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Several Senses of Being Starting from Metaphysics Δ7

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A faithful betrayal? Traces of Plato in Avicenna's notion of truth

Abstract: This article proposes that Avicenna's concept of truth, which combines true and necessary being, shows a hitherto overlooked Platonic influence, which could have determined his departure from the Aristotelian notion of truth. Such an influence would be evidenced by some allusions to Plato's *Sophist* and *Timaeus* that cannot be inferred directly from Aristotelian texts. The way Avicenna discusses these passages in his analysis of the first notions of the intellect would imply that he was more acquainted with Platonic texts than usually acknowledged. The first section compares Plato's and Aristotle's texts on the many senses of being and particularly on the truth, to point out their common context and their differences. The second section examines three references to Plato in Avicenna's *Metaphysics* that are relevant to the latter's discussion on the primary notions of the intellect and to his position on truth. The last section analyzes Avicenna's notion of truth against the Platonic background, to show how his departure from Aristotle is consistent with the Aristotelian distinction of the senses of being.

Keywords: Aristotle, Modality, Primary Notions of the Intellect, Senses of Being

One aspect that sets apart Avicenna's *Metaphysics* concerns his analysis of the foundations of that science, including a critical assessment of Aristotle's determination – or lack thereof – of the subject and the first principles of Metaphysics. In a way, it predates Kant's criticism of Aristotle's account of the categories, because Aristotle's exposition lacks a principle to deduce the relation an hierarchy between the different categories, besides assigning a primacy to substance over accidents (Kritik der reinen Vernunft A 81; Kant 1973: 66–67; Kritik der reinen Vernunft B 107; Kant 1962: 93–94). However, Avicenna's criticism seems to be directed to Aristotle's oft repeated sentence "τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς". Here as well, rather than explaining the relation of the senses

to one another and to being in general, Aristotle simply enumerates those senses before starting their analysis (Aristotle 1957: Δ c. 7 1017a 7–b 9; ibid: E c. 2–4 1026a 33–1028a 6). Moreover, the only passage of the *Metaphysics* that affirms that the many senses of being converge into one, the οὐσία (Aristotle 1957: Γ c. 2 1003a 33–b 18), there is no mention to the usual four senses. Instead, the primacy of οὐσία is asserted by indicating that all the different species or levels of being (including non-being) ultimately refer to the οὐσία. In another relevant passage to the many senses of being, at the beginning of *Physics* A, Aristotle sets up his criticism of Parmenides' position that "all [that is] is one (ἓν τὸ πᾶν)" under the assumption that being is said in many senses, without any further elaboration (Aristotle 1950: A c. 2–3 185a 20–187a 11). The fact that these elements, and an enquiry on their foundations, are never presented in a systematic manner in the extant writings of Aristotle induced Avicenna –as well as many other philosophers and commentators before him– to elaborate his own account of the subject of Metaphysics, its first principles and the relation between the many senses of being.

Among Avicenna's key departures from Aristotle there is one that takes place at the opening paragraph of *Metaph.* I c. 8, where he expands the notion of truth in a way that seems to counter Aristotle's distinction between truth and the modal sense of being (ἐνέργεια and δύναμις). The passage goes as follows[1]:

> As regards truth (*al-ḥaqq* ["realtà" o "verità", Lizzini]), one understands by it existence in external things absolutely (*fī ʾl-aʿyān muṭlaqan*), and one understands by it permanent existence (*dāʾim*), and one understands by it the state of the verbal statement (*qawl*) or the belief (*ʿaqd*) indicating the state of the external thing, if it corresponds with it, such that we would say "This is a true statement" and "This is a true

[1] We've followed the translation of Michael M. Marmura (2005), indicating, when needed, the differences with the translations by Anawati (1978), Lizzini (2002) and Koutzarova (2007), as well as the relevant Arabic words used.

> belief". The Necessary Existent would thus be the permanently true in itself [è vero per sé continuativamente, Lizzini], while the possible existent would be true through another and false in itself. Hence, all things other than One Necessary Existent are, in themselves, false. As for the truth by way of correspondence (*al-muṭābaqa*), it is similar to the veracious (*al-ṣādiq*), except that, as I reckon, it is "veracious" when considered in terms of its relation to the fact and "true" when the relation to the fact to it is considered. The statements most deserving of being true are those whose truth (*ṣidq*) is permanent (continuativa, Lizzini); and, of these, the most deserving [de l'être (vraie), Anawati] are those whose truth is primary, requiring no cause (Avicenna 2005: 38–39; cf. id. 1978: 123; id. 2002: 107; Lizzini 2023: 248).

As it is well known, given that for Aristotle a true statement depends on its coincidence with the thing that is its foundation, the thing itself is to be found in one the other senses –categorial, either accidental or proper, and modal being– rather than in true being (Lizzini 2023: 250–256. 258). Just as when he distinguishes the many senses of being, Aristotle only points out that there is a relation between true sentences and the things they present but does not elaborate on their connection any further. Nevertheless, the comprehensive analysis carried out by Plato in the *Sophist* of the broadest, most universal senses of the notion of being, and of the relation between thought and language as well, lends itself to a comparison with Aristotle's position, and casts some light into the aspects Aristotle does not elaborate upon. The first section of this article focuses on this comparison, to show how Aristotle is related to Plato when he distinguishes the many senses of being, particularly true being.

This comparison also evidences a certain degree of relation between Avicenna and Plato, which could help to explain the former's departure from Aristotle's concept of truth, among other divergences. As it becomes clear from the passage quoted above, Avicenna establishes a connection between truth and existence that contradicts their distinction in Aristotle, since they correspond to two different senses of being. However, such a connection is consistent with what Plato affirms

in the *Sophist* regarding being and language. Although it is difficult to establish that Avicenna had direct knowledge of Plato's writings, when he discusses the primary notions of the intellect, the notion of "thing", and the distinction between the necessary existent and all other existents, there are three distinct allusions to the *Sophist* the *Timaeus* that could account for a greater acquaintance of Avicenna's with Plato. The second section enquires into these passages, to determine whether they could lead to infer a hitherto overlooked Platonic influence on Avicenna. The third section examines whether Avicenna's departure from Aristotle's notion of truth could account for that influence at a deeper level, one that would allow the Persian philosopher to contradict Aristotle, while remaining faithful to the principles the Aristotelian position is founded upon.

