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Essence and Existence in Marius Victorinus and in Avicenna

It is well known that in general¹, Marius Victorinus uses the term *ex(s)istentia* to translate the Greek *huparxis* (existence), *substantia* to translate *ousia* (substance), and *subsistentia* to translate *hypostasis* (subsistence). As far as the meaning of these terms is concerned, Victorinus declares that *existentia* is opposed to *substantia* in the way that pure Being (Greek *einai*, Latin *esse*)², considered without its accidents, is opposed to a concrete existent (Greek *on*; Latin *ens* or, in Boethius, *id quod est*) once the latter has been determined by its substantial and accidental qualities or predicates³. Thus, Victorinus postulates a contrast between two kinds or rather states or stages of being: an initial state, represented by the simple, pure, indeterminate act of being, prior to any composition, and a subsequent stage in which being is compounded with qualities. At this (ontologically) posterior stage, we no longer have to do with pure Being as an indeterminate act that produces form: instead, being is henceforth *being-something*, (*aliquid esse*)⁴: a concrete substance⁵ endowed with qualitative form. Whereas in its original, indeterminate state, Being or

¹ But not always. In some passages, Victorinus exhibits the confusion between *huparxis* and *hypostasis* that was typical of several 4th-century Church Fathers; cf. Thomas Leinkauf “Die Bestimmung des höchsten Prinzips als reines Sein - (Porphyrios), Victorinus, Boethius”, in Th. Kobusch & M. Erler, eds. *Metaphysik und Religion: zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2002), 63-97, at 72. In such passages (for instance, *Ar.*, IV 33. 32; III 8.41-44), it is *ousia/substantia* that designates being in its indeterminate form, while *huparxis* refers to its determinate form; cf. Pierre Hadot “Existencia”, in *Plotin, Porphyre. Etudes néoplatoniciennes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1999), 59. Finally, Victorinus sometimes uses *existentia* as a mere synonym of *substantia* (*Ar.*, I, 30, 26; I, 55, 19). This is one of many signs that indicate Victorinus was working from several quite different sources which he integrated and reconciled with varying success; cf. Václav Němec, “Die Theorie des göttlichen Selbstbewusstseins im anonymen «Parmenides»-Kommentar”, *Rheinisches Museum* 154.2 (2011), 185-205, at 205 n. 37.

² *Ar.*, I, 30, 21-24: *existentiam quidem et exsistentiam praeexistentem subsistentiam sine accidentibus*; *Ad Cand.* 2, 19f.: *existentia ipsum esse est et solum esse et non in alio esse aut subiectum alterius, sed unum et solum ipsum esse*. Cf. Pierre Hadot, “La distinction de l'être et de l'étant dans le *De Hebdomadibus* de Boèce”, *Miscellanea Mediaevalia*, 2 (Berlin, 1963), 147-153, at 149; 152.

³ *Ibid.*, 24-26: *substantiam autem subiectum cum his omnibus quae sunt accidentia in ipsa inseparabiliter existentibus*; *Ad Cand.* I, 2, 21-22: *substantia autem non esse solum habet, sed et quale aliquid esse*. Here as often, there is a remarkably close parallel to this formulation in the 6th century CE Neoplatonist Damascius: cf. *De Princ.*, vol. I, p. 312 Ruelle, vol. III = p. 152, 13-15 Westerink-Combès: “It is in this respect, then, that substance will differ from existence: as being alone by itself [will differ] from what is seen together with the other things [viz., qualities or predicates]” (Ταύτη ἄρα διοίσει τῆς οὐσίας ἢ ὑπαρξίς, ἢ τὸ εἶναι μόνον καθ' αὐτὸ τοῦ ἅμα τοῖς ἄλλοις ὀρωμένου).

⁴ For the formula *aliquid esse*, cf. Victorinus, *Ar.*, IV, 10, 50; IV, 19, 17. Similarly, for Avicenna the First Principle is only Being, not being-something, cf. Olga Lizzini, “Ibn Sina's Metaphysics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/ibn-sina-metaphysics/>>. Cf. <Porphyry>, *In Parm.*, X, 23-24 Hadot: οὐκ ἔστιν δὲ τοιόνδε ὁ θεός.

⁵ Here too, Victorinus' usage fluctuates. He can also refer to God as substance, and even “primary substance, universal substance” (*Ar.* I, 28-32, quoted by Stephen Cooper, “Marius Victorinus”, in L. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 538-551, at 541).

Existence is unknowable, being, or rather the existent *qua* substance is henceforth determinate and knowable⁶.

According to Pierre Hadot, this doctrine presupposes a very specific metaphysical doctrine, according to which Being (*existentia*), as a pure act or subjectless verbal infinitive, starts out in a state of absolute universality and indeterminacy, then gradually determines itself by the addition of increasingly particular determinations or qualities. This doctrine, which has many parallels with that of such late Greek Neoplatonists as Damascius⁷, has its origin in the metaphysical speculation of the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre⁸. Building on but adapting and reversing Aristotelian⁹ and Stoic ideas¹⁰, Porphyry transformed the notion of *huparxis* from one

⁶ Hadot, "La distinction", 148.

⁷ On *huparxis* as indicating the fact of pure being or existence, Pierre Hadot (*Porphyre et Victorinus*, 2 vols. (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1968), vol. I, p. 252 n.1) cites Dexippus, *In Cat.*, p. 35, 18-22 Busse, a text which probably derives from Porphyry's lost commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* addressed to Gedalius. This doctrine of the equivalence between being and existence in the *Anon. In Parm.* is denied by Němec, "Theorie", 198f.

⁸ This is a highly controversial point, of course: Michael Tardieu famously argued that a Coptic parallel to a passage in Marius Victorinus shows that the latter was influenced not by Porphyry but by the Gnostics. Other scholars have maintained in reply that this and other similar Gnostic texts were influenced by Porphyry, rather than the other way around, a possibility cautiously endorsed by Riccardo Chiaradonna ("Nota su partecipazione et atto d'essere nel neoplatonismo: l'anonimo Commento al Parmenide", *Studia Graeco-Arabica* 2 (2012): 87-97, at 87-88 n. 2). For an excellent summary of this controversy, cf. Lenka Karfiková, "Victorinus (Marius—)", in R. Goulet, ed., *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques*, VII, d'Ulpian à Zoticus (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 2018), 153-166 at 164-166. This is not the place to rehash this debate, but I continue to find P. Hadot's erudite demonstration (*Porphyre et Victorinus*) convincing, despite the scepticism expressed by many scholars; cf. Michael Chase, "Porphyre de Tyr. Commentaires à Platon et à Aristote". In R. Goulet, ed., *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques*, V, de Paccius à Rutilius Rufus. Vb, de Plotina à Rutilius Rufus (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 2012) 1349-1376). I will merely assume, for the purposes of this paper, that the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides* is indeed by Porphyry, and that the latter was at least one main source of Victorinus' metaphysical views. For recent arguments against the attribution of the *Anon. In Parm.* to Porphyry, cf. Němec, "Theorie"; for arguments in favor, cf. Chiaradonna *Nota*; id., "Causalité et hiérarchie métaphysique dans le Néoplatonisme: Plotin, Porphyre, Jamblique", *χώρα REAM* 12 (2014), 67-85; id., "Logica e teologia nel primo neoplatonismo. A proposito di Anon., *In Parm.*, XI, 5-19 e lambl., *Risposta a Porfirio [De Mysteriis]*, I, 4", *Studia graeco-arabica* 5 (2015): 1-11. Cf. the conclusion of the last-cited paper, p. 11: "l'anonimo commentatore del Parmenide altri non è se non Porfirio". In all these important contributions, Chiaradonna's *pars destruens*, i.e. his refutations of the criticisms by scholars such as K. Corrigan and G. Bechtel of Hadot's attribution of the *Anon. In Parm.* to Porphyry seem to me decisive. However, his *pars destruens*, which amounts to a deflationary, Stoicizing interpretation of the metaphysical scheme espoused in this work, strikes me as much less persuasive. Nevertheless, Chiaradonna ("Nota", 97) quotes a remark by Alain Segonds which sums up my view: if the *Commentary* was not by Porphyry, it would have to be by "un clone de Porphyre"; why, then, should one multiply hypotheses unnecessarily? In contrast, Němec, "Theorie" 204-205, is reduced to postulating "the existence of an entire line of tradition of late Antique Neoplatonism" — about which we know nothing —, "that deviates from the main current known to us, and in context of which various versions of a similar metaphysical conception were thought through".

