

AVICENNA ON THE ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMIC STATUS OF FICTIONAL BEINGS¹

1. INTRODUCTION

To a degree unusual amongst medieval philosophers, Avicenna shows considerable interest in the ontological and epistemic status of fictional forms, that is, of forms which can be entertained by the mind yet have no counterpart in extramental reality, such as the mythical ‘*anqā*’ *mughrīb* or phoenix. Indeed, Avicenna explicitly addresses this topic in a short treatise recently edited by Jean Michot, the *Risālah fī al-naḥs* (*Letter on the Soul*), in which he attempts to answer the question of whether “forms opposed to the real”, like that of the phoenix, are able to persist in the soul after its death.² In formulating his reply to this very focused question, Avicenna presents his reader with what is in effect a concise summary of the fundamental tenets of his emanational metaphysics and its epistemological corollaries, as found in his major works, the *Shifā*’ (*Healing*) and the *Ishārāt wa-Tanbīhāt* (*Directives and Remarks*). However, the effort to apply these fundamentals to the problem of fictional being highlights a number of critical tensions within Avicenna’s philosophical system and raises questions about some commonly accepted interpretations of that system. In particular, these tensions centre around the implications of the Avicennian doctrine of the pure quiddity or common nature in its relation to the essence-existence distinction, the problem of universals, and the modalities. In what follows I will address each of these areas of Avicenna’s system as they bear upon the problem of fictional being, and I will also consider the role played by Avicenna’s cognitive psychology in his solution to this problem, specifically the respective roles assigned to the intellect and the internal sense powers in the conceptualization of fictional forms. It is first necessary, however, to analyze Avicenna’s arguments in the *Letter on the Soul* setting out the status of fictional beings in his system.

2. THE “LETTER ON THE SOUL”: AN ANALYSIS

The *Letter on the Soul* is Avicenna’s response to a specific query put to him regarding forms “opposed to the real” (*al-ṣuwar al-mukhālīfah/al-muqābilah li-l-ḥaqiqi*), namely, whether they disappear from the soul after its death and separation from the body.³ From the outset of the text Avicenna frames his reply with reference to the distinction between the pure essence or quiddity (the common nature) and its two modes of existence, conceptual existence in a mind, and concrete existence in material singulars. Unreal forms are described as «existent in the soul» (*al-mawjūdah fī al-naḥs*), their unreality referring not to

their utter non-existence, but to their possession of a merely conceptual mode of being to the exclusion of a corresponding instantiation in concrete singulars.⁴ Thus, in order to determine whether these forms continue to enjoy even this mode of being in the soul after its death, Avicenna is obliged to examine just what it means for a form to have “existence in the soul” without having any corresponding external being.

For Avicenna the answer to such a question turns upon the determination of the locus of the unreal forms’ existence in the soul. Avicenna entertains two possible views based upon the two possible “locations” of the vain forms among the soul’s faculties. On the first view, forms like that of the phoenix are taken as exclusively imaginary and entirely unintelligible (*mutakhayyilah wa-lā tak/nu ma‘qūlah al-battah*); on the second view they are taken as simultaneously imaginary and intelligible (*mutakhayyilah wa-ma‘qūlah ma‘an*).⁵ Now in an Avicennian psychology if one upholds the first position on the nature of unreal forms they will necessarily disappear after death, since the imagination is a faculty which uses a bodily organ (a ventricle of the brain).⁶ But although he will ultimately uphold the disappearance of these forms after death, Avicenna rejects the more direct route to that conclusion as untenable, and he proceeds to argue that the nature of our apprehension of unreal forms requires them to be not only imaginary, but also intelligible.

Avicenna’s argument consists in two stages: the first is an analysis of the criteria for intelligibility; and the second is an application of these criteria to fictional forms.⁷ Avicenna recognizes two closely related criteria that any apprehended form must meet in order to be intelligible. First, if a form is to have existence in the intellect, its nature must be compatible with the nature of the intellect, or, in Avicenna’s terms, it must be stripped (*mu‘rāh*) of all those qualities that inhibit sharing or association (*shirkah*) with the intellect.⁸ Such qualities are all those which presuppose a reference to a particular material individual, for example, position (*wad’*) and denotability (*ishārah*), i.e., the ability to be located and pointed to in space.⁹ These, in short, are all descriptions of the familiar criterion for intelligibility, abstractness from matter and material accidents. In addition to immateriality, Avicenna mentions a second criterion, namely, universality. Avicenna’s language suggests that this criterion is a consequence of the first criterion of associability: “Thus, every form existent in the soul, insofar as the intellect can permit association with it, is an intelligible universal (*kullīyah ma‘qūlah*)”.¹⁰ Avicenna cannot, however, mean that abstractness from matter necessarily implies universality, since this would

preclude the intelligibility of the separate substances, who are singular, not universal. But 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. So by establishing that the form of the phoenix conforms to either of these criteria, its intelligibility will be established. Hence Avicenna proceeds to argue that at least some unreal forms do meet these two criteria, and hence, they will admit of both imaginal and intelligible existence: “Among the impossible forms (*al-ṣuwar al-muḥālah*) there are some which are of this description, such as the belief (*i’tiqād*) that the phoenix is existent in concrete singulars (*mawjūdah fī al-a’yān*), for example”.¹¹

