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ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE:
AVICENNA AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

by

David B. Burrell, c.s.c.*

It should not be difficult to put ourselves in the place of those grappling for the first time with Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* either because we find ourselves performing the midwife's task from time to time, or simply because Greek thought remains so paradigmatic for philosophical inquiry that our experience with Aristotle proves exemplary. In either case, supposing a prior fascination with Plato, we will be prepared to approach these matters through what can be *said* of them, and come to respect Aristotle's concern for *how* things can be said—especially his concern for accurately distinguishing among the different ways things can be said of something. Nothing could quite have prepared us, however, for the gracelessness of his running criticism of his master. After having been introduced to the forms in Plato's middle dialogues, and watched him strive for the proper way to express *participation* in the later dialogues, it can only seem pedestrian for Aristotle to stick on the fact of their being separable from the things we normally encounter, and *as such* incapable of explaining what Plato invoked them to explain.

Such a tack hardly does justice to the virtuosity of the term *eidos,* nor to the tone of Plato's sustained treatment, which could never be taken as describing a parallel world except by readers utterly devoid of imagination or determined so to understand it. The *literal* sense of Plato's accounts hardly matches the reductive treatment they receive in Aristotle's hands. This manifest discrepancy has led

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some to propose an intermediate target: successors of Plato in the Academy, who collapsed the tensive language we associate with Plato into a flat description of forms as objects out there for our acquaintance. (And since one can usually find contemporary examples of such "platonists," the hypothesis remains a plausible one.) Another interpretation has been suggested, however, which proves at once simpler and more congruent with Aristotle's enterprise.

1. The role of the "Aporia"

That is to treat his "Plato-critique" as a continuing feature of Aristotle's own internal development: directed less towards Plato's actual treatment than to the clarifications he would have to demand of his own thought on such matters.[1] This reading can explain at once his preoccupation with Plato as well as his relative unconcern with Plato's forms of expression as he transposed them into his own terms. For it was Plato who had focussed us on the matter at hand: what is; and Plato who had established, through Socrates, the manner of getting hold of what is: attention to discourse. So Aristotle's own preoccupation with *formulae* (logoi) bespeaks his Platonic origins, and displays the depth of his debt. What generated the critique was the peculiar use to which he needed to put the term *eidos,* to express his intended focus on the individual existing thing—notably "a living organism belonging to a definite species."[2]

The individual thing is to be understood as a composite (*sunolon*) whose form (*eidos*) will make it to be what it is: a definite kind of thing. And since the form is rendered in a formula (*logos*), the formula will be a "kind of composite" (*sunolon ti*) as well. We are focussed, then, on individual things as paradigmatic of what is, yet directed to their formal structure since whatever is must be of a definite kind. And since kinds are rendered by formulae, we are led to definitions as expressing what something is. That is why the compositeness of the things we find: "Callias and Socrates—such and such a form induced in this flesh and these bones" (1034a 5–7) must be mirrored in their formula: "a kind of composite composed of this particular formula and this particular matter regarded as universal" (1035b 28–30). Yet their formula will not be 'Callias' or 'Socrates,' but what these are: 'rational animal.'

These elementary reminders bring us to the heart of Aristotle's project, indicate the extent of his indebtedness to Plato, and may even have succeeded in evoking our original encounter with his struggle to articulate what is. That struggle becomes ours as well the moment we see why it involves a continuing critique of Plato: the clear focus on individual existing things as the paradigm for

what is sets up an immediate tension with the sortal terms (like 'man' or 'horse') which answer to the formulae giving the kind of thing it is we are facing. He insists that such terms are not themselves paradigmatic of what is (*ousia*), yet since any consideration of what lies before us involves such general (or *kind*) terms, we are immediately drawn to think of individual existing things as *instances* of a certain kind. Yet to do so diverts our focus from the things themselves to their form, so to speak, and Plato wins after all.

