attempt for protecting the visible sensory universe and presenting the rational epistemic system based on sensible outside world. By accepting the way Aristotle thinks, Avicenna introduces philosophy as the true science and by analyzing the way epistemic certitude is acquired by the man, he shows his participation in cooperation for inquiry on the philosophical principles of peripatetic philosophers (especially Aristotle). Avicenna, however, as a philosopher, resorts to Aristotle's theory of 'potentiality' and 'actuality' in justifying motion and change in the universe to say that the human's intellect – due to its seeking perfection – also needs a potential being of the type of

intellect to lead it to the stage of actuality. It is a being – in Avicenna’s words – independent from human’s soul and purely actual, leading to acquisition of rational knowledge for human’s soul by illumination of intelligible beings (including both axiomatic and theoretical ones). Avicenna, while introducing Aristotelian Greek origin as an inquiry on truth, clearly distances himself – in justifying the way it is acquired – from Aristotelian thought about the origin of intelligible things. Unlike Aristotle, he does not consider the potential and actual intellects as well as the form and matter as everlasting, introducing the active intellect as a being who, in addition to granting the external existence of physical forms, emanates their rational existence to the soul, which is called the ‘rational knowledge of truth’. Of course, it must be noted that Avicenna has prepared the scientific foundations of illumination of the active intellect in his metaphysics, and his departure from Aristotle’s track is not polemic, but argumentative. We will deal with the metaphysical context of that departure in the next sections.

## **2. Avicenna and the Origin of Greek-Islamic Philosophical View (the Ontological Distinction of Existence from Essence)**

If we want to call the most important Peripatetic-Islamic philosophical principle that, due to the plurality of its special accessories and results, establishes the renewal of the Aristotelian-Greek rational system and presents a special reading of it in the context of the Islamic thought, that principle is – undoubtedly – the ontological distinction between existence and essence. The fundamental discussions of Islamic philosophy such as ‘the three matters’, ‘decrees of essence due to nature’, ‘proving the essentially Necessary Being and His attributes’, ‘agentive causality of the Necessary Being for the universe’ and many other primary and secondary discussions

have all been created and developed in the milieu of the discussion of the metaphysical distinction between existence and essence.

In general, we may say that the discussion (of the distinction between existence and essence) mainly shows Avicenna's active interaction in the framework of the Aristotelian-Greek thought. This – after him – turned into one of the main factors of the closeness of the Islamic theology to philosophy and the point of manifestation of reconciliation between the Greek rational thought and the Quranic transmitted thought in his descendants.

For a better understanding of Avicenna's performance regarding the metaphysical distinction between existence and essence and the theory that says the existence is an accident of the essence, we have to refer to some points in short.

**A)** In his logic, Aristotle distinguishes between 'what' and 'whether' questions. That is, he believes that the truth of something that comes in response to a question about its nature is different from the question about whether it exists or not. For instance, regarding the human being, a man's truth is different from the question on whether he exists or not. (Aristotle, 1991, 97b8-11). Thus, in Aristotle's view, something's truth is – at least in the container of the mind – distinct from its existence. Of course, Aristotle metaphysically does not believe in such a distinction, and maintains that knowledge of the existence of a subject is prior to its definition, and until something is not existent externally, knowledge of its nature and essence is nonsense (Aristotle, 1991, 89b, 39; 90a5). Clearly, according to that foundation, the essence and quiddity of something is unified with its existence in the outside world. However, how Aristotle's claimed distinction in the mind from the united external being is acquired

has not been stated. In other words, this question has not been investigated in Aristotle's metaphysics: "How knowledge of something's essence is acquired without knowledge of its external existence if its essence is externally realized?" In the next step, the question arises on that thing's existence. How can we understand Aristotle's saying that 'one can doubt the existence of something while one is certain about its essence in the mind'? Is knowledge of something's essence not subordinate to knowledge of its existence? How can be the essence – which is subordinate – certain while its external existence doubted?

This Aristotle's foundation has reached its descendants in the Islamic world in an ambiguous form. Farabi as the founder of the Islamic philosophy, while preserving Aristotle's foundation in external unity of existence and nature of something, turned Aristotle's mental distinction regarding the existence and essence of something into an independent being with an essence outside the mind and an independent being with an essence inside the mind. Like Aristotle, he maintained that the essence leading to the mental independence of something from other things – in case that thing lacks the external existence – is the 'description of the name' (*sharḥ al-ism*) and is not a true essence (Farabi, 1986, p. 116). Of course, Farabi has not, firstly, explained how that description is attained if the thing has no external existence; and secondly, he has not put the independent thing with an essence in the mind in opposition to the external being and has enumerated effects for the independent thing with a mental essence. One of them is justifying motion in the universe proposed in an answer to his predecessors among Greek philosophers and naturalists, while that is one of the metaphysical effects of distinguishing essence in the mind, not in the external world (Ihterami and Pazouki, 1400 SH).