Avicenna’s conclusion cannot help strike the reader as somewhat oblique; at the very least, several assumptions and inferential steps appear to be only implicit. In the first place, Avicenna has, without explanation, explicitly identified fictional, unreal forms as “impossible”, employing the technical modal term. Phoenixes are not, on Avicenna’s view, possible entities with natures that happen to be unrealized in the material world; they seem to be just as much impossible beings as are square circles. Avicenna presumes that this modal claim is evident to his reader, but its justification requires familiarity with certain tenets of Avicenna’s metaphysics which we will consider below. More immediately, the argument as just presented does not in any obvious way represent an application of the twin criteria for intelligibility to the fictional forms. How exactly does the belief, “The phoenix is existent in concrete singulars” fit the description of an “abstract” and “universal” cognition? Once again, at least part of the answer to this lies in the broader Avicennian theories pertaining to the nature of the intellect and the problem of universals which receive fuller treatment below. At present, however, it is possible to sketch briefly why Avicenna takes this judgment as an indication of abstractness and universality. It will be best to begin with universality.

It is noteworthy that despite his apparent concern with the status of fictional concepts, 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.¹² So here 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 existence 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.¹³ For according to Avicenna's metaphysical principles, all universals must be potentially capable of existing in multiple individuals, and all real possible beings must at some time be actualized necessarily through another.

What of the criterion of abstractness from matter? Since universality and abstractness appear to be mutually implicative in the case of material forms, it is likely that Avicenna believed that the potential universality of the phoenix is sufficient to establish its intelligibility and compatibility with the intellect. Hence, it will be Avicenna's doctrine of universals, rather than his general understanding of the nature of intellectual understanding, that determines the thrust of his views on fictional forms.

Having established that unreal or impossible forms are intelligible according to his criteria, Avicenna proceeds in the *Letter on the Soul* to argue that this is still insufficient to uphold their persistence in the soul after death. For while fictional forms are intelligibles, they are uniquely human intelligibles, that is, intelligibles that remain dependent, as intelligibles, upon the possession of corporeal faculties like the imagination. Here Avicenna's argument rests upon basic tenets of his accounts of the similarities and differences between human knowledge and the knowledge of agent or separate intellects.¹⁴

The key to Avicenna's approach at this point is his fundamental belief in the immateriality and subsistence of the intellectual soul. Separated human intellects, like agent intellects, are eternal. Thus, the alternative to the disappearance of unreal forms upon death is their remaining in human souls perpetually (*khālidatan*).¹⁵ But, Avicenna argues, unreal forms are incompatible with any eternal mode of existence (*al-umūr al-dā'imah al-sarmadīyah*), a point which can be established by an examination of the knowledge of the agent intellects.

That knowledge, as it is explained in all of Avicenna's metaphysical writings, is essentially the Aristotelian *noēsis noēseōs*, and it has as its primary object the essences of the intellects themselves and anything necessarily entailed by those essences: "For the agent intellects understand things insofar as they are necessary concomitants of their essences (*lawāzim dhāti-hā*); and they understand their own existence (*wa-hiya 'āqilah li-wujūdi-hā*) or the intermediaries (*wasā'it*) and preparations (*mu'addāt*) of their existence".¹⁶ Since these intellects are eternal and eternally in act, Avicenna argues, they cannot have anything impossible among their necessary concomitants, since the impossible is that which is never actual:

But anything which is a necessary concomitant of something which is existent in actuality cannot be such that it is impossible for it to exist in actuality. But if something impossible follows from the agent intellects, it will be necessary for that thing to be actually existent. The consequent is impossible, so it remains that an impossible thing is not a necessary concomitant of them, and they do not understand [an impossible thing], since we have said that they [only] understand their necessary concomitants.¹⁷

Here again Avicenna identifies unreal forms as impossible; indeed, his claim that they are unknowable by the agent intellects turns on this identification. For as impossible, they cannot be consequent in any way upon the activities of necessary beings. Avicenna's claim thus appears to amount to an application of the principle of plenitude on the level of universal natures: no truly possible nature or type of being can remain forever non-existent in an Avicennian scheme, because ultimately all beings are necessary emanations from eternally and hence necessarily actual principles. Assuming that phoenixes never have existed and never will exist, their existence will by definition be impossible.¹⁸

But having granted the intelligibility of the concept of "phoenix", Avicenna now is faced with an explanatory problem, to whose solution he gives his immediate attention. For phoenixes and the like do exist in human intellects, and not just in their imaginations. Yet on Avicenna's standard account of human knowledge, the human intellect alone is never a sufficient cause for its own intelligibles, nor is it sufficient even when coupled with the preparatory cognitive activities of sensation and imagination. All intelligibles, qua intelligibles, are received into individual human intellects by means of a direct influx from that agent intellect which governs the sublunar world. If that intellect has no fictional

forms in it, how does its effect, namely, our actualized material intellect, come to contain such forms?

