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Explaining Volition in the Ta'aliqat: Avicenna's View of Free Will

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Abstract

While a great deal of work has been produced on the free will debate amongst medieval Latin philosophers, very little has been generated in regards to the medieval Arabic world. As a prominent medieval Aristotelian, Avicenna's Neoplatonically inspired philosophy greatly influenced his contemporaries. Accordingly, Avicenna's contribution to the dialogue concerning free will deserves special attention. The ultimate purpose of this investigation is to enter into the academic discourse in hopes of advancing a broader understanding of Avicenna's view of free will. Those few scholars who have presented Avicenna's position on free will in the past have done so in one of two manners. The first group analyzed Avicenna's metaphysical theory concerning the emanation of the world by focusing on the relationship between final and efficient causes and the distinction between volition (*irāda*) and intention (*qasd*). The second deduced Avicenna's view by evaluating his theory of emanation in relation to moral evil and the divine law (*Shari'a*). This study examines these two interpretations of Avicenna's position on free will based upon a text not considered in these earlier works, the section of Avicenna's *Ta'aliqat* titled "Irāda", i.e., "Explaining Will" or "Explaining Volition". This investigation operates with the understanding that a deliberating agent possesses free will when he or she wills sensitive to his or her own judgments concerning what is best in the circumstances, whether or not the individual acts upon such a judgment. Considering his theory of emanation, theological framework, and arguments in the *Ta'aliqat*, this inquiry concludes that Avicenna deems that a human agent possesses free will when he or she accepts the guidance of divine illumination, which directs the individual in gaining pure knowledge of the ultimate good, God.

Introduction

While the view of free will held by ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle remains unclear, this is not the case with later thinkers such as the Neoplatonists and medieval Aristotelians. The position of a Neoplatonist like Augustine of Hippo, who proposes that free will is an agent's rational choice of the Good (God) over his or her desires, has received much attention. Likewise, a great deal of work has been produced on the free will debate amongst medieval Latin philosophers. Very little, however, has been generated in regards to the medieval Arabic world. As a prominent medieval Aristotelian, Avicenna's Neoplatonically inspired philosophy greatly influenced his contemporaries, not the least of whom was the towering figure Thomas Aquinas. Accordingly, Avicenna's contribution to the dialogue concerning free will deserves special attention. The ultimate purpose of this analysis is to enter into the academic discourse in hopes of advancing a broader understanding of Avicenna's view of free will.

Those few scholars who have presented Avicenna's position on free will have done so in one of two manners. The first group analyzed Avicenna's metaphysical theory concerning the emanation of the world by focusing on the relationship between final and efficient causes and the distinction between volition (*irāda*) and intention (*qasd*).[1] The second deduced Avicenna's view by evaluating his theory of emanation in relation to moral evil and the divine law (*Shari'a*).[2] I propose to examine these two interpretations

[1] Interpretations of this matter most notably use as support book IX, chapter 4 of Avicenna's *The Metaphysics of the Shifa* and book I, chapter 10 of Avicenna's *Physics.* A disputed interpretation of this matter is presented in: Shalahudin Kafrawi, "What Makes the Efficient Cause Efficient? The Notion of Will in Ibn Sīnā's Emanative Scheme," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association: Freedom, Will, and Nature* 81 (2007): 179-191.

[2] This interpretation of Avicenna and the implications thereof are most clearly presented in: Jules Janssens, "The Problem of Human Freedom in Ibn Sīnā," in *Ibn Sīnā and his Influence on the Arabic and Latin World,* ed. Jules Janssens (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006), 112-118.

of Avicenna's position on free will based upon a text not considered by these earlier works, the section of Avicenna's *Ta'aliqat* titled "Irāda", i.e., "Explaining Will" or "Explaining Volition". For the purposes of this study, I operate with the understanding that a deliberating agent possesses free will when he or she wills sensitive to his or her own judgments concerning what is best in the circumstances, whether or not the individual acts upon such a judgment.[3] In other words, willing is an activity that involves an individual's rational and volitional faculties as they pertain to his or her judgments about what he or she values, regardless of whether or not the individual's action from such deliberation conflicts with his or her desires. Such a definition generally parallels the medieval understanding of free will, and therefore presents an equitable criterion by which to analyze Avicenna's position on free will.

The importance of Avicenna's metaphysical theory of emanation to his philosophical agenda cannot be understated. Emanation is not only his ontological explanation for existence, but also provides the foundation for a large portion of his philosophy. Accordingly, any dialogue concerning causes, volition, and theology in Avicenna's philosophy necessitate an account of his emanative system. This study therefore begins by presenting Avicenna's theory of emanation, how efficient and final causes operate within his emanative framework, and how he concludes that emanation is a matter of divine volition. It subsequently analyzes the section "Irāda" from the *Ta'aliqat* to garner what exactly Avicenna means by volition and how he differentiates between divine volition and human volition. The inquiry then discusses Avicenna's

[3] Timothy O'Connor, "Free Will," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2010 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (29 October 2010), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/freewill/ (accessed March 1, 2011).

theological framework and what it reveals about his view of the will. Finally, I conclude that, considering his theory of emanation, theological framework, and arguments in the *Ta'aliqat*, Avicenna deems that a human agent possesses free will when he or she accepts the guidance of divine illumination, which directs the individual in gaining pure knowledge of the ultimate good, God.