1. Traces of Plato's influence on Aristotle's conception of true being and how it is different to modal being

The main consequence of Plato's discussion about the possibility of conceiving "non-being", which takes place in the central part of the *Sophist*, is that "being" neither is nor cannot be conceived in only one sense, i.e. univocally. This implies that "being" is said of everything that is but, at the same time, that none of the things that exist is identical with "being" (Plato 1995: 242b–248e; id. 1985: 216–241; Seligman 1974: 22–32; Rosen 1999: 212–225; Notomi 1999: 211–230). As a corollary to this discussion, and as a first step into the new direction he intends to give to the inquiry on "being", Plato advances a definition of "being" as "to possess any sort of power (or capacity, cf. Fronterotta 2008) either to affect anything else or to be affected" (δύναμις εἴτ' εἰς τὸ ποιεῖν ἕτερον ὁτιοῦν πεφυκὸς εἴτ' εἰς τὸ παθεῖν, Plato 1995: 247c–248a; id. 1985: 234; Brisson 2008; Fronterotta 2008). From that first definition, Plato then presents several senses of "being", which he calls the "highest genera".

Although they are mutually exclusive –motion and rest, sameness and otherness–, they are related to their respective opposite and, in the case of sameness and otherness, take place at the same time in the same thing that already participates of motion and rest. Such plurality of senses of "being" not only allows Plato to prove that even contradictory or mutually exclusive things are able to exist, but also that "non-being" is also one of the senses of "being", insofar it coincides with one of the "highest genera", "otherness" (Plato 1995: 250a–252d. 254b–259d; id. 1985: 250–259. 273–298; Seligman 1974: 33–51. 58–63. 73–86; Rosen 1999: 229–290; Notomi 1999: 230–234. 240–246; Ambuel 2013; O'Brien 2019). The following section explores the relation between Plato's solution and Aristotle critical position regarding the many senses of "being".

1.1. Aristotle's sentence on the many senses of being as a reformulation of Plato's "highest genera" in a broader context

Plato's solution regarding "non-being" belonging to the sphere of "being" rests upon two principles. First, that everything that is, is referred to "being", while at the same time is not identical with it, i.e. it is capable of existing and being conceived, insofar it takes part of "being", while at the same time it keeps its own determination, which makes it something other from "being" and any other thing that exists. Second, Plato realizes that it is impossible to define "being" according to a given quality or entity, as his predecessors did, but he rather conceives "being" as both the slightest and the most comprehensive notion, one that is to be found in everything and which does not exclude anything from its sphere, unless it contradicts itself. Although the first two "highest genera", motion and rest (κίνεσις καὶ στάσις) do exclude one another, they are both equally related to "being" and, consequently, none can prevail over the other or preclude its existence in absolute terms. The last two "highest genera", "sameness" and "otherness" (ταὐτὸ καὶ θάτερον), on the other

hand, even if they are opposite, do not prevent their opposite to take place at the same time in the same thing and, above all, they are almost co-extensive with "being", since all things, except themselves, take part of both at the same time. Moreover, these last two genera determine the terms of the relation between all beings, their "communication" (κοινωνία) with "being" and with all other things.

With regard to Aristotle's criticism of this position, the greatest point of contention seems to be Plato's choice of conceiving "being" and the other "highest genera" as "genera", especially considering that for Aristotle genus and species will have a definite technical meaning. Deeming "being", "sameness", "otherness" and the rest to be mere "genera" implies that they should be conceived as any other thing, and that is incompatible with the universal character proper to those notions. However, it has been argued that Aristotle's discussion on the principles of being (most notably in *Metaph.* B c. 3, cf. Aristotle 1957: 998a 20–999a 23) does not necessarily mean that he refutes Plato's view altogether, but rather that he gives a critical assessment, which addresses some of the difficulties he encounters in that view (Berti 2009). Should one give Plato the benefit of the doubt and –given the highly abstract nature of his enquiry[2]– allow his broad use of "genus", it becomes evident that he is interested in outlining the opposite operations that all things seem to share –motion and rest– and, on the other hand, the terms according to which these most universal operations relate to one another and to all other things. Moreover, these "highest genera" cannot be identical with "being", because each possesses its own operation, one that distinguishes

[2] Cf. M. L. West's observation in the introduction to his edition of Hesiod's *Theogony* (1966: 31–32): "… like other Greeks, [Hesiod] uses the word 'god' for beings of very diverse kinds … Lastly, things that we should call abstractions: Death, Sleep, Deceit, Sex, Strife, Battles, Lies, Victory, Power, etc. In Hesiod's time it was not understood what abstractions are — no more was it in Plato's. They must be something; they are invisible, imperishable, and have great influence over human affairs; they must be gods".

each from the others, while at the same time allows their opposite to operate as well. Hence, even if motion, for instance, excludes rest absolutely from itself, it does not prevent rest to take place and to exist as well, and vice versa, because both motion and rest participate of "being". Considering all genera together, they establish the framework according to which existence can take place, i.e. the terms according to which things constitute themselves and affect one another by their respective operations. However, Aristotle relegates this framework to the physical world, because he considers it not to be universal enough to be the foundation of all reality, including the things not affected by motion and rest. Consequently, he agrees with Plato's framework only insofar it allows him to counter the position, held by Empedocles and other φυσικοί, that claims that physical bodies or their operations are the principles of physical reality (cf. Aristotle 2012: A c. 6 987b 21–988a 7; Steel 2012, 191–197).