By focussing on living things, where he could count on a process of generation, Aristotle thought to obviate any "need to set up a form as a pattern (*paradeigma*)...; the thing which generates is sufficient to produce; and to be the cause of the form in the matter" (1034a 2–5). Yet since he himself invokes a formula (*logos*) to identify things by their kinds, one might suspect his shift in focus to have been more tactical than strategic: to serve to direct the development of specific lines of inquiry like biology, but not to have shifted the locus of inquiry into what is. As Charles Kahn succinctly puts it: "in Greek ontology, from Parmenides on, the question of Being is a question as to what reality must be like—or what the world must be like—in order for knowledge and true (or false) discourse to be possible."[3] Aristotle embodied that approach in his attention to predication: "What must reality be like if predications such as 'X is Y' are to be possible, and sometimes true? What will X be like? What will Y be like? And how can the two be related to one another?" (Kahn, 14). Does this not adequately describe Aristotle's endeavor? But if it does, what has happened to his explicit focus on the individual existing thing? It seems to have become but a matter of emphasis.

This is the quandary in which Aristotle leaves his reader, and it is one which even the initial reader can feel, especially if one finds his focus on the individual existent congenial—as indeed most do.[4] How to sustain that focus intellectually? How can we assure that it be more than an insistence, and that individuals not be reabsorbed into an account in which they become *instances* of definite kinds? It is a matter, to be sure, of where one puts the primacy: on the account or on the encounter? That is too neat, no doubt, yet the goal becomes clear to readers sympathetic to Aristotle's project, and attracted by his candid presentation of the quandary as an open-ended *aporia* to try to solve it themselves: how can we *account for* the primacy he gives to existing individuals?

Here the quandary reduplicates itself, as the attempt to state it reveals just how intractable an *aporia* it is. For one accounts for things by formulae, and one cannot admit a form of an individual without reintroducing the "third man"

conundrum. What makes Socrates to be is his human form; there is no other way of putting the matter for a Greek. Which is to say, there is no other way of expressing the answer to the paradigmatic question: what is X? If we are to adopt the question-form, and turn it about to ask: what is it for something to be an instance of X?—where X names the answer to the earlier question, i.e., the kind of x—then Aristotle's own "Plato-critique" should warn us that we will not be able to give an answer to that question in the form it anticipates. For what makes the individual an individual is not a form but something else.[5] Not *matter,* either, for that simply accounts for its being an instance—denumerable or statistically irrelevant, as the case may be. And that "something else" eludes the terms of Aristotle's analysis yet seems required for his insisting on the individual existing thing as the exemplar of what is. Another way of highlighting the *aporia*.

And lest one think any the less of Aristotle (or of Plato behind him) for being unable to resolve such a quandary, it might help to suggest that its very identification—by way of an open *aporia*—offers a brilliant way of showing us the limits of inquiry. Moreover, it does so by reminding us that inquiry's natural vehicle is discourse, and that discourse answers the question 'what is x?'. There simply is no other *accounting* to be done than to answer that question about x by developing those modes of inquiry which allow us to determine what makes x *what* it is. What has happened, then, to the individual existing thing? It has become an instance of a kind, to be sure; the pull endemic to scientific inquiry is formal (and in that sense platonic). Yet one has properly resisted reducing what makes the individual existent paradigmatic of what is to an indescribable formal feature called "individuality." We are warned off that *cul de sac* by Aristotle's own "Plato-critique," and so left with an insistence. Whether it be a mere insistence or a strong insistence will determine, I suspect, whether or not one remains an Aristotelian. My story will be that one cannot *remain* an Aristotelian, that his own open *aporiae* will see to that; and that the differing responses to the call implicit in that insistence will suggest different ways of overcoming his central *aporia*—much as one finds one's way through a *koan* without ever properly resolving it.

2. Interlude on method

To anticipate my story a bit, it should be clear that a new level of understanding will be required to give appropriate expression to Aristotle's insistence on the primacy of the existing individual. And since new levels of understanding can only be secured by introducing the proper conceptual tools, let me identify the "distinction between essence and existence" as the requisite tool

for opening us to that mode of understanding. It is dangerous to do so, of course, for shorthand descriptions of that sort can often undermine one's very intent. This is especially true here, since the *distinction* would serve no purpose if "existence" were to be assimilated to a property. Yet this is of course what the use of a substantive ('existence') presupposes. So I deliberately anticipate the story to encourage those who think they already know its ending to settle down to listen. For the fragment they have snatched may or may not be the ending to this story; and besides, who can presume to have grasped the sense of an ending without letting themselves be gripped by the narrative?