The Theory of Emanation

Avicenna's most extensive philosophical discussion of free will occurs within his prolonged account of divine creation, i.e., the theory of emanation. It is therefore necessary to comprehend Avicenna's theory of emanation in order to understand his account of volition. Emanation is couched in the Neoplatonic idea that that which is composite comes from being in relation to that which is simple. The Neoplatonic theory originates with the concept of the One as that which is absolutely simple and grounds existence in the explanation that all that exists does so in relation to the One. Since a thing only exists to the extent that it possesses an inherent unity, then existence itself requires a principle of unity. Paradoxically then, as it was for the Neoplatonist Plotinus, existence itself is not that which is most basic, rather, existence itself is dependent upon the One as the principle of unity. Like most philosophers, Avicenna's subsequent work was based upon the philosophical legacy he inherited. Accordingly, he develops his own version of the theory of emanation and the corresponding concept of the One.

Avicenna most identifies the Neoplatonic One as the Necessary Existent. He retains the Neoplatonic idea that the Necessary Existent, his deity, is absolutely simple, the source of existence, and consequently, the cause of the universe.[4] Likewise, he

[4] In some cases Avicenna also refers to the Necessary Existent as the First Principle or First Cause.

positions the Necessary Existent as the necessarily existing first principle of all existence and grounds existence in the explanation that all that exists is contingent upon the Necessary Existent. In other words, the Necessary Existent emanates creation *essentially, not accidentally*. Contrary to Neoplatonists like Plotinus, Avicenna proposes that the Necessary Existent, much like Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, is essentially pure intellect and the act of intellecting Itself is Its primary occupation.[5] The Necessary Existent, with pure intellect as Its essence, consequently emanates as Its primary representative the immaterial Intellect.

Given that the Intellect is an emanation from the Necessary Existent, Avicenna contends that the Intellect's essence is intellectual activity, albeit to a lesser degree. He also asserts that the Intellect is a composite. Since the Necessary Existent is absolutely simple, it is a puzzling matter how the existence of a composite comes from a simple. Avicenna resolves this issue by elucidating the relationship between necessary existence and possible existence within the Intellect.[6] Simply put, the Intellect is a possible existent, because it is contingent upon the Necessary Existent. In addition, since the Intellect exists, its existence is neither merely possible nor, obviously, impossible. Consequently for Avicenna, the Intellect necessarily exists through another, namely the Necessary Existent. The Intellect therefore possesses two types of existence, a possible existence and a necessary existence. The nature of its existence collectively with its essence makes

[5] The Arabic language, like the Romance languages, refers to all nouns in either the feminine or masculine. There is no gender neutral terminology. The Necessary Existent, First Principle, First Cause, and God are all masculine terms in Arabic. Pronouns within Avicenna's texts accordingly refer to these terms in the masculine. To avoid confusion between individuals and proposed entities, gender neutral pronouns within this paper will be used in reference to the Necessary Existent with no disrespect intended towards those who may consider It the divinity.

[6] For a detailed explanation of Avicenna's modal ontology see: Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 159-163.

the Intellect a composite consisting of three parts and clarifies how it might be that a composite comes from something absolutely simple.

The emanation process does not cease with the Intellect. In reflecting on the essence of the Necessary Existent, the first emanated Intellect emanates another Intellect. In addition, the first Intellect contemplates the possibility and necessity of its own existence, and, as a result, respectively emanates a celestial body and that celestial body's soul. The second Intellect, like the first Intellect, considers its relationship to that which came before it, i.e., the first Intellect and the Necessary Existent. Accordingly, the second Intellect continues the emanative process. This creates a cascading hierarchy of new Intellects, celestial bodies, and souls that terminates with the Active (Agent) Intellect. The Active Intellect, with its lesser degree of intellectual power and higher degree of privation, is unable to emanate another unified Intellect like itself. The Active Intellect therefore emanates a multitude of intellects, each of which requires a body as a tool to reach its perfection. In addition, the Active Intellect emanates the form/matter composites that become the bodies that compose the material world. The result of Avicenna's emanative arrangement is a causally determined system where material things are infinitely coming into existence.[7]

The significance of Avicenna's theory of emanation to his view of free will is two-fold. First, the Necessary Existent emanates creation essentially. Second, the material realm is causally determined. The implications of these consequences could create difficulties for Avicenna if he contends that free will has a place in his philosophy. Before any inferred problems can be addressed however, two questions not clarified in

[7] For a more detailed account of Avicenna's theory of emanation see: McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 203-206.

Avicenna's emanative scheme must be answered. Specifically, by what kind of *cause* does the Necessary Existent emanate? And, by what kind of *act* does the Necessary Existent emanate? Both of these questions are important to resolving any possible issues in Avicenna's account of free will. It is Avicenna's explanation of by what kind of cause the Necessary Existent emanates that this study now discusses.