Moreover, Aristotle does agree with Plato on the principle of that framework, namely that "being" is intrinsically plural. This intrinsic plurality does not consist in a division of being, as if it were a genus, but in the fact that "sameness" and "otherness" participate of "being". He agrees on the framework of the mutually exclusive realities as well, on the condition that it is restricted to things subject to motion and abstract, mathematical entities, which depend on the former. Hence, the "highest genera" (at least the two mutually exclusive ones, motion and rest) would correspond to the sense of "being" Aristotle calls "categorial", both accidental and proper (κατὰ συμβεβηκός and καθ' αὐτό, cf. Aristotle 1957: Δ c. 7 1017a 7-30; Owens 1978: 307–311). The other two senses, the modal one and truth and falsity, would transcend the categorial sense as a whole and qualify the things that take place in it, insofar they are capable of existing and are related to the intellect to be known as the thing they are. Just as "sameness" and "otherness", both act and potency and "being" as true are co-extensive with "being" but, since they qualify

"being" and are related to their opposite –act to potency, truth to falsity–, they cannot be identical with "being". The following section compares Plato's determination of truth and falsity with Aristotle's position and outlines the relation between truth and modality.

1.2. Plato's account of falsity and the terms of the distinction between "being" as existent and as intelligible

Once he has established that "being" implies a multiplicity that makes it possible for different, even mutually incompatible things to exist, i.e. the terms according to which "non-being" is compatible with "being", Plato examines how is it possible to affirm falsity. In this section, the several allusions to grammar and language in general he used in the previous sections –his digression about the compatibility between genera, letters and words, for instance, especially in relation to grammar and dialectics (Plato 1995: 252e–254b; id. 1985: 262–273)– become relevant to examine the relation between being and language. First, he observes that a statement (λόγος) implies a combination (συμπλοκή) of two different kinds of words, nouns and verbs (ὀνόματα καὶ ῥήματα). On one hand, each of them has a different operation, nouns are related to things that perform actions, while verbs refer to the actions themselves. Those operations are complementary, and when a noun and a verb are "weaved together", they form a statement, which "gives information about facts or events in the present or past or future". On the other hand, insofar as they are words, they are not just uttered sounds, but signify something, i.e. they present something that is (δηλώματα). Thus, a statement does not simply put together two kinds of words but, by fitting them together (συναρμόττειν), presents the operation a thing performs and, consequently, becomes a λόγος σημαίνων (Plato 1995: 261d–262e; id. 1985: 303–308; Fronterotta 2013: 205–211). This leads to a second combination, namely between the statement and the thing it refers to. Here, the

difficulty Plato had found at the beginning of his analysis of "non-being", that it is impossible to even formulate a statement about "non-being", since every element of a statement refers to something that participates of "being" (Plato 1995: 238a–239c; 1985: 205–209), appears in a positive sense, because "non-being" is also part of "being", insofar it corresponds to the genus of "otherness". Therefore, the relation between the statement and the thing it refers to entails a qualification, "true" or "false", which depends on whether the statement "states ... the things that are (or the facts) as they are" or "states ... things different from the things that are ... [namely] things that are-not as being" (Plato 1995: 262e–263d; id. 1985: 308–317).

Now, since it is possible to formulate false statements, they should also be present in the different ways human beings conceive reality, namely through thinking (διάνοια), judgement (δόξα) and appearing (φαντασία). Discourse (λόγος) is present in all these senses, taking place either in written or spoken sentences, which function as "a stream which flows from the mind through the lips with sound" (διὰ τοῦ στόματος ἰὸν μετὰ φθόγγου, Plato 1995: 263e; id. 1985: 318), or in the act of thinking, as an "inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound" (ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς αὑτὴν διάλογος ἄνευ φωνῆς γιγνόμενος … *διά νοια*, Plato 1995: ibid.; id. 1985: ibid.). Consequently, in the case of thinking (διάνοια), the dialogue the mind carries on with itself is bound to follow the rules of dialectic; hence, it should always be true. In the case of judgement (δόξα), the dialogue is further qualified by affirmation and negation, i.e. the critical apprehension is also informed by the conviction that one statement is true, and the opposite statement is false. When the dialogue does not concern the things as they are in themselves, i.e. considers them in simple and universal terms, but according to how they appear to the senses, judgement is accompanied by appearance (φαντασία). The fact that a discourse or enunciation is capable of being false shows that falsity can be present in all these modes of apprehending

reality as well and, hence, it is clear where the sophist hides when presenting his deceptions (Plato 1995: 263e–264b; id. 1985: 318–320).

Even more so than in the previous section, Aristotle elaborates on the relation between λόγος –conceived as sentence, discourse and thinking in general– and truth in several places, most notably in *De interpretatione* c. 1-6 (Aristotle 1949: 16a 1–17a 37; id. 2002: 43–47) and in the analyses of true being in his *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 1957: Δ c. 7 1017a 31–35; E c. 4 1027b 18–34; Θ c. 10 1051a 34–1052a 11; 2006: 247–269). In the case of the structure of sentences, Aristotle follows the general scheme of Plato, while he also elaborates upon the way affirmative and negative sentences behave regarding truth and falsity[3]. Aristotle distinguishes between simple sentences (λόγοι), which are either affirmative (καταφάσεις) or negative (ἀποφάσεις), and statement-making sentences (λόγοι ἀποφαντικοί), the only ones "in which there is truth and falsity" (Aristotle 1957: c. 4 16b 26–17a 7; id. 2002: 45–46). Most notably, even though he generally agrees with Plato on the terms of the relation between things and discourse, Aristotle conceives it as a relation between the affections in the soul (παθήματα τῆς ψυχής) and spoken and written expressions (φάσεις, i.e. nouns and verbs) and sentences. Unlike Plato, though, he distinguishes between thinking and mere imagination (φαντασία), because the latter "differs from assertion and denial", whereas truth and falsity consist in "an interweaving of thoughts" (συμπλοκὴ νοημάτων), which, even if they are different from imagination, at least must be related to it (Aristotle 1963: Γ c. 8 432a 10–14; id. 2016: 65).

To complete his analysis in the *Sophist*, Plato examines two sentences, "Theaetetus sits" and "Theaetetus flies", in order to establish how to ascertain the truth or falsity of that kind of sentences, which are not by themselves true or false (Plato 1995: 262e–263b; id. 1985: 309–317).

[3] For instance, that truth and falsity can be found in both affirmative and negative sentences (Aristotle 1949: c. 9 18a 28–29) or some differences between universal and particular sentences (Aristotle 1949: c. 7–8 17a 38–18a 27).