⁹ In particular, the distinction between *to einai hekastôî* and *hekastos*; cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 8.3 1043b; Hadot *Porphyre*, I, 359/490; 1973, 82; Cooper, "Marius Victorinus", 549.

that referred to predicates presently attributable to their subject, into a notion of Being or Existence as a kind of Platonic idea in which substances can participate. Existence thus becomes the transcendent principle of pre-existence — *to einai monon*, or rather *to proon*¹¹ — out of which substance is constituted¹². Reduced to its absolute universality, simplicity, and universality, Porphyry henceforth views Being as a pure movement that generates form. The result of this process of assimilation and adaptation is thus the appearance, for the first time in the West, of the fundamental opposition between the verbal infinitive “Being” (Greek *to einai*), as an act without a subject, creative of form, and the neuter participle “existent” (*to on*), as the first substance that results from the process by which Being externalizes itself in the process designated as “life”, only to be limited, determined and returned to its origin under the aegis of “thought”.

Pierre Hadot found distinct similarities between the metaphysical scheme which he found in the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides* and attributed to Porphyry, and the thought of Victorinus. Like the One for <Porphyry> in the *In Parm.*, for Victorinus, God the Father is pure being (*esse purum*), indeterminate, unparticipated, and consequently unknowable by means of normal rational human thought¹³:

Ante ðv et ante λόγον vis et potentia existendi illa est quae significatur hoc verbo quod est esse, graece quod est τὸ εἶναι (...) Verum esse primum ita inparticipatum est, ut nec unum dici possit, nec solum, sed per praelationem, ante unum et ante solum, ultra simplicitatem, praeexistentiam potius quam existentiam, universalium omnium universale, infinitum, interminatum, sed aliis omnibus, non sibi, et idcirco sine forma; intellectu quodam auditur et praeintellegentia potius quam intellegentia accipitur, cognoscitur, creditur.

¹⁰ Hadot (*Porphyre*) emphasized the importance for Porphyry's thought of what he called the Neoplatonization of Stoicism, which entailed adopting and adapting several Stoic doctrines (of the *pneuma*, vital tension, doctrine of types of mixture, etc.) while rejecting their materialism. Recently, Chiaradonna (“Nota”; “Causalité”, “Logica e teologia”) has endorsed Hadot's findings with regard to the adaptation of Stoicism by the author of the *Anon. In Parm.* (with some divergences), but in my opinion this eminent expert on Neoplatonism goes too far when he interprets the teachings of the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides* as *nothing but* a Porphyrian adaptation of the Stoic doctrine of the *lekton*, perhaps inspired by Porphyry's teacher Longinus, combined with Aristotelian doctrines of essential predication. For Chiaradonna, the *Anon. In Parm.* would thus anything like the distinction between essence and existence, which, he asserts, does not appear in Western thought until much later. I hope to provide an in-depth analysis of Chiaradonna's important publications in forthcoming work.

¹¹ Victorinus, *Ad Cand.* 14, 23; 15, 2. Cf. Hadot, *Porphyre*, I, 208-209. Cf. <Porphyry>, *In Parm.*, X, 25-26: ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦ εἶναι καὶ τοῦ ἔστιν ἐξήλλακται αὐτοῦ τὸ προούσιον. The rare term *proousion* is unattested prior to Porphyry, but its occurrence in Synesius (*Hymn I*, 222) and Didymus (*De Trinitate*, 4, 8, 2) implies a Porphyrian source. On Bechtle's view of the occurrence of the term *proousion* in the *Anon. In Parm.* as “preparing Plotinus' way of expressing himself” — even though the term does not occur in Plotinus — cf. Leinkauf, “Bestimmung”, 75. n. 48.

¹² Hadot, *Porphyre*, I, 489.

¹³ Victorinus, *Ar.*, IV, 19, 4-20. Cf. Němec, “Theorie”, 198.

As pure Being, God is bereft of form, and must be described by a radically negative theology. Unintelligible, infinite, invisible, inconceivable, and unsubstantial, God is the non-existent above the existent¹⁴:

Necessario per praelationem et per eminentiam τῶν ὄντων deum dicemus supra omnem existentiam, supra omnem vitam, supra omnem cognoscentiam, supra omne ὄν et ὄντως ὄντα, quippe inintellegibile, infinitum, invisibile, sine intellectu, insubstantiale, incognoscibile, et quod super omnia, nihil de his quae sunt, et quoniam supra quae sunt, nihil ex his quae sunt. Μὴ ὄν ergo deus est (...) istud τὸ μὴ ὄν super τὸ ὄν est¹⁵.

God is, therefore, understandable only in ignorance (*sed ut in ignoratione intellegibile, ibid.* 14, 2-3). The parallels¹⁶ to this doctrinal formulation, both in the works by Porphyry universally recognized as authentic¹⁷, in doctrines attributed to him¹⁸, and in the *Commentary on the Parmenides*¹⁹, are striking indeed. In the latter work, the mode of supra-rational cognition by which alone the First Principle can be known corresponds to the mode by which the First itself “knows” all things: it is a “knowledge outside of knowledge and ignorance”, from which knowledge derives²⁰.

In contrast, for Victorinus Christ the Son, like the Second One of the *Parmenides* according to Porphyry, is the existent or the first substance, who receives his being from the pre-existent Father²¹.

It was thus, Hadot claims, in Porphyry and his Latin adaptation by Marius Victorinus that, for the first time in Western history, being as an infinitive was distinguished from being as a participle: in other words, between essence, or what a thing is, and

¹⁴ Victorinus, *Ad Cand.*, 13, 5-14, 1. For God as “Das nichtseiende über allem Seiendem”, cf. Matthias Baltes, *Marius Victorinus. Zur Philosophie in seinen theologischen Schriften* (München: K.G. Saur, 2002), 28-29, with further references.

