AVICENNA ON THE IMPOSSIBILIA
THE LETTER ON THE SOUL REVISITED

SEYED N. MOUSAVIAN

Department of Philosophy, Loyola University Chicago
Email: smousavian@luc.edu

Abstract. The Letter on the Soul is interesting and significant; it attempts to tackle fundamental problems that fall on the borderlines of psychology, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and logic. The consensus among Avicenna scholars is that The Letter is Avicenna's. In this paper, I will argue against this consensus. I will examine the philosophical and logical content of The Letter, as well as Avicenna's view on the impossible forms in his authentic works, and construct a content-based argument against the authenticity of The Letter. This study, I hope, sheds some light on Avicenna's view on the *impossibilia*, what they are, and how they can be apprehended.

Résumé. La «Lettre sur l'âme» est intéressante et significative; elle tente de résoudre des problèmes fondamentaux qui relèvent des frontières de la psychologie, de l'épistémologie, de la métaphysique, de la philosophie de l'esprit et de la logique. Le consensus parmi les spécialistes d'Avicenne est que la «Lettre» est de sa plume. Dans cet article, je vais contester ce consensus. J'examinerai le contenu philosophique et logique de la «Lettre», ainsi que la vision d'Avicenne sur les formes impossibles dans ses œuvres authentiques, et je construirai un argument basé sur le contenu contre l'authenticité de la «Lettre». J'espère que cette étude éclairera la vision d'Avicenne sur les *impossibilia*, ce qu'ils sont et comment ils peuvent être appréhendés.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jean R. Michot edited, introduced, and studied a short treatise, titled "The Letter on the Disappearance of the Vain Intelligible Forms after Death" (or *The Letter* for short).[1] Following O. Ergin, G. C. Anawati, Y. Mahdavi, and for two reasons of his own, Michot attributed *The Letter* to Avicenna.[2] He rightly pointed out that *The Letter* is significant and interesting "because, while concerned with an eschatological question, it refers to fundamental psychological, epistemological and metaphysical topics."[3] Deborah Black, who afterwards scrutinized *The Letter* and discovered deep philosophical and logical problems with it, provided an interpretation of Avicenna's view on "fictional beings," e. g., the *phoenix*, on its basis. In a passing note, however, Dimitris Gutas raised serious doubt on the authenticity of *The Letter*. After pointing out that "The treatise is not mentioned in any bibliography," he challenged Black's view as follows:

> Black, who devotes a study to the subject ("Fictional Beings"), assumes the authenticity of the treatise without even raising the question. There are, however, many philosophical problems with the treatise – "difficulties," as Black calls them and proceeds to list them (435 and 446) – but instead of questioning its authenticity on their basis she prefers to pronounce Avicenna incoherent: "To admit an exception to this account of intellectual knowledge is to threaten the overall coherence of Avicenna's epistemology. And yet this would seem to be precisely what Avicenna's views on unreal forms require" ([Black 1997,] 446).[4]

Yet in another recent study,[5] Thérèse-Anne Druart suggested using a different interpretation of Avicenna's epistemology developed

---

[1] Jean R. Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter on the Disappearance of the Vain Intelligible Forms After Death,'" *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale*, 27 (1985), p. 94–103; Jean R. Michot, "L'épître sur la disparition des formes intelligibles vaines après la mort d'Avicenne: Édition critique, traduction et index," *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale*, 29 (1987), p. 152–170. Dimitri Gutas refers to *The Letter* as (throughout this paper, in references and quotations I keep the original transliteration/transcription): "*Risāla fī infisāḫ aṣ-ṣuwar al-mawǧūda fī n-nafs* (M36, A81)," see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden, Brill, 2014), p. 456.

[2] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 96, note 3.

[3] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 95.

[4] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 456. Deborah L. Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale*, 8 (1997), p. 425–453. [For references to Black below, I only had access to the file at http://individual.utoronto.ca/dlblack/articles/Avicunrealartweb.pdf and all page numbers refer to this version.]

[5] Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Avicennan Troubles: The Mysteries of Heptagonal House

by Jon McGinnis,[6] according to which divine emanation collaborate with "real" abstraction in human intellection, to resolve the "apparent difficulties" or "incoherencies" of *The Letter*. Last but not least, before the genesis of the recent literature on *The Letter*, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥāʾirī al-Māzandarānī (d. 1350Š/1972), in his classic study of Avicenna in Persian, had speculated that *The Letter* is written by Abū-ʿAbd-Allāh Maʿsūmī, Avicenna's disciple, on an examination occasion.[7] Al-Māzandarānī's brief remark, however, included neither an argument for his claim nor a substantive discussion of the philosophical problems in *The Letter*.

Here is an outline of this paper. I will confine my attention to the study of the philosophical content of *The Letter*.[8] *The Letter* "argues" for a basic principle according to which the impossible forms (or the *impossibilia*)[9] are both imaginable and intelligible, attempts to explain how one can "intellect" the *impossibilia* and concludes that after death the *impossibilia* dissolve from the rational soul and one cannot "intellect" (apprehend) them again. My main question is this: As far as the philosophical and logical content of *The Letter* is concerned, is *The Letter* consistent with Avicenna's view in his major works? I will give a negative answer to this question for four reasons: First, *The Letter*'s alleged explanation of how one "intellects" the *impossibilia* is not in alignment with Avicenna's explanation of how one "apprehends" the *impossibilia*. Second, *The Letter*'s argument for the claim that the *impossibilia* are intelligible because they are universal does not employ Avicenna's notion of universality. Third, *The Letter's* structure is incoherent in a way that Avicenna's view is not. And fourth, *The Letter*'s central presumption, that is, after death the faculty of the imagination will no longer be active, is questioned by Avicenna, at least on two different occasions. Unless one supposes that Avicenna changed his views on a range of fundamental

---

and of the Phoenix," *Tópicos*, 42 (2012), p. 65.

[6] Jon McGinnis, "Making Abstraction Less Abstract: The Logical, Psychological, and Metaphysical Dimensions in Avicenna's Theory of Abstraction," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 80 (2007), p. 169–83.

[7] Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥāʾirī al-Māzandarānī, *Ḥikmate būʿalī Sīna*, introd. ʿImādzādih, ed. Šīvā (Tehran, 1335 SH / 1956), vol. 1, p. 53. I will return to al-Māzandarānī's view in § 10.

[8] The research on the handwritten tradition of the text and its dissemination is essential to our understanding of the authenticity of *The Letter*. However, at the time being, I am not in a position to have access to the required material. Hence, I should leave this task to others.

[9] In § 2, I will explain how the term "impossible (*muḥāl*) forms" is used in *The Letter*. Then, in § 5, I will discuss the varieties of the *impossibilia* in *The Healing*.

topics such as intelligibility, universality, estimation, and imagination, in a single short treatise (for which there is no independent evidence), it can reasonably be concluded that *The Letter* is not Avicenna's and hence should not be relied upon in interpreting his philosophy.

This paper contains the following sections. In § 2, I will provide a synopsis of *The Letter*. In § 3, I will draw a roadmap of the recent literature on *The Letter*. I will unpack my first reason against the authenticity of *The Letter* in the following three sections. In § 4, I will defuse the claim that *The Letter* explains the intelligibility of the *impossibilia*. In § 5, I will provide a detailed analysis of Avicenna's view on the *impossibilia*. And in § 6, I will argue that the *impossibilia*, for Avicenna, are not apprehended as intelligible forms. Then, I will develop my second reason in § 7–8. First, in § 7, I will discuss Avicenna's view on the (intelligible) universals in his authentic works, and then in § 8, will demonstrate that *The Letter*'s argument for the claim that the *impossibilia* are intelligible, because they are universal, does not employ Avicenna's notion of universality. In § 9, I will present my third reason: *The Letter's* argument is incoherent in a way that Avicenna's view is not. Particularly, I will argue that first, *pace* Michot, the incoherence in *The Letter* is not Avicennan and, second, Druart's recent attempt to resolve the "problems" in *The Letter*, using McGinnis's interpretation of Avicenna, fails. Finally, in § 10, I will defend my fourth reason: *The Letter*'s central presumption, that is, after death the faculty of the imagination will no longer be active, is questioned by Avicenna at least on two occasions. This reason against the authenticity of *The Letter* is first noticed by Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥāʾirī al-Māzandarānī (1335Š/1956). I conclude, in § 11, that *The Letter* is not Avicenna's and hence should not be relied upon in interpreting his philosophy. This study, I hope, sheds some light on Avicenna's view on the *impossibilia*, what they are, and how they can be apprehended.

2. A SYNOPSIS OF *THE LETTER*

The Letter is primarily about the epistemology and semantics of the "forms which exist in the soul and are opposed (*muḫālif*) to the real," also referred to as the "impossible (*muḥāl*) forms," or "forms contrary (*muqābil*) to the real."[10] A brief clarification on the terminology may be helpful. The three expressions I mentioned are used interchangeably in *The Letter*. This suggests that "opposed to the real" and "contrary to the real,"

[10] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 98, and Michot, "L'épître," p. 155.

in the context of *The Letter*, mean *incompatible* with the real. *The Letter*'s mythical example, as an impossible form, indicates that the forms in question are necessarily incompatible with the real. The example is *ʿanqāʾ muġrīb*, translated as "phoenix" (Black), or "sphinx" (Zimmermann), or "griffon" (Bäck).[11] *ʿanqāʾ*, called "simurg" in Persian,[12] is the mythical king of birds:[13] "in Persian mythology, a large mythical bird of great age, believed to have the power of reasoning and speech; the name comes ultimately from Pahlavi."[14] This mythological sense is related to the later mystical use of the name.[15] Avicenna, in *The Refutation of As-*

---

[11] For references see Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Avicennan Troubles," p. 56. Two terminological points are in order. First, I use *simurg*, as an English name, for *ʿanqāʾ*. For one thing, I use *phoenix* for *ququnūs* (which, for Avicenna, does not stand for an impossible form, see below § 5). This is consistent with the use of *phoenix* in ancient Egypt and classical antiquity, see: https://www.britannica.com/topic/phoenix-mythological-bird. Second, I avoid using "fictional" in my discussion of *The Letter*. The expression *fictional beings* (Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," p. 3–4, for example), used in the sense of *unreal (or vain) forms*, can be misleading for three reasons. First, being fictional does not necessarily entail being unreal; some real objects may be referred to in works of fiction and thus are in some sense fictional. Second, the expression *fictional being* apparently attributes *being*, or some form of reality, to fictional entities. This is a controversial claim, and it is not clear if Avicenna holds it unqualifiedly. Third, it is not the case that everyone agrees that all merely fictional objects or characters, as we use the term, are *impossible* or unreal in the sense used in *The Letter*. So, I will primarily use the *impossibilia* to refer to the forms in question.

[12] Muhammad Ali al-Tahānawī, *Mawsuʿat kaššāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn wa-al-ʿulūm*, ed. Rafīq al-ʿAǧam et al. (Beirut, 1996), p. 1241.

[13] Hanns-Peter Schmidt, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/simorg.

[14] *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005).

[15] See, for example, Šihāb ad-Dīn Suhrawardī [Yaḥyā ibn Ḥabaš Suhrawardī], "The Whistling of the Simurg," in id., *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica III*, ed. and English introd. Seyed Hossein Nasr, French introd. Henry Corbin (Tehran: Muʾassasa-yi Muṭālaʿāt va Taḥqīqāt-i Farhangī, 1993 [1970]), p. 314.) Also, according to Attar (*The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Sholeh Wolpé [W. W. Norton & Company, 2017]), of the birds of the world who decided to meet their unseen sovereign, only thirty birds survive the journey over the seven valleys of separation (namely, quest, love, understanding, independence, unity, wonderment, and self-annihilation). Two points are notable: first, *al-manṭiq* which is translated as "conference" in "The Conference of the Birds" can also be translated as "speech," "language," or "logic." Second, "simurg" in Persian is syntactically made of *sī* (*thirty*) and *murġ* (bird). The thirty birds, in Attar's mystical poem, ultimately find the sovereign in themselves, i. e., in the *sī-murġ*. The mystical use of the "simurg" may indicate a semantic shift in its meaning. This may be part of a hermeneutic turn in the interpretation of *myths* in medieval Arabo-Islamic philosophy to which both the Illuminationist school and mystical tradition bear witness. Therefore, the "simurg" is sometimes used as a symbol for God, *con-*

trology (*Al-išāra ilā fasād ʿilm aḥkām al-nuǧūm*), introduces the *ʿanqāʾ* as a mythical bird, a flying human, imagined by some who "would like to see far-away cities and kingdoms" but could not travel or found traveling painful and difficult. And then he adds: "This thing [i. e., the *ʿanqāʾ*] is impossible as one knows with a minimum of reflection (*ʾadnā taʾammul*)."[16] So, I consistently use the *impossibilia* for the *forms necessarily "contrary" (or "opposed") to the real*.[17]

The Letter can be divided into three parts: in the first part, *The Letter* introduces the principle that the *impossibilia*, are (both imaginable and) intelligible:

> TEXT 1. There are two views about the forms which exist in the soul and are opposed to the real. One is that they are imaginable and not at all intelligible. The second is that they are both imaginable and intelligible. Whoever says that they are imaginable and not at all intelligible says something vain [i. e., false].[18]

The Letter then attempts to provide an argument for this principle. I will carefully examine this argument in § 8.

sidered in itself, and thus being absolutely unknown. The *ʿanqāʾ* has experienced a similar fate in Arabic and been used in the same mystical sense, see, for example, al-Ġazalī, "The Epistle of the Birds," in *Maǧmūʿat rasāʾil al-imām al-Ġazalī* [*The Collected Treatises of al-Imām al-Ġazalī*], ed. Ibrāhim Amīn Mohammad (Cairo, al-maktabat al-tawfīqiyya), p. 312–316). Let me add that a short Arabic treatise titled "The Bird" (*Al-ṭayr*) is attributed to Avicenna (see Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 483). In "The Bird," however, the *malik* (king), not *ʿanqāʾ*, is used to refer to the king of birds (*malik* is a Quranic term, but *ʿanqāʾ* is not).

[16] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Réfutation de l'astrologie*, ed., trans., introd., and notes Y. Michot (Beirut: Albouraq, 2006), p. 58–59; in Druart, "Avicennan Troubles," p. 57. Druart adds, "What that minimum of reflection is remains unexplained" (ibid.). One may explain that, I suggest, by the impossibility of the flying human. The flying human is impossible because the differentia of *flying* is incompatible with the differentia of *walking*. Recall, "it is required to divide animal primarily into: flying, swimming, crawling, and walking. And then divide the walking [animal] into biped and multiped" (Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān* [*The Healing, Logic, Demonstration*], ed. A. ʿAfīfī (Cairo, 1375 AH / 1956), vol. 3, bk. 4, ch. 7, p. 313). If human is a walking animal, then by its very nature, no human is a flying animal. "Flying," here, is used in the sense of "being capable of flying in virtue of one's nature." Accordingly, a flying human is as impossible as a walking snake.

