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**Individuation of Material Substances in Avicenna's  
Philosophy**

## 1. Status questionis

Ibn Sīnā, or in a Latinized version Avicenna (d. 1037), is probably the most influential philosopher in the Islamicate world. His cultural impact is twofold: on the one hand, he is unequivocally a reference point in the Arabic philosophy and theology; his prestige is probably on the same level as that of Aristotle in the West. On the other hand, his oeuvre, after having been translated into Latin, had a significant role in Scholastic philosophy, upon which such thinkers drew as Thomas Aquinas or Albertus Magnus. Among others, he was among the first philosophers, who used the term principle of individuation (*mabda' al-tashakhkhuṣ, principium individuationis*).

As far as individuation is concerned, it has not received the deserved scholarly attention in the secondary literature. When it comes to the Arabic Avicenna, apart from scattered remarks, there is only one chapter devoted to it in Amélie-Marie Goichon's book *La Distinction de l'essence et de l'existence après Ibn Sīnā*,<sup>1</sup> in addition to an article of Allen Bäck.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the critical edition of the *Kitāb al-Mubāḥathāt* (Bīdārfar, 1992) and David Reisman's thorough philological monograph on it opened up new possibilities to read Avicenna's later works, correspondences, and question-answer literature.<sup>3</sup>

The *Kitāb al-Mubāḥathāt* contains fragments that, unlike Avicenna's early and middle works, *expressis verbis* addresses individuation. These passages offer us an excellent insight, not only into Avicenna's answers but into his approach to the conceptualization of individuals as well. In light of these considerations, the topic of individuation deserves an entire monographic treatise in its own right.

## 2. Methodology

Individuation is a very flexible problem. Since in the Peripatetic–Neoplatonic philosophical tradition, it was not the proper object of science, it always appeared in relation to a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Goichon, Amélie-Marie: *La Distinction de l'Essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sīnā (Avicenne)*, Paris (Desclée de Brouwer), 1937, [Islamic Philosophy, Vol 38, ed. Sezgin, Fuat, Frankfurt (Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 1999)].

<sup>2</sup> Bäck, Allan: The Islamic Background: Avicenna (b. 980; d. 1037) and Averroes (b. 1126; d. 1198). In: *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-reformation (1150-1650)*, Ed. Gracia, Jorge J. E., New York (State University of New York Press), 1994, 39-69, (SUNY Series in Philosophy)

<sup>3</sup> Reisman, David: *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition. The Transmission, Contents, and Structure of Ibn Sīnā's al-Mubāḥathāt (The Discussions)*, Leiden–Boston–Köln (Brill), 2002.

topic. Namely, as a problem, it equally came to the fore in a theological framework, both in Christianity and Islam. Therefore, an investigation of this kind needs a well-defined approach. First of all, our method is textual criticism; that is, our results are drawn from the thorough philological examination of the texts.

Nevertheless, there are two main trends in the modern-day scholarship concerning Medieval Philosophy, the historical and theoretical ones. The first is the history of philosophy, where historical data are in the center, whereas the second is the philosophy on its own right, where ahistorical philosophical arguments and solutions are in the focus. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The former is usually criticized for neglecting the philosophical core of the problem, and for reading the history of philosophy as a static sequence of periods. The latter, in turn, is usually condemned because it reads too much into the philosophies of the past from its own problems, in an anachronistic way. Both methods end at distorted results. Therefore, according to the scholarly consensus, a middle way is the most appropriate choice, where philosophy is read against the background of the historical set of problems, after having been clarified the challenges of the time.

Furthermore, since individuation is a marginal topic, I have chosen a contextual approach, where a division between inner and outer contexts. By inner context, I mean those problems that the philosophical system in question prompted, and by outer context, I mean the cultural and religious ambient in which the given philosophy evolved. Inevitably, every culture in every epoch faces different challenges; therefore, while dealing with the philosophy of the past, we need to understand the cultural background as much as possible. My thesis is tentative to reach this end.

### 3. Results

3.1 In the first, introductory part of the dissertation, we set up the background against which Avicenna elaborated his philosophical tenets. We summarize the legacy of the Greek philosophical tradition, dividing the discussion into logical and metaphysical frameworks. We show that Avicenna follows the Neoplatonic commentators in the conceptualization of individuals, like in the Porphyrian bundle-like understanding of individuals, even though he challenges it. The spatio-temporal reading of this tenet is also foreshadowed by Elias. In the metaphysical approach, we highlight the role of the general Neoplatonic threefold division of the common element, which entails a derivative understanding of individuals.

We briefly summarize the Aristotelian principles of individuation, form, and matter. The role of the first as the criterion of identity may be grasped best in the growth argument, the source texts of which appeared equally in Arabic. We enumerate the different readings of matter in individuation, as the principle of distinction and multiplicity. This is, roughly speaking, the soil from which Avicenna's solution has grown out.

Then, we shortly look into *kalām* discussions in a rather introductory way. It is worth noting that the spatio-temporal differentiation was a well-known idea among the Mutakallimūn: similarly to Avicenna's position, extension plays a significant role both in differentiating substances and in the generation of existents. Although the theological system was strikingly different from the philosophical one, perhaps due to the frequent interactions, arguments or moves have been mutually borrowed from each other. This is actually part of the outer context.

3.2 In a "contextual approach," the first and foremost task is always to define what we mean by individuation. Following this method, we distinguish between the logical and metaphysical understanding of individuation respectively. We show that in a logical setting, individuation is taken as a distinction that is the main question referring to the criteria that are necessary and sufficient in distinguishing one individual from another. In a metaphysical setting, individuation appears in a different context, where the ontological structure of the individual is at stake, framed in the quiddity – existence, substance – accident, and form-matter approaches. In these subsections, discussion of individuals was always driven by the inner problems, and this is what explains the seemingly contradicting statements; in light of Avicenna's moderate realism the main problem is the particularization of the quiddity, and in the hylomorphic context the mutual relation of form and matter is at stake.

