

**BEATA SZMAGAŁA**

**AVICENNA'S METAPHYSICS AS THE ACT  
OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GOD  
AND HUMAN BEINGS**

The questions concerning existence, it's possible to say, are as old as philosophy itself. Precisely : “ Is it? ”- does it exist or not; “ What is it? ” – asked about the being; “ What is this ”? and “ Why? ”- the question about cause<sup>1</sup>.

These types of problems and attempts at explanation gave more than one philosopher sleepless nights in antiquity and became an inspiration for thinkers of later epochs. In the Middle Ages classical Greek philosophy was revived, in large measure, through the intellectual contributions of Arab thinkers. They created their own original philosophical tradition based on Greek philosophical legacy. One of their greatest representatives and the thinkers, who gave uniformity and concreteness to this philosophical system was Avicenna (980 - 1037).

Arabs' philosophical thought started with the Islamic mysticism called Sufism. Coming closer to God was the aim of the Sufi', but not by the path of belief and dogmas but through direct contact. In order to obtain deep knowledge of God you had to look into yourself and find your own identity. It's possible, through contemplation to refuse

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on: *Awicenna* in: E. Gilson, *Historia filozofii chrześcijańskiej w wiekach średnich*, tr. Zalewski, PAX, Warszawa 1966, p. 211-212.

the bodily, and to boundlessly love God. The problem of God's emanation appeared for the first time in Islamic mysticism and later was reflected in philosophical conceptions. The metaphysics of Avicenna talks specifically about emanation and tries to explain the terms : an existence, the being and entity.

His philosophic vision originated from the terms which designate existence. For Avicenna the act of communication between God and the human being occurs through the intellect, as God gave us the capacity which enables us to acquire knowledge. The more knowledge we have, the closer we can get to God. Knowledge contributes to the recognition of God and goes deeply to the Truth. What is the Truth? It's God. So, in broadening one's horizons one comes closer to the Truth. In this way we create something good, too. Let us now consider the following : why the metaphysics? What is relevant about metaphysics to communication? According to Avicenna's reasoning, existence is revealed in the differences between being and entity, and determines intellect's position in the hierarchy of existences. How is intellect given, if it is? Do all organisms have intellect? I will now discuss these matters.

Avicenna divided knowledge into two types : the theoretical and the speculative. I limit the discussion here just to theoretical knowledge which is divided into : the higher (metaphysics), the middle (mathematics), and the lower (natural sciences). It's worth emphasizing that in Avicenna's opinion theology is a lower science than metaphysics. None the less, theology is important. Why? It wasn't so obvious to Arabs because the unity and the uniqueness of God <sup>2</sup> is one of the fundamental dogmas of Islam, so how could there be something higher than religion? Avicenna explains that this dogma isn't clear to uneducated people in the following way:

“ They need The Qur'an and the anthropomorphic introduction of God. Only philosophers are able to understand the highest principle of faith. They consider the unity problem and the uniqueness of God and all the consequences coming from Him, as the result”. Avicenna conceived “philosophy as a specific way to God. This difficult way, is not for all, but it leads straight to the goal”<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, metaphysics is the philosophical reflection of the first cause. Truth is it's subject. Religion belongs to the sphere of practical matters. It speaks at length about God and the Truth. The Highest Good and the Truth are God.

The starting point of Avicenna is the term “existence” which is a real entity.

Existence is first. It is the direct object of our perception. All that we acquire through contact and recognize, we can call existence. But existence obtained in this way isn't precise and is general. As a result of this basic intuition we say of existence, that which appears to be, is. Defining words, including implications and drawing conclusions, is the essential task of metaphysics<sup>4</sup>. Existence, therefore, doesn't have a definition, because nothing is more general than existence and also because nothing more is known of it. The mind recognizes existence itself<sup>5</sup>. Yet, Avicenna postulated that existence is lower than God, because God has an intellect. As we see, this definition isn't clear at all,

<sup>2</sup> See: *The Qur'an*, the verse (2: 177) or (4:118).

<sup>3</sup> A. Aduszkiewicz, M. Gogacz, *Awicenna i średniowieczna filozofia arabska*, ATK, Warszawa 1983, vol.4, ed. 2, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> J. Legowicz, Z. Kuksewicz, *Historia filozofii średniowiecznej*, PWN, Warszawa 1980, p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> *Awicenna, Metafizyka*, tr. M.Gogacz, ATK, Warszawa 1973, p. 82.

because on one hand it applies to existence, which isn't a particular thing, because it's something more general.

On the other hand "existence" isn't the same as the existence of mathematics or natural existence. Existence is a term indicating the Creator of all things; He is absolute existence. Therefore, we can conclude that Avicenna wanted only to say that existence is a general term, which refers to everything ( here he makes a distinction between "thing" and "existence", as the thing is something particular, concrete and individual). For Avicenna, existence is a peculiar reference to the Creator of individual things or existences<sup>6</sup>. Existence is divided into two parts : the first – substance, and the second – appearance.