B) Plato considered *ousia* or 'whatever exists' as beings essentially acquired that were the only beings, and the beings sensed by human's senses have no existence. In posing objections on his master's foundation, Aristotle would say that *ousia* exists in the sensible world. Of course, this is an existence both sensible and intelligible. Thus, he believed that for instance:

1. "This human" is truly existent.
2. "This human" has an essence and some actions that are a substance and its accidents.
3. The substance of "this human" is a form common among all human beings and the truth of all human individuals is that typical form.
4. The form that is the truth of the human is an intelligible essence, not sensible.
5. The form, since it is the origin of the effects of 'this human', is the 'nature'.
6. The intelligible natural forms are considered the genuine truth of the sensible reality of things.

Considering the above foundations, the question arises as follows: How are Aristotle's *ousia* (the rational forms) metaphysically analyzable if they are not – like that of Plato – essentially acquired and independent of individuals, and if they are united with external individuals in having existence? In other words, what is the relationship between typical nature and the individuals from the ontological point of view, and how are they plural and at the same time single? Considering Aristotle's foundations, we can say that those forms are the nature and are the origin of the thing; and on

the other hand, they have a rational existence. Thus, they are the essence of the thing; that is, if one asks, 'what is the human's truth?' Aristotle would reply, 'it is the very sensible form that is the nature and essence of the human species and exists because of the individuals' existence in the outside world.'

C. Considering Aristotle and Farabi's thoughts in distinguishing existence and essence in the mind as well as the way Aristotle and Farabi explain the nature and essence of things in the outside world, Avicenna has accessed a foundation that is, though metaphysically different from Aristotle-Farabi's foundations, the fruit of the distinction between the nature and the existence of the thing or, in other words, the result of the separation between the being and the existence.

### **3. Avicenna's Innovation**

Avicenna has taken the mental distinction between the existence and the essence of the thing claimed by Aristotle, and adjusted it to Aristotle's statement on the typical substance and form of a thing (which is the essence of a thing, is sensible and comes in answer to 'what is'). He says, 'if that form and essence is considered independently and no mental and external mode is considered for that form and essence, it is the essence with its special features and can independently be the object of metaphysical reflection.' With some contemplation on the accessories of those considered independent essences, Avicenna developed the philosophy with a new reading in the Islamic era.

With a fundamental innovation regarding Aristotle's view on rational natural forms, Avicenna states that the human's faculty of understanding has a power to consider those essences and natures of

things independently, to relinquish the features of particularity and individuality of those essences in the outside world, as well as their generality in the mind, to consider those essences just as they are (the aspect that has no longer the features of the external and mental containers; it is neither particular, nor is it general); and to discern the truth of their essence. He chooses 'animal' as the genus to explain that idea and believes that 'animal' is by itself, regardless of the fact that it exists in the outside world or in the mind, is neither general nor particular. This is because if it was general, the 'individual animal' would be meaningless; and if it was particular, the 'general animal' would be meaningless (Avicenna, 1404 AHd, vol. 1, pp. 65-66). That is, the human's faculty of understanding can specify, by relying on his own understanding, the way something gets an attribute by its essence, and can judge whether that attribute is essential or accidental, and through that understanding, he can distinguish the constituting element of something from the non-constituting element, considering the constituting element (the essence) independently. Thus, he believes that anything with an essence has a quiddity on whom the constitution of that thing resides; and the truth and quiddity of that thing is the very limits (close genus and close differentia) of that thing. He states various examples for what he says. For instance, regarding the essence of 'being a horse', he says, 'being a horse' is just 'being a horse' and there is nothing else in it. It has neither the feature of generality nor the feature of particularity; it is neither the imaginal concept, nor the external individual realized being; there is neither existence in it nor non-existence (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, p. 196). Avicenna proposes the non-conditioned nature, which the human reason – in Khaja Nasir's words – can consider it, and can have philosophical reflection on it (Tusi, 1375 SH, vol. 3, p. 34).