3.3 In the logical context, Avicenna takes individuality to be a logical technical term that classifies mental concepts. As such, he elaborates on its meaning along very Porphyrian lines, namely that the individual concept is that which cannot be shared by anything else. By this move, he proposes an abstract understanding of individuality, which means a semantic relation, a relation that exclusively refers to one referent. As a result, he shows that it cannot be singled out by universal concepts because it will always be shareable. In his system, the spatial and temporal coordinates play the role of picking up one individual, being the necessary condition of differentiation. We show that he stands up against the Baghdad Peripatetics, Yahyā Ibn 'Adī and Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Ṭayyib, who held the term individual to be equivocal.

- 3.4 In the metaphysics, we approach individuals in the quiddity-existence and hylomorphic frameworks, as not excluding but supplementing each other. The main idea is that individuation has multiple aspects, and these aspects are accounted for by different factors in Avicenna's oeuvre. Several scholars attributed an individuating role to existence, but they did not specify in which way. We show that existence does not individuate in the logical sense, that is, it does not distinguish one individual from the other on the conceptual level, however, the existence is particular for each. Bearing in mind Avicenna's main tenet about the subject matter of metaphysics, which is existent qua existent having its proper essential attributes, we show that Avicenna has a clear-cut causal theory that explains why a given individual enjoys a particular existence. That is to say, particularity as being attached to existence in an absolute sense, has a cause. This is again, in the context of particularization, since in Avicenna's universe, every existent owes its existence to God, the Necessary of Existence. Nevertheless, the particular existence corresponds to the substantial form and quiddity: in this sense it has a role in individuation: it is responsible for formal identity and persistence.
- 3.5 As for the hylomorphic reading, as was common in the Aristotelian tradition, the substantial form (corresponding to existence) was responsible for the identity and persistence of the individual. This Peripatetic tenet was held by Alexander Aphrodisias, whose view was available in Arabic in the translation on his short treatise on growth. On the other hand, the role of the matter was always highlighted in individuation. This is the principle, along with spatio-temporal determinations to which Avicenna *expressis verbis* attributes an individuating role. We show that it does not explain all the individual aspects, rather, it explains the multiplicity of a given species. This latter idea was explicitly held by the Arabic Themistius.
- 3.6 Although it was sometimes indicated in the secondary literature, no distinct treatise has been devoted to the spatio-temporal reading of individuation. We show that the spatio-temporal coordinates as distinguishing features, as in epistemic (logical), physical and ontological (metaphysical) level play a central role in Avicenna's system. Their role appears both in the inner and outer contexts: the epistemic reading occurs in a theological question, namely, in God's knowledge of particulars. In metaphysics, it is the ultimate source of the diversity of material existents. In other words, and this is probably the main result of the thesis, the spatial position is the feature that *per se* counts for distinctness. It overarches Avicenna's philosophy; it appears in logic, as counting for the unshareability of concepts in the conceptual level, in the physics, where serves to differentiate circular motions, and finally

in the metaphysics, in different sub-questions. It explains the particularity of the material world if we look at the individual as an existent, and it is the criterion that serves to differentiate between distinct pieces of matter.

3.7 Avicenna's later works give us an insight into how he approached the topic on its own right. We show that he principally followed the logical understanding of individuation, and named the ultimate individuators that count for the unshareability of the individual: spatial position and time. This is wholly in accord with Avicenna's general account of individuation since one of the main challenges that his system posed was the particularization of the quiddity.

#### 4. Previous Publications

1. Az individuáció problémája a középkori arab lélektanban - Ibn al-Nafīs Avicenna árnyékában, [The Problem of Individuation in the mediaeval Arabic Psychology – Ibn al-Nafīs in Avicenna's Shadow], in: *Keletkutatás, A Körösi Csoma Társaság folyóirata*, 2012 Autumn, pp. 25–47.
2. Avicenna on the Afterlife. An attempt to Resolve the Problem of the Bodily Dispositions, in: *More MODOQUE. Die Wurzeln der europäischen Kultur und deren Rezeption im Orient und Okzident. Festschrift für Miklós Maróth zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*. Ed. Pál Fodor, Gyula Mayer, Martina Monostori, Kornél Szlovák and László Takács. Forschungszentrum für Humanwissenschaften der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Budapest, 2013. pp. 361–377.
3. Avicenna on Individuality. Some Considerations on Its Antecedents, in: *Contacts and Interaction: Proceedings of the 27th Congress of L'Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*, eds. J. Hämeen-Anttila – P. Koskikallio – I. Lindstedt, Leuven, 2015, 273-284.
4. Avicenna és az individuáció problémája, [Avicenna and the Problem of Individuation], in: *Annales I, Az Avicenna Közeli-Kelet Kutatások Intézete Évkönyve, 2013-2014*, ed. Kis Anna Flóra, Piliscsaba, 2015. pp. 205-342.
5. At the Crossroads of Theology and Philosophy: Avicenna and the Particularization Argument, in: *Esprit critique et textes sacrés*, *Studia Arabica* XXVI., ed. Marie-Thérèse Urvoy, Éditions de Paris, 2016, pp. 93-121.
6. God's knowledge of Particulars: Avicenna and the Greek Philosophical Tradition, in: *Re-defining a Space of Encounter. Islam and Mediterranean: Identity, Alterity and Interactions. Proceedings of the 28<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, Palermo 2016*, ed. Pellitteri,

Antonino, Sciortino, Maria Grazia, Sicari, Daniele, Elsakaan, Nesma, Peeters,  
2019, 439–455.