[17] It may be worth emphasizing that the forms that are neither existing nor contrary to the real are not the primary concern of *The Letter*. Hence, we are not concerned with the epistemology and semantics of past or future objects, or *merely* possible objects. For a study of Avicenna's view on such "nonexistent" forms, see Seyed N. Mousavian, "Avicenna on Talking about Nothing," in Christina Thörnqvist and Juhana Toivanen (ed.), *Forms of Representation in the Aristotelian Tradition*, vol. 3, "Concept Formation" (Brill, 2022), p. 141–177.

[18] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 98.

In the second part, *The Letter* attempts to explain how one (allegedly) "intellects" the *impossibilia*. This explanation is based on two main claims: first, the *impossibilia* do not exist in the active intellects (i. e., the separate celestial intellects), and second, the human intellect can perform its specific action on some imaginable forms of the *impossibilia* and make them intelligible. *The Letter* attempts to justify both claims. (I will discuss the alleged "explanation" in § 4.)

In the third part, *The Letter* "argues" that after death the *impossibilia* dissolve from the rational soul and one cannot "intellect" them again. This final conclusion is defended on the basis of three *main* premises: first, the rational soul does not perceive anything except through the senses and imagination, second, the *impossibilia* "arise" in the human soul through the mediation of the senses, imagination and estimation, and third "the human soul, as long as it does not turn towards the active intellects, does not perceive anything of the intelligibles and that no intelligible form gets preserved in it."[19] Since, according to *The Letter*, there is no sensation, imagination, or estimation after death, it is concluded that the *impossibilia* dissolve from the rational soul after death.

3. A ROADMAP OF THE RECENT LITERATURE ON *THE LETTER*

Now we can draw a roadmap of the recent literature on *The Letter*. Let's begin with Black's concern regarding the nature of *abstraction*. As stated in *The Letter*, the *impossibilia* are intelligible but they do not exist in the active intellects. The human intellect can perform its specific action on some imaginable forms and make them intelligible. For similar reasons, "rethinking" the *impossibilia* needs new acts of imagination. Therefore, there should be "a real causal connection between imagination and intellection, and a real abstraction of a universal nature from its particular imagined or imaginary instances."[20] According to Black's emanationist interpretation of Avicenna's epistemology, however, "Avicenna explicitly denies any causal influence of the imagination upon the intellect, that is, he denies the reality of abstraction as a cognitive process."[21] Therefore, Black concludes: "To admit an exception to

---

[19] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 95.

[20] Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," p. 15.

[21] Ibid., p. 14. Black shares this interpretation with Fazlur Rahman and Herbert Davidson, among others. See, for example: "Intelligible thoughts, he [i. e., Avicenna] has maintained, flow directly from the active intellect and are not abstracted at all" (Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmolo-*

this account of intellectual knowledge," namely to admit *a real causal connection between imagination and intellection* in Avicenna's account of intellectual knowledge, "is to threaten the overall coherence of Avicenna's epistemology."[22]

Black, next, considers a solution to the above problem and then rejects it as unsatisfactory. Here is the proposal: an unreal form comes about in the human intellect through the "composition" of its intelligible parts. Black dismisses this solution because, according to her, Avicenna has no "real composition or division" of the intelligible forms:

> In Avicenna's cognitive psychology, there just is no such thing as the intellect combining and dividing real concepts so as to generate a new unreal concept. Combining and dividing themselves are functions of the cogitative faculty, which is an internal sense power and thus a part of the cluster of faculties that make up imaginative soul. Avicenna is insistent that the intelligible content of any thought, as such, is always a single unity: the prior activities in preparation for receiving that content, and the subsequent sorting out of it, may be multiple and complex, but the intelligible, as intelligible, is one. So, Avicenna's position on unreal beings cannot consistently be salvaged by any route which makes the imagination the sole source for the intelligible content of universals such as our phoenix.[23]

According to Black, if an unreal form were the result of "composition" of its intelligible parts, then there would be "real composition or division" of the intelligible forms. A real composite of some intelligible forms is not a single unity, but the "intelligible content of any thought, as such, is always a single unity." Thus, there "is no such thing as the intellect combining and dividing real concepts." Therefore, and a fortiori, an *unreal* form is not a *composite* intelligible. I agree with Black that an unreal form is not a composite *intelligible*, but I believe that her argument fails. In § 8 , I will explain Black's analysis of the most foundational argument of *The Letter* and why it fails.

Gutas, however, does not have Black's reason to reject the claim that the *impossibilia*, as intelligible forms, are abstracted from the imaginable forms. According to Gutas, there is a real "causal influence of the imagination upon the intellect." Against Black, Gutas and Hasse defend an abstractionist interpretation of Avicenna, according to which "there

gies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect [Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 93). For a recent literature review, see: Richard Taylor, "The Epistemology of Abstraction" in Richard Taylor and Luis Xavier López-Farjeat (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy* (New York, 2016), p. 273–284.

[22] Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," p. 15.

[23] Ibid., p. 16.

is only one active power in the process [of concept formation], the human intellect: it turns towards the imaginable forms and acts upon them."[24] Nor does Gutas have Black's reason to reject the claim that the *impossibilia* as intelligible forms can be composite. For Gutas, the intellect can combine and divide intelligibles:

> So, what Avicenna is necessarily doing here (as he did also in Text 13)[25] is *setting up two parallel processes of thinking*, one in the rational soul and the other in the animal. The function of the former is to combine universal propositions or terms to form syllogisms and reach conclusions […] The function of the second process in the animal soul, that of the cogitative [*mufakkira*] faculty, is to combine conceptual images of particulars in imitation of (*muḥākāt*) the process in the intellect for the purpose of aiding it. […] the real thinking with the real intelligibles takes place in the rational soul.[26]

This implies that Gutas cannot reject the solution discussed and dismissed by Black in the same way. Having this observation in mind, one may expect that Gutas welcomes *The Letter* as an authentic work of Avicenna. This is not the case, however. Gutas, instead, questions the authenticity of *The Letter*: "There are, however, many philosophical problems with the treatise – 'difficulties,' as Black calls them and proceeds to list them (435 and 446) – but instead of questioning its authenticity on their basis she prefers to pronounce Avicenna incoherent."[27]

Gutas, referring back to the problems listed by Black, mentions three points concerning *The Letter*: first, "The treatise is not mentioned in any bibliography."[28] Second, as Michot reports, "of the twelve manuscripts

---

[24] Dag Nikolaus Hasse, "Avicenna on Abstraction," in Wisnovsky (ed.), *Aspects of Avicenna* (Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001), p. 63. Hasse follows and develops Gutas's earlier view, according to which the active intellect has no epistemological role in the process of concept formation. In a more recent work, Gutas writes: "What has to be kept in mind is that for Avicenna the concept of the emanation of the intelligibles from the active intellect has its place in his cosmology and it serves to solve essentially an ontological problem, not an epistemological one, which is the location of the intelligibles" (Dimitri Gutas, "The Empiricism of Avicenna," *Oriens*, 40 (2012), p. 411).

[25] Text 13, in Gutas's paper, refers to (an excerpt from) *Al-mubāḥathāt*, § 595. For Black's response, see Deborah Black, "Rational Imagination: Avicenna on the Cogitative Power," in Luis Xavier López-Farjeat and Jörg Alejandro Tellkamp (ed.), *Philosophical Psychology in Arabic Thought and the Latin Aristotelianism of the 13th century* (Paris: Vrin, 2013), p. 59–81, esp. 73–9.

[26] Dimitri Gutas, "Intuition and Thinking: The Evolving Structure of Avicenna's Epistemology," in Wisnovsky (ed.), *Aspects of Avicenna* (Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001), p. 22. Italics and capitalization are original.

[27] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 456.

[28] Ibid.

that he used for his translation only three attribute the work to Avicenna."[29] And third, as the introduction of *The Letter* explains, it is "occasioned by a question from an anonymous *al-ustāḏ ar-raʾīs*, a form of address not known to have been used for Avicenna."[30] Gutas does not directly discuss "contradictory" parts of *The Letter*. There is a deeper concern, however. Given Gutas's reading,[31] Avicenna has developed and revised his theory of intellection from an emanationist view, in his early works, to an abstractionist view, in his later works. This suggests that *The Letter* may belong to Avicenna and comprise the same tension as some other early and middle works of Avicenna.[32] Therefore, none of the above points, or a combination of them, strongly support Gutas's skepticism on the authenticity of *The Letter*. A further argument is needed.

In turn, the very same point, i. e., the alleged "incoherencies" or "ambiguities" of *The Letter*, is Michot's main philosophical reason for attributing *The Letter* to Avicenna. Michot describes such ambiguities as follows:

> Until now, I have followed the opinions of O. Ergin, G. C. Anawati and, especially Y. Mahdavi, and presented *The Letter on the Soul* as a work by Avicenna. Two facts incite me to adopt such a position. [...][33] Secondly, the demonstration of the vanishing of the vain intelligible forms from the soul after death, as presented in this work has a totally Avicennian appearance. This is so both as far as philosophical theories involved are concerned and as regards the way the whole affair is conducted, i. e. mainly its ambiguities: the affirmation, at one and the same time, of the ineluctability of empiricism and the pure transparence of the self; the negation, on the one hand, of the existence of the vain intelligible forms in the active intellects and the acceptance, on the other hand, of their emanation from these intellects; charging the imagination with the responsibility for producing the vain forms, as if everything was not predetermined at the much higher level of divine Providence.[34]

As Michot explains, *The Letter* is committed to "incompatible" theses: on the one hand, the *impossibilia* do not exist in the active intellects and,

---

[29] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 456.

[30] Ibid. I have kept Gutas's notation, i. e., *al-ustāḏ ar-raʾīs*, in my quote. I will return to his point in § 10.

[31] Gutas, "The Empiricism of Avicenna."

[32] For references, see: Hasse, "Avicenna on Abstraction," particularly p. 39.

[33] Michot's first fact is that out of 12 manuscripts of *The Letter*, collected by him, three refer to Avicenna as the author. Given that the other 9 manuscripts do not make this claim, one, following Gutas, may wonder if this fact counts as conclusive evidence for Michot's claim.

[34] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 96.

on the other hand, they emanate from the active intellects, upon the human mind. This emanation, in turn, is possible only if the *impossibilia* already existed in the active intellects. But this contradicts the assumption that they do not exist in the active intellects.[35] This may explain why he does not derive a "*definitive* conclusion on the authorship of *The Letter*," though he attributes *The Letter* to Avicenna as "the most reasonable" conclusion.[36]

Finally, in a more recent study of *The Letter*,[37] Druart suggests using Jon McGinnis's interpretation of Avicenna's epistemology, according to which divine emanation collaborate with "real" abstraction in human intellection, to resolve the "apparent difficulties" of *The Letter*. McGinnis's reading of Avicenna allows the intervention of the active intellect in all cases of human intellection, for the unreal and real forms alike:

> It is precisely because humans do receive the essences together with the material accidents and concomitants that the process of abstraction is required. When the material accidents and concomitants are stripped away, however, the essences are then themselves prepared to re-receive the intelligible accidents that are again being emanated by the Active Intellect.[38]

According to McGinnis, the abstracted essences, recovered from the imaginable and sensible forms, receive the "intelligible accidents" or "intellectualizing forms" from the active intellect to become intelligible.

Using McGinnis's interpretation, what Black finds to be "incoherencies" in *The Letter* or Michot describes as "ambiguities," might not after all be "incoherencies" or "ambiguities." Here is a key paragraph of *The Letter*, for instance:

> TEXT 2. When the imaginative faculty imagines some form, whether impossible or not impossible, the intellect accomplishes its specific action in it and makes it become intelligible.[39]

Druart suggests that McGinnis's compatibilist account ("compatibilism" is my term for the thesis that, in human cognition, divine ema-

---

[35] It should be noted that Black's main concern had a different focus: for her, accepting the causal link between the imagination and the intellect "is to threaten the overall coherence of Avicenna's epistemology." Michot seems to be aware of all these problems and might implicitly refer to them as "many other elements that should be taken into consideration" (Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" 96).

[36] As a referee of this paper has rightly pointed out, it seems that, for Michot, Avicenna's philosophy is contradictory, or incoherent, because Michot attributes *The Letter* to Avicenna *and* finds it contradictory.

[37] Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Avicennan Troubles," p. 65.

[38] McGinnis, "Making Abstraction Less Abstract," p. 176.

[39] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 99.

nation and real abstraction are both active, and thus compatible) can explain Avicenna's view in *The Letter* as well as in his main works uniformly. Here is Druart's proposal:

> Curiously, and not very clearly, the text [i. e., *The Letter*] on the one hand, argues that such forms contrary to the real are not in any agent intellect because if they were, they would be instantiated, but, on the other hand, claims that such forms flow from these agent intellects. This seems contradictory but the contradiction can be resolved, if, following Jon McGinnis, we consider that what the agent intellect grants is not the specific content of these forms but rather simply the accident conferring universality to some conception already present, but as a particular, in the imagination.[40]

Druart's solution succeeds only if McGinnis's reading can be substantiated. McGinnis's reading, however, faces some objections. For instance, Hasse argues, and I agree with him, that "the distinction between abstract forms (or essences) and intellectualizing forms (or accidents)," on which McGinnis's reading is based, "does not have a textual basis in Avicenna's psychological works."[41] However, and against Hasse's earlier view,[42] I find McGinnis's move toward a compatibilist account of Avicenna's theory of concept possession, according to which both divine emanation and real abstraction play epistemologically significant roles in human cognition, on the right track.[43] I believe that independently of

---

[40] Druart, "Avicennan Troubles," p. 65.

[41] Hasse, "Avicenna's epistemological optimism," p. 113.

[42] Hasse, "Avicenna on Abstraction."

[43] To formulate my opinion without arguing for that, I find the current emanationist and abstractionist readings of Avicenna's (mature) epistemology unsatisfactory. Like McGinnis and Hasse, I am inclined to compatibilism. I differ from both, however, on how to make "emanation" and "abstraction" compatible. For example, I find claims such as the following, at best, misleading: "It is true that, for Avicenna, considering the particulars disposes the soul for the emanation of a universal form. But Avicenna's phrase 'disposes' is not at all meant as a limitation of the soul's intellectual powers. Avicenna does not say that considering the particulars 'only' disposes [the soul] for an emanation. The soul is fully capable of acquiring universal forms all by itself: it is able to do all that is necessary to make a form flow from the active intellect upon it" (Hasse, "Avicenna's epistemological optimism," in Peter Adamson [ed.], *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays* [Cambridge University Press, 2013], p. 109–119, here on p. 119). Hasse's 2013 revised view leaves no *epistemological* role for the active intellect in the process of human intellection. Moreover, as I read Avicenna, he does not treat the unreal and real forms similarly. In this paper, I will discuss Avicenna's view on conceiving the *impossibilia*. In Seyed N. Mousavian, "Is Avicenna an Empiricist?" in Mojataba Mojtahedi et al., *Mathematics, Logic, and their Philosophies: Essays in Honour of Mohammad Ardeshir* (Springer, 2021), p. 443–474, I have explained why reasons offered against a compatibilist reading of Avicenna, by both emanationists and abstractionists, are not compelling.

the above controversy, there are good philosophical and logical reasons *not* to attribute *The Letter* to Avicenna. Thus, here, I should focus on *The Letter*.

