



# AVICENNA AND THE ORIGIN OF THE COSMOS: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

**Rejina Kabir**

Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Sarojini Naidu College for Women  
Kolkata, India

**Abstract:** This article investigates how the notions of the Necessary Existent and the contingent existent evolved in the philosophical discourse following Avicenna. It aims to explain the origin of the universe and critically explore how its multiplicity could originate from a simple and unified First Cause, or Absolute Being.

This article aims to explain the origin of the cosmos according to Avicenna's interpretation and offer a reasonable explanation to the question: "How can a universe, made up of various elements, arise from the completely unified First Cause?"

Regarding creation, Avicenna's views contrast with those of the theologians who argue for the existence of an eternal Creator based on the observable world. Avicenna, however, believes that the contingent Universe has no starting point in time and depends on the Necessary Existent for both its existence and continuity.<sup>1</sup>

The question now is: What does Necessary Existence mean? The answer is that Avicenna divided the nature of existence into two categories: necessary and contingent.<sup>2</sup> In *al-Šifā*, Avicenna defines the Necessary Existent as "for us, everything has a necessary principle of existence, not confined to a specific genus or reality, nor subject to limitation or proof, that encompasses quantity, quality, essence, location, time, and motion; it has no equal, companion, or opposite."<sup>3</sup> In his *Metaphysica in Dānīsh Nāma – i 'alā'ī* (The Book of Scientific Knowledge), Avicenna argues that the Necessary Existent has no essence (*māhiyya*) apart from its existence (*annīyya*). Therefore, for the Necessary Existent, essence and existence are one and the same.<sup>4</sup> He further asserts that the Necessary Existent lacks a genus (*jins*), differentia (*faṣl*), definition (*hadd*), species (*nau'*), place (*maḥall*), subject (*mauḍū'*), opposite (*ḍidd*), or companion (*yārwanidd*). It is not subject to change (*tahgāyyur padhīr*) nor divisible (*bahra padhīr*).<sup>5</sup> In short, the Necessary Existent is the existent which is not dependent on anything other than itself for Its existence.

<sup>1</sup>A.E. Affifi, 'The rational and Mystical Interpretations of Islam', *Islam the Straight Path, Islam Interpreted by Muslims*, K.W. Morgan (Ed.), Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987, Rpt. Delhi: 1998, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> S. M. Afnan, *Avicenna His Life and Works*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1958, p.115.

<sup>3</sup> *lana 'ana lil'kuli mabda waḡib 'alwuḡud, ḡayr daḡil fī ḡins 'aw waqie taḡt ḡadin 'aw burhan, yaraa' 'alkami walkayf walmahiat wal'ayn walmataa walḡarakat...* Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, 9.1.1, Michael E. Marmura (Trans.), Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005, p.299.

<sup>4</sup> Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, 8.4.3, Michael E. Marmura (Trans.), Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005, p. 274.

<sup>5</sup> P. Morewedge, *The Metaphysica of Avicenna (ibn Sīnā) A critical translation – commentary and analysis of fundamental arguments in Avicenna's Metaphysica in Dānīsh Nāma – i 'alā'ī* (The Book of Scientific Knowledge), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 224.

Avicenna asserts that the Universe is eternal, drawing its existence continuously from the Necessary Existent. While there is a logical priority between the two, there is no temporal priority.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the cause does not have temporal precedence over the effect. Rather, it can be seen as having a priority of rank, as the cause is typically considered superior to the effect.<sup>7</sup> Avicenna argues that the emergence of something does not necessarily have to begin at a specific point in time, nor does it always result from a conscious decision. Instead, it can arise naturally and inevitably from a source, much like the rays of the Sun, which emanate without any intentional action from the Sun. Similarly, the universe is intrinsically connected to its cause, the Necessary Existent. Avicenna further claims that if eternity and necessity are essential traits of the Necessary Existent as the primary cause, these attributes must also extend to His actions, which are the effects.<sup>8</sup> Thus, for Avicenna, the contingent universe has no temporal origin; it depends on the Absolute Being for both its existence and its ongoing continuity. The central question at hand is: How can a universe, consisting of numerous elements, originate from the fully unified First Cause?