To capture the connection of story with history here, and to reinforce an oft-neglected dimension of philosophical argument recently articulated by Alisdair MacIntyre, the summary statement of Charles Kahn sets the stage admirably:[6]

> My general view of the historical development is that existence in the modern sense becomes a central concept in philosophy only in the period when Greek ontology is radically revised in the light of a metaphysics of creation: that is to say, under the influence of Biblical religion. As far as I can see, this development did not take place with Augustine or with the Greek Church Fathers, who remained under the sway of classical ontology. The new metaphysics seems to have taken shape in Islamic philosophy, in the form of a *radical* distinction between necessary and contingent existence: between the existence of God, on the one hand, and that of the created world, on the other. The old Platonic contrast between Being and Becoming, between the eternal and the perishable (or, in Aristotelian terms, between the necessary and the contingent), now gets reformulated in such a way that for the contingent being of the created world (which was originally present only as a "possibility" in the divine mind) the property of "real existence" emerges as a new attribute or "accident," a kind of added benefit bestowed by God upon possible beings in the act of creation. What is new here is the notion of radical contingency, not simply the old Aristotelian idea that many things might be other than they in fact are—that many events might turn out otherwise—but that the whole world of nature might not have been created at all: that it might not have *existed*.

We shall see that Ibn-Sina's introduction of *existence* as something that "happens to" essence (or possible being) threatened the very distinction he wanted to introduce, by making it sound like a property, an "accident," Yet the movement of his thought, as Kahn suggests, motivated by theological concerns, was to transpose the Greek notion of contingency into a yet more radical one, and so suggest a way for expressing Aristotle's insistence on the individual existent as the exemplar for what is. That Ibn-Sina himself did not succeed in formulating that way properly will also be part of the story. Yet to show his place in the history of that elucidation called "the distinction between essence and existence" should contribute to our grasping that sense of an ending which any narrative hopes to achieve.

3. The way to Ibn-Sina

The "sway of classical ontology" was confirmed and stamped by three figures spanning the third to the fifth centuries: Plotinus, his pupil and publicist Porphyry, and Proclus.[7] (What is more, two books attributed to Aristotle and vastly influential among Arab and western thinkers—*Theology of Aristotle* and *Liber de Causis*—were in fact editions of Plotinus and Proclus respectively.) Their neoplatonic tendencies neatly reversed the primacy of "first/second substance" in Aristotle, as they yoked ontology with logic with the less general serving the more universal. The most inclusive category of all will then be *being* (*eis to einai*), itself an emanation (for Plotinus) from the One. Of immense fascination to religious minds, whether pagan, Jewish or Christian (and later Muslim), this systemic explanation of all things by an emanation which turns the increasing generality of substantial predication into a causal efflux can hardly be said to reproduce Aristotle's focal concern for individuals. Even the insistence is absent, and the publication of the "Theology" under his name can only have been an act of pious deference.

Two figures frame this development, however, who certainly attempted to be faithful to the master's concerns: Alexander of Aphrodisia (late II-early III) and John Philoponus (c. 490–c. 580). They each struggled with the issue of primacy in their respective commentaries on the logical and metaphysical works of Aristotle. In that respect they offer independent testimony to the quandary Aristotle left to his erstwhile disciples. Alexander insists that the genus "is an accident to" the thing in which it exists, yet must also aver that the "being (*to einai*) [of individuals] consists in having [the common] in themselves" (Booth 32)—a complex assertion nicely reproducing Aristotle's *aporia*. John Philoponus begins by adopting a neoplatonist line, suggesting that Aristotle's concern for individuals was pedagogical, designed to bring us to "universals, when after a time the principle shines out clearly in us"; but ends by insisting that "no universal nature exists outside of [individuals] (Booth 58–60).