¹⁵ When one considers that the only occurrence in all of Greek literature of the locution τὸ ὑπὲρ τὸ ὄν μὴ ὄν occurs in Porphyry (*Sentence* 26, cited by Pierre Hadot, *Marius Victorinus, Traités théologiques sur la Trinité* [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1960], vol. II, 715), it becomes hard to deny that the thought of Porphyry is at least one of the sources drawn upon by Marius Victorinus.

¹⁶ Cited by Jean Pépin in Luc Brisson et al., eds., *Porphyre, Sentences. Études d'introduction, texte grec et traduction française, commentaire par l'Unité Propre de Recherche n° 76 du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique avec une traduction anglaise par John Dillon* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), vol. II, 566-567.

¹⁷ Porphyry, *Sentence* 25, 2, in Brisson et al., eds., *Porphyre, Sentences*, 324 = p. 15, 1-2 Lamberz: θεωρεῖται δὲ ἀνοησίᾳ κρείττονι νοήσεως.

¹⁸ Porphyry, fr. 427 F Smith = *Theosophy of Tübingen*, 13, p. 34, 107-109 Beatrice: “Ὅτι Πορφύριος ὁ Φοῖνιξ, ὁ Ἀμελίου μὲν συμοιτητής, μαθητής δὲ Πλωτίνου, φησὶν οὕτως· ‘περὶ τοῦ πρώτου αἰτίου οὐδὲν ἴσμεν· οὔτε γὰρ ἀπτόν οὔτε γνωστόν, ἀλλ’ ἔστιν αὐτοῦ γνῶσις ἢ ἀγνωσία.’

¹⁹ <Porphyry>, *In Parm.*, II, 16-17; IX, 24-26; X, 25-29 ed. Hadot.

²⁰ <Porphyry>, *In Parm.*, V, 1-11 Hadot: “Ὅτι φημί εἶναι γνῶσιν ἕξω γνώσεω<ς> καὶ ἀγνοίας, ἀφ’ ἧς ἢ γνῶσις. Cf. Leinkauf “Bestimmung”, 80.

²¹ Victorinus, *Ad Cand.*, 15, 1-3: *ilius ergo Iesus Christus et solus natus filius, quoniam illud proòν nihil aliud genuit quam ὄν ante omnia et omnimodis perfectum ὄν.*

existence, or the fact that it is²². The distinction was known to Boethius, in whom it appears as the contrast between *esse* and *quod est*²³. It was Boethius, in turn, who transmitted to medieval Western thought this distinction between Being (*esse*), conceived as pure action transcending all form, and the existent (*ens/quod est*) as the concrete substance or subject endowed with a determinate form²⁴. Finally, it was probably from Boethius and the centuries-long history of the adaptations of his doctrine in medieval Scholasticism that Heidegger derived his doctrine of the ontological difference²⁵.

Hadot's own views on this subject underwent a certain evolution. In 1963, he thought that this distinction between Being as pure act and being as concrete determinate substance, originating in Porphyry's interpretation of the first two hypotheses of the *Parmenides* and adapted to Christianity by Marius Victorinus and by Boethius, laid the foundations for the distinction in Western thought between Existence and the existent. By the time of the publication of his magnum opus *Porphyre et Victorinus* in 1968, however, Hadot affirmed that Porphyry's doctrine does not imply a difference

²² Pierre Hadot, "L'Être et l'Étant dans le néoplatonisme", in P. Hadot, *Plotin, Porphyre. Etudes néoplatoniciennes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1999), 71-88; cf. Němec, "Theorie", 187. Cooper, "Marius Victorinus", 548, speaks of this opposition as having its roots in Plotinus, but he quotes no Plotinian examples. To be sure, several contemporary scholars (Gerson, Corrigan) have interpreted Plotinus as maintaining a distinction between essence and existence, but this interpretation, based *inter alia* on the inadmissible translation of *hypostasis* by "existence", has been persuasively refuted by Riccardo Chiaradonna, "Neoplatonismo e atto d'essere: a margine dell'interpretazione di Cornelio Fabro", in A. Acerbi (ed.), *Crisi e destino della filosofia. Studi su Cornelio Fabro* (Roma 2012) 123-138. For her part, Karfiková ("Victorinus (Marius—)", 162) rightly includes this doctrine of the difference between the existent (*on*) and being (*einai*) among those which are absent in Plotinus but present in Victorinus. Taken together, the ensemble of such doctrines (on which cf. Němec, "Theorie", 187) — Plotinus, unlike Victorinus, establishes a subordination between One and Intellect; he never identifies the One with the first member of the triad of being-life-thought; he does not use the technical term *huparxis* to designate the first member of this triad; he does not teach the pre-existence of intelligible forms within the One; and, perhaps most crucially for our present purposes, he does not identify the One with being — seems to me to rule out Plotinus an important direct source for Victorinus, pace Cooper. It is worth noting that all these non-Plotinian themes, typical of the thought of Victorinus, also characterize the metaphysics of Porphyry as reconstructed by Hadot.

²³ Boeth., *De hebdomadibus* 2-4 Stewart-Rand. Cf. *ibid.* 28-30: *diversum est esse et id quod est. ipsum enim esse nondum est, et vero quod accepta essendi forma est atque consistit.* Cf., with Hadot 1968, 1, 491, n. 4, Damascius, *De princ.*, p. 312, 19-20 Ruelle: τὸ πάντων ἐπέκεινα προὔποκείμενον ἐν [...] οὐπὼ δὲ οὐσία.

²⁴ Hadot, "La distinction", 153.

²⁵ In the context of a rich study of Heidegger's interpretation of medieval philosophy, Pasquale Porro ("Heidegger, la filosofia medievale, la medievistica contemporanea", *Quaestio* I (2001), 431-462, at 435) describes Thomas Aquinas' goal in emphasizing the distinction between essence and existence as that of marking the difference between, on the one hand, what possesses a formal determination (sc. all entities other than God) and God, i.e. that which is pure being without form, a being which cannot be objectified and therefore cannot be thought on the basis of an essence distinct from it, whether such an essence be conceived as formal or objective content, quiddity, or "coseità". On the ontological difference in Avicenna as between God as the uncaused principle and the world as caused, cf. Lizzini, "Ibn Sina's Metaphysics".

between essence and existence²⁶. Instead, the difference between Being (*to einai*) and the existent (*to on*) amounts to that between the indeterminate and the determinate: whereas Being is pure activity, absolute, unlimited, unrelated to and incommensurable with anything else, the existent (*to on*) is merely Being that has been rendered concrete, particular and determinate by its assumption of qualitative attributes. This is what allows the author of the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides* to speak of Being (*to einai*) as “like the idea of the existent” (*idea tou ontos*)²⁷. Being (*to einai*) is a pure, subject-less action or movement that generates form, while the existent (*to on*) is the first substance, a subject henceforth endowed with form²⁸. As we have seen, moreover, since Being, bereft of form or attributes, it is unknowable, at least by any kind of rational human cognition. Thus, we have here the origin of what Hadot has termed the “negative theology of Being”²⁹.

Yet to what extent might it be legitimate to pursue Hadot's earlier intuition, that is, that the distinction found in Porphyry, Victorinus and Boethius between Being (*to einai, esse*) and the existent (*to on, ens, id quod est*) is indeed analogous to the Avicennan distinction between essence and existence, which was so influential on Western Scholastic thought? As we shall see, it seems hard to deny that there is some analogy between these two complexes of ideas, which helps to explain why the young Thomas Aquinas made such abundant use of the Latin version of Avicenna's *Metaphysics of the Healing* in his commentaries on Boethius' *Theological Tractates*³⁰.