Aristotelian and Avicennian Causes

As a faithful medieval Aristotelian, Avicenna includes the Aristotelian causes (the material, formal, efficient, and final causes) in his causal theory. This schematic of causal explanations looms large in the reasoning substantiating Avicenna's theory of emanation. In establishing by what kind of cause the Necessary Existent emanates, Avicenna could *not* position the Necessary Existent as the formal or material cause of existence. If the Necessary Existent caused existence either formally or materially, then It would be the direct cause of all composite existents. This would mean the Necessary Existent consisted of multiple causal facets, thereby making It a composite. As noted, Avicenna's principal concern throughout his ontology remains guaranteeing the simplicity of the Necessary Existent. The Necessary Existent therefore could not be the material or formal cause of existence. This means it must be resolved whether the Necessary Existent is either the efficient or final cause of existence. Upon first glance, it appears that the Necessary Existent could only be one or the other of these causes for two reasons. First, to introduce the Necessary Existent as both the efficient and final cause of existence would seem to make It a composite. Second, an efficient cause needs an agent to cause any operation to go into effect, whereas this is not automatically the case for a final cause. Consequently, it seems that the Necessary Existent needs to be *either* the final cause *or* the efficient

cause of existence, *not both*. Avicenna, however, argues in his theory of emanation that the Necessary Existent *is both* the final and efficient cause of existence.

In Avicenna's emanative scheme, a thing's existence is contingent upon the essence of the Necessary Existent, and everything that does exist exists necessarily. In addition, Avicenna argues that possible existents desire to actualize necessary existence, and in doing so, possible existents aspire to be like the Necessary Existent. In other words, to be like the Necessary Existent is the *purpose* of existence for a possible existent. Consequently, Avicenna contends that the Necessary Existent is the final cause of existence. With the Necessary Existent's status as final cause established, Avicenna must now resolve how it is that the Necessary Existent is also the efficient cause without making It a composite. For the Necessary Existent to be the efficient cause of existence indicates that It is an agent and acts for some end. To cause something for some end would be in opposition to what Avicenna's concept of 'the necessarily existing first principle of all existence' implies, specifically, that the Necessary Existent is not causally dependent in any way or on anything other than Itself.[8] Avicenna dissolves this worry in his theory of emanation by arguing that the Necessary Existent, as the necessarily existing first principle of all existence, is the *agent* that brings about existence. In other words, the Necessary Existent *is* the efficient cause of the universe. Consequently, the Necessary Existent is *both* the final *and* efficient cause of existence and preserves its status as an absolute simple. The onus is now on Avicenna to prove *by what act the Necessary Existent emanates*.

[8] Avicenna's provides a further discussion of this solution in Book I of his *Physics*. Since that argument is primarily directed at the notion of intention rather than causal efficiency, a more robust discussion of the argument is located in the next section of this paper titled "Is Emanation by Nature or Intention?"

Is Emanation by Nature or Intention?

Reflecting on Avicenna's theory of emanation, the Necessary Existent emanates creation essentially, not accidentally. If anything were accidental to the Necessary Existent, then Avicenna's theory of emanation would be confronted with a problem. There would be that which belongs to the Necessary Existent necessarily, namely, necessary existence, and that which belongs to the Necessary Existent accidentally, which is something other than necessary existence. The combination of these two relations would necessarily make the Necessary Existent a composite. Since Avicenna's principal concern throughout his theory of emanation remains guaranteeing the simplicity of the Necessary Existent, it *cannot* be the case that the Necessary Existent emanates existence accidentally. Consequently, the goal of Avicenna's theory of emanation is to ensure that creation is nothing other than an essential act of the Necessary Existent.

There are two plausible respects by which emanation could be considered an essential act of the Necessary Existent. It appears existence could either emanate from the Necessary Existent by *nature* or by *intention.* In several short comments within *The Metaphysics of the Healing* and his *Physics,* Avicenna provides us with some insight into why neither option is tenable.

If the emanation of existence from the Necessary Existent were considered analogous to sunlight emanating from the Sun, then it looks as if it is possible that existence emanates by the Necessary Existent's *nature.* Emanation proceeding from the Necessary Existent by nature, however, appears to be a necessary act. This seems to be at odds with Avicenna's religious sensibilities that emanation must proceed from the Necessary Existent of Its own free will. In addition, Avicenna proposes that the

Necessary Existent is essentially pure intellect. Acts by nature, however, are not the result of the intellect. Accordingly, Avicenna argues that emanation is not by the Necessary Existent's nature, because, in being essentially intellect, the Necessary Existent meets the two requirements of intellecting, recognition (*ma'rifa*) and consent (*ridan*). First, Avicenna asserts that the Necessary Existent recognizes existence emanates from Itself, since as pure intellect there is nothing It does not know or recognize. Second, the Necessary Existent consents to the act of emanation, since as pure intellect It knows what proceeds from Itself and as a pure simple nothing hinders or prevents the procession of existence from Itself. The satisfying of the conditions of recognition and consent by the Necessary Existent allows Avicenna to contend that the emanation of existence is *not by the nature* of the Necessary Existent, but rather emanation occurs due to the fact that the Necessary Existent is essentially intellect.[9]