4. DOES *THE LETTER* EXPLAIN THE "INTELLEGIBILITY" OF THE *IMPOSSIBILIA*?

Let's turn to *The Letter*. To explain how the *impossibilia* arise in the human mind as intelligible forms, *The Letter* offers two arguments. The first argument shows that the *impossibilia* do not exist in the active intellects and the second argument tries to show that the *impossibilia* arise in the human intellect through the mediation of the faculty of imagination and a specific action of the human intellect. Let me explain each argument separately:

> TEXT 3. It is not possible, we say, for these forms to exist in the permanent (*dāʾim*) and everlasting (*sarmadī*) things nor in the active intellects. The active intellects[44] intellect (*ᶜaqala*) things in so far as they are concomitants (*lāzim*) of their essences. They intellect their existence or the means (*wāsiṭa*) and things prepared for their existence. But everything which is concomitant of something existing in actuality is inevitably existing in actuality. If something impossible was concomitant of the active intellects, it would thus necessarily exist in actuality. As the consequence is impossible, it remains that nothing impossible is concomitant of the active intellects and they do not intellect it, since we have said that they intellect their concomitants.[45]

This argument has the form of a reductio: if the forms contrary to the real, or the *impossibilia*, existed in the active intellects, then they would be intellected by the active intellects (because these intellects are constantly *active*). Furthermore, "The active intellects intellect things in so far as they are concomitants of their essences." Thus, if the *impossibilia* existed in the active intellects, they should be intellected insofar as they are concomitants of the essences of the active intellects.[46] Finally,

[44] One might think that the use of "active intellects," in plural, is a piece of evidence against the authenticity of *The Letter*. However, Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna] uses that form in both *Al-taᶜlīqāt* [*The Annotations*], ed. Abdurrahmān Badawī (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-miṣriyya al-ᶜāmma li-l-kitāb, 1973), p. 21, 41, 51, 62, 88, 97, and in *Al-mubāḥathāt* [*The Discussions*], ed. M. Bīdārfar (Qum, 1371 SH / 1992), p. 172, 217, 304, among other places.

[45] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 99, slightly modified: I use "intellect," as a verb, for *ᶜaqala*, instead of "apprehend."

[46] The concomitant of the essence of something is not part of its essence but is coextensive with it. For example, the sum of the three angles of a triangle is equal to two

"everything which is a concomitant of something existing in actuality is inevitably existing in actuality." But the *impossibilia*, by definition, cannot exist in actuality. Therefore, by modus tollens, the *impossibilia* cannot exist in the "everlasting things or the active intellects." It is noteworthy that if we assume that the *impossibilia* are not intelligible, contrary to what *The Letter* claims, still the conclusion of the argument in Text 3 holds, that is, the *impossibilia* are not intellected by the active intellects.

The second argument attempts to show that the *impossibilia* arise in the human intellect by the mediation of the faculty of imagination (or estimation) and a specific act of the intellect:

> Text 4. The human souls only perceive a thing through the mediation (*tawaṣṣuṭ*) of the senses and imagination (*taḫayyul*). As for their perception of their essence, it does not occur through the mediation of the senses and imagination. It is another kind of perception which we will make known in due course. […] And when the imaginative (*mutaḫayyila*) faculty imagined some form, whether impossible or not impossible, the intellect accomplishes its specific action in it and makes it become intelligible. Consequently, if there was not the mediation of the imagination absolutely no form opposed to the real would arise in the intellect.[47]

On a charitable reading, the argument may be reconstructed like this: The *impossibilia* can exist in the human intellect in one of the three ways: (a) they are emanated by the active intellects, or (b) they originate in the human intellect because of its essence, that is the essence of the human intellect necessitates them, or (c) they are produced by the lower faculties, i. e., the imagination and estimation. The previous argument (Text 3) shows that the *impossibilia* cannot be emanated by the active intellects because they do not exist in the active intellects. So, (a) cannot be the case. Next, "the human soul" perceives itself through "another kind of perception," a form of direct perception. If the *impossibilia* were perceived because of the essence of the human intellect, they would be perceivable directly, i. e., via direct perception. But the *impossibilia* are not perceivable directly. Their perception requires imagination and estimation. Hence, (b) cannot be the case either. Then, the argument con-

---

right angles. This property is a concomitant of the essence of triangle. The property is not identical to or part of a genuine definition of triangle. The concomitant necessarily follows from the essence without being part of it. The notion of concomitant, in this sense, and the example are perfectly known Aristotelian notions, also referred to as *per se accidents* (*kath' hauto sembebêkôs*) see e. g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Δ 30, 1025 a 31–3.

[47] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 99.

tinues as follows: "when the imaginative faculty imagined some form, whether impossible or not impossible, the intellect accomplishes its specific action in it and makes it become intelligible" (Text 4). This claim contains two points: first the process of generation of impossible intelligible forms , if there are any, is similar to that of possible intelligible forms and second, there is a "specific action" performed by the "intellect" (apparently by the "human intellect," as the context seems to suggest) that makes the imaginable form become intelligible. What this "specific action" is and how it makes some impossible form become intelligible are not explained in *The Letter*. Therefore, though this argument excludes some possible explanations for the intelligibility of the *impossibilia*, it does not offer a positive account of that.

5. AVICENNA ON THE *IMPOSSIBILIA*

Before further proceeding in the analysis of *The Letter*, it is helpful to review Avicenna's discussion of the *impossibilia* in *The Book of The Demonstration* of *The Healing*. I translate and discuss this text in detail, paragraph by paragraph, because it is crucial for understanding Avicenna's view on the *impossibilia* and for our subsequent argument about *The Letter*:[48]

> TEXT 5. Every inquiry concerning these [unknown things] is only achieved by means of existing and [already] acquired (*ḥāṣil*) things. Here, however, there is a place for doubt, namely, regarding the non-existent with respect to essence, the impossible with respect to existence (*al-maʿdūm al-ḏāt al-mūḥāl al-wūǧūd*):[49] how is it conceived (*yutaṣawwar*) [first,] when

[48] All translations are mine unless otherwise specified. My translation of this long paragraph is based on Michael Marmura's (in Michael Marmura, "Avicenna on Meno's Paradox," *Mediaeval Studies*, 71 [2009], p. 49–52). For another translation of this passage see: Fedor Benevich, "The Reality of the Non-Existent Object of Thought; The Possible, the Impossible, and Mental Existence in Islamic Philosophy (eleventh-thirteenth centuries)," *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, 6 (2018), p. 55.

[49] Marmura, "Avicenna on Meno's Paradox," p. 49, translates *al-maʿdūm al-ḏāt al-mūḥāl al-wūǧūd* as "the thing whose entity (*al-ḏāt*) is non-existent [and] whose existence is impossible" and Benevich, "The Reality of the Non-Existent Object of Thought," p. 55, translates that expression as "a non-existent essence whose existence is impossible." I do not translate *al-maʿdūm al-ḏāt* as "the thing whose entity (*al-ḏāt*) is non-existent" because inserting an extra "thing," which is equivalent to *al-šayʾ* in Arabic, and then describing *entity* as *non-existent* may have the connotation that Avicenna is committed to nonexistent things, entities, or realities in some sense. Translating *al-maʿdūm al-ḏāt* as *non-existent essence* is similarly problematic. Moreover, the latter translation might mislead the reader regarding the

[it is] asked "What is it?" so thereafter, it could be asked: "Does it exist?"
Because if no meaning of it is ever acquired in the soul, how would it be
judged if it is occurring or not occurring [among concrete particulars]?
When the impossible has no form in existence, how, then, would a form
of it be taken into the mind so that *that conceived* [thing] would be its
meaning?[50]

Avicenna's approach, here, can be described as "semantic ascent:"
consider a name "N," which signifies (*dalla*) N.[51] Any inquiry concerning
N, if there is one, requires knowledge of what "N," the name, signifies.[52]
In other words, comprehension of the signification of "N" is necessary for
any inquiry about N. If "N" signifies an existent object, then its significa-
tion may be explained by its (exemplification) instance (*šaḫṣ*), which ex-
ists in reality.[53] But if "N" purports to signify an impossibility, because
necessarily there is no *instance* of it, it is not clear how the signification
of "N" can be explained. Text 5 begins with this question: what is the sig-
nification of *a name* for the "non-existent with respect to essence, the im-
possible with respect to existence"? (It is interesting that Avicenna does
not use the expression "nonexistent essence" or "nonexistent thing.")[54]
To answer the question, then, Avicenna provides a taxonomy of the *im-
possibilia* in terms of the meanings of their names:

> Text 6. Then, we say: this impossible is either (a) single (*mufrad*) with
> no composition (*tarkīb*) or differentiation (*tafṣīl*) in it[55] [or (b) it has some

original Arabic ("the non-existent essence" would be *al-ḏāt al-maʿdūm* in Arabic). I
thank Stephen Menn for pressing me on this point.

[50] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 1, ch. 6, p. 72. My parsing of the
last sentence is different from both Marmura's and Benevich's. All emphases are
mine.

[51] I use "N" in quotation to refer to the name itself and with no quotation to refer to
whatever the name stands for.

[52] Ibn Sīnā, [*Al-naǧāt* (*Al-manṭiq*)] *The Deliverance: Logic*, trans. Asad Q. Ahmed (Ox-
ford University Press, 2011), p. 97–98. The discussion is rooted in Aristotle's *Pos-
terior Analytics*, bk. II, ch. 7–10. For a review and an analysis of some interpre-
tations, see David Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence* (Oxford University
Press, 2001), ch. 2 and 4. For a different interpretation see Deborah Modrak, *Aris-
totle's Theory of Language and Meaning* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). For
a collection of papers containing more recent scholarly debates, see David Charles
(ed.), *Definition in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2010), § II, ch. 6, 7
and 8. For a recent discussion focused on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, see David
Bronstein, *Aristotle on Knowledge and Learning: The Posterior Analytics* (Oxford
University Press, 2016).

[53] For Avicenna, *everything* exists, either in (extra-mental) reality or in the mind. In
other words, the domain of the universal quantifier does not range over any nonex-
istent object, in the Meinongian sense.

[54] See note 49.

composition or differentiation.] [If the single impossible has no composition or differentiation,] it cannot be at all conceivable except by some kind of comparison (*al-muqāyasa*) with [something] existent or in relation (*al-nisba*) to it. For example, our utterance *the void* (*al-ḫalaʾ*) and *the anti-God* (*ḍidd-Allāh*). The void is conceived as *that which is like a receptive to bodies* and the anti-God is conceived as *that which is* [*in the same relation*] *to God as cold is to hot*. [Therefore,] the impossible is conceived in the form of something possible to which impossibility is attributed (*yunsabu*),[56] [the single impossible with no composition or differentiation] is conceived by being compared with it or in a relation to it. However, [the single impossible with no composition or differentiation] in itself (*fī ḏātihi*) is neither conceivable (*lā yakūnu mutaṣawwaran*) nor intelligible (*wa lā maʿqūlan*) and has no essence.[57]

In the first sentence of Text 6, Avicenna apparently describes some *impossibilia* as single with no composition or differentiation. This description is puzzling and can be interpreted in three ways: first, Avicenna literally talks about some *impossibilia* and describes them as single with no composition or differentiation, second, Avicenna talks about the expressions or names (for some *impossibilia*) and describes the expressions as single with no composition or differentiation, and third, Avicenna talks about the meanings of the expressions or names (for some *impossibilia*) and describes the meanings as single with no composition or differentiation.

The first interpretation can be supported by textual evidence as well as traditional scholarship, though some exegetical work has to be done. A name for an impossible has no (exemplification) *instance* (*šaḫṣ*); after all, the impossible necessarily does not exist. However, if one supposes, counterfactually, that the impossible existed, then the suppositional instance, as it were, could be described as single with no composition or differentiation. Avicenna uses this counterfactual analysis in *The Interpretation*:

> TEXT 7. However, [concerning] the things that have no existence in any sense, the meaning of the proof sometimes used with regard to them, when

---

[55] Marmura and Benevich translate *tafṣīl* as *separable parts*. I use *part* for *ǧuzʾ* below. Thus, I translate *tafṣīl* as *differentiation*, to have a technical term for semantic purposes. Having said that, if context allows, I may use "separable parts" as well.

[56] Avicenna, in this sentence, uses the word *al-muḥāl* twice: "The *impossible* is conceived in the form of something possible to which the *impossibility* is attributed." Marmura and Benevich use a pronoun, i. e., *it*, instead of the second occurrence of *al-muḥāl*. This can be confusing in English.

[57] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 1, ch. 6, p. 72. I have consistently translated *ḏāt* as *essence*. Marmura translates it as *entity* and *being*.

it is the case that the mind makes a judgement about them such that they are such and such, is that if they were existent, their existence in the mind (*wuǧūduhā fī-l-ḏihn*) would be such and such, as [when] one says "the void is dimensions."[58]

Text 7 explains that if something has no existence, e. g., an impossible, a proof or description (*waṣf*) concerning it,[59] is still meaningful and can be interpreted counterfactually. For instance, one may use the following statement, as a premise, to argue that the void is impossible:

(1) The void is dimensions.

The void is not something of which the property of *being dimensions* can be affirmed. In fact, in the context of Avicenna's physics, there is no true affirmation of the void. The void does not exist and necessarily so; it is impossible and "There is no designation of an impossible whatsoever."[60] However, one may use the name "void" and make statements such as (1) to derive the conclusion that the void is impossible.[61] Avicenna suggests that (1) is meaningful and can be interpreted as follows: If the void were to exist, its existence would be dimensions.[62] One may

---

[58] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-ʿibāra* [*The Healing, The Logic, The Interpretation*], ed. Maḥmoud al-Ḫuḍayrī (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-miṣriyya al-ʿāmma li-t-taʾlīf wa-n-našr, 1390 AH / 1970), vol. 1, bk. 2, ch. 1, p. 80–81.

[59] In the context of an argument about the void, one may try to "specify what is intended by 'void'" or "describe" it by *descriptions* such as "being dimensions" or "being a certain substance" (Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], [*Al-šifaʾ, Al-ṭabīʿiyyāt, Al-samāʿ al-ṭabīʿī*] *The Physics of the Healing*, ed. and trans. J. McGinnis [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2009], p. 177).