Essence and existence in Avicenna

The doctrine of the distinction between essence and existence³¹ in Avicenna is notoriously complex and controversial, so much so that leading modern

²⁶ Hadot *Porphyry*, I, 490; “L'Être et l'Étant”, 80.

²⁷ <Porphyry>, *In Parm.*, 12, 31-33: ...τοῦ ὄντος τοῦ ἐπέκεινα ἐνός τοῦ εἶναι ὄντος τὸ ἀπόλυτον καὶ ὡσπερ ἰδέα τοῦ ὄντος. On the importance of this qualifying *hōsper* as neutralizing K. Corrigan's contention that the *Anon. In Parm.* contradicts Porphyry's elsewhere attested view that the intelligible cannot participate in anything, cf. Chiaradonna, “Nota”, 87-88 n. 2; “Causalité”, 78-79.

²⁸ Hadot “L'Être et l'Étant”. In the words of G. Huber (*Das Sein und das Absolute. Studien zur Geschichte der ontologischen Problematik in der spätantiken Philosophie* [Basel 1955], 114), for Victorinus “das formlose Sein erzeugt erst das formhaft Seiende”.

²⁹ Hadot “L'Être et l'Étant”, 80.

³⁰ Cf. R. E. Houser, “Avicenna and Aquinas: essence, existence and the *esse* of Christ”, *The Saint Anselm Journal* 9.1 (2013).

³¹ Not unlike Victorinus, Avicenna's terminology sometimes fluctuates and may have undergone some evolution throughout his intellectual career. In general, the Avicennan terms designating being or existence are *anniyya* and *wujūd*, but one sometimes also finds *huwiyya* or *aysa*. Essence or quiddity, for their part, are referred to as *dāt*, *māhiyya*, *šay'iyya*, *ṭabī'a*, or *haqīqa*, cf. Lizzini, “Ibn Sina's Metaphysics”. Each of these terms possesses its own nuances. Confusingly, Avicenna can also refer to a thing's essence as its “proper existence” (*al-wujūd al-ḥāṣṣ*), cf. Amos Bertolacci, “The Distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna's *Metaphysics*: The Text and Its Context”, in F. Opwis & D. Reisman, eds., *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture and Religion. Studies in honor of Dimitri Gutas* (Leiden etc.: Brill, 2012), 257–288.

commentators have proposed a variety of mutually exclusive interpretations of it³². The following sketch will therefore be necessarily inadequate, but I hope will not be misleading. I will base my exposition on Avicenna's own account in section 8.4 of the *Metaphysics (Ilāhiyāt)* of the *Šifā'*³³.

For Avicenna, God or the First (*al-awwal*) has no quiddity or essence (*māhiyya*) other than being (*al-anniya*)³⁴. Avicenna adds that he has explained how essence differs from *anniya* "at the beginning of our present exposition", although modern interpreters do not all agree on what he means³⁵. At any rate, God as the Necessarily Existent (*al-wājib al-wujūd*) cannot be compound, as He would be if made up of a quiddity or essence (*māhiyya*) and existence (*wujūd*). The Necessarily Existent has no other essence than the fact that He is necessarily existent, and this is being (*al-anniya*)³⁶.

³² Cf. Olga Lizzini, "Wuğūd-Mawğūd/Existence-Existent in Avicenna. A Key Ontological Notion of Arabic Philosophy", *Quaestio* 3 (2003), 111–138, at 122, with further literature, who discusses current interpretations that range from a "logical-conceptual" to a "real" interpretation of the essence-existence distinction; Bertolacci, "The Distinction", 258-260. I will argue that at least in some passages, such as the one cited below from the *Notes on the Theology of Aristotle*, Avicenna seems clearly to propound a realist doctrine of the ontological priority of essence to existence.

³³ For a full exposition of this doctrine in all its subtleties, the reader is referred to the masterful expositions of Olga Lizzini ("Wuğūd-Mawğūd"; "Ibn Sina's Metaphysics") and Amos Bertolacci ("The Distinction"; id., "A Hidden Hapax Legomenon in Avicenna's metaphysics: considerations on the use of *Anniya* and *Ayyiyya* in the *Ilāhiyyāt* of the *Kitāb al-Šifā'*", in A.M.I. van Oppenraay *et al.*, eds., *The Letter before the Spirit. The Importance of Text Editions for the Study of the Reception of Aristotle* (Leiden etc.: Brill, 2012) 289–309.), with exhaustive references to previous literature. For the text from *Ilāh*. 8.4 cf. Bertolacci, "Hapax Legomenon", 296.

³⁴ Avicenna, *al-Šifā'*, *al-ilāhiyyāt*, ed. M.Y. Mūsā, S. Sunyā, S. Zāyid (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-'amma li-šu'un al-maṭābi' al-amīriyya, 1960), 8.4, p. 344, 10f.: *wa-na'ūd fa-naqūl: inna al-awwal lā māhiyya lahū ġayr al-anniya*. Some translations: "Il primo non ha una quiddità che sia diversa dal suo proprio essere" (Lizzini in *Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), Metafisica. La scienza delle cose divine (al-ilāhiyyāt) dal Libro della Guarigione (Kitāb al-Šifā')*, a cura di O. Lizzini e P. Porro (Milano: Bompiani, 2002), who notes (p. 1214 n. 110) that the meaning of this term oscillates between "existence" and "particular essence"); "Le premier n'a pas de quiddité que *al-anniya*" (Anawati in *Avicenne, La métaphysique du Šifā'. Livres de VI à X. Traduction, notes et commentaires par G.C. Anawati* (Paris: Vrin, 1985); "The First has no quiddity other than his individual existence" (Michael A. Marmura, *The metaphysics of "The healing": a parallel English-Arabic text = aš-Šifā': al-ilāhiyyāt* [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005]); "The First has no quiddity other than existence" (Bertolacci, "Hapax Legomenon", 296).

³⁵ For Anawati and Lizzini, the reference is *Ilāh*. I.5; but Marmura thinks the reference is to the Avicenna's paraphrase of the *Isagoge* of the *Šifā'*. Bertolacci ("Distinction", 283 & n. 43) argues that both interpretations are possible, pointing out that in his paraphrase of the *Isagoge (Madḥal* I, 5, p. 29, 11-13), Avicenna opposes quiddity to "individual thatness" (*anniya šaḥsiyya*) as the concrete existence of the individual.

³⁶ Avicenna, *Ilāh*. 4, 8, p. 346, 11-12: *fa-lā māhiyya al-wājib al-wujūd ġayr annahū wājib al-wujūd, wa-hāḍihī hiya al-inniya*. Translations: "Dunque per il Necessariamente Esistente non c'è una quiddità diversa dal fatto che è necessariamente esistente, e questa è il suo stesso essere" (Lizzini); "Il n'y a donc pas d'autre quiddité pour le nécessairement existant que le fait qu'il est nécessairement existant. Et c'est cela l'être" (Anawati).