Since Avicenna argues that it is not the case that existence proceeds from the Necessary Existent by nature, then it is possible that emanation proceeds from the Necessary Existent by *intention*. In *The Metaphysics of The Healing,* Avicenna discusses intention in regards to the Necessary Existent, where he states:

> It is impossible that there should, in any manner whatsoever, be for Him a principle and a cause – neither [the cause] from which [something] comes to be, [nor the cause] either in which or by which [something] comes to be, nor [the cause] for [the purpose] for which [a thing] is, whereby He would be for the sake of something. For this reason it is impossible for the existence of all things [proceeding] from Him to be by way of intention – like our intention – for

[9] McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 207.

forming the whole and for the existence of the whole, not that He would be intending for the sake of something other than Himself.[10]

For Avicenna then, if the Necessary Existent intended to cause something, such as the existence of the universe, then It would be acting for the sake of some good It would receive, rather than for the sake of no other good than the good of Its own existence. Avicenna further clarifies this matter of intention in regards to causal relations in his most extensive yet short treatment on the term *qasd* (intention) in Book I of his *Physics.* In this section, intention is always associated with a final cause (*ghaya*) or end (*gharad*). Specifically, an agent intends to perform an act, because they desire something. In other words, such intentions are directed towards an end that is either a real or apparent good.[11] As previously noted, acting for an end is in opposition to what Avicenna's concept of 'necessary in of itself' implies, namely, that the Necessary Existent is not causally dependent in any way or on anything other than Itself. As the necessarily existing first principle of all existence, the Necessary Existent could not emanate existence contingent upon anything else, for such an act would be necessary through another. According to Avicenna then, since the Necessary Existent is the necessarily existing first principle of existence, It *does not intend* for emanation to occur.

Avicenna also denies that the Necessary Existent intends the emanation of existence on more important metaphysical grounds. Specifically, Avicenna argues that

[10] Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing: A Parallel English-Arabic Text = Al-Ilahīyāt Min Al-Shifā,* intro., trans., and annot. by Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), book IX, chapter 4, 326.

[11] Jon McGinnis, "Comments on 'What makes the Efficient Cause Efficient? The Notion of Will in Ibn Sīnā's Emanative Scheme' by Shalahudin Kafrawi", (Unpublished, 2007).

intention violates the idea that the Necessary Existent is absolutely simple. Avicenna writes:

> His intending the existence of the whole [that proceeds] from Him . . . would lead to a multiplicity in His essence. For then there would be something in Him by reason of which He intends – namely, His [direct] cognizance and knowledge of the necessity of intending, or a deference to it, or a goodness therein that necessitates it. Then [there would be knowledge in Him] of the intention [itself], then of a benefit the intention would bestow on Him, as we have previously clarified – [all] this being impossible.[12]

What Avicenna asserts is that if the Necessary Existent intends the emanation of existence to occur, then It would know of, defer to, or think some good of the universe. Furthermore, a single intention in the agent always consists of the intention to act, the intended act, and what is intended by the act. In both cases, the incorporation of multiple facets within the Necessary Existent positions It as a composite rather than a simple. Again, this is a state of affairs Avicenna strongly asserts is not the case.[13]

Conclusively for Avicenna, the emanation of existence is *not* by the Necessary Existent's nature or intention. Though Avicenna's comments are a bit obscure, they create difficulties for him if the emanation of existence must be through divine volition. In arguing that the Necessary Existent could not intend for existence to occur, it makes it appear that the act of willing is not an intentional act.[14] This would be similar to saying,

[12] Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing,* book IX, chapter 4, 326.

[13] McGinnis, *Avicenna,* 206.

[14] McGinnis, "Comments".

"I willed to drink the glass of bourbon, but I did not intend to do so." This is an odd sounding statement to say the least. Furthermore, one might wonder that if the Necessary Existent's will to act is not aimed at some end, then why shouldn't Its actions be characterized as anything other than a mere happenings. It appears Avicenna could only resolve such problems by elucidating what he means by volition (*irāda*). In the section of the *Ta'aliqat* conveniently titled "Explaining Will" or "Explaining Volition" ("Irāda"), Avicenna presents a more robust discussion clarifying these matters.

The *Ta'aliqat* on Divine Volition

In arguing that the Necessary Existent emanates existence neither by nature nor intention, Avicenna is left without an obvious solution to the matter of by what *act* the Necessary Existent emanates. The issue for Avicenna becomes exactly how to solve this conundrum. The resolution proposed by Avicenna is that the Necessary Existent emanates existence of Its own volition. As noted previously, how one wills to do something without intending to do that thing is a puzzling matter. Avicenna must clarify how intentional and volitional acts are considered acts and explain the distinction between volition and intention. In the *Ta'aliqat,* Avicenna attempts to resolve these issues while discussing how divine volition is different from human volition. It is with Avicenna's goals in mind that this study turns its attention to "Irāda" and its discussion of the divine will.

