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The Place of God in Metaphysics: A Short Analysis of Ibn Sīnā's Critique of Aristotle

Abstract: This article deals with Ibn Sīnā's criticisms of Aristotle regarding what the place of God should be in the science of metaphysics. From Aristotle's point of view, the existence of God is proved by the proof of motion in physics and is held as a subject matter in a science that comes after physics, which is metaphysics. According to him, metaphysics is the most sublime science because God is its subject matter. The most striking criticism against Aristotle's conception of metaphysics was put forward by Ibn Sīnā. From Ibn Sīnā's point of view, the most important problem encountered in Aristotle's understanding of metaphysics is that ontology and theology are intertwined. According to him, God cannot be a subject matter in metaphysics, rather, proving the existence of God is the aim of metaphysics. The subject matter of metaphysics is being *qua* being, and its aim is to prove the Necessary Existent that is the principle of existence. Accordingly, for Ibn Sīnā, metaphysics is an *ontological* science in terms of its subject and a *theological* science in terms of its aim. This new conception of metaphysics, developed by Ibn Sīnā, had a profound effect not only on Islamic thought but also on Western philosophy. In a way, the ontotheological notes of Islamic and Western thought from the Middle Ages to the present have progressed through the metaphysical symphony composed by Ibn Sīnā.

Keywords: Aristotle, Ibn Sīnā, metaphysics, God, ontology, theology

Part I

Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Avicenna, was a Muslim philosopher who inherited the intellectual accumulation of the previous Greek philosophy and the early Islamic theological tradition, and succeeded in establishing an original metaphysical system by subjecting them to critical analysis. Aristotelian metaphysics has a special place in the philosophical system of Ibn Sīnā. Ibn Sīnā is generally referred to as an Aristotelian philosopher; however, his philosophy can also be read as a critique of Aristotle. Ibn Sīnā's Aristotelianism is not a case of blindly imitating Aristotle's footsteps, but of his original quest to transcend Aristotle by critically analyzing his philosophy.¹ He tells in his life story that he read Aristotle's book, *Metaphysics*, 40 times, but he could not understand the contradictions in that book, and the issue became clear in his mind when he read al-Fārābī's small treatise on that book, *On the Aims of the Metaphysics*.² The new metaphysical system developed by Ibn Sīnā by criticizing Aristotelian metaphysics is the most important breaking point in the relationship between ontology and theology in both Islamic and Western philosophical traditions. This article aims to analyze Ibn Sīnā's criticisms of Aristotle about the place of God in metaphysics, and then to present a general framework for the profound effects of Ibn Sīnā's ontotheological conception of metaphysics in the Islamic and Western philosophical traditions.

The basis of the disagreement between Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā is related to the place of God in the science of metaphysics. According to Aristotle, every science must have a subject matter, and every science differs from other sciences in terms of the subject it deals with.³ So, if metaphysics is a science, what is the subject matter of it? According to Aristotle, metaphysics, in its original expression *first philosophy*, is a universal science that deals with being *qua* being. This science should also be called *theology*, since it also deals with God.⁴ Accordingly, from the point of view of Aristotle, there are two subject matters for the science of metaphysics: being *qua* being and God. For Aristotle, every science must have a subject matter, but no science can prove the subject it deals with.⁵ In this case, from where did metaphysics obtain the God of which it was the subject of research? To understand this point, it would be appropriate to look at Aristotle's views on the science of physics. According to him, physics is a theoretical science that deals with the corporeal things in terms of being mobile and stationary. He claims that when the motion in the world is analyzed in physics, it will be concluded that there

¹ O. Lizzini, "Ibn Sina's Metaphysics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/ibn-sina-metaphysics/> (accessed 14.04.2022); E. Erdem, "İbn Sīnā Metafizigi," [in:] *Metafizik: Filozofların Metafizik Sistemleri*, A. Çiğen (ed.), Bursa 2019, pp. 196–204.