Avicenna goes on to assert that everything that has an essence other than being (*anniyya*) is caused, because being (*anniyya*) and existence (*wujūd*) are not like necessary concomitants to the essence. All that has an essence is caused, and this includes everything other than the Necessarily Existent. In other words, only contingent beings have an essence. The First Principle has no essence³⁷, but existence flows from him upon beings that do have an essence³⁸. The First can be designated as absolute existence, on condition that non-existence and other attributes are denied of Him³⁹. Immediately afterwards, Avicenna clarifies that he does not mean that the First is participable absolute existence⁴⁰; instead, what he means is that the First is an existent on condition that no composition is added to Him. In other words, the First is not a universal, for a universal is shared by everything, whereas the First is not attributed to what is susceptible of addition, that is, everything other than He. Furthermore, the First's lack of an essence entails that He has no genus: if He did, the genus would be a part of Him, and He would be composite. He also has no specific difference, and His lack of genus and specific difference entails, of course, that he has no definition. There can therefore be no demonstration of him, nor does He have a cause or a “why”. Finally, the First, is not a substance (*jawhar*)⁴¹.

It certainly seems hard to deny that in this section of the *Metaphysics* of the *Šifā'*, we find many themes that are highly analogous to several of those we found in Marius Victorinus. These include the ideas that God or the First Principle is One and alone⁴², that He is simple, that he is identical with his essence⁴³, that he has no essence,

³⁷ On passages in Avicenna implying that the First has no essence at all, cf. Bertolacci “Distinction”, 276 & n. 26.

³⁸ Note that at least in this passage, there is the clear implication that sheer essences exist (presumably in the mind of God), independent of and prior to existence. It therefore provides grist for the mill of those who interpret Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence from a realist or ontological perspective (cf. Sarah Pessin, “Proclean ‘remaining’ and Avicenna on existence as accident. Neoplatonic methodology and a defense of pre-existing essences”, in J. Inglis, ed., *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, [London 2002]), rather than one that is primarily logical or conceptual (Bertolacci, Lizzini).

³⁹ Avicenna, *Ilāh*. 8.4, p. 347, 10: *Fa-huwa mujarrad al-wujūd bi-šarṭ salb al-‘adam wa-sā’ir al-awšāf ‘anhū*. Translations: “Esso è, infatti, puramente esistente a condizione che se ne neghino l'inesistenza e tutte le alte descrizioni” (Lizzini); “Il est l'existence pure avec condition de nier de lui le non-existant et les autres qualifications” (Anawati); “He is pure existence with the condition of negating privation and all other description of Him” (Marmura).

⁴⁰ Compare Marius Victorinus' insistence that the Father is *inparticipatum* (one of Victorinus' many uses of a Latin *hapax*).

⁴¹ Avicenna, *Ilāh*. 8, 4, p 348, 7ff. Cf. Bertolacci, “Distinction”, 279 n. 29.

⁴² On God as *unum et solum*, cf. Victorinus, *Cand.* I.3.15-17. On the One as purely one, without existence, substance or knowledge: *Ar.* 1B.49.7-19; cf. Cooper “Marius Victorinus”, 546.

⁴³ For Avicenna, only in the case of God does existence coincide with essence (Lizzini, “Wuğūd-Mawğūd, 115). For Victorinus, in divine realities the *quod est esse* (pertaining to substance) differs from the *quod est ita esse* (pertaining to qualities, which is characteristic of the perceptual world); but the two are united in the case of divine, eternal realities (*Ar.* 3.1.20-24; cf. Cooper “Marius Victorinus”, 548). As Pierre Hadot pointed out (“La distinction”, 152-153), we find an analogous doctrine in Boethius, for whom Being (*esse*) and the existent (*id quod est*) coincide in the First Principle: cf. *De hebd.* 45-48: *omne simplex esse suum et*

genus, difference or definition, and is therefore unknowable, and that he is not a substance.

Perhaps the most striking common feature Avicenna shares with Marius Victorinus is the designation of the First Principle as being (*anniyya*). This term, which goes back to al-Kindī and the *Neoplatonica Arabica*⁴⁴ that arose under his supervision in the second quarter of the 9th century CE, is of disputed etymology, but it is generally translated as “being”, “proper being” or “existence”⁴⁵. Scholars have already drawn attention to the similarity between the use of the term *anniyya* to designate God or the First principle in the *Neoplatonica Arabica* and use of the Greek verbal infinitive *einai* to designate the One in the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides*, attributed to Porphyry⁴⁶: indeed, this resemblance constitutes one of the main grounds for supposing that, as the incipit of the *Theology of Aristotle* indicates,

id quod est unum habet. Hadot cites a parallel passage from Simplicius (*In Phys.*, vol. 9, p. 773, 19-25 Diels) perhaps reproducing the doctrine of Simplicius’ teacher Damascius, which speaks of the state in which the One begins to emanate the Unified or One-Many. Prior to this emergence of the first trace of difference, Being is not yet distinguished from the existent (καὶ οὐδὲ τὸ εἶναι τοῦ ὄντος ἐκεῖ διακέκριται). Once difference and multiplicity makes its appearance, Being becomes distinct from the existent (καὶ τὸ εἶναι ἄλλο γέγονε παρὰ τὸ ὄν). It is at this point that time makes its appearance.

⁴⁴ A catchall term designating a group of apocrypha, mostly ascribed to Aristotle but in fact consisting primarily of Arabic paraphrases, originating in the 2nd quarter of the 9th century CE, of Greek Neoplatonic texts by Plotinus, Proclus, and (in my view, at least), Porphyry. Their titles include the *Theology of Aristotle* (hereafter ThA, ed. ‘Abdurrahmān Badawī, *Aflūṭīn inda l-‘arab/Plotinus apud Arabes. Theologia Aristotelis et fragmenta quae supersunt* [Cairo 1955]), the *Book of the Pure Good* (ed. Otto Bardenhewer, *Die pseudo-aristotelische Schrift Ueber das reine Gute, bekannt unter dem Namen Liber de Causis* (Freiburg: Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1882), translated into Latin as the *Liber De Causis*, and the *Sayings of the Greek Sage* (ed. Franz Rosenthal, “Aš-Šayḥ al-Yūnānī and the Arabic Plotinus source”, *Orientalia* 21: 461-492; 22: 370-400; 24: 42-65 (1952-1955); Badawī, *Aflūṭīn*; Elvira Wakelnig, *A Philosophy Reader from the Circle of Miskawayh* (Cambridge 2014). Several passages in works by Miskawayh, Sijistānī and Miskawayh (10th cent), as yet insufficiently explored, contain doctrines, often anonymous, that bear strong affinities to these *Neoplatonica Arabica*; cf. Gerhard Endress, “Die Integration philosophischer Traditionen in der islamischen Gesellschaft des 4/10. Jahrhunderts: at-Tauḥīdī und as-Siġistānī”, in U. Rudolph, ed., *Philosophie in der Islamischen Welt. 1, 8.-10. Jahrhundert (Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Basel: Schwabe, 2012); 198-209; Elvira Wakelnig, “Die Philosophen in der Tradition al-Kindīs. Al-‘Āmirī, al-Isfīzārī, Miskawayh, as-Siġistānī und at-Tawḥīdī”, in H. Eichner, M. Perkams und C. Schäfer (eds.), *Islamische Philosophie im Mittelalter. Ein Handbuch* (Darmstadt 2013), 233-252. I believe these works may contain many a Porphyrian doctrine: Miskawayh, for instance, claims that his entire exposition on the meanings of “One” in his *Minor Triumph* (*Al-Fawz al-aṣġar*, section 1.5, ed. Ş. ‘Uḍayma —R. Arnaldez, *Miskawayh, Le petit livre du salut* [Tunis 1987]), is derived from Porphyry.