The western witness to this collective attempt to contain Aristotle within a neoplatonic scheme of emanation, while deferring as best one could to his concern with individuals, was Boethius (c. 480–524). His logical works tend to reproduce the Porphyrean tree in a manner reminiscent of Proclus (*Liber de Causis*), yet he also comments on Porphyry's hesitation regarding the status of universals by considering them to be abstracted from experience to give that same experience an intelligible form (Booth 68). In general, however, it seems that he forebore judging "between Plato's separate ideas and Aristotle's universals"

(Booth 66 n. 48), utilizing the realist conception *ante res* when needing to express the containing priority of universals, and the conceptualist *post res* when deferring to Aristotle's insistence. When he does bring them together, it is to assert that an individual subject can be taken at once particularly *and* universally, though the being (*esse*) is clearly that of the subject.[8] (It is significant that Aquinas chooses to comment on two works where Boethius exhibits a greater affinity to Pseudo-Dionysius' monotheistic correction of Plotinus and Proclus: *de Trinitate* and *de Hebdomadibus*. In the latter Boethius identifies God with *ipsum esse*, carefully distinguishing "between the *esse* which makes God *ipsum esse*, and the *ipsum esse* of things which flow from him" [Booth 74]. It is a notion on which Aquinas will capitalize, yet only after clearly discriminating *esse* from *essentia*. But that carries us well beyond this version of the story.)

The central *aporia* of Aristotle will not admit of resolution, then, and even returns to threaten the urge to reduce the tension between species and individual by subsuming both in a larger emanation scheme. One maneuver, however, had not yet been attempted: distinguishing what distinguishes the individual, namely its existing, from what makes it to be the kind of thing it is. (Boethius' use of '*esse*' cannot yet be compared with Aquinas' discrimination of the term from '*essentia*' in *de Ente et Essentia*.) As if to confirm Kahn's sense of the history, this move does not appear until the Arabs, arguably first with al-Farabi (?870–?950), and clearly (though not yet coherently) with ibn-Sina (980–1037). And the pressure to do so comes from the need to distinguish the "first being" (al-Farabi) from all that is not first and derives from it. While not yet a coherent notion of creation, the concern clearly to mark a hiatus in the emanation scheme which he adopted made al-Farabi separate "a principle which has no essence as apart from being (*huwiyya*)" from everything else which "must have [its being (*huwiyya*)] from something else"—namely, the principle (Booth 100).[9] What will be required, however, to keep the principle from being identified simply with the first in the scheme—in short, to secure a notion of creation, will be a way of clearly distinguishing being (*huwiyya*) from essence (*mahiyya*). So we are brought to Ibn-Sina's wrestling with that task. Though it will not appear so clearly in him as it does later in Aquinas, that same distinction will allow one to overcome Aristotle's central *aporia*. Through a notion of creation, the difference of creator from creation will also mark what distinguishes the individual existent from its essential explanations. But that is to anticipate the story's final point.

4. Ibn-Sina's conceptual struggles

Ibn-Sina's discussions of *mawjūd* (or *anniyya*) as distinct from *mahiyya* are all in the context of distinguishing necessary being (*wājib al-wujūd*) from possible being (*mumkin al-wujūd*). And the consideration of universals-*in-se*, which might be said to prepare the way for the distinction, reminds us that "the providence of God accounts for its being in so far as it is animal."[10] Ibn-Sina, in short, is less preoccupied with Aristotle's quandary regarding the proper way to characterize existing individuals so as to secure their exemplary status, than he is to find a way of characterizing essences so that their existence in things may properly be explained. It is the essence—the *haqīqa*—that he has in view, generally rendered by a specific term 'man' or 'animal.'

But that does not mean that they exist apart; explicitly not, in fact ('5.1, 204:14–17). As the essence of what may possibly exist, however, something other than itself must explain this animal's existing. For the essence as such is neither universal nor particular, one nor many; all it can explain is the animal's being an animal. (And, as we have seen, that is all that Aristotle seemedly directly concerned to account for). As for the individual animal's coming to be and passing away, as well as its continuing to exist as long as it does, it is this fact which Ibn-Sina insists cannot be accounted for by the essence itself. Why not? Because all essences are essences of possible beings, and the "proper character [of such beings] is that they necessarily require some other thing to make them be in act" (*bil-fiᶜl mawjūdan*) (1.8, 47:10–11). There is only one whose existence is necessary, and that one, "the first, has no essence (*mahiyya*) except its existence (*anniyya*)" (8.4, 344:10). "Necessary being has no essence (*mahiyya*) except that it be necessary being, and this is its existence (*anniyya*)" (8.4, 346:11).