Substance is the individual being and the being of something possible ( the being with an arrangement of possibilities); its entity isn't in things<sup>7</sup>. Here, I explain what appearance is? "An entity exists in a thing because of another thing, or simply by itself"<sup>8</sup>. For example, let's say the first event is a white human being. The human being (subject) is the basis for white. The second event – the existence is the white itself. Substance is divided into nine categories including, for example; quantity, quality, relation, activity and experience. I will not mention all of them. Appearance becomes a cause. It's necessary in order for existence to exist in reality.

The cause of appearance is either it's own subject (the thing itself) or something different (derived from outside)<sup>9</sup>. Let's return to substance, which consists on four components :

- matter results in power or possibility (because for Avicenna it's the same);
- form results in act which results in necessity;
- matter plus form is an organism;
- soul or intelligence;

Matter is the basis of all things. Entity which is in matter is complete and becomes actual because of what it gets. That which entity receives is form<sup>10</sup>. What does we mean by "the complete entity"? Matter exists in a condition of possibility; that is, a condition where the being of something possible, which is in the matter, can get entity because an act occurs. The being in the act means that the entity is real. It's an act of realization, not an act on something. To exist means to ensue with a sequence of possibilities in the sphere of actual or real existences. The power, which Avicenna identified with possibility, is something which exists before form (the act) and determines the existences of relative necessity. Reality existence doesn't arise from power; in fact, doesn't have to exist at all. Power has the possibility of an entity which doesn't exist in present time. The power of existence is stuck in matter. Entity is the necessity in the sense that the cause of a possible thing is given an entity. Then this thing, in effect, enters into a range of existences of relative necessity. The cause has to be in order for the act to happen, to be real and for the being to exist. This existence, whose being is the substance and the entity is the appearance (because the entity is something different from the being), is

<sup>6</sup>A. Aduszkiewicz, M. Gogacz, *Awicenna i średniowieczna filozofia arabska*, ATK, Warsaw 1983, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> Avicenna, *Metafizyka*, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

called accidental. We contrast necessary existence (God)<sup>11</sup> to accidental existence. Necessary existence doesn't exist in reality, He isn't the substance, His entity is also His being.

God doesn't belong to any category, because others' entity is appearance and applies to being with a range of possibilities. So, God's entity (the necessary existence) is the entity of Himself with a range of possibilities. Consequently, He doesn't have any definition. He is neither in basis, nor in subject. He doesn't have cause<sup>12</sup>, because He is the first cause and all causes begin on Him. He isn't divisible into parts. He isn't complex as are accidental existences. Necessary existence doesn't have the essential connection with any other existence. The qualities with which we define necessary existence are in our own imaginations. They don't apply to His own existence. This existence can be defined only through the one, the eternal. All comes from Him. Quantity gives form to accidental existences. There are three possibilities of entity for accidental existences :

- intelligence – gives something to the soul and body and receives nothing;
- the soul – receives something from intelligence and gives something to the body;
- the body – receives something from intelligence and the soul and gives nothing<sup>13</sup>;

Having these three possibilities of entity provide a basis for “perfect” realization. As far as God is concerned, He has all He needs and even more than the quantity. He is “above perfection”<sup>14</sup>. Necessary existence is above intelligence. Concrete existences don't come directly from necessary existence, because as I mentioned earlier, His structure makes unity, and if more existences came from Him, He would be a quantity, because existences are different; for example, closer, further, earlier, later. Necessary existence creates an existence from Himself, His one existence – which is intelligence. His intelligence has a dichotomy : an active intellect and a passive intellect. The passive intellect is sensual knowledge. Necessary existence recognizes all existences by the active intellect – this is the condition in which the first thought emanates from necessary existence. It's the beginning and cause of the creation of all intellectual forms.

As a consequence He not only recognizes Himself and is recognized by Himself, but He is also pure knowledge<sup>15</sup>. Necessary existence knows all things in others' being. Therefore, His knowledge is the cause of the existence in things, and this way, entity is granted to all things<sup>16</sup>. The human being recognizes a thing because of the form and the being in the range of possibilities. This thing is separated from matter<sup>17</sup>. Human beings have the knowledge because our form can be disconnected from our matter. The entity of this disconnected form is knowledge. Avicenna gives an example here : a bricklayer must possess knowledge before a house can be built; he must first possess the form, and not the opposite. So, thought proceeds actualization. Knowledge is in a human being's soul. The soul is connected to spiritual substance and bodily form.

<sup>11</sup> Avicenna describes God as “the necessary existence” for example.

<sup>12</sup> Avicenna, *Metafizyka*, p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151-152.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> A. Aduszkiewicz, M. Gogacz, *Awicenna i średniowieczna filozofia arabska*, p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> Avicenna, *Metafizyka*, p. 130.