### 3-1. The Occurrence of Existence over Essence and Proving the Necessary Being

Considering the discussion of “distinction of existence and essence”, Avicenna believes that the essence of something is different from its existence; and if the essence wants to put on the clothes of the objective or mental existence, the external or mental existence must occur for it. As he himself says, ‘Know that everything has an essence. And verily, it is a being realized either objectively or in the mind, for its particles are present with it, and when there is a truth for it other than its existence existent with one of the existences, not constituent on it, then the existence is a meaning added to its truth, whether essential or not. And the causes for its existence are also other than causes for its essence such as humanity...’<sup>1</sup> (Avicenna, 1375 SH, p. 5). Thus, according to Avicenna’s foundation, existence – from the ontological viewpoint – is distinct from something’s essence; and if an essence wants to be existent, the existence must occur to it. Of course, it is clear that ‘occurrence’ here means that existence is not inside the essence and is distinct from it; and this sense must not be mixed with the term ‘accident’ common in discussion on categories.

Another important point about the ‘nature and essence’ proposed by Avicenna is that the relationship between essence and existence/ non-existence is non-conditioned; that is, it always has ‘possibility’ with it as its main feature. The nature and quiddity of something, while they are possible in view of essence, must take the necessity for being existent from something other than itself to

١. «اعلم أن كل شيء له ماهية، فإنه إنما يتحقق موجودا في الأعيان أو متصورا في الأذهان، بأن يكون أجزاءه حاضرة معه و إذا كانت له حقيقة غير كونه موجودا بأحد الوجودين، غير مقوم به فالوجود معنى مضاف إلى حقيقتها لازم أو غير لازم و أسباب وجوده أيضا غير أسباب ماهيته مثل الإنسانية، فإنها في نفسها حقيقة ما و ماهيته ليس أن لها موجودة في الأعيان أو موجودة في الأذهان مقوما لها بل مضافا إليها».

become existent in the outside world. That is, if it wants to be existent in the outside world, its relationship to existence must change from possibility to necessity; and the essential need of 'essence' to occurrence of existence is the feature of any essence. In other words, due to essential nature of that feature, any essence – for being existent – is essentially in need of occurrence of existence. Avicenna says, 'Thus, anything with an essence is the effect and all things other than the necessary being have essences; and those essences are in themselves possible beings. And verily, the existence occurs to them from outside' (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, pp. 347-354).<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that the essence itself – due to being essence – is impossible to fulfil its existential need and become existent. Thus, for essences to become existent, we need a being that is other than essence from the existential viewpoint. That is, a being like the essence does not have the possibility essentially, and be essentially necessary, a being that is outside the circle of nature and essences of things and, according to Avicenna and as the result of the discussions on essence, has several features specified to it, with no copartner. Thus: (1) it has no essence, because if it had an essence, it would be among the essences and natures and would be a possible being, not being able to grant existence to anything other than itself (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, pp. 346-350). (2) It grants existence, for Avicenna accepts the existent universe outside and, according to his own view, the existent outside essences have no existence essentially, and the existence has certainly accidentally occurred to them. Thus, it has granted existence to them essentially (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, p. 347). (3) It is

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١. «فكل ذي ماهية معلول و سائر الأشياء غير الواجب الوجود فلها ماهيات و تلك الماهيات هي التي بأنفسها ممكنة الوجود و إنما يعرض لها وجود من خارج».

existence, not being; that is, since it has no essence to which the existence has occurred, it is not existent (the essence for which existence is proved); rather, its being existent is the same as existence. (4) It is necessity; that is, since it has no essence and quiddity with the attribute of possibility, we cannot say it is an essence with the attribute of necessity; rather, it is the necessity itself (essentially necessary being), the necessity also called eternal necessity. (5) It is the same as unity, because if it has no essence, no need for plurality – neither in essence, nor in names or attributes – can be imagined for it. Thus, in Avicenna's metaphysics, existence, unity and necessity are the same. Therefore, in Avicenna's metaphysics, the one necessary being is essentially rich and self-contained, and the possible essence is essentially in need of existence. The necessary being – due to its essential existence, is the same as existence; and if the possible essence becomes existent, the existence will be borrowed for it due to its essential possibility. Reflection on these sentences alone shows that if the subject of Avicenna's metaphysics is the 'being' because it is a being, then how will the necessary being as the only being that is the same as existence (necessarily existent) be the axis of the discussions of that metaphysics.