[60] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Kitāb al-taʿlīqāt* [The Book of Annotations], ed. Ḥasan Maǧīd al-ʿAbīdī (Damascus: Dār al-Farqad, 2009), p. 152. For informative discussions on Avicenna's view on the void see Andreas Lammer, *The Elements of Avicenna's Physics* (De Gruyter, 2018), and Jon McGinnis, "Avoiding the Void: Avicenna on the Impossibility of Circular Motion in a Void," in Peter Adamson (ed.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy: Sources and Reception* (Warburg Institute, 2007), p. 74–89.

[61] This can be done by a reductio argument. If one assumes, for the sake of reductio, that the void exists, then in the context of this argument, (1) is meaningful and can be "true." The premises of a reductio need not be true outside the context of the argument; they are assumed to be true for the purpose of deriving a contradiction. How to explain the concept of "true under a counterfactual assumption" is a related but different problem (see Wilfrid Hodges, "Ibn Sīnā on Reductio ad Absurdum," *The Review of Symbolic Logic*, vol. 10 [2017], p. 583–601, and S. N. Mousavian, "Avicenna on Talking about Nothing"). One suggestion goes as follows: the mind can conceive (via a mental act like *supposition*) a situation in which the void exists. So, the void has an existence in the mind. Call this the suppositional instance of the "void." The reductio argument provides a thorough examination of the properties of this suppositional instance and shows, at the end, that the suppositional instance or the situation containing it, involves a contradiction.

[62] For further discussion, see Ibn Sīnā, *Burhān-e-Šifāʾ* [*The Demonstration of the*

expand this approach and attribute *single with no composition or differentiation* to *the void* in the following sense: if the void were to exist, its existence would be single with no composition or differentiation.

The second interpretation of "single with no composition or differentiation" focuses on the expressions or names for the *impossibilia*. Avicenna divides expressions into single and composite[63] and the latter, i. e. composite expressions, into complete (*tāmm*) and incomplete (*nāqiṣ*): "a single expression is one by the part of which, insofar as it is a part, one does not intend any signification at all:"[64] "Examples of incomplete expressions are 'in the house' and 'not a human being.'"[65] Such incomplete composite expressions have parts, namely, "in" and "not," of which "there is no full comprehension" in isolation. Thus, the parts do not have complete signification. Therefore, the whole expression is incomplete.[66] If in Text 6, by "a single with no composition or differentiation" Avicenna means an impossible whose *expression*, or name, is not a *complete* composite and its signification has no differentiation,[67] then both names, i. e., "void" and "anti-God," are single with no composition or differentiation.[68] The name "anti-God" is not a *complete* composite expression because a part of it, namely "anti-" does not have a complete signification.

According to the third interpretation, "single with no composition or differentiation" is interpreted as a description of the *meanings* of the

---

Šifāʾ], trans. and comm. Mahdī Qavām Ṣafarī (Tehran: Fikr-e-Rouz Publication, 1371 SH), p. 517.

[63] Some terms may form a unity, and thus be conceived or asserted, in virtue of some relations that hold between them. "Composition," in a technical sense, refers to such relations. As a result, one can move toward comprehending or perceiving (*idrāk*) unknown matters through composition of expressions of known things. See Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Al-išārāt wa-l-ṭanbīhāt*, with al-Ṭūsī's Commentary, ed. S. Dunyā, 4 vol. (Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif bi-Miṣr, 1970), vol. 1, bk. 2, ch. 11, p. 221, and Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-maqūlāt* [*The Healing, The Logic, The Categories*], ed. Ibrāhīm Madkūr (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿāmma li-šuʾūn al-maṭābiʿ al-amīriyya, 1378/1959), vol. 1, bk. 1, ch. 1, p. 8.

[64] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], [*Al-išārāt wa-l-ṭanbīhāt* (*Al-manṭiq*)] *Remarks and Admonitions, Part One: Logic*, trans. Shams Inati (Wetteren: Universa Press, 1984), p. 51. Cf. Ibn Sīnā, *Al-išārāt wa-l-ṭanbīhāt*, ed. S. Dunyā, vol. 1, bk. 1, ch. 7, p. 143.

[65] Ibid., p. 52.

[66] Ibid.

[67] The differentiation, or having separable (semantic) parts, applies to what is signified, not to the expression.

[68] See, for instance, Mohammad Hossein Heshmat Pour, "Lectures on *Al-burhān* [from *Al-šifāʾ*]," available at: https://www.eshia.ir/feqh/archive/text/heshmatpour/shefa_borhan/92/920625/.

names for the *impossibilia*. A quick note on "differentiation" and "composition" may be helpful. "Differentiations" (or "separable parts") refer to the semantic parts of the meaning of an expression if they are constitutive of that meaning. For example, the meaning of "rational animal" has two semantic parts: the meaning of "rational" and that of "animal" and these two parts are constitutive of the meaning of "rational animal" in the sense that "rational animal" is not predicable of something unless the meaning of "rational" and that of "animal" are also predicable of that thing.[69] Thus, a meaning with some differentiations is identifiable with them. Otherwise put, the differentiations of a meaning are internal to it. If these separable parts are reflected in the syntax of an expression, then the expression is composite. According to the third interpretation, the *impossibilia* are single with no composition or differentiation if the meanings of their expressions are such.

The third interpretation can be preferred to the first two readings for three reasons. First, the wider context of Text 6 suggests that Avicenna is primarily concerned with meanings and definitions; in the previous two pages, Avicenna consistently talks about the definition of single meanings and different ways of comprehending such meanings.[70] Second, the third reading enhances the second interpretation by taking it one step further, from expressions to their meanings. The ultimate ground for the distinction among names for the *impossibilia* is the *significations* of the parts of the names and composition and differentiation in what-is-signified. Third, this interpretation is not necessarily incompatible with the first reading either. If, for example, the meaning of the "void" in the mind is exemplified by the supposition of the existence of the void in the mind, when the mind conceives of a counterfactual situation in which the void exists, then this suppositional instance of the void is single with no composition or differentiation.[71] According to this proposal, the suppositional instance of the void in the mind bears the meaning of the "void."

Now we may return to the most interesting part of Text 6, in which Avicenna explains how one may conceive of the meaning of a single impossible with no composition or differentiation. Here, Avicenna mentions three main theses: First, starting from the last sentence of Text 6,

---

[69] For example, Avicenna is explicit that the verbal formulation of a genuine definition, e. g., "rational animal," signifies *the differentiations of what the name, e. g., the "human," signifies*. Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 4, ch. 3, p. 283.

[70] See Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 1, ch. 6, p. 70–72.

[71] For the notion of suppositional instance, as used here, see note 61 above.

a single impossible *in itself* is "neither conceivable nor intelligible and has no essence." Second, "the impossible is conceived in the form of something possible to which impossibility is attributed." And third, this way of conceiving of the impossible is by "some kind of comparison with something existent or in relation to it." Avicenna, then, offers two examples, *the void* and *anti-God*, to illustrate conceiving through "some kind of comparison with something existent or in relation to it." We should discuss each thesis separately.

The first thesis leaves no doubt that for Avicenna, the single impossible with no composition or differentiation *in itself* (that is, with no comparison with or relation to something existent) "cannot be at all conceivable," "is not intelligible" and "has no essence."

The second thesis in Text 6 is that "the impossible is conceived in the form of something possible to which impossibility is attributed." This suggests that strictly speaking there is no impossible form *simpliciter*. We conceive of the *impossibilia* only through conceiving of some possible things, and attributing *impossibility* to them. To explain this, we need to move to the third thesis in Text 6, according to which one conceives of the *impossibilia* by "some kind of comparison with something existent or in relation to it." These acts of conceiving of some meanings through comparison or relation should explain the cognitive processes through which the mediums for conceiving of the *impossibilia* are formed. Avicenna introduces two examples to illustrate his point: the void and anti-God (or contrary to God).

"The void is conceived as *that which is like a receptive to bodies*" (Text 6). To conceive of the meaning of "that which is like a receptive to bodies," one needs to conceive of the meanings of the parts of this description, that is, the meaning of "that," that of "which" etc. All these expressions (incomplete or complete) have some meaning and the entire description is also meaningful. This composite *meaning*, i. e., *that which is like a receptive to bodies*, itself is something possible and some part of it, e. g., the meaning of "receptive to bodies," may be applicable to some existent thing, e. g., space. To apprehend the void, one attributes *impossibility* to this composite meaning. Now, the void is apprehended through a comparison, expressed by "is like," to something existent, expressed by "a receptive to bodies." It is notable that the void is a single impossible with no composition or differentiation. The void, in itself, has no essence and is not intelligible. The meaning of "that which is like a receptive to bodies" only works as a reference-fixing description to explicate what the name "void" is intended to signify. Let me illustrate the

notion of reference-fixing. Suppose I try to introduce my son to a guest of mine by saying that "the one who is very like the girl who will first enter this house," knowing that my daughter arrives first and her twin brother next. My description does not give any essential information about my son. However, the description helps my guest fix the reference of the name and identify my son. Similarly, I suggest, the descriptive meaning *that which is like a receptive to bodies* is neither identical to nor constitutive of the meaning of the "void;" it is only a way of explicating what we intend to talk about. Therefore, the parts of descriptive meaning do not count as differentiations of the meaning of the name "void." Nor is the descriptive meaning reflected in the syntax of the name by different syntactic parts. To repeat, the name "void" is not a composite expression. The meaning of "anti-God" can be explained similarly. The anti-God is apprehended through a relation (introduced as the relation between cold and hot, i. e., opposition) to something existent, i. e., God. Again, the anti-God is a single impossible with no composition or differentiation; if it existed, it would be single. The anti-God, in itself, has no essence and is not intelligible. The meaning of "that which is [in the same relation] to God as cold is to hot" only works as a reference-fixing description to explicate what the name "anti-God" is intended to signify.

Now we may turn to how one conceives of the *impossibilia* with some composition or differentiation:

> TEXT 8. As for that in which there is some composition or differentiation, like *the goat-stag* (ᶜ*anz-ʾuyyal*), *the simurg* (ᶜ*anqāʾ*) and *a human* [*that*] *flies* (*insānun yaṭiru*), indeed what is first conceived is their differentiations, which are not impossible, [and] then *some* conjunction (*iqtirān*) between those differentiations is conceived. This conjunction is [conceived] by comparison with the conjunction that exists between differentiations [that are] in existent objects whose essences are composite.[72] Thus, there are three things: two of them are parts (*ǧuzʾān*) such that each individually exists and a third [one] which is the combination (*taʾlīf*) between the two, conceived so far as it is a combination, because the combination in so far as it is a combination is among the things that exist. According to this, the meaning of signification (*dalāla*) of a name for [a] non-existent is conferred. Thus, the non-existent is only conceived because of the prior conception of existents.[73]

In Text 8, Avicenna explains how the *impossibilia* whose meanings contain some differentiation or composition can be conceived. He dis-

---

[72] The last two sentences are one in Arabic, the second one is a clause modifying "conjunction," (*iqtirān*) mentioned in the first sentence.

[73] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 1, ch. 6, p. 72.

cusses three examples. In all examples, the meaning of a name for an impossible has differentiations, that is, there are semantically separable parts which constitute the meaning of the name. These parts are not merely reference-fixing descriptions; they are included in the meaning. Let us discuss each example distinctly.

First, the goat-stag is an impossible whose expression, namely "goat-stag," is a complete composite expression made from two names, namely "goat" and "stag," each of which signifies a substance, in particular a natural kind.[74] Avicenna mentions goat-stag elsewhere as an example of a "non-existent in itself" (*maꜥdūman fī nafsihī*) and "impossible in *its* existence" (*muḥālan fī wuǧūdihi*).[75] The meaning of "goat-stag" has two semantically separable parts: the meaning of "goat" and the meaning of "stag." It also contains a combination between the two parts, represented by hyphen, or juxtaposition of the two names in Arabic. (Avicenna does not refer to this combination as a "part.") These parts are constitutive of the meaning of "goat-stag" and are reflected in the syntax of the name.

Second, *al-ꜥanqāʾ* (or simurg), *The Letter*'s example. According to Text 8, the meaning of the "simurg" has differentiations or separable parts (for example, a gigantic bird, with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion etc.) These separable parts are essential to the meaning of the "simurg:" they allow one to combine them and conceive of the combination. However, the name *ꜥanqāʾ* lacks composition in the technical sense because the separable parts are not reflected in the syntax of the name in Arabic (*ꜥanqāʾ* has no meaningful syntactic part).

Third, a "human [that] flies." The term itself is a complete composite expression for an impossible. As was explained, *a man that flies* is impossible (in the Aristotelian science, a flying man is as impossible as a walking snake). The expression is composed of "a man," which signifies a substance, and "flies," which signifies an accident (not a differentia).[76] The meaning of "a man that flies" has two parts: the meaning of "a man" and that of "flies." It also contains a combination between the two parts, indicated by the juxtaposition of *insānun* ("man") and *yaṭiru* ("flies") in Arabic, and emphasized by "that" in my English translation. One conceives of the meaning of "a man that flies" by conceiving of the meaning of its separable parts. In all three cases, one conceives of the impossi-

---

[74] Goat-stag is impossible, for Avicenna, because it encompasses two incompossible essences. Goat and stag are incompossible essences because their differentiae are incompossible. See note 16 above.

[75] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 1, ch. 1, p. 6, emphasis is mine.

[76] See Mohammad Hossein Heshmat Pour, "Lectures on *Al-burhān*."

ble form through conceiving of something possible in the imagination to which impossibility is attributed.

6. ARE THE *IMPOSSIBILIA* CONCEIVED AS INTELLIGIBLE FORMS?

The Letter claims that the *impossibilia* are (both imaginable and) intelligible. In this section, I will argue that according to Avicenna the *impossibilia* are not in general conceived as intelligible forms. I will discuss three reasons.

The first reason was discussed above: If every impossible form were intelligible, then the impossible that is single with no composition or differentiation, e.g., the void, *in itself* would be intelligible. However, Avicenna is explicit that such *impossibilia* are "neither conceivable nor intelligible" and have "no essence" (Text 6). As far as we know, there is no piece of evidence that Avicenna ever revised (or compromised on) this principle. Therefore, the general claim that all *impossibilia* are intelligible is not consistent with Avicenna's view.

It might be objected that Avicenna is not fully consistent on this point because in *The Physics* of *The Healing* "Avicenna concludes that the idea of a void is simply a vain intelligible" (*maʿqūlan mafrū̇gan*).[77] So, at least on some occasions Avicenna considers a single impossible such as the void as intelligible:

> TEXT 9. In short, on the grounds that [something] is, it should have some difference. So, when it is said that there is an absolute void – that is, some indeterminate thing susceptible to continuous division – the difference upon which this follows as a consequence is that (whether in one, two, or all directions) there should be some difference that qualifies the intelligible concept of the interval and gives it some determinate existence in reality and in the intellect, and that the intellect needs in order to determine whether it is some existing thing or [simply] a vain intelligible.[78]

The last sentence of Text 9 introduces the void as a "vain intelligible." So, perhaps Avicenna's view is not fully consistent on this point.