Avicenna restates his theory of emanation at the beginning of this section. Existence emanates from the Necessary Existent and is not something the Necessary Existent intends as an object of desire.[15] It therefore appears that the Necessary Existent

[15] Avicenna, "Explaining Will" ("Irāda") in *The Ta'aliqat,* trans. and anno. by Jon McGinnis (St. Louis, Missouri, March 28, 2011), section 16.

does not will existence for the sake of some end outside of Itself. This position seemingly contradicts Avicenna's view that the Necessary Existent is an efficient cause of creation, because an efficient cause always acts in reference to some good or end. In other words, it appears that the Necessary Existent is not the agent of existence. This, however, is not a problem for Avicenna, because he contends that the Necessary Existent, in being the order of the good, has Itself as the proper end of Its emanative act. In other words, the Necessary Existent wills existence for Its own sake. This inquiry now investigates how Avicenna concludes that the Necessary Existent, by willing Itself as Its proper end, emanates existence as an act of free will.

Avicenna begins clarifying the matter of emanation as an act of the Necessary Existent's free will in the *Ta'aliqat,* where he contends that action is either essential or accidental. Essential action, he states, is itself either natural or volitional. Acts of volition, he contends, originate either from imagination, opinion, or knowledge. Avicenna then differentiates between the three origins of volition. First, he explains that an agent acts from imagination when, for example, the agent desires a thing for its apparent good or to become more like that which appears good. An example of acting from opinion is when an agent acts cautiously in light of an apparent risk, i.e., he is of the opinion that harm might befall him. Avicenna concludes that "it is simply not the case" that the Necessary Existent acts from either opinion or imagination because these are actions that are "owing to some end (outside of Itself)."[16] The Necessary Existent's act could therefore only be from knowledge. Avicenna admits, however, that knowledge can be directed at knowing that something is desirable. For example, if it were the case that the Necessary Existent

[16] Avicenna, "Explaining Will" ("Irāda"), section 16.

acts from the knowledge that something outside of itself is good, then Its act would be for the sake of desiring that thing. In a similar manner to imagination and opinion then, to act from the knowledge that something is desirable is acting for some external end. In other words, for Avicenna, acts from imagination, opinion, or knowledge that something is desired, i.e., acts owing to some external end, are acts of intention. Avicenna concludes that since it is the case that the Necessary Existent does not act for some end outside of Itself, i.e., by intention, then it is neither through imagination, opinion, nor knowledge of knowing that something is desirable that It acts. It remains unclear, however, by what kind of knowledge the Necessary Existent acts.

The term Avicenna applies to the type of knowledge the Necessary Existent possesses is *'ilm,* which is the cognitive term for knowing something completely from its *causes*.[17] Avicenna defines such causal knowledge as the case when an agent recognizes (*ma'rifa*) both that an act proceeds from him and that he is the agent of that act. Since acts by nature do not involve the intellect and acts from intention are directed toward some external end, Avicenna deduces that acts from causal knowledge are not acts by nature or intention. Moreover, Avicenna asserts that the Necessary Existent meets the requirements for possessing causal knowledge, in view of the fact that, as pure intellect, there is nothing that It does not know or recognize. Consequently for Avicenna then, since he argues acts do not proceed from the Necessary Existent by nature or intention and It possesses causal knowledge, every act that proceeds from the Necessary Existent is an act of volition.

[17] Avicenna, "Explaining Will" ("Irāda"), section 16.

Avicenna bolsters his argument further. The Necessary Existent's knowledge determines that when It emanates existence It does so in descending order from the existent with the greatest good, the first Intellect, to that with the least, the material universe. This descending cascade of existence occurs with the recognition (*ma'rifa*) and consent (*ridan*) of the Necessary Existent, yet it is not an act "beneficial" to the Necessary Existent. The emanation of existence, rather, is something *traced back to* (*munāsab*) the Necessary Existent, i.e. *the agent,* as the other existents' proper end.[18] When it is the case that something external to an agent is not an end for that agent and the agent possesses causal knowledge that they are the agent of that thing, then the agent acts of its own volition, because the thing is traced back to the agent as the source of that thing. In other words, since the Necessary Existent possesses causal knowledge that It is the agent of existence and existence is of no benefit to It, it can be said that the Necessary Existent wills the existence of the universe because the existence of the universe is traced back to the Necessary Existent as its source. This positions the Necessary Existent as the agent and therefore the efficient cause of existence, but it does not fully explain for what end the Necessary Existent, as the efficient cause, wills existence. Avicenna does provide an argument that clarifies this matter.