As Fronterotta observes (2013: 212–219), the truth of the first sentence and the falsity of the second cannot be completely confirmed by the reader. As for the first, since we readers do not see whether Theaetetus sits or not, we must rely on what Plato says, namely that, at that moment during the dialogue, Theaetetus sits. As for the falsity of the second sentence, one must rely on the fact that Theaetetus' is part of the species "human being" and, consequently, it would be impossible for him to fly by himself. However, if one considers both sentences in universal terms, the falsity of "Theaetetus flies" is confirmed *a priori* by the fact that flying is not among the attributes that are compatible with human beings, whereas it is impossible to confirm *a priori* the truth of a sentence such as "Theaetetus sits", given that the connection between subject and predicate is not universal nor necessary, but particular and contingent. Moreover, although the truth of that kind of sentences is confirmed with the help of appearance (φαντασία), appearance alone is not enough to be the basis of a true universal sentence, because it is only *a posteriori* and, most of all, it is not a principle valid for all members of the species. On the other hand, neither the fact that "to sit" is an attribute compatible with all human beings –and, for that matter, with all animals that have hind legs– can be the foundation to assert the truth of such a sentence, insofar is an accidental activity, because human beings sit only temporarily. Since, as Aristotle affirms, truth and falsity are not present in things, but only in the intellect (Aristotle 1957: E c. 4, 1027a 25–27; Θ c. 10, 1051b 3–5), it follows that the truth of non-self-evident, i.e. contingent sentences must be founded on a principle that is present in things and common to all of them, i.e. as co-extensive with "being" as truth and falsity are, and just as intrinsically related to "being" as they are. As it turns out, given that "being" considered in the categorial sense is not as co-extensive as truth and falsity, but limited to things that belong to a genus or species, and is divided into *per se* and accidental categorial being (Aristotle 1957: Δ c. 7 1017a 22–24), only potency and act remains as

the real basis to assert the truth and falsity of contingent sentences. Consequently, however related truth and modality are, they remain different senses of "being".

2. Avicenna's allusions to Plato in his analysis of the first notions of the intellect

The influence of the *Corpus Aristotelicum* on Avicenna's *Book of the Cure* (*Kitāb aš-Šifāʾ*), and on his *Metaphysics* (*al-ʾIlāhīyāt*) in particular, is evident both in the structure of the work and the subjects he deals with (Bertolacci 2006: 265–302; Menn 2013: 143–146)[4]. Such structure only reflects Avicenna's own course of studies, which added some texts to the standard Muslim curriculum (Gutas 2014: 169–179; Reisman 2003). Regarding the *ʾIlāhīyāt*, besides Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Themistius' commentary on *Metaph.* Λ and Kindī's *Inclusive Philosophy* (*al-Falsafa ad-dāḫila*, Gutas 2014: 172), in his autobiography Avicenna points out the influence of Fārābī's short treatise on the purpose of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, a text which helped him to understand Aristotle's treatise (Gutas 2014: 269–288; Koutzarova 2009: 13–38). However, his attitude towards Aristotle was critical, and as he grew more independent in his thinking, this criticism became more incisive as well (Reisman 2013: 19–22; Gutas 2014: 323–334). On the other hand, although in his autobiography Avicenna suggests having read Plato's *Sophist*, his criticism is even harsher, and he is ready to dismiss Platonical positions in favor of those of Aristotle, because he considers Aristotle's thought, unlike Plato's philosophy, to be "matured to the point of reaping"[5].

[4] Cf. Wisnovsky (2000) for a discussion on the influence of *kalām* in Avicenna's notion of thing (*šayʾiyya*), which gives a broader context to section 2.2. of this article.

[5] Cf. Avicenna's autobiography in Gutas 2014: 28 – 29: "Aristotle's teacher [Plato] digressed from the due course and did not treat the subject adequately in what he wrote in the book which he called *The Sophist* ['Sophistics', *sūfisṭīqā*]. His digression was due to his

We propose not only that there are distinct traces of Avicenna's critical attitude towards Plato in some sections of the first treatise of his *Metaphysics*, but that those passages evidence, if not a direct knowledge of Plato's writings, a familiarity that has been hitherto overlooked. In this section, we focus on three passages of Avicenna's analysis of the primary conceptions of the intellect (*al-maʿānī*, "begreiffliche Strukturen", according to Koutzarova, 2009: 310), "thing" (*aš-šayʾ*), "existent" (*al-mawǧūd*) and "necessary" (*aḍ-ḍarūrī*) in particular. This discussion with Platonic positions would give a general context to his conception of truth, which in part would help to understand his departure from the Aristotelian position.

2.1. Being as capacity and the immediate character of the first notions

The first allusion appears at the beginning of the analysis of the first conceptions of the intellect, when Avicenna affirms that any attempt to explain a prior concept from a posterior notion falls into a circular demonstration:

> [...] none of these things can be shown by a proof totally devoid of circularity or by the exposition of better known things. Hence, whoever attempts to place in them something as a [defining] constituent falters – as, for example, one who says: "It is of the existent's true nature to be either active or acted on". This, while inescapably the case, belongs to

confusion of Logic with Physics and Theology, [subjects] feebly distinguished by philosophers before the appearance of this great man [Aristotle]. Plato's inadequate treatment was due to the fact that the only way for the occurrence of sophistry which he understood was homonymy. It is proper, then, that the truth be told: if the extent of Plato's achievements in Philosophy is what came down to us of him, then his wares were paltry indeed and philosophy in his time had not matured to the point of reaping. Whoever affects allegiance to him, having at his disposal only the amount of knowledge about Plato that has been transmitted to us, does it either out of envy for Aristotle or out of a foolish notion that the prior in time is also in a discipline prior in rank. The truth, however, is the opposite".

5; Avicenna 2005: 23; id. 1978: 107; id. 2002: 71; Koutzarova 2009: 312–313).