The appearance of inconsistency, however, is based on a misleading translation of the last sentence of Text 9. The original text can be interpreted as follows: Avicenna, attempting to argue that the void is impossible, says that if the void existed and had a generic nature such as

---

[77] McGinnis, "The Introduction," in Avicenna, *The Physics of the Healing*, ed. and trans. J. McGinnis, p. xxix.

[78] Avicenna, *The Physics of the Healing*, ed. and trans. J. McGinnis, p. 180.

quantity, it would need a *differentia* to exist (in reality) and be conceivable as an intelligible (with a genuine definition). Avicenna's goal, in this chapter, is to show that there is no such *differentia*. The problem we are concerned with lies in the last sentence of Text 8, which can alternatively be translated as:

> Text 10. […] The intellect needs [the *differentia*] in order to determine whether it [the meaning of the "void" or the void] is some existing thing or intelligible, to have it [i. e., this inquiry] settled.

I read *mafrūġan ᶜanhi* as *hāl* which describes the mode of the object or agent in Arabic grammar. Here, the agent is the human intellect, and the object is the meaning of the "void" (or the void), for which the intellect needs a *differentia* to determine whether it is something existing or intelligible. McGinnis apparently reads *mafrūġan ᶜanhi* as a *naᶜt* (description) of the "intelligible." This has two problems: semantically *mafrūġan* is the past participle of *faraġa* (mainly used with the preposition *min* in Arabic) meaning *finished* or *accomplished*.[79] In Persian (in a primarily old and technical use), *mafrūġan* is used with the preposition *ᶜan*, with the same meaning, as well as *settled* or *relieved* (after finishing or completing an act).[80] So, neither in Arabic nor in Persian *mafrūġan* means *vain*. Second, and syntactically, there is a pronoun in *ᶜanhi*, after the preposition *ᶜan*, and this pronoun needs antecedent reference. If one translates *mafrūġan ᶜanhi* as *vain intelligible*, the pronoun is simply overlooked. I kept the pronoun in English as "it" and take it to refer to the inquiry for the *differentia* of the meaning of the "void." Either way, Avicenna does not talk about the void as a "vain intelligible." Thus, I translate *mafrūġan ᶜanhi* as *to have it*, i. e., this inquiry, *settled*. Avicenna's view is not inconsistent. The void is intelligible only in a comparative sense, that is, if it is conceived through a comparison with something existent. The void *in itself* is not a "vain intelligible" because it is not intelligible in the first place.

The second reason for the non-intelligibility of the *impossibilia* for Avicenna is this: If a meaning is intelligible, then it is conceivable as *one* thing by the human intellect. Everything conceived as one thing by the human intellect has a unity (or oneness) that intelligible meanings

---

[79] Alternatively, the ending part of Text 9 can be translated as "… to have it [i. e., this inquiry] accomplished."

[80] My reading follows Mohammad Ali Furūġī in *Fann Samāᶜ Ṭabīᶜī*, Persian trans. Mohammad Ali Furūġī (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publication, 1361 SH), p. 160. (Furūġī drops *al-* from both *al-samāᶜ* and *al-ṭabīᶜī* in the title of his translation, most likely to turn them into Persian words.)

have. The *impossibilia*, however, do not have such unity (or oneness). Therefore, the *impossibilia* are not conceived as intelligible meanings. The argument can be recovered in two steps from Text 11 and Text 12:

> Text 11. And the parts of the definition that is nominal, when it does not correspond to one existent [thing], seems to have unification by binders [hypotaxis] (*bi-l-arbaṭa*) unless it is taken in comparison with one image in the soul (*ḫayālin wāḥidin fi-l-nafs*). And some have followed this [latter] view. This [i. e., the latter view] seems not to hold always in all definitions meant to be nominal explications.[81]

According to Text 11, the descriptions put together to form the nominal definition of a term require unity (or oneness), otherwise if there are two or more such units dissociated from each other in a nominal definition, it would not be clear if the nominal definition defines one thing or more. If the nominal definition corresponds to one existing thing in reality, the unity of this existing thing can account for the unity of the nominal definition. (Avicenna does not explain this point here but this is not our concern now). Avicenna considers two possibilities to account for the unity of a nominal definition of something that does not correspond to one existent thing: (1) syntactic binders (that express semantic relations) and (2) an image in the soul. According to (1), the semantic content of the syntactic binders or hypotaxis can explain the unity of the meaning. According to (2), the unity of an image associated, via comparison, with the nominal definition can explain the unity of the meaning. Then, Avicenna immediately argues that (2) cannot be a general solution to the problem:

> Text 12. Thus, if the *meaning* were impossible, [with] no image of it whatsoever in the soul, then, how could an image of it be inner [, that is, internal to the soul, or unitary]?[82] And if it [i. e., the meaning or form] were impossible and there were an image of it in the soul that has parts but not integrated in nature, then how could this image be one (*wāḥidan*)? For example, our imagining *a man that flies*: if this image were one it might be one in a manner different from that in which intelligible *meanings* and sound images are one.[83]

Text 12 argues against (2) (that is, a meaning is unified because the

---

[81] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 4, ch. 4, p. 289.

[82] ʿAfīfī has recorded the Arabic word as *wiǧdāniyyan*, which can be translated as *inner* or *mental* (Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*). A similar word, without a dot under its second letter is read *wahdāniyyan* and can be translated as *unified* or *unitary*. Both readings make sense in this context. Though I prefer the second one, I have followed ʿAfīfī's edition here.

[83] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 4, ch. 4, p. 289.

image associated with it is unified) in two steps: first, some impossible meanings have no images whatsoever, and hence are not imaginable. Nonetheless, they can have nominal definitions that are unified and form a "unity," that is a semantic unity. Therefore, the unity of the nominal definition of such an impossible meaning should not be explained by an image, or the faculty of imagination because there is no corresponding image. Second, some impossible meaning might be associated with an image, but the image might not be one in the sense that an intelligible meaning is. Avicenna illustrates his point by the following example: *a man that flies* (also used in Text 8). This makes it clear that Text 11 and Text 12 are about the same kind of impossible meaning discussed in Text 8. Furthermore, Avicenna suggests that even if one has an image of *a man that flies*, this image does not have the unity of intelligible meanings. Therefore, the *impossibilia* in general lack the unity of intelligible meanings.

One might wander about the difference between the unity of the meaning of "a man that walks" and that of "a man that flies."[84] The unity of the meaning of "a man that walks" can be accounted for by the unity of any existing man that walks, or so is Avicenna's contention. But the meaning of "a man that flies" is unified in a much weaker sense, that is through syntactic binders, for example by juxtaposition of *insānun* ("man") and *yaṭiru* ("flies") in Arabic (emphasized by "that" in English). As with the unity of the meaning of "void," even this explanation is not directly available because there is no syntactic binder in the "void," and there is no combination or differentiation in the meaning of the "void" itself. This may explain why the void in itself is not even conceivable for Avicenna (Text 6). The void can only be apprehended indirectly and through some comparison with something existing. The description that expresses the comparison has unity by binders, but this descriptive meaning is not included in the meaning of the "void." So, the unity of the meaning of the "void," through its association with the meaning of "that which is like a receptive to bodies," is even weaker than the unity of the meaning of "a man that flies." None of these two meanings, i. e., *a man that flies* and *the void*, have the unity of an intelligible meaning, e. g., *a man that walks*, and, thus, they are not conceived as intelligible

---

[84] One might think that "*a* man that flies" expresses a proposition whereas "man that flies" expresses a non-propositional intelligible meaning. I think this is not true. Both expressions express non-propositional meanings. "A man that flies" is neither true nor false; it is not truth evaluable. Therefore, it does not express a proposition. A similar argument is applicable to "man that flies."

forms.

The third reason to hold that *impossibilia* are not conceived as intelligible forms is that there is no textual evidence for this claim in Avicenna's authentic works. He never considers a name for an impossible as signifying an intelligible meaning, or even as being ambiguous between an intelligible meaning and another meaning. I will discuss two texts and refer to similar texts at the end (note 87).

Avicenna appeals to two faculties to explain the process of conceiving of the *impossibilia*. These faculties are compositive imagination (*al-mutaḥayyila*) and estimation (*al-wahm*), the latter is indirectly responsible to produce the corresponding meanings in the compositive imagination. The idea is succinctly formulated in *The Provenance and Destination*:

> TEXT 13. Then, after the faculty/power of (retentive) imagination (*al-ḥayāliyya*) comes another faculty/power which, if it is in humans and the intellect employs it, is called "cogitative faculty" (*al-mufakkira*), and if it is in [other] animals or in humans and the estimation employs it, it is called "(compositive) imagination" (*al-mutaḥayyila*). And the difference between this [i.e., compositive imagination] and retentive imagination is that there is nothing in retentive imagination unless it is taken from sensation (*al-ḥiss*) whereas the compositive imagination composes and differentiates and thus some forms come about [therein] that have never been sensed nor will ever be sensed, like *a flying man* and *a person half human half tree*.[85]

As Text 13 explains, the images taken from sensation are preserved in the faculty of retentive imagination. Then, there is another faculty that can be employed by two higher faculties, i.e., the intellect and estimation. If this faculty is employed by the intellect, and "in imitation (*muḥākāt*) of the process in the intellect for the purpose of aiding it,"[86] it is called "cogitation." If this power is employed by the estimation, in either humans or other animals, it is called "compositive imagination." Here, Avicenna does not give a name to the underlying power independently of the manner in which it is employed by the intellect or estimation. Avicenna explains the process of conceiving of the *impossibilia* in Text 13, by the faculty of compositive imagination with no reference to the intellect or any specific action of the intellect. In fact, this reference shows that the ultimate managing power in this case is estimation, not the intellect. More importantly, Avicenna's examples in Text 13, *a fly-*

---

[85] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Al-mabdaʾ wa-l-maʿād* [The Provenance and Destination], ed. ʿAbd-Allāh Nūrānī, Tehran: The Institute of Islamic Studies (1363 SH / 1984), p. 93–94.

[86] Gutas, "Intuition and Thinking," p. 22.

ing man and *a person half human half tree*, are very similar to *a man that flies* and *the goat-stag*. Both the "goat-stag" and "a person half human half tree" are meaningful and have incompatible essences as their (semantic) separable parts. In other words, the meanings have composition and differentiation. Avicenna does not mention anything about the ambiguity of these expressions between an intelligible meaning and an image (or imaginable meaning). Putting all these pieces of evidence together, one can reasonably conclude that the *impossibilia* are not apprehended by the intellect.

A similar explanation can be found in *The Logic* of *The Healing*, with the difference that this time Avicenna explicitly says that the "simurg" signifies a meaning in the faculty of the estimation:

> TEXT 14. It is true to be said that the simurg is not seeing and it is not true to be said that the simurg is non-seeing. This is based on that *the simurg* is a name that signifies a meaning in the estimation, and it does not exist *in re* (*al-aᶜyān*).[87]

Here Avicenna tries to explain the difference between simple negation (e.g., "the simurg is not seeing"), in which negation works on copula, and metathetic negation (e.g., "the simurg is non-seeing"), in which negation is part of the predicate. His point is that, in the case of the simurg, a simple negation is true whereas a metathetic negation is false. The difference is explained, a paragraph earlier, in terms of the truth-conditions of the corresponding utterances. The truth of a metathetic negation requires the existence of the subject-term but the truth of a simple negation does not have this existence requirement. (In fact, the non-existence of the subject-term is sufficient for the truth of a simple negation.) This logical point aside, at the end of Text 14, Avicenna explicitly mentions that the name "simurg" signifies "a meaning in the estimation." Again, here Avicenna does not claim that the meaning of the "simurg" is intelligible nor does appeal to the intellect or to "a specific act of it." This explanation is repeated in Avicenna's authentic works.[88]

7. AVICENNA ON UNIVERSALITY

The question of the intelligibility of the *impossibilia* is closely related to the question of their universality. In this section, I will discuss three

[87] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-ᶜibāra*, vol. 1, bk. 2, ch. 1, p. 82.

[88] For instance, see Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-ᶜibāra*, vol. 1, bk. 2, ch. 1, p. 100 and 110, and id., *Al-qānūn fī-l-ṭibb* [The Canon of Medicine], 3 vol. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ᶜilmiyya, 1999), vol. 1, p. 100.

main texts from *The Book of Demonstration*, *The Metaphysics*, and *The Remarks and Admonitions*, in which Avicenna explicates his notion of universality. I will argue that these texts can be read in a coherent and consistent manner. Then, I use two excerpts from *The Salvation* and *The Provenance and Destination*, to support my claim that being predicable of more than one thing is not a sufficient condition for universality. Then, using this material, in section 8, I will show that *The Letter*'s argument for the *universality* of the *impossibilia* is not sound.

Let's begin with universality in *The Book of Demonstration*:

> TEXT 15. And the universal nature is said to be "universal" in three ways: [1] It is said [to be] "universal" by way of being actually said of many [things] in existence […] [2] It is said [to be] "universal" by way of being possible to be said of many [things] in existence, though it may happen to be presently said of one, e. g., the *heptagonal house*, or as reported about a bird called *phoenix* (*quqnūs*), that it is one in the world, so it is said, and when it ceases [to be] (*baṭala*), from its corpse or the ashes of its corpse another similar one rises, [3] And it is said [to be] "universal" of [something], which actually has no generality in existence nor does it have the possibility of generality in existence, [but] its very conception by the intellect does not prevent commonality in it, though another meaning or something [else] attached to it prevents the existence of commonality in it and indicates that it will never be found except one.[89]

For our purposes, four points are worth emphasizing in Text 15. First, the subject-matter of analysis, of which "universality" is predicated, is the *nature* (*al-ṭabīʿa*) as a meaning. This suggests that if something (is impossible and thus) has no nature, in its broadest sense, it may not be subject to this analysis and hence not be described as "universal." The impossible, hence, lacks a precondition necessary for the assessment of universality.

Second, the three ways in which a nature may be called "universal" are introduced by a modal-conceptual criterion formulated through semantic ascent (in the sense of what is *said* or what is possible to be *said*). The three categories are: (1) that which is *actually* said of many things *in existence* (2) that which is *possible* to be said of many *in existence*, though it may actually be one and (3) the meaning whose very conception by the intellect does not prevent commonality in it (though it may be both actually and necessarily one in existence).[90] I interpreted Text 15 as literally as possible. In (1) and (2) Avicenna uses the language

---

[89] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-manṭiq, Al-burhān*, vol. 3, bk. 2, ch. 4, p. 144–145.