Avicenna maintains that the existence of such a necessary being must be proved and is not axiomatic; however, the proof he offers (as we saw in no. 2 above) is in effect making the reader aware of existence and essence. That is, only one external being with essence is sufficient for proving the essentially necessary being; and even in that one single case, the existence is proved through existence itself, not through the essence. In other words, accepting the existence is the same as accepting its being necessary, being one

and being individual. It is necessary because it is essentially not possible. It is single because any kind of duality negates the necessity of its existence. It is individual because it is not essence, and is the same as external. Indeed, it is just the external individual being (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, pp. 354-365; Avicenna, 1379 SH, pp. 354-357).

Thus, Avicenna says, 'If there is a series of beings, only the first one is necessary, and only the first one is truly existent, because truth is the state of existence and just the first one truly exists. Thus, everything is annihilating unless God (the first being) turns to it' (Avicenna, 1404 AHb, p. 356).<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, in Avicenna's view, the human's faculty of understanding in the Greek-Aristotelian system is able to discern and specify – in addition to acquiring rational knowledge through its own faculties – the essential and accidental features of something. It is even able to separate that essence and nature (quiddity) from its existence and – in an independent look at it – extract its judgments from metaphysical point of view. In Avicenna's view, 'existence' is not something that can be present inside the essence and nature of things. Neither is it the genus of those essences that exist, nor their distinctive feature or differentia. 'Existence' must be added to the nature of something (like 'humanity') so that a human being comes to the scene of existence, just like generality that must be added – in the container of mind – to the 'humanity' so that it is described as general. Avicenna believes that if we have an external being with essence, it is enough to adjust the rational system based on

1. His statements are as follows:

«سائر الأشياء فإن ماهياتها كما علمت لا تستحق الوجود، بل هي في أنفسها و قطع إضافتها إلى واجب الوجود تستحق العدم، فلذلك كلها في أنفسها باطلة و به حقة و بالقياس إلى الوجه الذي يليه حاصلة، فلذلك كل شيء هالك إلا وجهه، فهو أحق بأن يكون حقاً» (ابن سينا، ١٤٠٤ق «ب»، ص ٣٥٦).

necessary being/ possible being to it and prove that no being with essence can be eternal. And all of them need a being that is essentially the same as existence and needlessness, a being that is the cause granting existence to all essences. This foundation is ontologically necessary for distinction between existence and essence, and the separation between existence and essence.

Avicenna's special interpretation of Aristotle's view could make his philosophical-logical system an interpretative context for religious concepts (God, creation, etc.). If someone has not accepted Avicenna's foundation, he cannot pose – merely because of its difference from Aristotle's foundation – objections to the theory that says existence is accidental to essence, and introduce it as a polemical and theological theory, considering Avicenna as a philosopher influenced by theologians. However, if there is a considerable objection, it must necessarily be about Avicenna's main foundation in the way he considers the validity of essence (as it is essence), and nothing else.

### **2-3. A Reflection on Avicenna's Innovation**

In the first place, it seems that Avicenna's interpretation of the essence of something, introduced by Aristotle as different from its existence in the mind, is a clear and understandable interpretation. However, the whole problem reveals itself when we want to specify the metaphysical status of Avicenna's foundation; that is, the man's recognition faculties as the perceiver of the world of beings are at a later order than their external existence. According to him, any kind of perceiving the essence and nature of something is considered a truth when before it the external existence of that thing has been affirmed. Therefore, firstly, how is it possible that the man casts doubts on the external existence of

something and – at the same time – is aware of its truth? Is it not the case that any perception of the essential and accidental meanings of things follows its external existence? How is Avicenna certain about the essence of something while he is in doubt about its existence, and while he himself takes the images related to that thing (including both essential and accidental ones) from its external existence? Secondly, according to Avicenna's foundation, the total limit of the thing, which comes in the answer to 'what is it?' question, follows – in its being total limit – the external existence of the thing (the simple 'whether' question). And, according to him, if the thing related to those essential meanings has no external existence, those features will not be total limit; rather, they will be 'descriptions of the name' (*sharḥ al-ism*). How is it possible that the man considers his images of something as its truth, while its being true follows the knowledge of its external existence? Thus, how have 'description of the name' without an existent [external] thing been acquired for the man, while there is no image of them to be descriptions of the name?