⁴⁵ Lizzini “Wuġūd-Mawġūd”, 112 n. 5. According to Bertolacci “Hapax Legomenon”, 295, in Avicenna’s *Metaphysics*, *anniyya* means “existence” as an opposite term to “quiddity” (*māhiyya*) and as a synonym of *wujūd*; cf. *ibid.* p. 298. For a full survey of the translations of *anniyya*, cf. Bertolacci *ibid.*, 292-293, who lists “quoddité”, “haeccéité”, “être”, “entitas”, “essence individuelle”, “existence”. As this author notes (*ibid.*, 293 n. 8), Cristina d’Ancona usually translates *anniyya* by *essere* in her edition and translation of chapters 1 and 7 of the *Theology of Aristotle*; cf. Cristina D’Ancona, et al., eds., *Plotino, La dicesa dell’anima nei corpi (Enn. IV 8 [6])*; *Plotiniana arabica (Pseudo-Teologia di Aristotele, capitoli 1 e 7; “Detti del sapiente greco”* (Padova: Il Poligrafo 2003).

⁴⁶ Cf. Richard Taylor, “Aquinas, the Plotiniana Arabica, and the Metaphysics of Being and Actuality,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998), 217-239; Michael Chase, “Porphyry and the Theology of Aristotle”, in press, with references to previous literature.

Porphyry may have played a role in the elaboration of the Greek original of this pseudepigraphic work.

The problem of avenues of transmission

How, then are we to explain these apparent similarities between, on the one hand, the metaphysics of Avicenna and certain metaphysical themes attested in the *Neoplatonica Arabica*, and, on the other, some doctrines of the theological writings of Marius Victorinus and Boethius? Clearly, there can be no question of direct influence: Avicenna certainly knew no Latin, and it is highly unlikely that either Boethius or Marius Victorinus was ever translated into Latin.

One could envisage several hypotheses. First, as far as the distinction between essence and existence is concerned, we might have to do with completely independent developments of philosophical themes already present in Aristotle. Aristotle's famous enumeration of four methodological questions in Book Two of the *Posterior Analytics*⁴⁷ presuppose a distinction between whether a thing exists (*to hoti*) and what a thing is (*ti estin*): perhaps both the Latin and the Arabic tradition independently developed this distinction into one between existence and essence respectively. Plausible as such an explanation may be, however, it fails to account for the other analogous features present in Arabic-language philosophical thought and in the theological speculations of Boethius and Marius Victorinus. There are many of these: to limit ourselves to features shared by the *Theology of Aristotle* (*ThA*) and the theological works of Marius Victorinus, one might mention:

1. The idea the time is only introduced, in the description of suprasensible realities, to facilitate human understanding: Victorinus, *Adv. Ar.*, IV, 5, 26-48; IV, 21, 16-17; *Ad Cand.* 21, 2. Cf. *ThA* p. 27-28 Badawi:

“The ancients were obliged to mention time at the beginning of creation since they wanted a description of the generation of things, and were obliged to introduce time into their description of generation and into their description of creation, which did not take place in time at all.”

Compare Porphyry, according to Šahrastānī⁴⁸:

“And he [sc. Porphyry] claimed that the statement attributed to Plato concerning the world's coming into being is not correct. He said in his *Letter to Anebo*: what separates Plato from you, viz. that he

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 2, 1, 89b23-25, translation Barnes: “The things we seek are equal in number to those we understand. We seek four things: the fact, the reason why, if something is, what something is” (Τὰ ζητούμενά ἐστιν ἴσα τὸν ἀριθμὸν ὅσαπερ ἐπιστάμεθα. ζητοῦμεν δὲ τέτταρα, τὸ ὅτι, διότι, εἰ ἔστι, τί ἐστίν).

⁴⁸ Porphyry, fr. 459, p. 529-351 Smith ap. al-Šahrastānī, *Book of Religions and sects*, in D. Gimaret, G. Monnot, and J. Jolivet, *Shahrastānī, Livre des religions et des sectes*. 2 vols (Louvain 1986-1993), vol. II, p. 357-358.

gives the world a temporal beginning, is a mendacious assertion. This is because Plato did not think that the world has a temporal origination, but an origination with regard to a cause”.

2. The First One remains immobile, and exerts no activity in order to engender the second Principle. With Victorinus *Adv. Ar.* I, 33; I, 51, 11f.; I, 52, 20f., cf. *Sayings of the Greek Sage*, p. 184, 10 f. Badawi = *Philosophy Reader* 32, p. 94, 7 Wakelnig: “The first agent must be at rest and unmoved” (*wa-yanbağī li-l-fā‘il al-awwal an yakūna sākinun ġayr mutaḥarrakun*); Miskawayh, *al-Fawz al-aşğar*, I, 8, p. 54, 3 ‘Uḍayma: “we say that He is unmoved” (*naqūlū annahū lā bi-mutaḥarrakin*).

3. The need for divine ignorance as higher cognitive faculty in order to know God: with Victorinus *Adv. Ar.* IV, 19, 15-16 cf. *ThA* p. 9, 8; 37, 2-4 Badawi, which speaks of “an ignorance more noble than knowledge” (*bi-jahlin aşraf min al-‘ilm*). The author declares that God can only be known by a kind of “intellectual imagination”; cf below. Compare the Porphyrian texts cited above, n. 00.

4. The First Principle has no attributes: with Victorinus, *Ad. Ar.*, IV, 19, 10, cf. *ThA* p. 62, 3-6 Badawi: “As for the first maker, He makes a thing without any attribute, for there is no attribute within Him at all, but he makes <things> by his essence”. Cf. *Sayings of the Greek Sage* 6, p. 184 Rosenthal: “there is no attribute at all in Him” (*laysa fihī şay’un min al-şifāt*).

5. There is no distinction between essence and existence in the higher world. We saw above that for Marius Victorinus, Boethius and Avicenna, essence coincides with existence *in divinis*. Similarly, the author of the *Theology of Aristotle* (p. 69f. Badawi) explains that the separation between the what-it-is and the that-it-is applies only to natural things; but in the case of things whose goal is originated simultaneously with their existence, as is the case for things originated without time, there can be no separation between the that-it-is and the what-it-is. When a thing's origination is simultaneous with its achievement of its goal, one knows “why it is” by knowing “what it is”: “If here in the lower world ‘what a thing is’ and ‘why it is’ are found to be identical, all the more so is this necessary in intellectual things, I mean ‘what it is’ and ‘why it is’ are identical”. Human beings, the author goes on to affirm, can perceive this state of affairs, in which the world is whole and causes are simultaneous with their effects, by an act of intellectual imagination (*tawahhum ‘aqlī*)⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ It is true that in this passage, the author of the *ThA* builds on the doctrine of Plotinus VI 7, on which cf. Chiaradonna “Causalité”. But the author expands upon Plotinus by adding elements extraneous to him, such as the doctrine of intelligible imagination.