[90] I use "general" for ʿāmm, "many" for kaṯirīn, and "commonality" for ṣirkat, trying to reflect distinct terms that Avicenna uses to talk about multiplicity (kaṯrat).

of "actually being said of many" and "possibly being said of many" respectively. So, he uses a form of semantic ascent to talk about universality. In (3), he talks about something actually and necessarily being one in existence though its very conception by the intellect (not by any other faculties, e. g., estimation) does not prevent commonality in it.

Third, the two examples of (2) are the heptagonal house and phoenix. These are (or may be) one in existence but it is possible to be said of many in existence. This implies that, for Avicenna, phoenix is not an impossible form, as widely and incorrectly presumed in the literature. Hence, "simurg" cannot be translated as *phoenix* (*quqnūs*).

Fourth, a nature as a universal meaning in the third way actually has no generality in existence nor does it have the possibility of generality in existence. Thus, in some sense, it is impossible for it to be said of more than one individual in existence. This impossibility of predictability of more than one thing in existence, however, is *not* rooted in the meaning of the name, or in its very conception; rather, it is due to something external to the meaning and attached to it. This external meaning "indicates that it, i. e., the universal nature, will never be found except one." This implies that the universal nature, in this way, has at least (and at most) one instance *in existence*.[91] Putting all these points together, a universal can be defined as (Def. 1): a "*nature* (*al-ṭabīᶜa*) […] the very conception of which by the intellect does not prevent commonality in it" (Text 15).

Now let us move to *The Metaphysics,* in which Avicenna further discusses the above three ways of universality and gives more examples:

> Text 16. The "universal" is spoken of in three ways: [1] The "universal" is said of the meaning by way of its being actually predicated of many – as, for example, the *human being*. [2] The "universal" is [also] predicated of a meaning if it is permissible for it to be predicated of many, even if it is not a condition that these [many] should exist in actuality – as, for example, the *heptagonal house*. For it is a universal inasmuch as it is in its nature to be predicable of many. But it does not follow necessarily that these many must exist – nay, not even one of them. [3] The "universal" is [also] said of the meaning whose very conception does not prevent it from being predicated of many. It is only prevented if some cause prevents it and proof indicates [such prevention]. An example of this is the *sun* and the *earth*. For, inasmuch as these are intellectually apprehended as *sun* and *earth*, there is nothing to prevent the mind from allowing their meaning to exist in many, unless a proof or an argument makes it known that this is impossible. This, then, would be impossible because of an external cause (*bi sababin min ḫāriǧin*),

---

[91] "At least one" because it actually exists and "at most one" because the external meaning attached to it excludes the possibility of any other instance in existence.

not by reason of its very conception (*li nafsi taṣawwurihi*).[92]

I would like to mention three points in Text 16. First, on the "universal" in the second way, Avicenna adds that "it does not follow necessarily that these many must exist – nay, not even one of them." Thus, it is permissible to have a universal with no (exemplification) instance (*šaḫs*) if, in virtue of the very conception (*taṣawwur*) of the meaning, "it is permissible for it to be predicated of many." So, a universal in the second way is not always many or one; it may have no instance. Then, Avicenna explains this by adding: "For it is a universal inasmuch as it is in its nature to be predicable of many." So, a universal nature has a modal property, i. e., *predictability of many*, and possesses this property in virtue of its *very conception*.

Second, on the "universal" in the third way, Avicenna mentions two examples: the *sun* and the *earth*. The meaning of "sun" is such that its very conception "does not prevent it from being predicated of many," though necessarily there is no second *sun*. This "necessity" is rooted in something external to the meaning of "sun" or its conception;[93] however, as far as the intellect considers its very conception nothing in the meaning of the "sun" prevents it from being predicated of many.

Third, universals can be redescribed as follows: (a) they have actually many instances, (b) they have possibly many instances, though they may have none or one actual instance, and (c) they have one and only one actual instance (and it is necessarily one), but the very conception properly apprehended does not prevent the meaning from being predictable of many. The common denominator of the three ways of being universal is: (Def. 2) "the meaning whose very conception does not prevent it from being predicated of many" (Text 16). It can easily be shown that Def. 1 (in Text 15) and Def. 2 (in Text 16) are equivalent.[94] Thus, I conclude, Text 15 and Text 16 are perfectly consistent. Def. 1 and Def. 2 clearly show that universality neither presupposes nor implies complete

---

[92] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], [*Al-šifāʾ, Al-ilāhiyyāt*] *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, ed. M. E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), p. 148–9, slightly revised.

[93] Let's call a world "cosmologically possible" if according to the laws of cosmology it is possible that the world exists. Given Avicenna's laws of cosmology, there is no *cosmologically* possible world in which there are two *suns*.

[94] To show this, one should assume that: (i) the *nature* is a meaning (or can semantically be interpreted as such), (ii) "does not prevent commonality in it" (in Def. 1) and "does not prevent it from being predicated of many" (in Def. 2) are equivalent, and (iii) "the very conception of which by the intellect" (in Def. 1) and "by whose very conception" (in Def. 2) mean the same thing. All three assumptions are plausible.

immateriality or abstractness of the universal meaning. The notion of universality is primarily a semantical/logical notion, not a metaphysical concept.[95]

The third text on universality is a very short comment from *The Remarks and Admonitions*:

> TEXT 17. Any meaning predicated of a non-restricted many is intelligible, regardless of being valid for one individual, as in your utterance *son of Adam*, or not, as in your utterance *human*.[96]

I would like to touch on five points in Text 17. First, it introduces a third definition for universality by characterizing intelligibility as follows (DEF. 3): "any meaning predicated of a non-restricted many." Again, it can be shown that Def. 3 is coherent with Def. 1 and Def. 2.[97] The proviso "non-restricted" added to "many" in Def. 3, however, calls for clarification, to which I will return shortly.

Second, Adam himself *is* an individual and the meaning of "Adam" is a particular meaning. The meaning of "Adam" is a particular because it is not predicable of more than one, i. e., Adam. In other words, the very conception of Adam, properly apprehended, should contain some particularizing attributes that prevent commonality in it. Hence, the conception of Adam cannot be predicated of many.

Third, the meaning of "son of Adam," however, is intelligible and universal because it is predicable (in virtue of its very conception) of a (non-restricted) many. In other words, logically speaking, anyone can be a son of Adam. So, the very conception of son of Adam does not prevent commonality in it.

Fourth, the meaning of "son of Adam" though universal is not devoid of particulars, i. e., the particularizing attributes involved in the conception of Adam. The meaning of "son of Adam," as characterized in relation to the conception of Adam, is inconceivable unless one conceives of the particular meaning of "Adam." Therefore, not all universal meanings are completely immaterial or abstract. (I take that this is obvious that some universal meanings are completely immaterial.)

---

[95] In contrast, as we will see in the next section, *The Letter* characterizes universality as complete immateriality or abstractness.

[96] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-išārāt wa-l-ṭanbīhāt*, ed. S. Dunyā, vol. 2, p. 439.

[97] To show this, one should assume that (i) by "meaning" Avicenna means *a meaning in virtue of its very conception* and (ii) by "predicated of a non-restricted many" he means the same as "does not prevent commonality in it" (Def. 1) or "does not prevent it from being predicated of many" (Def. 2). This implies that by "predicated of" in Def. 3, Avicenna means "predicable of." These assumptions seem plausible.

Fifth, Avicenna in Def. 3 says that "any meaning predicated of a *non-restricted many* is intelligible" (emphasis is mine). Al-Ṭūsī, in his commentary, gives an example of a meaning predicable of a restricted many and explains that such a meaning is not universal. If one quantifies over a restricted many, e. g., by an utterance like "every one of *those* people" accompanied by an act of demonstration specifying the people in question, the resultant meaning is not universal. Hence, according to Avicenna's criterion, the conception of *every one of those people* is not universal, even if it contains a universal quantifier and is predicable of more than one individual. This last point is subtle and significant for our purposes. Therefore, being predicable of more than one thing is not a sufficient condition for universality.

The last claim can be supported by other authentic texts. The following two excerpts, Text 18 and Text 19, may be helpful in this regard:

> Text 18. It is not possible, of course, in the imagination (*al-ḫayāl*) to imagine a form in a state (*hīa bi ḥāl*) such that it would be possible for *all* (exemplification) instances (*ašḫās*) of that species (*nawᶜ*) to participate in / share it (*yaštariku fīhi*) [...].[98]

In Text 18, the non-universality of an imaginable form is explained as follows: not "*all* (exemplification) instances" of the species, if there are any, can participate in/share the imaginable form. This implies that a "restricted many" (actual or imaginary) instances of the species can participate in the imaginable form.[99] The difference between an imaginable form (e. g., the imagination of cat, not necessarily imagination of a *particular* cat) and an intelligible form (the universal *cat*) is that in the former case *not all* instances of the species, i. e., all cats, can share the imaginable form, whereas in the latter case *all* instances of the species, i. e., all cats, can share the intelligible form. In other words, the imaginable form can be partially indeterminate: an imagination of cat may be determined with respect to its colour but indetermined with respect to its weight. Thus, imaginable forms are not completely determined, that is, they are not determined in all respects. Nonetheless, because they are imaginable forms, they are determined at least in some respects, and this implies that *not all* instances of the corresponding species can share the form. And this explains why imaginable forms are not univer-

---

[98] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Al-naǧāt* [*The Salvation*], ed. Moḥammad Taqī Dānešpaǧūh (Tehran: Entešārāt-e Dānešgāh-e Tehran, 1364 SH / 1985), p. 347.

[99] One might read "It is not possible... for all instances," in Text 18, as implying that *only one instance* can participate in the imaginable form. This reading, however, is obviously fallacious: it conflates negation of a universal quantifier with uniqueness.

sal, or more accurately are not intelligibly universal.

Avicenna's analysis of degrees of generality in terms of degrees of abstraction (in this use, "abstraction" is an epistemic act performed by various cognitive faculties, including imagination, estimation, and intellect) suggests that higher levels of cognition involve some general but not necessarily intelligible forms of apprehension.[100] The following excerpt from *The Provenance and Destination*, in which Avicenna describes some "universals" as "intelligible universals," reconfirms this point:

> TEXT 19. Hence the estimation further abstracts the form from the matter because it takes non-sensible, even intelligible, meanings but it [i. e., the estimation] does not take them as intelligible universal, rather [the estimation takes them] as related to a sensible meaning.[101]

The faculty of estimation does not take the meanings that it considers "as intelligible universals." This implicates that even if objects of estimation may enjoy some degree of generality, and hence be more "abstract" than sensible forms, they are not universal by the standard of the intellect, and therefore they are not proper objects of the faculty of the intellect. This is consistent with the point made in Text 17, according to which being predicable of a restricted many is not a sufficient condition for being an intelligible universal. We can now use these results in our study of *The Letter*.

8. IS *THE LETTER*'S ARGUMENT FOR THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE *IMPOSSIBILIA* SOUND?

Let us turn to *The Letter*'s argument for the claim that the *impossibilia* are intelligible:

> TEXT 20. Indeed, the reality of the intelligible lies in this: the form exists, in the soul, and is devoid of position (*waḍʿ*) designation (*išāra*) and the rest of that in which the intellect does not admit commonality. So, every form which exists in the soul in such a way that it is possible for the intellect to admit in it commonality, is universal and intelligible.[102] Now among the

---

[100] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-naǧāt*, ed. Moḥammad Taqī Dānešpaǧūh, p. 347–349. For a discussion of grades of abstraction see Cristina D'Ancona, "Degrees of abstraction in Avicenna," in *Theories of perception in medieval and early modern philosophy* (Springer, 2008), p. 47–71. For a criticism of D'Ancona see Gutas, "The Empiricism of Avicenna."

[101] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-mabdaʾ wa-l-maʿād*, p. 103.

[102] The Arabic expression *kulliyyatun maʿqūla* can be read in two ways: first, as a conjunction of two adjectives. Michot's translation, i. e., universal *and* intelligible, suggests this reading. Alternatively, *maʿqūla* (intelligible) may modify *kulliyyatun* (universal), and thus the compound adjective can be translated as *intelligible universal*. In Text 20, I have followed Michot's translation.

impossible forms, there are some which have this characteristic (*ṣifa*), for example, the belief (*iᶜtiqād*) that the *ᶜanqāʾ muġrīb* exists *in re* (*al-aᶜyān*). Whoever admits its existence *in re* also admits that it can be more than one individual (*šaḫs*). He, therefore, believes something universal and this thing is intelligible. As the first view – i. e., that the form contrary (*muqābil*) to the real is not at all intelligible – is impossible, it therefore remains that this form can be intelligible.[103]

Text 20 attempts to argue that some impossible forms can be intelligible. Let me begin with a logical reformulation of the argument:

Arg. 1.

(1.1) If a form exists in the soul and is devoid of position, designation, and any attribute in which the intellect does not admit commonality, the form is intelligible.

(1.2) If the form exists in the soul and it is possible for the intellect to admit commonality in the form, then the form is universal and, thus, intelligible.

(1.3) Among the impossible forms, there are some which have this characteristic.

(1.4) For example, the *belief* that the simurg exists *in re*.

This is because,

(1.5) If one admits that the simurg exists *in re*, one also admits that the simurg can be more than one individual.

(1.6) If one admits that the simurg can be more than one individual, then one believes something universal.

Hence,

(1.7) This thing, i. e., the simurg, is universal.

So,

(1.8) This thing, i. e., the simurg, is intelligible.

Thus,

(1.9) The view that the form contrary to the real is not at all intelligible is impossible.

Therefore,

(1.10) Some impossible forms can be intelligible.

(1.1) and (1.2) attempt to provide a criterion of intelligibility. (1.3) and (1.4) claim that the criterion of intelligibility is applicable to some impossible form, i. e., the simurg. (1.5) and (1.6) try to justify this application. (1.7) expresses the conclusion that some impossible form, e. g.,

---

[103] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" 98, slightly revised. Michot's translation is accurate, I have only attempted to make it more accessible, e. g., by substituting "communion" with "commonality" and "in the singulars" with *in re*.

the simurg, is universal and (1.8) reads that such a form is intelligible (because everything universal is intelligible). (1.9) concludes that the view according to which the impossible form is not at all intelligible is necessarily false and (1.10) generalizes (1.8) and concludes that some impossible forms can be intelligible. Arg. 1 has two main steps: First, to give a lemma for intelligibility and second to apply that lemma to an impossible form, i. e., *the simurg*. Both steps, I submit, are questionable.