² W.E. Gohlman, *The Life of Ibn Sīnā: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*, transl. W.E. Gohlman, Albany–New York 1974, pp. 32–34.

³ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, transl. J. Barnes, Oxford 2002, 71b–72b.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, transl. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis 2016, 1026a5–30.

⁵ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 76b5–30.

is a first mover not moved by someone else at the beginning of the chain of causes. Later, Aquinas will identify this first mover with God in his *the first way*.⁶

According to Aristotle, after the existence of God was proved as a first mover in physics, it is transferred as a subject matter to the meta-physics, that is, to the science that comes after physics. To put it more clearly, God, the subject matter of metaphysics, is proved in physics. The fact that the science that Aristotle called *first philosophy* was later called *metaphysics*, in the sense that comes after physics, is not just a matter of orderings of his books by the commentators; but it is an issue related to his conception of God. From Aristotle's point of view, because of the fact that metaphysics deals with both being *qua* being and God, it is a universal science in one aspect and a particular science in another. Again, according to him, the value of every science is determined in terms of its subject matter, accordingly, metaphysics is the most honorable of all sciences, that is the queen of the sciences, since it deals with God, the most sublime being.⁷

The point that Ibn Sīnā objects to is precisely related to the place of God in the science of metaphysics. In the first article of his book, entitled *al-Shifā' /The Healing*, he examines the place of metaphysics among the sciences and what the subject matter and aim of this science are.⁸ According to him, the most important problem that arises in Aristotle's understanding is how to reconcile the universality of ontology and the particularity of theology in the same science.⁹ Ibn Sīnā agrees with Aristotle that metaphysics is a universal science that deals with being *qua* being, *al-mawǧūd bi-mā huwa mawǧūd*. However, according to him, God cannot be the subject matter of metaphysics. Metaphysics is a universal science that deals with being *qua* being and God as a particular being cannot be a subject matter in this science.¹⁰ First of all, God is not a corporeal being; therefore, the existence of God can not be proved by starting from the science of physics, of which the subject matter is corporeal things. Since God is not a corporeal being, His existence must be proven in a science that deals with the field of existence that is separate in all respects from matter and all material qualities.¹¹

According to Ibn Sīnā, the subject matter of each science is proven in another science that precedes that science, and metaphysics, on which the principles of all particular sciences are based, is at the top of the hierarchy of sciences.¹² When God is accepted as the subject matter of metaphysics, as in Aristotle, God must either be proven in another science that comes before metaphysics or his existence must be self-evident. However, for Ibn Sīnā, it is not possible to prove the existence of God

⁶ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, transl. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1, Notre Dame 1981, Pt. 1 Q. 2 Art. 3, p. 13.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1026a5–30.

⁸ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-Shifā' = The Metaphysics of The Healing: A Parallel English–Arabic Text*, transl. M.E. Marmura, Provo–Utah 2005, pp. 1–6.

⁹ J. Aertsen, "Why Is Metaphysics Called 'First Philosophy' in the Middle Ages," [in:] *The Science of Being as Being: Metaphysical Investigations*, G.T. Doogan (ed.), Washington 2012, p. 55.

¹⁰ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-Shifā'*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 3–4.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 11–12.

neither in physics, mathematics, ethics, nor any other science.¹³ Because, none of the aims of these sciences is to prove the existence of God, and it is out of the question for these sciences to realize such an aim in terms of their subject matters. As for the self-evidency of the existence of God, this is also not true according to Ibn Sīnā. If that were the case, there would have been no discussion of His existence. Therefore, for him, the existence of God is neither self-evident nor is the way closed to prove the existence of God; on the contrary, there is evidence of His existence.¹⁴