By insisting that the necessary being's essence (*dhat*) can only be characterized by its existing (*anniyya*), Ibn-Sina wants to avoid a misunderstanding which could jeopardize his entire enterprise: taking existence (*wujūd*) as a property contingently held by everything but the first being, who possesses it necessarily.[11] Such a reading would jeopardize his project, for it would make the distinction of necessary from possible being explicable by an independent understanding of modalities. (It would also require understanding *wujūd* as a property; a point which will emerge for comment). Ibn-Sina seeks rather for an independent way of characterizing "the first," which will then clarify his use of necessary/possible being. That is to present it as "sheer being—with the condition of negating anything understood as [adding] properties to it" (8.4, 347:10). The result is that

such a one alone is utterly without potentiality and "a unity, while everything else is a composite duality" (1.7, 47:18).

The statement just cited actually uses the ordinary Arabic word, *fard,* or 'individual,' but is better translated 'unity,' since the entire chapter is concerned to show the exemplary unity attending necessary being. In the process, however, of so distinguishing necessary from possible being, Ibn-Sina succeeds in identifying a new mode of composition in everything that is not necessary; it is "a composite duality." Not that of matter and form, which he presumes throughout, but one of essence (*mahiyya*) and of some other factor which causes the individual thing to be. That factor is never identified as such, though it would be tempting to identify it as *anniyya.* The pair (*mahiyya/anniyya*) would then sound like essence/existence. Yet that factor is never isolated; *anniyya* expresses "the real existence of a particular individual" rather than identifying what it is that makes the individual exist.[12]

Moreover, the term which Ibn-Sina consistently prefers, *mawjūd,* which is the participial form of *wujūd,* is probably best rendered 'existing,' as we do when we look for a participial form for 'being'—once it has been fixed as a noun! So we say that a being is an existing thing. Yet we have not yet thereby isolated a distinct factor, existence. That is why I have usually rendered *wujūd* as 'being' rather than 'existence,' *mawjūd* as 'existing,' saving 'existence' for *anniyya.* Yet even here, following van den Bergh, d'Alverny, and Frank, 'existent' would render the usage more accurately. So once again *existence* has eluded us, yet we are on the track. And we shall also see where Ibn-Sina in fact addresses Aristotle's *aporia,* even though it does not explicitly structure his inquiry. These features will emerge as we examine more closely his treatment of essence (or universal) in itself. In examining that treatment we will see how clearly Aristotelian are his preoccupations, just why he took care not to treat existence as a property, and assess the claim of Gilson and others that Ibn-Sina has "given ontological priority to essence and thus violated his Aristotelian commitment to the ontological priority of substance."[13]

5. Essence-in-itself

A glance at the more sweeping change will help to place our discussion of essence-in-itself. If these critics mean to say that he is preoccupied with essences and their ontological status, their observations simply formulate any reader's reaction to *al-Shifa,* and coincide with my contention that Aristotle's quandary regarding the proper way to characterize the primacy of substance did not

explicitly structure Ibn-Sina's inquiry. Both Gilson and de Raeymaeker do say that much, and more; yet the *more* presents a comparative judgment of Ibn-Sina's achievements in formulating the essence/existence distinction by contrast to Aquinas'. The most measured assessment, to my mind, is that of Ibn-Sina's current editor and translator, Georges Anawati, O.P., who puts the matter succinctly: "C'est en partant de l'essence qu'Avicenne aboutit forcément à considérer *l'esse* qui l'affecte comme un accident. S. Thomas par contre part de l'être existant et il fait de *l'esse* ce qu'il y a de plus intime et de plus profond dans cet être."[14] Again, it would be difficult for a reader of both to contest that description of their respective starting points and the pictures or metaphors which guide their analyses. The advantage of Anawati's assessment is that it regards their different approaches to the matter rather than weighing their achievements. It is to that extent pretheoretic, and so useful in guiding a discussion of Ibn-Sina that will not intend to compare him with Aquinas.