To begin with the problem in the first step, let us review Black's analysis of the argument. Black ultimately accepts Arg. 1. However, she describes its conclusion "as somewhat oblique" and "several assumptions and inferential steps" of it as "only implicit."[104] As she explains, "Avicenna recognizes two closely related criteria that any apprehended form must meet in order to be intelligible. [...] abstractness from matter and material accidents [or] immateriality, [and] universality."[105] I assume that Black refers to (1.1) and (1.2) respectively. According to (1.1), if a form exists in the soul and is devoid of any attribute such as having a position or being designated, then the form is intelligible. The condition of existence in the soul, namely, being mental, excludes all immaterial forms that do not exist in the human soul, e.g., separate substances. The condition of being devoid of any attribute such as having a position or being designated excludes all forms that exist in the soul but have some particularizing attribute. Assuming that all such particularizing attributes are associated with matter and material accidents, (1.1) says that immaterial mental forms are intelligible. This is the immateriality lemma for intelligibility.

(1.2), to which Black refers as the "universality criterion," characterizes the notion of universality of a form in terms of the intellect's ability to admit commonality in it. (1.2) is apparently derived from (1.1), assuming that a mental form is immaterial if and only if the intellect can admit commonality in it. Black correctly notes that separate substances, which are immaterial but not universal, are not at stake (because they are excluded by the condition of "existence in the soul").

The move from (1.1) to (1.2), nevertheless, faces a problem: if immateriality, to which Black refers as abstractness, implies universality, but universality does not imply immateriality, then the move from (1.1) to (1.2) would be a form of association fallacy. In other words, if immateriality is a sufficient (but not necessary) condition for both intelligibility and universality, one cannot substitute immateriality with universality,

[104] Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," p. 3.
[105] Ibid., p. 2.

in (1.1), because they are not equivalent. To justify the argument, Black suggests that "within the context of a discussion of the intelligibles corresponding to material forms, abstractness does imply universality, and universality in turn implies abstractness: the two criteria are coextensive."[106]

My analysis of Avicenna's notion of universality, however, does not support this proposal. What Black calls "abstractness" or "immateriality" condition should more accurately be called "complete immateriality" condition, that is being *completely* without any particularizing attribute such as position or designation, or material accidents. Black is right in suggesting that *The Letter* presumes that the complete immateriality is coextensive with universality, but the problem is that this is not consistent with Avicenna's notion of universality. To repeat, as Def. 1, Def. 2, and Def. 3 witness, Avicenna's characterization of universality neither presupposes nor implies complete immateriality or abstractness. In fact, Text 17, provides a counterexample: The meaning of "son of Adam" is universal: *son of Adam* in virtue of its very conception is predicable of a non-restricted many, but it is not completely immaterial because it is not completely without particularizing attributes (in fact, it contains particularizing attributes associated with *Adam*).

As with the second main step of Arg. 1, that is, the application of the lemma of intelligibility to *the simurg*, I would like to mention a prima facie textual problem and a deeper twofold issue, methodological and logical.

First, the textual problem is this: Arg. 1 is intended to show that some impossible form, e. g., *the simurg*, is intelligible by showing that it is universal. So, one expects that in (1.3), that is:

(1.3) Among the impossible forms, there are some which have this characteristic.

the "impossible form" refers to the meaning of the "simurg," or its conception, and "this characteristic," to universality. However, in (1.4), that is:

(1.4) For example, the belief that the simurg exists *in re*.

The Letter presents the *belief* that the simurg exists *in re*, not the meaning of the "simurg" or its form or conception, as an example of something possibly universal (I will talk about "possibly universal" shortly). This move conflates between the universality of the impossible form and the universality of the belief containing the impossible form. So, the argument again is fallacious.

---

[106] Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," p. 3.

Black offers the following solution:

> Avicenna's argument here seems to presuppose that the universality of the phoenix requires an act of belief and hence seems to be a matter of assent (*taṣdīq*) and not merely of conceptualization (*taṣawwur*). The ultimate rationale for this claim would seem to be the universal's fundamental role as a one-over-many: for a form to be a universal, it must be intrinsically possible for that form to be understood as existent in a multiplicity of concrete, singular, individuals. But the forms in question are precisely such as to preclude real multiplicity in the concrete: evidence for their universality, then, can only be culled from the way in which they are apprehended. Since some people do believe in the existence of phoenixes, they must conceive of the phoenix as a universal, and hence, in them the form of the phoenix must possess an intelligible existence.[107]

The above reading can be summarized as follows: for a form to be universal, it must be intrinsically possible for it to be multiple in existence. An impossible form cannot exist, much less to be multiple in existence. So, *The Letter* appeals to beliefs containing the impossible form and the fact that some may believe that the impossible form is multiple in existence. Then, from this belief, *The Letter* derives the universality of the meaning of the "simurg," or its conception, as a constituent of the belief.

This proposal in effect takes "the belief that the simurg exists *in re*" in (1.4), to be ultimately about the meaning of the "simurg," or its conception. This use of "belief," however, faces a textual objection: Avicenna does not normally, if ever, use "belief," to talk about or refer to a constituent conception of a judgment. For example, of the 20 uses of "belief" (*iʿtiqād*) in *The Logic* of *The Healing* none is intended to refer to a constituent conception of a judgment. This may be justified by Avicenna's clear distinction between assent (or belief), on the one hand, and conception (or concept), on the other hand, as two kinds of acquired knowledge. Thus, the above reading entails attributing an unprecedented kind of ambiguity to Avicenna with no textual evidence.

Second, there is a deeper twofold, methodological and logical, issue with (1.6):

(1.6) If one admits that the simurg can be more than one individual, one believes something universal.

Black explains the point here as follows:

> Avicenna seems to be using the belief scenario as a means for establishing the possibility of universalizability. Still, it remains curious that Avicenna should choose to focus on the possibility of actual belief in the exis-

---

[107] Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," p. 3–4.

tence of phoenixes to establish their universalizability. For surely those who are fully aware that phoenixes are fictional creations and so believe accordingly, or even those who withhold any existential judgment, have universal, abstract concepts of phoenixes too. But as will become clear later, Avicenna's views on both universality and possibility force him into the stronger and less plausible of these two positions.[108]

Black's point is that the argument only establishes the *possibility of universalizability* of the conception of the simurg, not its *universality*. This is because (1.6) is a conditional claim whose antecedent requires that one believes that there are more than one simurg. However, any well-informed speaker about simurg who is "fully aware that phoenixes are fictional creations and so believe(s) accordingly, or even those who withhold any existential judgment," will not form the belief that there are more than one *simurg*.

I think the problems with (1.6) run deeper. First, and methodologically, given Avicenna's notion of universality, a meaning is universal if and only if in virtue of *its very conception* it is predicable of a non-restricted many. The key is that by "its very conception" Avicenna means a "proper conception" of something. Thus, for example, if one misapprehended Zayd and formed the belief that there can be more than one Zayd *in re*, it would not follow that the conception of Zayd is universal. Perhaps it only follows the person has not properly conceived of Zayd. Zayd is an individual and a proper conception of Zayd is such that in virtue of its very conception it is not predicable of a non-restricted many. In other words, the conception of Zayd is particular, regardless of whether some uninformed people erroneously believe that there can be more than one Zayd *in re*. Similarly, an argument for the universality of the "simurg" cannot be based on what some uninformed people erroneously believe about the simurg.

Second, and logically, (1.6) employs a mistaken lemma for universality. As discussed above, *not* every meaning that is predicable of more than one thing is an intelligible universal. Some forms of cognition, including (compositive) imagination and estimation involve conceptions or forms that are predicable of some (but not all) instances of their species. So, an imaginable form, in virtue of not being fully determinate, may be predicable of some hypothetical instances, and one who imagines this form may come to believe that there are more than one instance of the form in existence. None of this, however, suffices to show that one apprehends an intelligible universal (see Text 18 and Text 19). To repeat,

---

[108] Black, "Avicenna and the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," p. 4.

being predicable of more than one thing, or more accurately *believing* so, is not a sufficient condition for universality.

9. THE INCOHERENCE IN *THE LETTER* IS NEITHER DISTINCTLY AVICENNAN NOR EASILY RESOLVABLE

Now we can move to the third part of *The Letter*, in which the author "argues" that after death the *impossibilia* dissolve from the rational soul and one cannot "intellect" them again. It is notable that the alleged problems or "ambiguities" of *The Letter*, largely rooted in its third part, is Michot's main philosophical reason for attributing *The Letter* to Avicenna:

> [T]he demonstration of the vanishing of the vain intelligible forms from the soul after death, as presented in this work has a totally Avicennian appearance. This is so both as far as philosophical theories involved are concerned and as regards the way the whole affair is conducted, i. e., mainly its ambiguities.[109]

These "ambiguities," according to Michot, have the same character as the alleged ambiguities in Avicenna's epistemology and philosophy of mind which led to two rival emanationist and abstractionist interpretations of Avicenna (see § 3). Along the same lines, Druart's view implies that the ambiguities in *The Letter* and incoherence in Avicenna's epistemology are similar. She suggests using McGinnis's interpretation to provide a coherent account of *The Letter* as well as Avicenna's epistemology.[110]

After explaining the "arguments" in the third part of *The Letter* below, I will argue that Michot's reasoning and Druart's proposal both fail. The incoherence in *The Letter* is not (only) about whether the intelligible form is emanated upon the human intellect by the active intellect or abstracted from sensible forms by some process of taking away the accidental properties. Nor is the locus of the problem the existence *and* nonexistence of the unreal forms in the active intellects, though *The Letter* involves this type of confusion as well. The main point, rather, is that the only way that the *impossibilia* can be conceived of is through imagination, broadly construed, and *The Letter* disproves this very mode of cognition of the *impossibilia* after approving it. As with Druart's proposal, i. e., using McGinnis's interpretation to dissolve the ambiguities and tension in *The Letter*, I will show that McGinnis's construal, though

[109] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 96.
[110] Druart, "Avicennan Troubles," p. 65.

subtle and creative, is unlikely to be applicable to the activity of the human soul after death.

First, let me introduce the "ambiguities" in the third part of *The Letter*. Here, we find two main arguments, with a theological twist to the problem of the *impossibilia*. The first argument goes like this:

> Text 21. The engraving (*intiqāš*) of the particulars only occurs in something divisible, which has a position. From this, it necessarily follows that their treasury is a body or a faculty in a body, whereas it is not possible for the treasury of the intelligibles to be a body or a faculty in a body. On the contrary, their treasury is the active intellects. So, whenever this form which is contrary to the real withdraws from the soul, the soul refers (*rāǧaʿa*) to the imagination and these forms arise through the mediation (*wāsiṭa*) of a new act of imagination.[111]

Before discussing Text 21, I would like to mention how it can be related to Text 4 (also taken from *The Letter*). Text 4 attempts to explain the *existence conditions* of the *impossibilia* vis-à-vis their origination conditions, that is, through an act of imagination accompanied with a "specific action of the intellect." Text 4 does not spell out this specific action of the intellect. But, even if it did, it would not still explain the *persistence conditions* of the *impossibilia*, that is "how can they be stored and apprehended again?" Text 21 attempts to answer this latter question.

I will discuss Text 21 in five steps. First, the forms of particulars (as particulars) are inscribed in something divisible, or some sense organs. This implies that their preservatory is something material, like the human body or a faculty of it. Second, the intelligibles cannot be inscribed in something divisible or material. This point is consistent with the earlier parts of *The Letter*,[112] and with Avicenna's view. Third, the treasury of the intelligibles is the active intellects. This is an Avicennan thesis as well (one may recall that according to Avicenna, no intelligible [possible or impossible] can be stored in the human intellect).[113] Fourth, Text 21 concludes that the only way in which a "form contrary to the real" can be apprehended again is that the human soul refers to imagination and "such forms arise through the mediation of a new act of imagination."

[111] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 100.

[112] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 99: "The intelligibles, it is known, do not get inscribed in something divisible, i. e., in something that has a position."

[113] Here is an Avicennan argument for this claim: if the intelligibles were stored in the human intellect, they would always be intellected by the human intellect. However, the intelligibles are not always intellected by the human intellect. Therefore, the intelligibles are not stored in the human intellect.

To complete this picture, and fifth, one may suppose that in each act of reconceiving of an impossible form, the intellect needs the imagination to retrieve its "impossible" or "contradictory" images and then the intellect performs its "specific action" (as claimed in Text 4) on that image and produce the corresponding intelligible impossible form. To put it in a nutshell, to reconceive of an impossible form, one should reproduce it.

The next paragraph, however, is the crux of the "ambiguities" and problems:

> TEXT 22. [1] This being established, it is true that the forms which are contrary to the real dissolve from the rational soul after death. [2] These forms no longer flow onto the soul, after death, as the real forms (*al-ṣuwar al-ḥaqqa*) do, for the simple reason that they do not correspond (*munāsib*) to the essence of the soul (*ḏāt al-nafs*); [3] and evil (*šarr*) only proceeds (*ḥaṣal*) from the Creator when indispensable (*bi-l-ḍarūra*). [4] These forms which are opposed to the real were only flowing from Him because of (*li-ḍarūra*) the imagination and [5] when the imagination vanishes, they necessarily do no longer flow from Him, [6] whereas the real forms carry on doing so since it is good.[114]

I will discuss Text 22 sentence by sentence (as I have numbered them above). Sentence 1 reads that the *impossibilia* dissolve from the rational soul after death. The main premise for this statement is expressed by sentence 5, that is, after death imagination vanishes. This can be justified assuming that both estimation and compositive imagination are material faculties and by the corruption of the human body, they no longer function.[115] Given the argument of Text 21, since each act of reconceiving of an impossible form requires a corresponding act of imagination, if there is no imagination, there will be no act of reconceiving of an impossible form as an intelligible. Thus, "the forms which are contrary to the real," i.e., the *impossibilia*, should "dissolve from the rational soul after death."

Sentence 2 repeats the previous claim, and attempts to justify it in a different way, that is "for the simple reason that they do not correspond to the essence of the soul (*ḏāt al-nafs*)," and adds that the real forms do continue to flow onto the human soul after death. That the *impossibilia* do not correspond to the essence of the soul is not further explained here, and in fact is self-defeating in the context of *The Letter*. According to Arg. 1, the *impossibilia* are intelligible. The argument involves the premise that intelligibles, in this context, are completely immaterial.

---

[114] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 100, slightly revised.
[115] I will return to this point in the next section.

Given that the essence of the human soul is intelligible and immaterial too, one may wonder why the *impossibilia*, as intelligible and immaterial forms, do not correspond to the essence of the human soul. Again, *The Letter* sounds incoherent.