Looking at Ibn Sīnā's understanding of philosophy of science, it is seen that every science should have the principles on which it is based, the subject it researches, the problems it discusses and the aim it tries to achieve.¹⁵ Accordingly, the basic principle on which metaphysics is based is that the knowledge of being is self-evident. For him, there is no doubt that something exists.¹⁶ The concepts such as *being, one, thing* and *necessary* are the most basic concepts that we have a priori knowledge of.¹⁷ These primary notions, which are the most common and trans-categorical terms, are the subject matter of metaphysics. As *the doctrine of first principles* was in Aristotle before, Ibn Sīnā also put forward *the doctrine of primary notions* for the first time in metaphysical thought.¹⁸ Because of the fact that our knowledge on being is self-evident, metaphysics does not derive its subject matter from any other science; on the contrary, the subjects of all particular sciences are ultimately based on metaphysics. In this respect, it is more appropriate to call metaphysics a science that comes *before* physics, not after it.¹⁹ Ibn Sīnā makes the point that the existence of God is not a subject matter of metaphysics, rather it is something that it seeks to prove. In other words, the aim of metaphysics is to prove the existence of the Necessary Existent, which is the principle of existence, by analyzing the being *qua* being. Therefore, the aim of metaphysics is to know the existence of God.²⁰ The order of the subjects and the way they are handled in Ibn Sīnā's book, *al-Shifā'*, are compatible with his metaphysical conception. Analyzing the ontological issues such as existence, essence, substance, accident, causality and universals in the first seven articles of this book, he explains the theological issues such as the existence of God, his attributes and prophecy starting from the eighth article.²¹ For Ibn Sīnā, it is true that metaphysics is called theology and that it is the most supreme science. However, the reason why metaphysics is the most supreme science is not because its subject matter is God, as Aristotle claims, but because it aims to prove the existence of God.²²

Also, Ibn Sīnā's criticisms of Aristotle about what the place of God should be in metaphysics make it clear how his method in proving the existence of God should

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 4.

¹⁵ Ibn Sīnā, *Kitābu 'ṣ-Ṣifā: II. Analitikler*, transl. Ö. Türker, İstanbul 2006, p.102.

¹⁶ Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb an-Najāt*, M. Fakhry (ed.), Beirut 1982, p. 271.

¹⁷ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-Shifā'*, p. 22.

¹⁸ J. Aertsen, "Avicenna's Doctrine of the Primary Notions and Its Impact on Medieval Philosophy," [in:] *Islamic Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, A. Akasoy, W. Rawen (eds.), Leiden–Boston 2008, p. 24.

¹⁹ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-Shifā'*, p. 17.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 12.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 257.

²² Ibidem, pp. 11–12.

be named. Different views have been put forward as to whether the method he follows in proving the existence of God falls within the scope of ontological or cosmological arguments. Considering Ibn Sīnā's metaphysical conception, as outlined above, it is more appropriate to call his way *the metaphysical proof*.²³ From the point of view of Ibn Sīnā, as Aristotle claimed, even if the existence of a God was proven with a physical proof, it cannot be proven that God is one as there might be many first movers, and the unity of God is not a problem for Aristotle. However, as Henry of Ghent says, since the metaphysical proof aims to prove the existence of God as the Necessary Existent, and this concept excludes multiplicity by definition, Ibn Sīnā, in proving the existence of God, also explains His unity.²⁴