The next point is that as said before, according to the distinction between essence and existence of the things as well as the way one acquires knowledge, the man's epistemic faculties, influenced by the external existence of things, achieves recognition (including both sensory and rational) of the universe. Thus, things have an external existence and a mental one for the man, which is the man's very image of the external existence of things. Therefore, the container of the truths of things will not be metaphysically outside those two, and any abstraction and rational recognition formed for the man is ontologically formed in a dialectic relationship between the outside world and the mind. When Avicenna says that the man is able to understand the truth and

essence of things independently and is able to metaphysically investigate their judgments (such as essential possibility, being non-conditioned to external and mental existence, unity and plurality, and the like), and if as Khaja Nasir points out, this separation between essence and existence is formed in the container of the reason and shows one's power of understanding, how does this very 'perception' and 'consideration' related to the essence and nature of things, formed in the container of reason, make a container for the quiddities and natures of things called 'essences', and that world is – in Avicenna's words – metaphysically neither external nor mental?

Someone may say that Avicenna has spoken only of the self-validity of those natures and has not spoken of the world of natures and essences. However, we must note that if Avicenna believes in an independent rational perception for the man's faculty of understanding in regard with those natures and quiddities, he certainly believes – according to traditional epistemological foundations – in a fact-itself and corresponding item for those perceptions outside the reason, considering the reason as the perceiver and those things as the perceived ones. The question then arises as follows: "Where is the fact-itself of what is metaphysically perceived of the nature of things by the man's reason?" If it has external existence, then it is initially external and – afterwards – is separated in human's mind from its external existence. However, he does not regard those quiddities, independently considered, neither external nor mental. Avicenna regards metaphysical effects and other great results for the perceived things whose manifestation in human's reason is later than their manifestation in the outside world. In other words, how are the natures and quiddities of the things introduced as possible beings and needy beings; and due to this feature, how are they influenced by causality law, and how is an

essential necessary being proved in the outside world while before their being perceived in the human's reason, they were existent through the external existence. And no previous stage is imaginable for them existentially, because the essence of the things, in Avicenna's view, is of the close genus and close differentia, and both of them are – in his view – the same as non-conditioned matter and form, which is abstracted from the external matter and form 'negatively conditioned'. In other words, the essences of the things (from the viewpoint of being so) are themselves the product of human's rational perception. So, how is their essential possibility – which is the product of the type of human's rational independence – used as a metaphysical resort for proving the external existence of the agentive cause of the whole world of substantive beings? Do they have true existence in the universe before being considered by human's reason or even before the existence of human's reason, so that they take their existence from the necessary being? One may say the fact that the man perceives them independently shows that they are rational fixed ideas and that the human's reason is united with them to perceive them; and this shows that the world of quiddities is a rational world that neither has existential realization (external as opposed to mental) nor mental realization. The answer is that one can say that Avicenna, in the most basic disagreement of the Greek master and his pupil in considering or not considering the nature of things as essentially acquired, supports the master and interprets the thesis offered by the pupil (i.e. Aristotle) in a way that reveals the master's statement (Plato's world of Ideas).<sup>1</sup>

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1. However, this defense of Avicenna is firstly opposing his views in following any true perception of the universe from perceiving its external sensible existence. Secondly, it opposes his view on the way the typical essences are related with

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The type of Avicenna's look at the human's perception system and its relationship with Aristotelian world of sensible and intelligible beings starts – at least – in Aristotelian form, though it does not end in an Aristotelian way. Perhaps these very problems have caused some scholars to use expressions such as psychological justification instead of metaphysical analysis regarding Avicenna's innovations (occurrence of existence to essence) (Golson, 1952, p. 75).

### Conclusion

In the first step, Avicenna accompanies the Greek thought, especially that of Aristotle, in asking question about the existence and essence as well as finding answers for them by relying on the findings of human's epistemic faculties. He maintains that it is possible to present a natural and philosophical explanation for the universe, and considers philosophy as the way of recognizing truths in proportion to human's ability. That is, he believes that the man can use his epistemic faculties to perceive the truth of things outside the mind in a certain way. Not only does he believe in such a capacity for the man, but also he participates actively – by studying the works of Greek philosophers and their successors – in fixing the basic principles of the man's comprehensive knowledge of the universe through his own perceiving faculties (i.e. philosophy). This participation is not restricted to exposition and elaboration of his predecessors' views and uses a critical look at those principles that could lead to the Eastern philosophy.