That "whoever" who claims that the nature of the existent is either to be active or acted on, i.e. is capable of exercising an action or to suffer the action of another, seems to be none other than the Stranger in Plato's *Sophist*. And although Avicenna could have been indirectly acquainted with this definition of "existent", the context in which it appears in Plato's dialogue is relevant to the point Avicenna is trying to make. Since all primary conceptions are immediate, no other notion which depends on them can render them more intelligible. Hence, Plato's definition of "being" as "capacity" (δύναμις) –which itself is a reaction to the positions that identify "being" with a certain reality, either material or immaterial– is bound to fail, because it falls into a circular proof. Even if Avicenna agrees with Plato in conceiving "existent" as one of the most universal conceptions, he disagrees with his definition of "being" as "capacity", not because it is wrong, but because the terms of that definition, "activity" and "passivity", are not as immediate as "being" and depend on it to be known. Moreover, to define "existent" or any other primary conception in the same way as we define all other entities, entails the risk of conceiving them as any other posterior, dependent and particular thing, not as the universal, immediate and independent conceptions they are, i.e. to conceive "existent" as completely identical to "thing".

2.2. Plato's analysis of false sentences as the point of departure of the distinction and affinity between "thing" (*šayʾ*) and "existent" (*mawǧūd*)

The second allusion comes immediately after the previous one and allows Avicenna to determine how the notion of existent (*mawǧūd*) is subject to "thing" (*šayʾ*), thus establishing a primacy of the latter over the former:

> The case is similar with somebody's statement: "The thing is that about which it is valid [to give] an informative statement", for "is valid" (*yaṣiḥḥu*) is less known than "the thing"; and "informative statement" is [likewise] less known than "the thing" ... in this and similar things there may be some art of directing attention (*tanbīh* [un certain rappel, Anawati]); but, in reality, if you say, "The thing is that about which it is valid [to give] an informative statement", it is as if you have said, "The thing is the thing about which it is valid [to give] an informative statement", because the meaning of "whatever" (*amr* [ce, Anawati; Sache, Koutzarova]), "that which" (*al-ladḏ* [dont, Anawati; dasjenige, welches, Koutzarova]), and "the thing" (*aš-šayʾ*) is one and the same. You would have then included "the thing" in the definition of "the thing". Still, we do not deny that through this [statement, *qawl*] and its like, despite its vitiating starting point, there occurs in some manner a directing of attention to the thing ... "The thing", or its equivalent, may be used in all languages to indicate some other meaning. For, to everything (*amr* [eine jede Sache, Koutzarova]) there is a reality (*ḥaquīqah*) by virtue of which it is what it is ... It is that which we should perhaps call "proper existence" (*al-wuǧūdu l-ḫāṣṣ*), not intending by this the meaning given to affirmative existence (*al-wuǧūdu l-ʾiṯbātī* [behauptbare Daß-Sein, Koutzarova]); for the expression "existence" (*al-wuǧūd*) is also used to denote many meanings (al-maʿānī [begreiffliche Strukturen, Koutzarova]), one of which is the reality (*al-ḥaqīqah* [vérité, Anawati; Wesen, Koutzarova]) a thing happens to have. Thus, [the reality] a thing happens to have is, as it were, its proper existence (*Metaph.* I c. 5; Avicenna 2005: 23–24; id. 1978: 107–108; id. 2002: 71–73; Koutzarova 2009: 313–315).

Here, Avicenna considers the negative result of the first section of the analysis of "being" in the *Sophist* –that it is impossible to conceive or enunciate absolute "non-being", because in that case something that is would be predicated of "non-being", hence one should admit a degree of being to "non-being"– in affirmative terms, namely that "being", or rather "thing", is conceived and enunciated of everything that is, i.e. of every "thing", even if in every case "thing" is predicated of another "thing". Although Avicenna admits that it might appear like another case of circular predication, "because the meaning of 'whatever', 'that which' and

'thing' is one and the same", he also points out that "thing" is the common name for everything that is "this something", i.e. that possesses an intrinsic determination, a reality or truth (*al-ḥaqīqah*). In other words, the notion of "thing" stands for every concrete thing –"human being" or "horse", for instance–, insofar each of them has its own name that refers to its intrinsic determination, by virtue of which each is what it is ("'The thing', or its equivalent, may be used in all languages to indicate some other meaning. For, to everything there is a reality by virtue of which it is what it is").

However, since every one of them is a thing, just as any other, the notion of thing cannot be identified with any particular thing, nor can be an essential attribute of any, i.e. "thingness" (*šayʾiyya*) cannot be considered as just another attribute of a thing, given that because of it things constitute as such. As Avicenna continues:

> [...] It is evident that each thing has a reality proper to it (*ḥaqīqatun ḫāṣṣah*) – namely, its quiddity (*māhīyatuhū*). It is known that the reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) proper to each thing is something else than the existence that corresponds to what is affirmed (*al-ʾiṯbāt* [die Behauptung des Daß-Seins, Koutzarova). This is because, if you said, "The reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) of such a thing exists either in concrete things, or in the soul, or absolutely, being common to both", this would have a meaning [that was] realized and understood; [whereas], if you were to say, "The reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) of such a thing is the reality of such a thing", or "The reality of such a thing is a reality", this would be superfluous, useless talk [une tautologie inutile, Anawati]. [Again], if you were to say, "The reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) of such a thing is a thing", this, too, would not be a statement imparting knowledge of what is not known. Even less useful than this is for you to say, "Reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) is a thing", unless by "thing" you mean "the existent"; for then it is as though you have said, "The reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) of such a thing is an existing reality" (*Metaph.* I c. 5; Avicenna 2005: 24–25; id. 1978: 108; id. 2002: 73; Koutzarova 2009: 315–316)

This is Avicenna's way of saying that "existent" is not a real predicate, insofar "existent" coincides with "thing", i.e. consists in the quiddity or intrinsic determination of every given thing, in its *al-ḥaqīqah*. In other words, "thingness", i.e. quiddity or *al-ḥaqīqah*, are the principle according to which all things constitute in each case as "this something" and, consequently, it is redundant to say, for instance, that "horseness" is the quiddity of a horse, and "humanity" the quiddity of a human being, but to say that "horseness" is a thing, i.e. it is something real, capable of existing, is not redundant, but adds something to our knowledge of "horseness". However, as a universal, no *ḥaqīqah* can exist as an independent, self-subsistent entity, just as Plato's forms; hence, considered according to the most extreme interpretation, the *ḥaqīqah* exists only in the intellect (*Metaph.* V c. 2; Avicenna 2004: 157; id. 1978: 240; id. 2002: 467), which is and is known as "this something" and "this something" only – "humanity" or "horseness", for instance. Moreover, since quiddities are only "this something", in themselves they are prior to universality, individuality and existence, all of which converge in them, as it is clear from this passage of *Metaph.* V:

> The universal, then, inasmuch as it is a universal, is one thing; and, inasmuch as it is something to which universality attaches, it is [another] thing. The universal inasmuch as it is a universal is that which is denoted by one of [the above] definitions. If that [indicated thing] happens to be "human" or "horse", then there is another meaning other than the meaning of universality – namely [to take the latter example] "horseness". For the definition of "horseness" is not the definition of universality, nor is universality included in the definition of "horseness". For "horseness" has a definition that is not in need of the definition of universality, but is [something] to which universality accidentally occurs. For, in itself, it is nothing at all except "horseness"; for, in itself, it is neither one nor many and exists neither in concrete things nor in the soul, existing in none of these things either in potency or in act, such that [these] are included in "horseness". Rather, in terms of itself, it is only "horseness" ... Thus, "horseness" – on the condition

> that, in its definition, it corresponds to many things – becomes general; and, because it is taken with properties and accidents to which one points, it is specific (*ḫāṣṣah*). "Horseness", however, is in itself only "horseness" (*Metaph.* V c. 1; Avicenna 2005: 149; id. 1978: 234; id. 2002: 445).

The notion of *šayʾ*, then, is prior to *mawǧūd*, because "thingness" is the same as quiddity (*ḥaqīqah*), i.e. the intrinsic determination that constitutes every thing as "this something", and everything else that determines the way things are –their being only in the intellect because they are universal notions, their existing independently from the intellect because they are real, or their actual or merely potential existence– is posterior to it and occurs to it.

Once Avicenna establishes the primacy of *šayʾ* over *mawǧūd*, asserting that it is true that a thing is "that about which information is given", he continues examining the possibility of affirming absolute "non-being". Once again, his exposition follows Plato's parallel passage in the *Sophist*:

> If by the nonexistent is meant the nonexistent in external reality (*al-maʿdūm fī-l-ʾaʿyāni*), this would be possible; for it is possible for a thing that does not exist in external things to exist (*ṯābit* [soit établie, Anawati) in the mind (*aḏ-ḏihn*). But if [something] other than this is meant, this would be false and there would be no information about it at all. It would not be known except only as [something] conceived in the soul. [To the notion] that [the nonexistent] would be conceived in the soul as a concept that refers (*tushīr* [désignerait, Anawati]) to some external thing, [we say] "Certainly not!". Regarding the informative statement (*al-ḫabar* [Aussagbarkeit, Koutzarova]), [the above analysis is correct] because information is always about something realized in the mind (*mutaḥaqqiq* ["vérifié", Anawati; im Verstande Erfaßten, Koutzarova]). No affirmative information about the absolutely nonexistent is [ever] given. If, moreover, information about it is given in the negative, then an existence in some respect is given in the mind (*Metaph.* I c. 5; Avicenna 2005: 25; id. 1978: 108–109; id. 2002: 75; Koutzarova 2009: 317–318).

First, he concedes that it is possible to call "nonexistent" something that admittedly exists only in the intellect, such as universal concepts. On the other hand, regarding absolute nonexistence, Avicenna refutes the possibility of both affirmative or negative statements about it, and any statement that refers to absolute nonexistence is regarded as a false statement, and accepted as such, as long as it is meant to be a mere statement, not related to external things. Just as Plato asserts in the *Sophist*, a statement implies the attribution of something that is, and no existent can be attributed to absolute "non-being", otherwise the sentence would presuppose its existence, and here the contradiction is self-evident. Avicenna reformulates this interdiction by saying that "information is always about something realized [i.e. determined as a thing] in the mind", but he also adds something which he will explain immediately after this passage, namely that no sentence regarding absolute "non-being" can be imagined –echoing Plato's distinction between thinking, judgement and appearing– in the same way as sentences that refer to external things. Avicenna then turns his attention to what he considers the key notion regarding being:

> [This is] because our saying "it" [il nostro dire "è", Lizzini] entails a reference (*išārah* [désignation, Anawati; Hinweis, Koutzarova]), and a reference to the nonexistent that has no concept in any respect at all in the mind is impossible. For how can anything affirmative be said about the nonexistent when the meaning of our statement, "The nonexistent is such", is that the description "such" is realized for the nonexistent (*ḥaṣil lil- maʿdūm* [est acquis au non-existant, Anawati]), there being no difference between the realized (*al-ḥāṣil* [das Verwirklichte, Koutzarova]) and the existent? It would be as though we have said, "This description exists for the nonexistent" (Avicenna 2005: 25; id. 1978: 109; id. 2002: 75–77; Koutzarova 2009: 318).

If the defining notion of *šayʾ* was quiddity or *al-ḥaqīqah*, what characterizes *mawǧūd* is the fact that there is no difference between

existing and the realized (*al-ḥāṣil*). Thus, existence is not something extrinsically added to the thing, but is its realization, its subsisting independently from the mind, and this realization is known when it is indicated in a sentence such as "*a* is *b*". Therefore, although regarding its *ḥaqīqah*, *šayʾ* is prior to *mawǧūd*, the opposite is true concerning the actual, individual determination of the existent, insofar it is realized, i.e. it exists and is known as an existent (Koutzarova 2009: 346–350).