Form is disconnected from matter and exists by itself. Form recognizes itself. Because of its separation from matter, form recognizes what it isn't separate from and what it's connected to<sup>18</sup>. It means that the being of separated existence interlinks being and makes knowledge. The knowledge of a human being is different than the knowledge of necessary existence. A human being has the basis in his soul. There's no basis in necessary existence aside from Himself. Necessary existence consciously gives an entity to every real existence. These acts result from His knowledge and they are the realization of His will. It means that the will of necessary existence comes from His knowledge.

If things are accidentals, it means they were created arbitrarily, not as the result of the Creator's nature of necessity, otherwise they could be necessary by themselves. Necessary cause can't result in something accidental. So, if the created world is accidental, His final cause couldn't be active in a necessary way, but rather, would lead to free choice<sup>19</sup>. Necessary existence knows, "that an entity of something is worthy and good by itself and that the entity of a thing ought to be worthy and gentle. In this way, an entity of something is more desirable to God than there being no entity at all"<sup>20</sup>. The intellect has been given to the human being thanks to God's will, from His knowledge and by His emanation.

This is due to the intellect being connected with the soul and the soul being connected with the body. The realization of the first existence is the same as, the recognition by necessary existence of His own being<sup>21</sup>. The first existence doesn't resemble complex existences. The first existence has differences in matter and in form, and comes from God. The soul is the cause of a human being's loving necessary existence. Human beings aim at perfection. A human being's soul can achieve a level of active intellect through exploration and a broadening of knowledge, as well as through contemplation.

A human being can reach an insight into pure truth, and at the same time, gain an ability to contemplate the sublime subject of this knowledge<sup>22</sup>. The active intellect's knowledge is cognition about God. It refers to an ideal plan of the world which doesn't exist in reality.

The metaphysics referenced above in one path which can guide a human being to cognition of necessary existence. This path, however, is not complete. It becomes a reflection of God's knowledge when it is connected with mystical experience.

The act of communication between the human being and God is due to knowledge. The link in this realization is the soul. The active intellect makes the cognition of God (the pure truth) possible. Speech is not needed for communication to take place. It occurs on a non-verbal level. Thought which is the beginning of knowledge is enough. It predates speech. Thought expresses all, even our intentions. God reads our thoughts. An investigation into the discovery of truth is the path the soul takes for contact with God. Human beings are equipped with suitable tools which enable them to have cognition of

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> J. Legowicz, *Historia filozofii średniowiecznej*, p. 231. Compare also with : Avicenna, *Metafizyka*, p. 141.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> A. Aduszkiewicz, M. Gogacz, *Awicenna...*, p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

necessary existence. Perception of necessary existence is possible for the human being through communication with God (necessary existence). The act of communicating with God is as follows : the sender is the human being because he wants to have deep knowledge about God. God cannot be the sender because He's the knowledge Himself, and therefore, He has no intentions. The will to possess knowledge which comes from intention is peculiar only to complex existences, because it expresses utility or profit – it is a *communique*. In this way, it's possible that the human being can come closer to necessary existence. The human being goes to God and realizes his own non – perfection. If possible, the human being would like to be perfect as “the highest perfection”. God makes the act of communication possible, as He is the receiver. The context of this communication is the human being's knowledge based on existing reality. The act of contact is the soul sending a message – a code to God. This message(a code) is the entire act of communication.

Avicenna in his conceptualization shows that God is Creator of the world and the final end of the human being's earthy migration. All comes from Him and wants to return to Him. All existences who come from necessary existence want to be the same as He is. Therefore, bringing existences to perfection is symptomatic of the longing and loving thanks of the existences.

Avicenna's proposition of metaphysics makes his philosophy typical Arabic, because it's harmonious with disciplines contained in The Qur'an. He interlinked many spheres : philosophy, metaphysics, mysticism, and theology, into a common explanation. These disciplines gave him a chance to describe and understand reality. Avicenna had to stay faithful to his religion and cultivated a philosophy which was similarly faithful. He interlinked these disciplines with his philosophy. It was necessary because the Arabic understanding of the world excludes the existing areas of study which have no common ground with theology. The determinism of existences is visible in his conception and has it's own justification, because God is described not as a power which punishes and rewards as in theology, but as the principle from which every existence originates.

To sum up, I have discussed Avicenna's terms of existence as a starting point by describing his intellectual paradigm : substance and appearance with their own further divisions and dependences, and separation of an entity from the being reached by intelligence, which comes from the emanation of God. I have closely examined terms such as, possibility, necessity, matter, and form. These are indispensable in coming to a place where the soul is found and responsible for making possible, an agreement between the human being and necessary existence. Yet, theology wasn't enough. Avicenna needed something more. He found it possible to describe an existence as an existence in metaphysics.

In the end, I think a fragment of Avicenna's poetry is most eloquent. It completely expresses what he articulated above :

The spirit was formed by science. He climbed higher!  
 Don't worry about rest. It's the treasure house to all.  
 The soul is the pure crystal, the lamp is science,  
 The olive which burns is the human being's wisdom.  
 You come back to life when wisdom spreads it's own light.  
 You die when science's brightness dims the ignorance.