For Ibn-Sina does begin with essence, and his treatment of the universal-in-itself offers him the leverage to consider *wujūd* as something which "comes to" the essence, while also assuring that it *not* be considered as an accident properly so-called, i.e., a property. His discussion (5.1) quickly leaves behind the general term 'universal' ((*kullī*) and concentrates on man or animal: "animal insofar as it is animal, and man insofar as it is man, that is in terms of their definition and meaning, without reference to other things accompanying them—nothing but man or animal" (5.1, 201:1–3). One cannot help but find this a congenial rendering of Aristotle's "secondary substance": the formula. Universality, or predicability of many, belongs to it only upon further reflection regarding its role in discourse; hence it is an accompanying feature to "animal as animal." (One is reminded here of C. S. Pierce's preference for 'general' rather than 'universal,' lest one pre-judge the issue by speaking of the "problem of universals."[15])

What Ibn-Sina is reaching for is an essence prior to universality or particularity, without any conditions at all; *not*, he insists, one with the expressed condition *not* to attribute particularity or universality to it (5.1, 203:18). It is the essence taken by itself, without regard to existence, and hence short of a separate Platonic status. Such a one, he avers, can and indeed does "exist in reality," while the Platonic one—considered *as separate*—can only exist in the mind (1.5, 204:5–10). How can we say it "exists in reality," if not separately? The Latin translation, which formed the basis for western interpretation of Avicenna, answers that unequivocally by translating "in reality" (*fī'l-a'yān*) as "in sensibilibus."[16] Such a rendering would leave no doubt as to Ibn-Sina's

Aristotelian commitments, and it is as plausible as any in rendering the vague expression "in reality," especially when the Arabic carries the original meaning of "upon observation." What is essential, after all—if one may pun a bit—is that we arrest our considerations at the essence-itself: "animal insofar as animal." For that is what Ibn-Sina will show cannot explain the fact of existing animals.

And if we ask why it cannot do so, the question fairly answers itself. For the essence of all that is not necessary being is itself indifferent to existence or to non-existence; indeed that is what it is to be possible being (1.6, 38:12–17). To have no cause is not to exist, and to exist such an essence "demands another thing which will make it be in act" (1.7; 4712—cf. Anawati, 237n.). There is no further question remaining; the only question is the one implicitly put by Anawati: why select such a starting point? Nor can we expect Ibn-Sina himself to answer that question; the best one can do is point to the neoplatonic manner of resolving Aristotle's quandary, and note the predilection of that tradition (and of much of philosophy) to focus on the formula, genus and species, "secondary substance."[17]

Standing in such a tradition, yet unwilling to give ontological primacy to what is more general, Ibn-Sina sought a *reason* for giving primacy to existing individuals. Though the Aristotelian *aporia* did not structure his inquiry, it could not help but motivate it. Since that reason could not come from the formal side, it had to come from elsewhere. With matter a mere repository of possibility, that could only be from "the first" being whose very essence would be to exist. The image that comes to mind is of the Copernican system before Newton. As Bellarmine rightly saw, it remained a likely mathematical story without an account of the origin of movement. The Plotinian emanation scheme remained a logico-aesthetic theory without an ontologico-kinetic source. Aristotle's prime mover accounted for the activity of the spheres governing generation and corruption; Ibn-Sina's "first being" would account for the scheme's actually existing. No wonder Kahn insisted on the newness of this "notion of *radical* contingency, not simply the old Aristotelian idea that many things might be other than they in fact are... but that the whole world of nature might not have been created at all: that it might not have *existed.*"

6. Returning to the "Aporia"

This is not to say, however, that Ibn-Sina succeeded in formulating a notion of creation corresponding to so radical a contingency, any more than he was able to identify *what* it was which united with essence to yield the composite dualities called substances.[18] Whatever it was, however, it had to "happen to" or "come

to" essence, or possible being (1.7, 47:12). And since the Arabic verb for 'happen/ come to,' like the Latin verb *accidere,* in its noun form had translated Aristotle's 'accident,' Ibn-Sina was said to have made of existence an accident. Kahn describes the new situation neatly: "for the contingent being of the created world (which was originally present only as a "possibility" in the divine mind) the property of 'real existence' emerges as a new attribute or 'accident,' a kind of added benefit bestowed by God upon possible beings in the act of creation."