Furthermore, Avicenna considers both *mawǧūd* and *šayʾ* (or *amr*) to be intrinsically related and concomitants (*mutalāzimāt*), even if they differ in their proper determinations: "Hence, you have now understood the way in which 'the thing' differs from what is understood by 'the existent' and 'the realized' and that, despite this difference, the two [that is, 'the thing' and 'the existent'] are necessary concomitants" (Avicenna 2004: 27; id. 1978: 110; id. 2002: 79; Koutzarova 2009: 321; Druart 2001). In other words, insofar a thing is intrinsically related to *mawǧūd*, it possesses what Koutzarova (2009: 148–149) calls a "possibility to realization" ("Möglichkeit zur Verwirklichung, [*taḥṣīl*, *ṭubūt*]"), i.e. it is capable of independent existence, and when it is realized (*al-ḥāṣil*) it becomes one with all its external determinations. Once Avicenna has established this affinity, he introduces the different ways existence can take place, namely necessarily or by an external cause. Here, too, there is an allusion to Plato, this time even more clear.

2.3. Causality as the main distinction between necessary and contingent existence

Avicenna's last reference to Plato, taken almost verbatim from the *Timaeus*, appears at the beginning of his analysis of necessary being (*Metaph.* I c. 6):

> We thus say: The things that enter existence bear a [possible] twofold division in the mind. Among them there will be that which, when considered in itself, its existence would be not necessary. It is [moreover] clear that its existence would also not be impossible, since otherwise it would not enter existence. This thing is within the bound of possibility [dans le domaine du possible, Anawati]. There will also be among them that which, when considered in itself, its existence would be necessary. We thus say: That which in itself is a necessary existent has no cause, while that which in itself is a possible existent has a cause. Whatever is a necessary existent in itself is a necessary existent in all its aspects. The existence of the Necessary Existent cannot be equivalent [omologa, Lizzini] to the existence of another where each would equal the other as regards necessary existence, becoming [thereby] necessary commitants. The existence of the Necessary Existent cannot at all be a composite, [deriving] from multiplicity. The true nature of the Necessary Existent can in no manner be shared by another (Avicenna 2005: 29–30; id. 1978: 113; id. 2002: 85).

First, Avicenna establishes the terms to conceive the possible and the necessary existent based on the presupposition that they both are capable of existing. Their distinction, however, bears "a [possible] twofold division in the mind". The possible existent is conceived as different from both the necessary and the impossible existent, but neither of them is to be included in its definition, as it would, if possible being was defined as "what does not exist by necessity nor is impossible for it to exist". Instead, Avicenna defines possible being as that which does not contradict itself, but whose existence is not implied in its *ḥaqīqah*, because it depends on something else to exist. The fact that it does not contradict itself implies that it is formally a thing, because it is valid to formulate an informative statement about it, even if it is evident that it could not exist independently. On the other hand, in the case of the necessary existent, it already exists and has always existed, because, unlike possible existents, it does not entail a cause, whereas the latter exist as a result of a cause, i.e. they depend on something else that causes

their *ḥaqīqah* to be realized (Bertolacci 2008: 39–50; Koutzarova 2009: 362–382). This is the same difference Plato affirms in the *Timaeus*:

> That which [is always real] is apprehensible by thought with a rational account is the thing that is always unchangeably real; whereas that which is the object of belief together with unreasoning sensation is the thing that becomes and passes away, but never has real being. Again, all that becomes must needs become by the agency of some cause; for without a cause nothing can come to be (Plato 1902: 28a; id. 2014: 22).

There is an important difference between Avicenna and Plato on the way both the eternal and the possible beings are known. According to Plato, who puts in a real, physical context the distinction of the ways human beings conceive reality he had established in the *Sophist*, the eternal being is apprehended by an intellection that takes place through enunciation ("apprehensible by thought with a rational account"), while all things that are subject to generation and destruction are judged by a judgment that takes place through a perception without enunciation ("is the object of belief together with unreasoning sensation"). For Avicenna, in turn, the distinction between necessary and possible being takes place in the intellect, because their *ḥaqīqah* that is subject to causation is apprehended by the intellect prior to their existence, and it predetermines the way their existence will be realized. As he already stated while distinguishing *šayʾ* from *mawǧūd*, that realization is something that occurs to the thing, namely to its quiddity (*ḥaqīqah*), which exists insofar possesses a possibility to be realized (*taḥṣīl*). This distinction also regards their truth, as we will see in the following section.

3. Avicenna's manifold account of truth and his "faithful betrayal" of Aristotle

In the passage presented at the beginning of this paper, Avicenna distinguishes three senses of truth, namely that it exists absolutely in external things (*fī ʾl-aʿyān muṭlaquan*), that it signifies permanent existence, and that it is "the state of the verbal statement or of the belief indicating the state of the external thing, if it correspond with it", i.e. as a correspondence between the thing and the understanding. It is immediately apparent that he does not limit the notion of truth to Aristotle's assertion that truth belongs to the intellect. Instead, Avicenna's position seems to consider the existent as true being as well, insofar the thing that possesses a possibility to be realized, once he exists, has realized that possibility. Moreover, if that existence is permanent, so is the truth. Avicenna's betrayal of Aristotle's fourfold distinction of the senses of being would lie in that he identifies true being with the existent, insofar he considers them to be two facets of the same phenomenon, rather than two different, but co-extensive senses of being.

Furthermore, this threefold distinction of truth is consistent with his discrepancy with Plato's account of how the eternal being and the possible things are known, which we noted in section 2.3. Unlike Plato, for whom eternal and changeable being belong to different spheres of reality and, therefore, they are known by the intellect alone or by belief together with "unreasonable sensation" respectively, Avicenna considers that all things are conceived by the intellect –at least regarding the first principles, not the actual process of knowing, which also entails perception–, and the distinction between the possible and the necessary regards their being subject to causation or not, i.e. whether their quiddity (*ḥaqīqah*) depends on something else, as all other things do, or its existence is neither subject to causality nor to universality, because it

consists on the absolute identity between existence and essence, *anniyya* (Metaph. VIII c. 4; Avicenna 2005: 273–278; id. 1985: 85–89; id. 2002: 781–793; D'Alverny 1959; Lizzini 2003: 112–113). Hence, insofar the necessary being does not depend on anything else but is "a necessary existent in all its aspects. The existence of the Necessary Existent cannot be equivalent to the existence of another … cannot at all be a composite, [deriving] from multiplicity" (Metaph. I c. 6; Avicenna 2005: 30; 1978: 113; 2002: 85), it is also "permanently true in itself, while the possible existent would be true through another and false in itself" (Metaph. I c. 8; Avicenna 2005: 38; 1978: 123; 2002: 107).