I have discussed parallels between Porphyry and the *Theology of Aristotle* in Chase, “Porphyry and the Theology of Aristotle”. On the idea that the Highest principle is absolute knowledge, for instance: with <Porphyry>, *In Parm.*, V, 34; VI, 4-12 Hadot, cf. *Sayings of the Greek Sage* fr. A, 6, p. 484 Rosenthal = Wakelnig, *Philosophy Reader* §36, p. 98: “(He) is the pure, ultimate knowledge that contains every knowledge (*li-annahū huwa al-‘ilm al-maḥḍ al-aqsā al-muḥīt bi-kull ‘ilm*), and the cause of <all> sciences” (*wa-‘illa al-‘ulūm*). On the appearance of this theme in the <Porphyry>, *In Parm.*, and the fact that,

As we have seen, however, the most striking common feature shared by Avicenna, the *Neoplatonica Arabica*, Marius Victorinus and Boethius is no doubt the description of the First Principle as being (Greek *einai*, Latin *esse*, Arabic *anniyya*). Like <Porphyry's> *Commentary on the Parmenides*, but unlike Plotinus, the *Theology of Aristotle* describes this principle as “the first, true Being” (*al-anniya al-ūlā al-ḥaqq*, p. 26 Badawi), or “the first Being (*al-anniya al-ūlā*, *ibid.*, p. 51, 8; 87, 10; 113, 14 B). The First is also designated as “simple Being” (*anniyya faqat*) in the *Book of the Pure Good* = *Liber De Causis* 8[9] p. 79.1 Bardenhewer, as well as in the *Sayings of the Greek Sage* (p. 185, 5 Badawi)⁵⁰. In his *Muqābasāt*, which reports on philosophical discussions current at the Būyid court at Baghdād in the 10th century CE, where the philosophical *koinê* of the *Neoplatonica Arabica* formed the basis for theological speculation, both Christian and Islamic⁵¹, al-Tawḥīdī reports a series of definitions he had read in books and heard from the mouths of sages. One of these reads as follows⁵²:

It was asked, What is the first cause (*yuqāl mā al-'illa al-ūlā*)? The answer <is> that it is the Originator of the all (*al-jawāb mubdi' al-kull*), the Perfector of all (*mutammim al-kull*) unmoved (*ḡayr mutaḥarrik*) and again, pure being (*wa-ayḍan anniyya faqat*), and again, pure good (*wa-ayḍan ḥayr maḥḍ*).

So striking and numerous are these resemblances, I would argue, that one could almost speak of a “philosophical *koinê*”, or complex of shared ideas, common to Marius Victorinus, Boethius, the *Neoplatonica Arabica* and Avicenna. Yet how can we explain the origin of this *koinê*, which presupposes the circulation of ideas among Greek, Latin and Arabic sources?

A possible solution: the role of Porphyry

In a nutshell, the answer may be Porphyry. We have seen that Pierre Hadot has maintained that Porphyry, the probable author of the *Anonymous Commentary on*

contrary to what some critics have maintained, it does not contradict the doctrine of Plotinus, cf. Chiaradonna “Causalité”, 78-79.

⁵⁰ The author of the *ThA* also has no hesitation in referring to God as the First Cause (*al-'illa al-ūlā ThA* p. 6, 7; 34; 37, 7.18; 51, 7.8; 87, 4; 89, 10.11 Badawi), or even the “cause of causes” (*al-'illa al-'ilal ThA* 6, 8; 156, 20; 157, 1; 161, 9; 172, 12; 177, 16), while the Greek Sage (§41, p. 106, 20-21 Wakelnig) refers to it as “pure cause” (*'illa maḥḍ*) or “simple cause” (*'illa faqat*). In contrast, Plotinus is extremely reticent to ascribe causality to the First; cf. Chiaradonna “Causalité”, 68-69.

⁵¹ Christian, as in the thought of Yahyā ibn 'Adī (c. 893.-974), the learned theologian of the Trinity and commentator on Aristotle; Islamic as in the bold speculations of al-Sijistānī (c. 912-c. 985) and Miskawayh (c. 936-1030). Cf. Joel Kraemer, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam: Abu Sulayman al-Sijistani and his Circle* (Leiden: Brill 1986); idem, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam. The cultural revival during the Buyid age* (Leiden: Brill 1992). Al-Tawḥīdī's *Muqābasāt* (ed. Muḥammad Tawfiq Ḥusain [Baghdad 1970]) also contains one of two known versions of the *Treatise on the Soul* attributed to Porphyry, which exhibits very close parallels in doctrine and terminology to the *ThA*; cf. Charles Genequand. “La mémoire de l'âme. Porphyre et la Théologie d'Aristote”, *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* 48 (1996): 103-113.

⁵² Al-Tawḥīdī, *Muqābasāt*, 91, p. 298, 3ff. Ḥusain.

the Parmenides, is likely to be at least one main source of the complex of ideas concerning the distinction between essence and existence in Marius Victorinus and in Boethius. But as I have argued elsewhere⁵³, Porphyry is also likely to be at the origin of the *Neoplatonic Arabica*, or at least of *Theology of Aristotle*. Indeed, the incipit of this work presents it as a “commentary by Porphyry”, and Porphyry himself tells us (*Life of Plotinus*, ch. 26.) that he added commentaries on some of the *Enneads* to his edition of his teacher's masterwork. I have suggested that the *ThA*'s considerable divergences from Plotinus may be due to the fact that the Arabic translator of the *Enneads* was working from a manuscript that contained the text of Plotinus in the middle, surrounded, as was customary in Late Antiquity, by scholia, in this case originating from Porphyry. The translator thus reproduced both Plotinus' text and Porphyry' scholia, without being particularly concerned to distinguish them.

This hypothesis may at least partially explain the presence of Porphyrian themes in the *Neoplatonica Arabica*. But what of Avicenna?

The influence of the *Neoplatonica Arabica* on Avicenna is a subject that is still in its infancy⁵⁴. What is certain, however, is that at some point in his intellectual career Avicenna produced an important work known as the *Notes on the Theology of Aristotle*⁵⁵. This under-studied work shows Avicenna struggling with distinctly Neoplatonic ideas which the text ascribed to Aristotle: he rejects some but adopts many others⁵⁶, and one of these notions he takes over from the *Theology of Aristotle* may well be the famous distinction between essence and existence⁵⁷. In one of Avicenna's *Notes*, we find the following passage, which discusses the duality that arises when the Intellect emanates forth (*yaşduru 'anhā*) from the First Principle:

We say: there is no composition in essence from the viewpoint of the two relations⁵⁸, so that it is not originated insofar as it is an essence (*fa-naqūl inna al-māhiyya lā tarkīb fihī min jihati al-nisbatīna fa-innā laysat mubda'a min ḥayṭu hiya māhiyya*), but insofar as existence is combined with it (*bal min ḥayṭu maqrūn bi-hā al-wujūd*), and when the essence turns to it insofar as it is essence, it is not a

⁵³ Chase, “Porphyry and the Theology of Aristotle”.