Avicenna contends that if an agent recognized perfection and arranged a state of affairs according to a model based upon that perfection, then the perfection is the end for the agent's act. Similarly, the Necessary Existent, as pure intellect, recognizes Its own perfection and, in that It possesses causal knowledge, arranges a state of affairs according to Its perfection. In other words, the Necessary Existent, in being the order of the good,

[18] Avicenna, "Explaining Will" ("Irāda"), section 17.

has Itself as Its proper end of Its emanative act. The Necessary Existent is therefore both the final cause of existence, in that It is the end for existence, and the efficient cause of existence, in being the agent that emanates existence. This echoes Avicenna's argument in his theory of emanation for the Necessary Existent being both the efficient and the final cause of existence.

It appears that Avicenna's discussion of volition within the *Ta'aliqat* provides the standards by which to consider an act not only an act of volition, but also an act of free will.

1. The agent involved must possess intellect.
2. The agent must be the efficient cause of the act.
3. The agent's act must originate from the agent's imagination, opinion, or knowledge.
4. The act is one of free will if it results from the agent's causal knowledge and with the consent of the agent.

The Necessary Existent appears to meet Avicenna's demands not only for Its emanative act to be considered one of volition, but for emanation to be an act the Necessary Existent freely wills. In establishing Avicenna's argument for emanation as an act of the Necessary Existent's free will, this inquiry has not raised the matter of human will. Avicenna, however, does address human volition in the *Ta'aliqat* within his discussion of the Necessary Existent's will. This study now discusses whether Avicenna thinks human acts are acts of volition and whether humans can act of their own free will.

The *Ta'aliqat* on Human Volition

While in all of his works Avicenna has very little to say about human volition explicitly, in the *Ta'aliqat* he discusses human volition in the context of explaining the Necessary Existent's will. Since few scholars have attempted to make sense of Avicenna's position on human will, and those that have did not consider the *Ta'aliqat* in their investigations, this inquiry hopes to provide new insight into Avicenna's view of the human will. This study parallels Avicenna's discourse in the *Ta'aliqat* and evaluates his view of human volition by taking into consideration his position on divine will.

At the beginning of "Irāda", Avicenna reveals that normally when an individual wills something he or she does so "only for the sake of some appetite or pleasure, not for the sake of the very thing desired."[19] For example, Jon wills to drink a glass of bourbon not for the intrinsic value of the bourbon, but for the end of fulfilling his desire for bourbon. The Necessary Existent, in contrast, only wills for the sake of some essential good, specifically the good of Itself alone. Human desires, however, are not self aware in the manner that the Necessary Existent recognizes Its own perfection. If Jon's desire was self aware and his action generated from the desire itself, then Jon would will to drink the bourbon for his own sake. Avicenna asserts this is *not* how human desires directed at some material or sensible end operate. He elaborates, however, that human will can be directed at more than just material or sensible ends, by contending human will can be directed at the concept of a thing. It is through the notion of conceptualizing that Avicenna further distinguishes between human volition and divine will.

[19] Avicenna, "Explaining Will" ("Irāda"), section 16.

Avicenna posits that when a human wills something, he or she "conceptualize(s) that thing as something of the variety of opinion or imagination or (causal) knowledge, where that thing is in fact agreeable in the sense that it is excellent or beneficial."[20] In other words, the concept of a thing has a good attached to it, and humans wish to acquire the conceptualized thing because of the good attached to it, not the intrinsic value of the thing itself.[21] Furthermore, Avicenna argues that every conceptualized thing can itself be a desired end. For example, the concept of going on a walk might itself be the desired end, or it might also be the case that it is the concept of exercise attached to the concept of going on a walk that is the desired end. Either way, it is a desired end at which the act of human volition is directed. Avicenna accordingly asserts that human will can be from imagination, opinion, or knowing something is desirable, because these forms of volition are focused upon a desired end. In other words, human will can be an intention, because the human will aims at an end attached to an imagined, opined, or known concept of a thing. This juxtaposes the notion of human will directed at an end to the idea that the Necessary Existent wills from causal knowledge. Avicenna contends, however, that intention, volition aimed at a desired end, is not the limit of the human will.

In the last section of "Irāda", Avicenna finally reveals that it is possible for human volition to proceed from causal knowledge as it does for the Necessary Existent. Such an act occurs when a human conceptualizes something and acquires the causal knowledge that what the concept of the thing entails is good in of itself. Recalling that the Necessary

[20] Avicenna, "Explaining Will" ("Irāda"), section 16.

[21] For example, when Jon begins to imagine coffee and its supply of caffeine, he eventually desires not just the concept of coffee, but coffee itself. In addition, a conceptualized thing can be a more general concept like friendship or love. Avicenna's point, however, is that what Jon desires is the benefit attached to the concept, whether it be the caffeine in the coffee or the benefit he sees in his friendship with another. In either case, it is the good attached to the concept that Jon desires first and foremost.