Consequently, the first definition of true being, that it exists absolutely in external things, indicates both the absolute existence of the necessary being, which can only be one, and the concomitance of a quiddity (*ḥaqīqah*) and its existence (*mawǧūd*), i.e. the thing insofar it is realized (*al-ḥāṣil*). In the first case, the necessary being simply exists and its existence does not depend on anything else, and it is true by itself because its existence contains and exhibits everything it needs to be known (Lizzini 2023: 255–257). In the second case, the individual is the same thing as its quiddity, although delimited by the attributes that are present in it. This implies that the existent constitutes what the thing truly is, especially regarding possible beings, whose present, contingent truth changes as soon as their attributes do. On the other hand, given that the attributes that are compatible with the thing are predetermined by its quiddity, there is nothing in the existent that was not already expected to be there, because it was possible for all compatible attributes to take place in the thing at some point and, therefore, the existent does not contain anything beyond what could be conceived as possible, i.e. existence adds nothing to the possible, their only difference being in the actual relation between the thing and the attributes that inhere in it at the moment, which confirms the truth of it (Lizzini 2023: 257–258). Hence, recalling Plato's example of Theaetetus sitting or flying,

Theaetetus' quiddity is compatible with being seated, but only the fact that he is sitting at a given moment, i.e. that he exists as a sitting human being, makes it true.

The second definition of truth, that signifies permanent existence, further emphasizes Avicenna's choice that true being is equivalent to the existent, especially in the case of the necessary being. Since it possesses everything it needs to exist, its existence is permanent and unchangeable, and, therefore, it is true by itself, i.e. all statements that regard the necessary being are true *a priori*. Something similar occurs with the quiddity and the essential attributes of possible beings. Even if they are false in themselves, i.e. their quiddity does not exist by itself, but by an extrinsic cause, which is ultimately the necessary being; at the same time, the relation between their quiddity and the essential attributes is also necessary, so the statements that regard the quiddity and its essential attributes are also true *a priori*, although they depend on the necessary being to be realized. This also regards sentences that state a contingent activity of a possible being, such as "Theaetetus sits". Given that the existence of the quiddity in relation to one of its possible activities confirms the truth of the statement, this sentence is also eternally true, considering all the circumstances that delimit its validity.

The third definition, which became the standard enunciation of truth as correspondence (*al-muṭābaqa*) of the thing and the intellect in the Latin West, reformulates Aristotle's notion of truth to determine the relation between the thing and the statement (*qawl*) that presents its quiddity or its proper operations, as well as the judgement or belief (*iʿtiqād*) that derives from that statement. Most of all, it establishes an absolute primacy of the necessary existent concerning both truth and existence. In the first case, Avicenna rephrases Plato's sentence in the *Timaeus* about the difference between eternal and possible being. While the former "is always unchangeably real" (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὄν), the latter not only exists in continual change, as it "becomes and passes away"

(γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον), but also, because of that, it never completely is what it is, "never has real being" (ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν). Therefore, the possible depends on the necessary to exist and to be true as well, because its quiddity, by itself, is incapable of causing itself and all other attributes to occur to it, i.e. cannot realize itself, and, consequently, there can be no true sentence regarding it, unless something causes that quiddity to exist. Only when something is realized, i.e. when it exists, is actually true, and "it is valid to give an informative statement" about it.

While Avicenna's definition of truth echoes Aristotle's sentence, that "it is not because of our truly thinking you to be pale that you are pale, but it is rather because you are pale that we who say this speak the truth" (οὐ γὰρ διὰ τὸ ἡμᾶς οἴεσθαι ἀληθῶς σε λευκὸν εἶναι εἶ σὺ λευκός, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ σὲ εἶναι λευκὸν ἡμεῖς οἱ φάντες τοῦτο ἀληθεύομεν, Aristotle 1957: Θ c. 10 1051b 6-9; id. 2006: 14), it is formulated in more radical terms, insofar it presents the relation between the thing and its thinking as concomitant. According to Avicenna, a statement is not true, but truthful or veritable (*ṣādiq*), insofar it corresponds to the thing, whereas the thing is true with regard to the sentence that expresses it: "As for the truth by way of correspondence, it is similar to the veracious (*al- ṣādiq*), except that, as I reckon, it is 'veracious' (*ṣādiq*) when considered in terms of its relation to the fact and 'true' (*ḥaqq*) when the relation of the fact to it is considered" (Avicenna 2004: 38–39; id. 1978: 123; id. 2002: 107). However, concerning possible beings, this relation between the intellect and the thing presupposes the activity of the necessary existent that causes, directly or indirectly, the thing to be realized, hence, to exist[6]. Should this be

[6] Cf. Lizzini (2023, 254–255): "Logical truth is syntactic: it always concerns things recognized as part of a whole; it always concerns the relationships that things establish among themselves (regardless of whether they are related to the quiddity of the thing, to mental existence, or to external existence) ... the foundation of Avicenna's ontology is no longer to be found in the substance and unity of being, but instead in its internal and inescapable division and the consequent composition which recognizes in things an essence or quiddity and an existence. It is in this sense that the ontological background

another trace of Platonic influence in Avicenna, namely that the existent –conceived as the concomitance of the quiddity (*ḥaqīqah*) and its existence (*mawǧūd*)– implies a κοινωνία of the quiddities and their universal notions and their individuals, or a causal relation between existents, remains open for debate.

With regard to Avicenna's "faithful betrayal" of Aristotle, there seems to be evidence that, besides the Islamic philosophical and theological tradition Avicenna belongs to, Plato also plays a role in relating the two most comprehensive senses of being, modality and truth, to one another. It also seems consistent with an Aristotelian viewpoint to identify the existent with true being, since when something exists, it confirms not only that it is "this something" but also the relation it has with its attributes. Most of all, it reaffirms that the senses of being are different aspects of the same thing, ουσία.

of Avicenna's theory of truth lies in relations, logical and ontological".

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