Sentence 3 puts a theological twist to the epistemological problem of reconceiving of the *impossibilia*. The explicit claim made here, that is, no unnecessary evil flows from God, is a familiar theological principle. Sentence 3 entails that the *impossibilia* are evil and that evil only proceeds from God when indispensable. Again, why the *impossibilia* are referred to as "evil" is not explained. To be charitable, one might offer the following explanation: The purpose of apprehending forms, or forming conceptions, is forming beliefs, or making judgments. The purpose of forming beliefs or making judgments is acquiring truth. Assuming a proper principle of transitivity,[116] it follows that the ultimate purpose of apprehending forms is acquiring truth. However, the *impossibilia*, in general, are not truth conducive: there is no true predication of the *impossibilia*. Thus, the *impossibilia* harm the epistemic goal of apprehending forms.[117]

Sentences 4, 5, and 6 try to explain the indispensability of the *impossibilia* before death, their disappearance after death, and the constant flow of the real forms before and after death. According to sentence 4, "These forms [i. e., the *impossibilia*] were only flowing from Him because of the imagination." In other words, the activity of imagination is necessary for the activity of human mind and the *impossibilia* are necessary offshoots of the activity of imagination. Thus, the *impossibilia* are indispensable evils. Sentence 4, moreover, describes the origination of the *impossibilia* as "flowing from Him," i. e., from God. If the *impossibilia* flow from God because of the activity of imagination, then they flow from Him because of the activity of imagination *before death*, as well. Sentence 5, then, immediately adds that after death "the imagination vanishes." Sentence 6 concludes that the "real forms" flow from God before and after death because their flow "is good."

The above picture, again, is deeply problematic. If before death the *impossibilia* are intelligible, as *The Letter* holds, then they, like other intelligibles, should flow from God through intermediary causes. This

---

[116] Such a principle can be formulated as follows: if the purpose of A is B and the purpose of B is C, then the ultimate purpose of A is C.

[117] This "argument," nonetheless, is problematic: the *impossibilia* and contradictions can be used to acquire many different truths: for example, to understand the principle of no contradiction (no proposition is both true and false) one needs to understand contradiction in the first place.

is because in Avicennan metaphysics God always act in sublunar world through mediatory causes. The only mediatory causes available in this case are celestial, or active, intellects. Therefore, the *impossibilia* should find their way to the human mind through the mediation of the active intellects. This, however, contradicts an important claim made in *The Letter* earlier, that is the *impossibilia* do not exist in the "everlasting things and the active intellects" (see Text 3 above).[118] If the active intellects cannot contain the *impossibilia*, then the active intellects cannot work as intermediary causes that allow the *impossibilia* to flow upon the human mind.

Alternatively, one might suppose that the *impossibilia*, before death, directly flow from God upon the human intellect, with no mediation of the active intellects. This statement not only contradicts Avicenna's principles of divine causation but also undermines a central claim of *The Letter*, that is, "the unreal forms arise in the human mind through the mediation of imagination" (see Text 4 above).[119] This reading violates the very condition of thinking about the *impossibilia* through the power of imagination.

This incoherent picture is repeated in *The Letter*:

> TEXT 23. [T]he human soul, after death, also perceives all its intelligibles at one and the same time. But the case of the intelligibles which are contrary to the real differs from this one since, we have said it, the active intellects no longer let these vain forms flow from themselves. Indeed, they are evil, and evil is only concomitant of their essences by accidents (ʿaraḍ), when indispensable. Moreover, the soul would then need the imagination, which no longer exists after death.[120]

Text 23 reinforces the puzzle, rather than resolving it. If the vain forms do not exist in the "active Intellects" (Text 3), in what sense "the active intellects no longer let these vain forms flow from themselves" after death? Again, *pace* Michot, the puzzle is not that the *impossibilia* as intelligible forms are overdetermined through emanation and abstraction processes; rather, the issue is that they are underdetermined, or not determined, through the active intellects because they cannot exist in the active intellects. The problems in this part are internal to *The Letter*; they are not part of the scholarly debate on Avicenna's epistemology.

Now let us turn to Druart's suggestion. Her solution implies that the

---

[118] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 99.

[119] Ibid., p. 99.

[120] Ibid., p. 102. See also Michot, "L'épître sur la disparition des formes intelligibles vaines après la mort," p. 160.

impossibilia as imaginable meanings can receive the intellectualizing accidents, e. g., *universality*, from the active intellect and then become intelligible. Hence, her view does not have the implausible consequence that the *impossibilia* first exist in the active intellect and then are bestowed upon the human mind. Putting aside the issue of lack of textual evidence for McGinnis's proposal, Druart's attempted solution fails for a philosophical reason. According to Druart, McGinnis's view uniformly explains the formation of possible and impossible intelligible meanings, before death, by appeal to their corresponding imaginable forms and their reception of the intellectualizing accidents from the active intellect. Extending this account to the apprehension of the intelligibles after death has the consequence that possible and impossible intelligibles, particularly composite forms, are either uniformly conceivable or uniformly inconceivable after death. This, however, contradicts the main conclusion of *The Letter*, according to which the composite real intelligibles are conceivable after death but the composite impossible forms are not. I should explain the issue in more detail.

Consider two composite forms: *celestial body* and *goat-stag*, one real and the other impossible. According to *The Letter*, before death, both forms can be intellected by the human mind, but after death, only the real form can be intellected. The question, then, is: how can Druart's proposal explain this asymmetry?

The most natural explanation for conceiving of a composite intelligible, following Druart's suggestion, is to hold that the human mind first puts together the imaginable forms corresponding to the ingredient meanings of the composite intelligible, for example by putting together an image of a goat and that of a stag, and then the resultant composite imaginable form receives the intellectualizing accidents from the active intellect, and becomes a composite intelligible. After death, according to *The Letter*, there is no imagination and thus there would be no imaginable forms available to the human soul. Hence, the human mind cannot construct any composite imaginable form. Therefore, there is nothing to receive the intellectualizing accidents that McGinnis's reading introduce. Thus, the goat-stag cannot be intellected after death. The problem is that the same argument is applicable to real composite forms, e. g., the celestial body: after death, according to *The Letter*, there is no image of celestial or that of body because there is no imagination. Therefore, neither *celestial body* nor *goat-stag* can be intelligible after death. This, however, contradicts *The Letter*.

One might reply that Druart's proposal can explain the apprehension

of composite intelligibles through compositional acts of the human intellect and the intelligible ingredients of the composite intelligibles. For example, one can conceive of the *celestial body* as an intelligible meaning by putting together the intelligible *celestial* and the intelligible *body*, through a compositional act of the intellect. Therefore, no image or imaginable form is needed for the formation of composite intelligible forms, and hence after death one may entertain all real composite intelligibles as well. Again, the problem is that the same argument is applicable to impossible composite forms. After death, the intelligible *goat*, and the intelligible *stag* both are available to the human mind as real intelligibles. Given that the intellect's capacity for its compositional acts remain intact after death,[121] one would expect that the *goat-stag* also be conceivable as intelligible at this stage. But this, again, contradicts the conclusion of *The Letter*.

The solution may lie in denying that the intellect has the power to put together the intelligible *goat* and the intelligible *stag* before or after death. The most reasonable explanation for the intellect's "inability" may be rooted in the incompatibility of these two intelligibles, i.e., *goat* and *stag*. Two essences with incompatible *differentia* are incompatible. This incompatibility is independent of the status of the human soul, before or after death. So, I suggest, the intellect should not be able to apprehend the goat-stag as an intelligible before death either. *The Letter*, however, says otherwise. To put it in a nutshell, the uniform treatment of possible and impossible intelligible meanings before death, which is an alleged virtue of McGinnis's proposal, becomes its vice when the view is extended to the human mind's conception of the intelligibles after death. Therefore, McGinnis's reading, even if justified independently, cannot give a coherent reading of *The Letter*. The incoherence in *The Letter* is not easily resolvable.

10. AL-MĀZANDARĀNĪ

Finally, the fourth reason for the inconsistency of *The Letter* with Avicenna's authentic works is that Avicenna does not deny the possibility of the activity of the faculty of imagination after death, but *The Letter* does. At the last stage of this research, I learned that a classic Persian interpreter of Avicenna has used the above reason to attribute *The Let-*

---

[121] It is noteworthy that if the human intellect has no capacity for compositional acts, after death or all along, again it follows that no composite form (real or impossible) can be intelligible. This obviously is not Avicenna's view either.

ter to a student of Avicenna. Muḥammad Sāliḥ al-Ḥāʾirī al-Māzandarānī (d. 1350Š/1972), who quotes *The Letter* as part of his discussion of Avicenna's view on "blessing," introduces *The Letter* as follows:

> Now we reach what we aimed at, namely quoting the treatise of the Šayḫ's pupil who has written it on the forms [that are] opposed to reality, according to his teacher's order. [In this treatise] the Šayḫ examines and assesses his [i. e., the pupil's] understanding. I suspect that he should be Abū ᶜAbd-Allāh Maᶜsūmī.[122]

Three pages earlier, al-Māzandarānī makes the same claim, that is, *The Letter* is written according to Avicenna's "order to one of his students" and adds that Avicenna evaluated his talented students by making them examine philosophical problems according to his method.[123] Before quoting *The Letter* from his own handwritten manuscript, as he explicitly mentions that, al-Māzandarānī explains that "I quote this treatise with its translation to make sure that the works that are the results of the Šayḫ's orders, as its document is before my eyes, will not get obliterated in future."[124] Then, al-Māzandarānī mentions one reason, in one sentence, for why *The Letter* is not Avicenna's:

> The author [al-Māzandarānī] says: [the view] that the faculty of compositive imagination would be futile after death is attributed to Aristotle in *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal* and we mentioned Avicenna's saying in *The Healing*, [and] the points of disagreement are obvious, and we should elaborate on this in [the study of Avicenna's] psychology and resurrection.[125]

Al-Māzandarānī's reason for holding that *The Letter* is not Avicenna's is that *The Letter* assumes that "the faculty of compositive imagination would be futile after death" and this is Aristotle's view, not Avicenna's. Al-Māzandarānī mentions *The Healing* but does not refer to any specific chapter. I speculate that the paragraph al-Māzandarānī has in mind is the following:

> Text 24. It also seems likely that what some scholars have said is true, namely: If these [imbecile souls] were pure [of vice] and separated from the body when a mode of belief in [consequences] in the hereafter had been embedded in them, [… these souls] separate from [their] bodies […] will imagine all that they had believed in regarding the states of the hereafter. The instrument [these scholars go on to explain] by means of which [such souls] are enabled to imagine would be something that belongs to the celestial bodies.[126]

---

[122] Al-Māzandarānī, *Ḥikmate būᶜalī Sīna*, vol. 1, p. 53 (translation is mine).
[123] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 49–50.
[124] Ibid, p. 50.
[125] Ibid, p. 58.

Text 24 refers to the possibility of the activity of the faculty of imagination after death. Accordingly, "something that belongs to the celestial bodies" *might* serve as the necessary instrument for some disembodied human souls to "*imagine* all that they had believed in regarding the states of the hereafter." Thus, the activity of imagination, after death, is neither impossible nor futile.

Avicenna repeats the very same point, in a slightly different formulation, in *The Remarks and Admonitions*:

> Text 25. As regards the imbeciles, if they raise themselves above imperfections, they will be set free from the body and will reach the happiness that befits them. But perhaps even in this state [of relative happiness], they do not dispense with the assistance of a body which is the subject of their imaginations. It is not impossible that this body be a celestial body or the like.[127]

Avicenna, again in Text 25, confirms the possibility of the activity of the faculty of imagination after death, particularly for "imbeciles," which might be a technical term here, referring to the souls that are caught in the grip of images for all their cognitive activities. Such souls, after death, might employ other bodies, "celestial or the like," to keep their faculty of imagination active. *The Letter*, however, categorically rejects this possibility.

Let me add a short remark on al-Māzandarānī's conjecture that the author of *The Letter* is ᶜAbd-Allāh Maᶜsūmī. What the author of *The Letter* says at the outset, that is, "I have examined the question on which the most honorable master *al-ustāḏ al-raʾīs* – may God make his greatness last – has consulted us, […],"[128] supports the hypothesis that *The Letter* is the result of the author's attempt to answer a question posed to him by the master *al-ustāḏ al-raʾīs*. The last part of *The Letter* corroborates this hypothesis where the author of *The Letter* asks master *al-ustāḏ* (*sayyidunā al-ustāḏ*) "to remedy its [*The Letter's*] defects and to correct what is wrong in it."[129] A problem left for al-Māzandarānī's conjecture is Gutas's point that *al-ustāḏ al-raʾīs*, is "a form of address not known to have been used for Avicenna."[130] Gutas's observation is interesting. However, *al-ustāḏ al-raʾīs* literally means "the head teacher"

---

[126] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-šifāʾ, Al-ilāhiyyāt*, ed. Marmura, bk. 9, ch. 7, p. 356.

[127] Ibn Sīnā, *Al-išārāt wa-l-ṭanbīhāt*, ed. S. Dunyā, vol. 4, p. 35–36. Translation: *Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism. Remarks and Admonitions: Part Four*, trans. Shams C. Inati (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), p. 78.

[128] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 98.

[129] Michot, "Avicenna's 'Letter,'" p. 102.

[130] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 456.

and in *The Letter* is further modified by *al-ʾaǧall* (translated as "the most honorable" by Michot). The expression *sayyidunā al-ustāḏ*, used in both the opening and ending paragraphs of *The Letter*, contains *sayyidunā* which is a common way of addressing a higher authority. It is also a known fact that Abū-ʿAbd-Allāh Maʿsūmī refers to Avicenna as *sayyidī* ("my master") in his rejoinder to al-Bīrūnī's comments on Avicenna's responses to al-Bīrūnī's questions,[131] without using the name Ibn Sīnā or any other title for him. Thus, this way of addressing Avicenna might not be altogether unknown.

11. CONCLUSION

The Letter on the Soul is interesting and significant; it attempts to tackle fundamental problems that fall on the borderlines of psychology, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and logic. The consensus among Avicenna scholars, e. g., Ergin, Anawati, Mahdavi, Michot, Black, and Druart, is that *The Letter* is Avicenna's, though some, e. g., Gutas, have expressed a passing doubt. In this paper, I constructed a content-based argument against the authenticity of *The Letter*. I offered four reasons for my thesis: First, *The Letter*'s alleged explanation of how one "intellects" the *impossibilia* is not in alignment with Avicenna's explanation of how one conceives of the *impossibilia*. Second, *The Letter*'s argument for the claim that the *impossibilia* are intelligible because they are universal does not employ Avicenna's notion of universality. Third, *The Letter's* argument is incoherent in a way that Avicenna's view is not. And fourth, *The Letter*'s central presumption, that is, after death the faculty of the imagination will no longer be active, is questioned by Avicenna, on different occasions. Unless one supposes that Avicenna changed his views on a range of fundamental topics such as intelligibility, universality, estimation, and imagination in a single short treatise (for which there is no independent evidence), it can reasonably be concluded that *The Letter* is not Avicenna's and hence should not be relied upon in interpreting his philosophy.

---

[131] Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna], *Al-asʾalah wa-l-ajwibah: Questions and Answers: Including the Further Answers of al-Bīrūnī and al-Maʿsumi's Defense of Ibn Sina*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Abjad Book Designers & Builders, 1997), p. 59.