In his response, Avicenna explains that plurality arises because the incorporeal beings that follow the First Cause possess multiple thoughts.<sup>9</sup> To fully grasp this explanation, it is necessary to understand the cosmogony process Avicenna adopts, which closely mirrors Plotinus' cosmogony.<sup>10</sup> According to Avicenna, beings are categorised as necessary or contingent, with God's Intellection serving as the cause of existence.<sup>11</sup>

According to Avicenna, anything other than the Absolute Being is considered a contingent being, meaning it depends on something other than itself for its existence.<sup>12</sup> He classifies contingent beings into four categories: a) separate Intelligences (angels), b) celestial Souls, c) celestial bodies, and d) sublunary bodies.<sup>13</sup> Avicenna also explains that the Universe consists of nine spheres, including the eight of Ptolemaic astronomy and one additional starless heaven added by Muslim astronomers. This starless heaven lies above the sphere of fixed stars and represents the transition between becoming and being.<sup>14</sup> Each sphere is governed by an intellect or a group of angels, which are influenced by souls or groups of souls. These spheres are made up of a body formed by the beings that occupy a higher position in the cosmic hierarchy.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, Avicenna places the First Cause of the universe beyond these intelligences, as the force that moves the celestial spheres.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to note that Avicenna's view about the motion of the universe differs from Aristotelian cosmology. In Aristotle's model, God, as the Prime Mover, only moves the outermost sphere. However, Avicenna argues that the motion of the entire heavens is caused by God. He moves all the heavens collectively, rather than individually.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, all the heavens exhibit both simple and complex motions simultaneously. While their unity comes from God, the diversity within them arises from the intelligences and souls. The movement of the heavens is not automatic or accidental; rather, it is driven by the will of the soul governing each sphere. The intelligences are the true source of motion, while the souls serve as intermediaries. These souls act as immediate movers, driven by a profound love ('*ishq*') that compels them to actualise what is yet unrealised within them. Thus, the motions of the universe are fuelled by the desire to actualise potential

<sup>6</sup> A.E. Affifi, 'The rational and Mystical Interpretations of Islam', *Islam the Straight Path, Islam Interpreted by Muslims*, K.W. Morgan (Ed.), Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987, Rpt. Delhi: 1998, p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> H. A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.77.

<sup>10</sup> S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.203.

<sup>11</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Morewedge, *op.cit.*, p.50; Afnan, *op. cit.*, p.115.

<sup>13</sup> S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.236.

<sup>14</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Adding this heaven to the cosmos Ibn Sīnā deviates his view from Ptolemaic astronomy but, follows the Greeks insisting on the fact that the spheres of heaven as a whole form a single body. It is also mentioned in *Najāt* (Cf. that S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p236) that the natural shape of each body is circular; since if these bodies disperse, they will create a vacuum between them and since the presence of the vacuum is impossible, therefore, the totality of the world is one body.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, *op. cit.*, p.75.

<sup>17</sup> Nasr, *op. cit.*, p.236.

and perfect the imperfect.<sup>18</sup> The heavens, with their circular motion, embody the most perfect form, and their nobility is reflected in their luminosity.<sup>19</sup> The celestial realm is incorruptible, composed of ether, which is considered superior to the elements of the sublunary world. These heavenly bodies move as living, animated beings. The relationship between the souls of the heavens and their bodies is akin to the connection between human souls and their bodies. In both cases, motion is initiated by the soul, but in the case of the heavens, the soul possesses the perfection of the angelic state. The heavens exist in a state of 'pre-eternity,' remaining constant above the changes of the earthly world. They move in accordance with Divine foresight and, in turn, bring order to the sublunary realm.<sup>20</sup>

Avicenna derives the hierarchy of living beings from Pure Being without compromising the absolute transcendence of the Absolute Being in relation to the universe it manifests. The First Intellect (*al-'aql al-'awwāl*) is contingent by nature but becomes necessary due to its connection with the 'Cause of Causes,' the Necessary Being itself.<sup>21</sup> It is contingent because it depends on something other than itself for existence. However, it is necessary because it serves as the 'Cause of Causes' (*'illat al-'ilal*), the Necessary Being. Through its intellection of the Divine Essence, the First Intellect gives rise to the Second Intellect, and through its own self-intellection, it generates two beings: (a) the Soul of the first heaven, and (b) its body.<sup>22</sup> This can also be expressed in another way: The First Intellect possesses three forms of knowledge:

- (i) Knowledge of the Essence of the Necessary Being.
- (ii) Knowledge of its own essence as a being is necessary through another.
- (iii) Knowledge of itself as a contingent and dependent being.