⁵⁴ Cf. Cristina D'Ancona, “Avicenna and the *Liber de Causis*. A contribution to the dossier”, *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval* 7 (2000): 95-114; *eadem*, “The Timaeus model for Creation and Providence. An example of continuity and adaptation in early Arabic philosophical literature”, in G. J. Reydams-Schils, ed., *Plato's Timaeus as a Cultural Icon* (Notre Dame/ University of Notre Dame Press 2003), 206-237.

⁵⁵ Ed. 'Abdurrahmān Badawī, *Aristū 'inda-l-'Arab* (Cairo 1947, many reprints); French translation Georges Vajda, “Notes d'Avicenne sur la Théologie d'Aristote”, *Revue Thomiste*, 51 (1951), 346-406.

1951. A team at the CNRS Centre Jean Pépin, consisting of M. Geoffroy †, M. Sebti, J. Janssens and myself, is currently working on a badly-needed new critical edition with French translation of this work.

⁵⁶ Among the ideas he rejects is the pre-existence of the soul. Here, Avicenna suspects the text of the “ has been tampered with.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of this passage cf. Lizzini, “Wuğūd-Mawğūd”, 121-122. Bertolacci makes no mention of Avicenna's *Notes on the Theology* in his two recent articles (“Distinction”, “ Hapax Legomenon”) dedicated to the Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence. My translation of the passage is extremely tentative, based as it is on Badawi's inadequate edition.

⁵⁸ I.e., between essence and existence.

combination of essence and existence from the first was necessary by it ? (*fa-laysat al-māhiyya idā iltafat ilayhā min ḥayṭu hiya māhiyya majmū' māhiyyatin wa-wujūdin min al-awwal bi-hī wajabat*), but existence is related to it like a thing that occurs to it (*bal al-wujūd muḍāf ilayhā ka-šay' ṭāri' 'alayhā*).

We have here, in the context of a commentary on the Neoplatonically-inspired *Theology of Aristotle*, a statement of Avicenna's doctrine, not only of the distinction between essence and existence⁵⁹, but of the accidentally of existence, which is described as something that accrues or occurs later to essence. This doctrinal element, which seems to envisage a set of pre-existence essences upon which existence is subsequently conferred, is highly embarrassing for those who wish to interpret Avicenna as a dyed-in-the-wool Aristotelian averse to all that smacks of "mysticism". To make matters worse, at the end of this crucial passage Avicenna informed the reader that he has already explained the relation between essence and existence in detail in his "Oriental Wisdom"⁶⁰, a work which has been, and continues to be, the subject of fierce debate between those who understand Avicenna as, to some extent and in contexts, a mystic and a Sufi, and those who understand him as a hard-head Aristotelian who would feel quite at home in any modern analytically-oriented Philosophy Department⁶¹.

Let me be clear about precisely what it is I am proposing. It is emphatically not my suggestion that Avicenna merely took over his doctrine of the distinction between existence and essence lock, stock and barrel from works belonging to the complex of works known as the *Neoplatonica Arabica*, works which, I believe, can be shown to contain a high degree of Porphyrian influence. There is no trace in Avicenna of the scheme we have identified, following Pierre Hadot, in the metaphysical theology of <Porphyry's> *Commentary on the Parmenides* and Marius Victorinus' *Theological Treatises*, according to which an initially indeterminate Being or Existence externalizes itself in a stage corresponding to Life, only to return to itself, henceforth endowed with self-consciousness, in a stage identified with the Intellect, resulting the determination of Being into substance or the existent, henceforth delimited, endowed with qualities that can be predicated of it, and thus knowable. Nor is this surprising: Avicenna was much too great a philosopher to slavishly copy any

⁵⁹ It is important to note that whereas, according to Badawi's edition, this passage occurs in that part of Avicenna's treatise that comments on Maymar 5 of the *ThA*, it is in fact far from clear which passage from the *ThA* Avicenna is actually referring to and/or inspired by. Did he have access to a version of the *ThA* containing passages that are absent from the current edition as edited by Badawi? Cf. Amos Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifā'* (Leiden 2006), 49. Further work on the critical edition of Avicenna's *Notes*, in conjunction with the new critical edition of the *ThA* announced by Cristina D'Ancona, will be required to shed light on this subject.

⁶⁰ *fa-qad šuriha fī al-Ḥikma al-Mašriqiyya*, p. 61, 24 Badawi.

⁶¹ For a fair-minded survey of the issues, cf. Jules Janssens, "Ibn Sīnā. A Philosophical Mysticism or a Philosophy of Mysticism?", in *Mediterranea. International Journal for the Transfer of Knowledge*, 1 (2016), 37-55.

2016. The extreme terms of the interpretations of Avicenna range from Henry Corbin's characterization of his thought as fundamentally mystical, to Dmitri Gutas' portrayal of him as a rationalist.

philosophical doctrine from the many various sources he encountered in the course of his vast reading. Instead, my claim is much more modest. I suggest that may be that Avicenna encountered materials in the *Neoplatonic Arabica*, some of which may have been of Porphyrian origin, which contained some form of the existence-essence distinction. These materials served as the starting-point for Avicenna's developments of his own complex doctrine of the distinction between essence and existence, which mobilizes elements, such as the relationship between necessity and contingency, of which there is, so far as we know, no trace in the philosophical doctrines attributable to Porphyry. It is in fact quite conceivable that Avicenna developed his own doctrine of essence and existence, at least in part, *in reaction* to, rather than in imitation of, Porphyrian material that he may have found circulating in the school of Ibn 'Adī, a Christian of Neoplatonic tendencies whose indebtedness to Porphyrian philosophical doctrines is only now beginning to become apparent⁶².

The advantage of this hypothesis set forth here is that it may help to explain how an apparently similar doctrine — that of the differentiation between essence and existence — appears in such widely different linguistic, historical and cultural contexts as late 3rd-century Greek Neoplatonism (Porphyry), 4th and 6th century Latin Church Fathers (Marius Victorinus, Boethius), 9th century Arabic apocrypha (the *Neoplatonica Arabica*), and the early 11th century Islamic philosopher Avicenna. The defect of my hypothesis is, of course, that it is deeply speculative and probably unprovable, not unlike Pierre Hadot's attribution of the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides* to Porphyry, and his concomitant claim of wide-ranging Porphyrian influence on the theological thought of Marius Victorinus. But to classify a hypothesis as speculative is not equivalent to proving it to be wrong: in the study of ancient philosophy and theology, where such a huge percentage of original works have disappeared without a trace, there is, in my view, no place for dogmatic positivism, and it remains true, even more so that in the other fields of the humanities, that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Certainty in such matters is forever unattainable: the best we can ever hope for is plausibility and the cumulatively increasing confirmation or disconfirmation of a given hypothesis. In the present instance, this goal can, I believe, be achieved, or at least approximated, by continued work on the edition, translation and commentary of Arabic works that contained echoes of Neoplatonic doctrines, first and foremost among which are the *Neoplatonica Arabica* and Avicenna's *Notes on the Theology of Aristotle*.

Michael Chase

⁶² Cf. Marwan Rashed. "Ibn 'Adī et Avicenne: sur les types d'existants", in V. Celluprica -C. D'Ancona, eds., *Aristotele e i suoi esegeti neoplatonici* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2004), 107-171; Fedor Benevich, "Fire and heat. Yahyā b. 'Adī and Avicenna on the essentiality of being substance or accident", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 27 (2017), 237-267.

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