Evaluated in the light of Ibn Sīnā's criticisms, it is seen that the most important problem in Aristotle's metaphysics is that ontology and theology are intertwined.²⁵ Ibn Sīnā, who offers a consistent explanation of the place of God in metaphysics, has put the relationship between ontology and theology on a scientific basis. In this respect, as Jan Aertsen says, this approach of Ibn Sīnā should be called *the second beginning of metaphysics*.²⁶ To summarize, in Ibn Sīnā's understanding, metaphysics is an *ontological* science, since it deals with being *qua* being; it is a *theological* science as it aims to prove the existence of God.²⁷ Considering the subject and aim of metaphysics as a whole, it can be said that for Ibn Sīnā metaphysics is an *ontotheological* science. Here, it would be useful to mention the following point. Contemporary Polish philosopher Piotr Jaroszyński systematically analyzes the history of Western philosophy by focusing on the concepts of *metaphysics* and *ontology* in his book titled *Metaphysics or Ontology?* According to Jaroszyński, for the metaphysical philosophers, being *qua* being has a reality on its own apart from mind. Whereas, for those who have ontological understanding, being *qua* being has only mental reality.²⁸ Jaroszyński claims that Ibn Sīnā is not a metaphysician, but a philosopher on the line of ontology.²⁹ However, considering Ibn Sīnā's emphases on the reality of being *qua* being and his views on the fact that there is no essence and existence distinction in God, it is not easy to say that this assessment about him is accurate. Actually, when the tradition of Islamic thought is evaluated with respect to Jarantksy's metaphysics and ontology distinction, it can be said that Ibn Sīnā stands on the metaphysical line, whereas the late *Ash'arī kalam*, which started with al-Ghazālī, is closer to the ontology line.

²³ A. Bertolacci, "Avicenna and Averroes on the Proof of God's Existence and the Subject-Matter of Metaphysics," *Medioevo* 32 (2007), pp. 83–84; E. Erdem, *Varlıktan Tanrı'ya: İbn Sina'nın Metafizik Delili*, İstanbul 2016, p. 274.

²⁴ Henry of Ghent, *Henry of Ghent's Summa: The Questions on God's Existence and Essence (Articles 21–24)*, transl. J. Decorte, R.J. Teske, Paris–Leuven 2005, p. 153.

²⁵ J. Aertsen, "Why Is Metaphysics Called 'First Philosophy,'" p. 55.

²⁶ J. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought: From Philip the Chancellor (Ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez*, Leiden 2012, p. 75.

²⁷ A. Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifā': A Milestone of Western Metaphysical Thought*, Leiden–Boston 2006, p. 107.

²⁸ P. Jaroszyński, *Metaphysics or Ontology?*, transl. H. McDonald, Leiden–Boston 2018, p. 6.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 218–222.

Part II

Ibn Sīnā's conception of metaphysics deeply influenced both the later Islamic and Western philosophical traditions. It is seen that the philosophical and theological texts in the tradition of Islamic thought after Ibn Sīnā were organized in accordance with his metaphysical conception. Ever since, philosophical and theological issues have begun to be handled in the same texts within a new organizational scheme, not in separate texts. Accordingly, the texts of the many philosophical theologians, such as Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī and Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī, in the late period of Islamic thought, have been basically divided into two main parts as *general metaphysics/ilāhiyyāt-ı āmma* and *special metaphysics/ilāhiyyāt-ı hāssa*.³⁰ In the part of general metaphysics, ontological issues such as existence–non-existence, the essence and existence distinction, the commonality of existence, the predication of existence and causality are discussed. In the part of special metaphysics, theological issues such as the existence of God, divine attributes, prophecy, and life after death are held. Interestingly, the Aristotelian and Avicennian dispute over the place of God in metaphysics has turned into a discussion of the relationship between metaphysics and *kalam*/Islamic theology in late Islamic thought. According to some thinkers, like al-Urmavī, the existence of God must be proved in metaphysics and then treated as a subject matter in *kalam*.³¹ On the other hand, according to thinkers such as al-Ījī and al-Jurjānī, proving the existence of God should be the aim of *kalam*, not metaphysics, because the latter is not an Islamic science.³²