Showing that *existence* cannot in any proper sense be an accident requires no great philosophical acumen. For the grammer of that category — "what exists in another" — presupposes primary existents of which it can be an accident. If existence is taken to be that which enters into composition with essence to make a primary existent, then it could not itself be of such a sort as to presuppose itself. And if the contrast term for existence is not substance but the essence taken by itself, then Ibn-Sina could well say that existence must *come to* such an item for it to exist as an individual, but would have no right to call what "came to" it an *accident* of it. Ibn-Rushd belabored this point, intending it as a criticism of Ibn-Sina; in our time Fazlur Rahman and Alexander Altmann have cleared the record.[19]

So where, then, do we stand? Nowhere — ontologically — and that is the difficulty, yet certainly on the threshold of a new world. Aristotle's penetrating analysis of discourse, and especially of its key structural relation, predication, gave us a world of substance and accidents. Yet the logical elaboration of that analysis could not of itself resolve the central *aporia* regarding the status of existing individuals: how to account for their ontological primacy? What would be required would be a similarly penetrating analysis of discourse which directed itself to statements as Aristotle's had to propositions — a distinction his analysis had elided just as he had presupposed the fact of things' existing. For what was at stake was not the addition of a new feature to the universe, but a new look at the universe of discourse itself. More like discovering the force of gravity than discovering America, such an analysis would have to find the proper terms to characterize the new mode of composition discovered by Ibn-Sina. To be sure, it would have to be as intimate a union as that fashioned by Aristotle for matter/ form, and like that composition, be shown to be an intrinsic feature of our operating discourse.

Ibn-Sina did not manage such a feat, but he certainly prepared the way for it. By refusing to employ *wujūd* as a property, he did not pretend to operate within the Aristotelian scheme and so offer a misleading solution which may have

diverted later efforts. He simply said what he had to say—in Anawati's words, "beginning from essence, [he] was forcibly brought to consider the existence which affected it as if it were an accident." Here the Aristotelian *aporia* reasserts itself—as those impatient with the "as if" turn his discovery into a property, and others, acutely feeling the absence of a proper characterization, are pressed to discover a more proper ontological niche for this emergent reality. The same discovery will give Aquinas a way of formulating creation in terms which show at once the pervasive influence of "the first being" in everything which is, as well as account for the integrity of each existing individual. But that would be to carry our story beyond the threshold secured by Ibn-Sina into the new world which Kahn indicated. Let us be content with that portion of the tale which has carried us from Aristotle's original quandary to bin-Sina's interim resolution, in the face of a "first being" whose influence will be conveyed to each thing in granting it to be.

David B. Burrell, c.s.c.

NOTES

1. Edward Booth, O.P., *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

2. Charles H. Kahn, "Why Existence Does not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy," in Parviz Morewedge, ed., *Philosophies of Existence Ancient and Medieval* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) 7–17, citation at 15.

3. *Ibid.*, 14. He goes on to remark: "It is, in effect, the first question which Wittgenstein sets out to answer in the *Tractatus:* How must the world be structured if logic and scientific language are to be possible?"

4. The singular merit of Booth's study (note 1) is to have identified this quandary (or *aporia*). It is a quite different one from that detailed by Joseph Owens regarding modern attempts to interpret the *Metaphysics* as a whole ("The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian *Metaphysics*—Revisited," in Morewedge, ed. [note 2] 33–59), for it is accessible at the outset and even betrayed by Aristotle's own hesitations on the matter. Booth delineates the course of subsequent systematic attempts to resolve it.

5. Scotus' introduction of *haecceitas* contravenes the very grammar of the analysis, and so strikes one as "scholastic" in the pejorative sense: to introduce distinctions (and hence entities) without due regard for their coherence. Revenge soon comes at the hands of those who will insist that "entities not be multiplied beyond what is necessary." It is instructive that the tradition which grappled directly with Aristotle's *aporia* did not have recourse to such a ruse.