These three types of knowledge lead to the creation of the Second Intellect, the Soul of the first heaven, and its body. Similarly, the Second Intellect generates the Third Intellect, the Soul of the second heaven, and its body. This process continues in the same fashion until the Ninth Heaven and the Tenth Intellect emerge.<sup>23</sup> According to Avicenna, the Tenth Intellect, or the Active Intellect, governs the sublunary world.<sup>24</sup>

The sublunary realm occupies the lowest position on the cosmological scale. It derives its existence from the Tenth Intellect and remains entirely reliant on, and completely passive to, the influence of the celestial spheres.<sup>25</sup> This raises the question: How can the Intellection of the Absolute Being be the cause of the universe's existence?

In response, Avicenna argues that creation itself is the result of God's intellection of His own Essence. It is this act of intellection, along with the knowledge of His own Essence, that brings everything into existence. This process is boundless, and the manifestation of the Universe reflects God's eternal self-knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Through creation, every creature in the Universe is connected to the Divine source both through its existence and its intelligence.<sup>27</sup>

According to Avicenna, both the invisible and physical realms are not only reliant on the Divine Intellect for their existence, but also on His Will and Being. Ultimately, everything's existence stems from the Divine Essence.<sup>28</sup> Avicenna further asserts that the Absolute Being is the embodiment of pure good, as it is free from matter and potentiality.<sup>29</sup> In this context, 'goodness' refers to a positive existence, the opposite of evil or non-being. The Absolute Being, or Necessary Existent, is the source from which goodness, i.e., positive being, constantly flows into all things in the world. The concepts of the Absolute Being and goodness are ontologically inseparable.<sup>30</sup> The Absolute Being is pure goodness because it is entirely devoid of imperfection. As Avicenna states, "There is no beauty or splendour greater than that which is pure intellectual essence, pure

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.237.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*; This scheme is a systematisation of the Plotinian cosmology; Ibn Sīnā's First Being, First Intellect, and Soul correspond to the Plotinian hypostases.

<sup>25</sup> Nasr, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>27</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Affifi, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>30</sup> A.M. Goichon, 'The Philosopher of Being', *Avicenna Commemoration Volume*, V. Courtois (Ed.), Calcutta: Iran Society, 1956, p.116.

goodness free from all defects. The Necessary Being possesses pure beauty and splendour. He is the principle of all things, and the principle of all beauty.”<sup>31</sup>

Conversely, the entire realm of existence is drawn toward the Absolute Being in a love-like manner due to its pure goodness.<sup>32</sup> The world loves the Absolute Being because it loves goodness, and goodness is the only thing that is cherished for its own sake.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the Absolute Being sets the entire world into motion through love, and everything that exists is the product of this love.

Avicenna describes the relationship between the Absolute Being and the external world in terms of love and revelation.<sup>34</sup> Love comes from the world, while revelation is granted by the Beloved. Thus, the human soul, as part of the external world, is also connected to the Absolute Being through love.<sup>35</sup> *Allāh* reveals Himself to His creatures in a way that aligns with their inner nature, proportionate to the level of perfection they seek to attain.

Thus, regarding the relationship between the Absolute Being and the individual soul, Avicenna distinguishes between the two in his ontology, while in his cosmogony, he views the Universe as originating from the Absolute Being.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn Sīnā, *Shifā'*, II, 598; *Najāt*, 400-401, Cf. Goichon, *op. cit.*, p.116.

<sup>32</sup> *wawağib 'alwuğud biđatih ḥayr mahđ* - which means the Necessary Being in and of itself is pure good. - Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, 8.6.2, Michael E. Marmura (Trans.), Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005, p.283.

<sup>33</sup> Affifi, *op. cit.*, p.165.

<sup>34</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> M. Elkaisy-Friemuth, *God and Human in Islamic Thought 'Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī'*, Culture and Civilization in the Middle East, Series Ed., Ian R. Netton, London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006, pp.106, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Nasr, *op. cit.*, p.212.