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the external individuals – stated in an answer to Hamadanian scholars, interpreting it as the way fathers and sons are related and maintaining that its external existence is dependent on the external existence of individuals. In principle, the Aristotelian spirit of the nature of things, running in Avicenna's metaphysics, is difficult to be a place for their Platonic interpretation.

Just like Aristotle, Avicenna starts the process of the man's acquisition of certainty from the sensory perceptions, and believes that when the man confronts the outside world with his senses, he faces another action – along with the initial sensory receptions – which is not of the type of sensory perception; rather, it is of the type of judgment. This is a judgment on which the sensory forms are imposed and its carrier on the subject perceived by the sensory perception is a faculty other than the faculty of sense and imagination, and is called rational or intellectual faculty. For Avicenna, the intellectual faculty is initially potential and material, and is actualized gradually. He considers the perceptions of the intellectual faculty either 'axiomatic' – that the man is innately aware of their verity – or 'theoretical' that turns into the certain knowledge for the man on the basis of logic through the same axiomatic items.

Considering the foundations he has taken from Aristotle on the interpretation of the change in the universe through 'potentiality and actuality', Avicenna maintains that any actualization for the intellectual faculty is related to the being called actual intellect; and since it actualizes the humans' intellects, it is called active intellect.

He believes that one can consider the essence of the beings independent of their external and mental existence and investigate its metaphysical implications the most important among which are the essential possibility of essences and occurrence of existence to essence.

As the result of the theory of occurrence of existence to essence, the world of natures – in Avicenna's view – is in need of a being outside of the circle of entities with essence becoming external, individual and particular. That being – if existent – will be

the same as existence, necessity, unity and all perfection in an eternal way. For Avicenna, the initial origin for the universe of the beings is the agentive cause who grants existence to the whole universe of substantive beings.

Avicenna accepts Aristotle and Farabi's view that knowledge of the effect belongs to the knowledge of the cause, and considering the fact that the agentive cause of the beings is the essentially necessary being. Thus, knowing the existence and attributes of that agentive cause of the universe is among the issues of metaphysics and – indeed – its sublime section, which is known in Islamic tradition – as the 'theology in its most specific sense' (*ilāhiyāt bi ma'na al-akhaṣṣ*). Considering his own foundations in the discussion of 'occurrence of existence to essence', Avicenna says, 'philosophy is the knowledge of the Necessary Being, and since no being – save God – knows His essence', the true philosopher is the Prime Being.

Based on the aforementioned explanations, we may say, regarding Avicenna's view on the Greek-Aristotelian thought, that Avicenna is one of the most important followers of the Greek philosophical thought, especially that of Aristotle, in the Islamic world. Thus, in the first place, he accepts the foundation of Aristotelian thought about the self-founded ability of human's reason in rational and natural recognition of the universe, and tries to develop his own specific philosophical system based on it. That rationality emerges in an epistemic process specified to human beings and develops. It is a rationality that is acquired and the man must rely, in the first place, on his own cognitive faculties for acquiring it. In that rationality, the world of sensible beings is not void and illusive; rather, the man perceives their rational existence and achieves true recognition of them through the perception of that world of sensible beings. The certainty resulted from that

rationality is a certainty that can be used in dialectical argument and change the unknown to the known. Of course, Avicenna – while following Aristotle's intellectual path in following the philosophical rationality based on the criterion of logics – does not remain as an expositor of the views of the First Teacher and, according to what he himself says, in the way of achieving the truth, he attempts to modify the principles, foundations and method of Greek philosophy rightly. He tries to establish the principles and a reading in the foundations of Aristotle's philosophy with very important results in metaphysics to the extent that it has showed itself as the Avicenna's metaphysics along with Aristotelian metaphysics, influencing many thinkers (both in the Islamic and the Christian world).

Avicenna's metaphysics, even though it may be influenced by Islamic teachings, attempts to offer those teachings not in the polemic or theological form, but in a form that attracts its addresses without religious axioms and only through imagining and affirming its ontological and epistemological foundations. Avicenna's metaphysics is a Greek one, but its principles are easternized through Avicenna's modifications. And the axis of discussion in it is shifted from universe to God by Avicenna's innovative interpretations. These innovations include the metaphysical distinction between existence and essence, the relationship between possible beings and the Necessary Being, investigating the existence and attributes of the essentially Necessary Being as the agentive cause granting existence to the world of beings, special project of the relationship among the rational beings in actualizing the world of beings and actualizing the human's reason through emanation of rational existence of the beings over the human's reason, etc.

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