6. Cf. Alisdair MacIntyre's "Response" in the second edition of *After Virtue* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). For Kahn citation, see Morewedge (note 2) 7–8.

7. In this historical review I am heavily indebted to Booth (note 1), chs. 2–3.

8. The "passage [is] much quoted by Albert and Thomas: '*idem singularitatis et universalitatis unum quidem subjectum est, sed alio modo universale est, cum cogitatur, alio singulare, cum sentitur in rebus his in quibus esse suum habet*'" (Booth, 70).

9. Clearly authentic works of al-Farabi, like the *Ideas of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* (ed. R. P. Jaussen et al. [Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1980]), do not contain so unequivocal a statement of the distinction as can be found in the questionable *Gemstones of Wisdom* (ed. M. Horten, *Das Buch der Ringsteine Farabis* [Muenster, 1906]), so one cannot definitively attribute the move to him. Schlomo Pines claims authorship for Ibn-Sina: "Ibn Sina et l'auteur de la *Risālat al-Fusūs fi'l hikma,*" *Revue des Études Islamiques* 19 (1951) 121–4; others continue to favor al-Farabi.

10. References to Ibn-Sina, unless otherwise noted, will be from *al-Shifa: Al-Ilāhiyyāt* (*La Métaphysique*) I, ed. G. C. Anawati and S. Zayed; II, ed. M. Y. Moussa, S. Dunya, and S. Zayed (Cairo, 1960): citations by book and chapter, followed by page: lines. First part of a French translation by Georges Anawati has appeared: *Avicenne: La Métaphysique du Shifa,* Livres I à V (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978). The sections most relevant to this inquiry will be 1.6, 5.1, 8.4. The citation can be found at 5.1, 205:13.

11. The distinction between *mahiyya* and *dhat* is that between *quiddity* and *essence*, where *quiddity* requires an answer to the question what (*quid, mā*) is it? in proper terms: genus plus difference; while *essence* will tolerate a less precise answer. So in answering 'what is necessary being?' one will not be able to respond with a genus and difference, but can say something: it is *anniyya*. On this point (and several others) I have been assisted mightily by Fadlou Shehadi, *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy* (Delmar NY: Caravan, 1982) esp. 84.

12. Discussion surrounding *anniyya* abounds. For a clear summary, see Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, "Anniyya-Anitas," in *Mélanges offerts à Etienne Gilson* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1959) 59–91; as well as Richard Frank, "The origin of the Arabic Philosophical Term *anniyya,*" *Musée Lavigerie Cahiers de Byrsa* 6 (1956) [Paris: Imprimerie Nationale] 181–201. Citation is from van den Bergh's article in second edition of *L'encyclopédie de l'Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960) I, 529.

13. Etienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme,* 5 ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1944) 56 n. 1; elaborated in a seminal article by L. de Raeymaeker, "L'être selon Avicenne et selon S. Thomas d'Aquin," in *Avicenna Commemoration Volume* (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1956) 119–32. The description of the charge is Shehadi's (note 11) 76.

14. Introduction to translation of *al-Shifa* (*La Métaphysique*) (note 10) 78.

15. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960) 1.27, 1.422, 1.165, 5.429, 5.453, 5.503.

16. Simone van Riet, ed., *Avicenna Latinus: Liber de Philosophia Prima* V–X (Leiden: Brill, 1980) 236–7.

17. For a useful discussion of the background to Avicenna's notion, see G. Verbeke, Introduction to *Avicenna Latinus* (note 16), "Une Nouvelle Théologie Philosophique," 2*–19*.

18. Verbeke, *ibid.,* 30*–36*, 51*–68*.

19. For Ibn-Rushd's objection, see Simon van den Bergh, ed., *Averroes' Tahafut al-Tahafut* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) I, 236. Also Alexander Altmann, "Essence and Existence in Maimonides," in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) 108–27, and Fazlur Rahman, "Essence and Existence in Avicenna," in Richard Hunt et al., eds., *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (London: Warburg Institute, 1958) 1–16.