Existent recognizes Its own perfection and arranges a state of affairs according to Its perfection, a human can likewise come to possess causal knowledge of the perfection in the concept of a thing and arrange a state of affairs in accordance with the perfection in the conceptualized thing. For example, an engineer could come to possess causal knowledge of the perfection in a building that is to be built and arrange a state of affairs according to that state of perfection. Avicenna argues that the causal knowledge that a conceptualized thing is good in of itself can only motivate the human will under certain conditions. Specifically, if there is not another desire "carrying greater weight" or acting as an "obstacle" preventing human volition to proceed from causal knowledge, then the human will motivates action for the sake of the conceptualized thing itself. Avicenna is even more explicit when it comes to the tension between a human's bodily desires and causal knowledge. Avicenna holds that, in order for a human to recognize causal knowledge of a conceptualized thing, a human must eliminate the interference of their bodily desires.[22] If the end for a human is to achieve causal knowledge of the perfection in the concepts of things, then it can be inferred that a human's ultimate goal is the acquisition of pure causal knowledge of the ultimate perfection. More explicitly, the fundamental purpose of human existence is to achieve absolute causal knowledge of the Necessary Existent.

In "Irāda", Avicenna presents an account of human will in contrast to divine volition. For clarity, while human will can be from imagination, opinion, or some variety of knowledge, the proper end of human will is to help bring about absolute causal knowledge of the essence of perfect concepts, most prominently the Necessary Existent.

[22] Avicenna, "Explaining Will" ("Irāda"), section 18.

This argument, however, does not reveal whether Avicenna believes that humans possess free will. In fact it appears that due to his ontology, where all is the necessary result of emanation from the Necessary Existent, Avicenna has constructed a model where all of existence, including the human intellect, is causally determined. This determinism ensues from the notion that the Necessary Existent causally knows everything and everything must necessarily exist as It causally knows it to be. Since the understanding of free will used for the purposes of this study requires that a deliberating agent wills sensitive to their *own* judgments, then the human intellect must *not* be causally determined *by another*. Quite often, the issue of free will is discussed in accordance with moral judgments. Accordingly, in hopes of clarifying whether Avicenna believes that humans possess free will, this inquiry now investigates Avicenna's concept of evil in regards to moral decisions.

Divine Law and Free Will

Avicenna conceives of a human as a spiritual being whose essence is intellect. In addition, Avicenna's theory of emanation proposes that the Active Intellect emanates material existence and in the process joins together the spiritual and material nature of each human. Upon first glance then, it appears that the cascading of intellect from the Necessary Existent and into every human provides each particular human with the capacity to gain causal knowledge. As inferred from the *Ta'aliqat*, the faculty of intellect is one of Avicenna's requirements for volition. Furthermore, for an act to be considered an act of free will, the act must result from the agent's causal knowledge and with the agent's consent. Since Avicenna's theory of emanation seemingly constructs a causally determined system, however, it is plausible that an individual's cognitive capability is determined by that which is external to them, namely the Necessary Existent. It appears

then that the act of intellecting, i.e., deliberation, is not accomplished by the individual alone. In light of this study's operational definition of free will, if a deliberating agent does *not* will sensitive to their *own* judgments but those causally determined by the Necessary Existent, then humans do not truly possess free will. The question of whether a human's intellect is autonomous or determined lacks explicit clarification within Avicenna's theory of emanation or the *Ta'aliqat*. In hope of providing an answer to this question concerning the human intellect, this study examines Avicenna's theological framework. Specifically, this inquiry now attempts to clarify what freedom the human intellect might possess by examining Avicenna's view of moral evil and the divine law (*Shari'a)*.

Avicenna holds that the universe is created good, since the Necessary Existent recognizes itself as perfection, pure good, and consequently emanates the order of the good. What humans call evil then, is merely the privation of good. More explicitly, evil is a deficiency, imperfection, or absence of good. Since the existence of the universe is good, pure or absolute evil would be the absence of existence. The universe, however, exists, so it is impossible for pure evil to exist.

Avicenna conceives of evil in two manners, natural (surd) evil and moral evil. He defines natural evil as that evil which is an unintended result of naturally occurring things performing their essential and fitting activities.[23] In other words, natural evils are not evils at all, but the necessary and proper actions of naturally existing things. Two examples provide clarification. The destruction that results from a tsunami is not evil. The perceived evil effects of the tsunami are merely the result of certain geological facts

[23] McGinnis, *Avicenna,* 224.

about the earth. Likewise, when a cougar eats a deer, it is not an evil act either, though one might wish to consider the harm befalling the deer to be evil. The deer's death is merely the result of certain biological facts about animal bodies, namely that a carnivorous cougar eats meat and the deer is made of flesh. The apparent evil in both the case of the tsunami and the case of the deer is merely the conjunction of natural causal series. In the few obscure places where Avicenna references moral evil, he posits moral evil to be the *willful* acts of harm that occur *when an individual chooses* a course of action.[24] This explains what a moral evil is, but does not reveal how an individual decides to act. Avicenna attempts to clarify the matter when he discusses the role of the intellect in moral decision making.