Ibn Sīnā's conception of metaphysics has also been significantly influential in the line of Western philosophy from the Middle Ages to modern philosophy. The issue of whether Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who argues that God is the subject matter of metaphysics in line with Aristotle, or Ibn Sīnā, who argues that God is the aim of metaphysics, is right, has been one of the most important discussion topics of medieval Christian thinkers such as Albertus Magnus, St Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus. As Étienne Gilson said, in order to understand the intellectual profile of a philosopher in medieval Christian thought, it is sufficient to look at whether this philosopher considers Ibn Sīnā or Averroes great.³³ In the first section of his book, titled *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Duns Scotus tackles the question of “Is the subject of metaphysics being or God?” and takes the side of Ibn Sīnā, who argues that God is the aim of metaphysics, against Ibn Rushd, who claims that God is the subject matter of metaphysics like in Aristotle.³⁴

³⁰ E. Erdem, “İbn Sīnā Metafizigi,” p. 212.

³¹ S. el-Urmevi, “Metafizik (Tanrı-bilim) ve Kelam Arasındaki Fark Üzerine/On the Difference between Metaphysics and al-Kalam,” transl. E. Erdem, *Journal of Islamic Research* 27 [3] (2016), pp. 445–446.

³² S.Ş. Cürcânî, *Şerhu'l-Mevâkıf*, transl. Ö. Türker, vol. 1, İstanbul 2011, pp. 55–56.

³³ E. Gilson, *Ortaçağda Felsefe: Patristik Başlangıçtan XIV. Yüzyılın Sonlarına Kadar*, transl. A. Meral, İstanbul 2007, p. 347.

³⁴ John Duns Scotus, *Questions on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, transl. G.J. Etzkorn, A.B. Wolter, vol. 1, New York 1997, Book I, Question One, p. I, p. 13.

More importantly, the organization of Francisco Suárez's book, titled *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, which Martin Heidegger describes as the most important work between the late medieval philosophy and early modern philosophy,³⁵ is based on the discussion of the place of God in metaphysics. Suárez touches upon this issue right at the beginning of his book and says that Ibn Sīnā, who argues that the aim of metaphysics is to prove the existence of God, is right.³⁶ It is one of the most important innovations in the history of Western metaphysics that Suárez divided the aforementioned book into two main parts as *metaphysica generalis* and *metaphysica specialis*.³⁷ The distinction of general metaphysics and special metaphysics was transferred to Immanuel Kant through Christian Wolff and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and the main structure of his book, *Critique of Pure Reason*, is in accordance with this distinction.³⁸ According to Kant, the ontological argument belongs to general metaphysics, while the cosmological and teleological arguments belong to specific metaphysics.³⁹ Lastly, the conflict between Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā about the place of God in metaphysics, as Amos Bertolacci points out, is not limited to these two philosophers only, rather, it makes it necessary to visit the main routes of the long journey of metaphysics from Athens to Buhārā, Cordoba, Paris, Cologne and Königsberg.⁴⁰

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³⁵ M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, transl. A. Hofstadter, Indianapolis 1988, p. 80.

³⁶ F. Suárez, *The Metaphysical Demonstration of the Existence of God: Metaphysical Disputations 28–29*, transl. J.P. Doyle, South Bend 2004, p. 55.

³⁷ B. Cantens, "Ultimate Reality in the Metaphysics of Francisco Suárez," *Meaning* 25 [2] (2002), pp. 77–78.

³⁸ J. Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics from Parmenides to Levinas*, transl. L. Soderstrom, New York 2012, pp. 104–105.

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⁴⁰ A. Bertolacci, "From Athens to Buhārā, to Cordoba, to Cologne: On the Transmission of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the Arab and Latin Worlds during the Middle Ages," [in:] *Circolazione dei saperi nel Mediterraneo. Filosofia e Scienze (secoli IX–XVII). Circulation des savoirs autour de la Méditerranée. Philosophie et sciences (IXe–XVIIe siècles). Atti del VII Colloquio Internazionale della Società Internazionale d'Historie des Sciences et de la Philosophie Arabes et Islamiques. Firenze, 16–18 febbraio 2006*, G. Federici Vescovini, A. Hasnawi (eds.), Firenze 2013, pp. 217–218.

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