Avicenna deems the intellect to be a higher good than bodies and the corporeal. This means what lacks intellect is a lower ordered good. Since in can be inferred from the *Ta'aliqat* that each human's ultimate end is to achieve causal knowledge of the Necessary Existent, then an individual must eliminate or subjugate via the exercise of reason that which interferes with such knowledge, i.e., an individual's bodily desires. It therefore appears that the application of an individual's intellect to a moral decision is responsible for determining whether a desire within the individual will lead to a moral evil. Avicenna asserts that an individual must "make a strong personal effort in order to increase [the powers of] his soul, according to the measure of force which was given to the soul."[25] To "make a strong personal effort" implies an act of the *will,* though the process of deliberation still appears to be determined by that "which was given to the

[24] McGinnis, *Avicenna,* 225.

[25] Jules Janssens, "The Problem of Human Freedom in Ibn Sīnā," in *Ibn Sīnā and his Influence on the Arabic and Latin World,* ed. Jules Janssens (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006), 115.

soul". In Avicenna's philosophy, practical wisdom concerns itself with the *contemplation* of the good via the Necessary Existent. In other words, individual ethics are a *deliberation* concerning the right action of the individual in light of the Necessary Existent. The individual can therefore attain the proper moral quality or "change by his will" to the proper quality even when such change is contrary to his current nature or desires.[26] Avicenna believes the individual accomplishes such a feat by repeating the correct habits whose guidelines are found in divine revelation and the related divine law, the *Shari'a*. This makes it appear, though, that divine law determines choice. Avicenna, however, argues that the *Shari'a* provides guiding principles or restraints, not determinants. It is still left to the individual to realize his or her own choices.[27] If this is the case, then Avicenna's view on the soul in the afterlife may be telling.

Generally speaking, Avicenna contends that there exist two types of souls in the afterlife. The Noble Souls, which are those that possess a fully developed intellect, and the Imperfect or Mediocre Souls, those with a less developed intellect.[28] It is within an individual's capacity to develop their intellect's capability, i.e., to become a Noble Soul, so as to shed the bad desires (evils) that determine an individual's moral choices. Since an individual's existence in the afterlife is merely an extension of one's life on earth, one's existence in the afterlife is dependent upon one's actions here on earth. In other words, an individual's actions in the here and now determine one's punishment or reward in the hereafter. An individual's existence in the afterlife is therefore dependent upon the

[26] Janssens, 115.

[27] Janssens, 116.

[28] Janssens, 114.

development of one's intellect *and* moral disposition, though these are not necessarily linked to one another.[29] In the end, while Avicenna's theological framework relies on the development and implementation of the intellect as it pertains to moral evil, it fails to clarify if the human intellect is autonomous or causally determined. This means it remains unclear whether or not humans truly possess free will.

Conclusion

At this point, it looks as if the tension in Avicenna's philosophy has left delineating his view of free will at an impasse. As mentioned before, the consequence of emanation is a causally determined system. The implication is that a human's intellect is causally determined as well, and therefore *humans do not possess free will*. Via his theological position and in apparent opposition to the notion of causal determination, Avicenna argues that it is within an individual's own capacity to prepare for and accept intellectual enlightenment that leads to the proper moral disposition. In addition, one can infer from the *Ta'aliqat* that it is the purpose and within the capacity of the human will to bring about causal knowledge of the essence of perfect concepts, most prominently the Necessary Existent. These last two positions suggest that an individual's ability to deliberate is not restricted, and consequently, *humans possess free will*. The seeming paradox Avicenna has created for himself, however, is not as problematic as it appears.

The Necessary Existent, as pure intellect knows that It is the ultimate cause of all that exists. It therefore knows particulars and the effects that result from Itself. Reflecting on the fact that the Necessary Existent is both the efficient and final cause of all that exists, it can be surmised that the causal chain emanating from the Necessary Existent also

[29] Janssens, 117.

contains efficient and final causes. Avicenna argues that efficient causation requires an end, and an end begins as a conceptualized thing. The question therefore becomes whether or not a human can deliberate about the goodness of a conceptualized thing and act according to his or her own volition. Within the causally determined scheme of existence, humans do not seem to be free to determine the good conceptualized with a thing. Avicenna asserts, however, that the *Shari'a* tells us how to act so that we do conceptualize the true good. In other words, a human could deliberate upon the goodness of a conceptualized thing and, via the guidance of the *Shari'a*, come to possess absolute causal knowledge concerning what is ultimately good. Avicenna's view therefore does not entail the elimination of free will; only that human volition is limited by what is good.

If Avicenna's definition of free will simply means to deliberate sensitive to one's own judgments concerning what is best in the circumstances, then what is best in any circumstance is that which is absolutely good. An individual therefore wills freely when they act in light of the ultimate good, the Necessary Existent. In other words, since the Necessary Existent willed the emanation of the most good, i.e., existence, then an individual possess free will when they accept the guidance of divine illumination provided by the Necessary Existent in the *Shari'a,* which directs one in gaining pure knowledge of the ultimate good, the Necessary Existent. Conclusively then for Avicenna, an individual's free will is contained in his or her intellectual pursuit of the Necessary Existent which can be achieved by attending to the guiding principles within the *Shari'a*.

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