Avicenna's ultimate reply to this question represents a compromise between the two alternatives which were initially entertained regarding the cognitive status of fictional forms))that they are purely imaginary or that they are both imaginary and intelligible. Avicenna now argues that while unreal forms are not limited to the imagination, they are unique as intelligibles insofar as the imagination is absolutely essential not only to their becoming intelligibles, but also to their continued existence in the intellect.¹⁹ To explain why this is the case, Avicenna outlines the role usually played by sensation and imagination in the acquisition of intellectual knowledge, noting that "human souls do not perceive any of these things except by means of sensation and imagination; . . . and whenever the imaginative faculty imagines some form, whether it be impossible or not impossible, the intellect performs its proper operation upon it and renders it intelligible".²⁰ Avicenna also points out that the perception of the essences of things (*dhāt-hā*) is the exclusive province of the intellect,²¹ and then he proceeds to introduce his standard emanational account of how the intelligible is received in order to illustrate why, "if the imagination did not intervene, a form opposed to the real would not arise at all in the intellect".²²

Somewhat unexpectedly, Avicenna switches his focus in what follows to the issue of the preservation of the unreal intelligibles))although the move makes sense against the background of the original question regarding their persistence after death.²³ Since intelligibles cannot be impressed upon something divisible and occupying space,²⁴ they cannot be stored in a bodily faculty, and so it is the agent intellects, who are continually engaged in thinking, who must serve as their treasury and their source for human intellects: "So long as [the soul] is turned towards [the agent intellects], the intelligible forms emanate upon it from them".²⁵ Embodied human intellects are not always consciously engaged in thinking, so when they cease to contemplate some particular form, it is necessary for them to recall that form from its appropriate treasury or treasuries. But since it has already been established that unreal forms do not exist in the agent intellects themselves but only arise in human souls through the mediation of the imagination, the human soul will not be able to re-establish them when it has separated from the body and hence from the imaginative treasuries upon which these unreal forms depend.²⁶

Avicenna's conclusion, then, turns on the role of the imagination in preserving unreal forms for reason, that is, upon the basic premise of his

epistemology that there is no preservation at all in the intellect apart from actual thinking. Every time the rational soul thinks about unreal forms, it must turn anew to the imagination, just as it usually turns anew to the agent intellect. But after death, when the imagination is gone, there is no intermediary by which the unreal forms can emanate into the soul again, the way real forms continue to do without mediation. Avicenna concludes his argument with a further observation on the unique status of unreal forms, noting that they cease to emanate upon the soul “because they do not correspond to the soul’s essence, and evil does not arise from the creator except through compulsion. But these forms opposed [to the real] emanate from him because of the compulsion of the imagination”.²⁷ Exactly why fictional forms should be considered an “evil” is unclear, although the implication seems to be that it is on account of their incompatibility with the intellect. This seems unsatisfying, however, since Avicenna has taken such pains to argue that, qua intelligible, these forms are abstract and compatible with the intellect. Hence, the evil involved is more likely to be a function of the very impossibility of these forms, which renders them unworthy to be necessary concomitants of the eternal agent intellects and, as a result, unworthy to be found in any eternal being, including a separated human soul.²⁸ Evil is not, then, being imputed to the imagination or the body per se here; rather, the imagination is simply the medium whereby the intellect, as embodied, is compelled to receive forms that are not in themselves consonant with its own eternal nature.²⁹

In this concluding part of his argument,³⁰ Avicenna has added to his list of properties unique to intellectual cognition the ability to grasp the essences of things. While this is hardly a startling revelation in itself, it is significant in this context in that it appears to imply that unreal beings, if universalizable and conceivable by the intellect, must have essences and quiddities of some sort.³¹ This, however, raises serious difficulties for the description of fictional forms as “impossible” and thus unknowable by agent intellects. Once unreal beings are allowed as intelligibles, they seem to need quiddities of some sort, and yet the only possible source for these quiddities seems to be the imagination. Closely related to this problem is Avicenna’s failure ever to articulate exactly what it is that emanates from the agent intellects in the case of unreal forms, that is, what is the conceptual content of that emanation, if any? Since the agent intellects do not think these forms themselves, it would seem unlikely that the intelligible content of “phoenix”, for example, could emanate from the separate intelligences. The content here seems to be provided by the imaginative faculty alone; but then does that mean that the intellect subsumes the image under some other intelligible or group of intelligibles, such as “bird”, “possessing magical powers”, and so on?

Or does the emanation provide nothing but the universalization of the form? Central to difficulties such as these is the tension between Avicenna's characterization of unreal forms as both impossible and intelligible. As impossible, these forms would seem to be not only concretely non-existent, but also contradictory by definition and devoid of any true nature. But as intelligible universals, they would seem to require an underlying essence or quiddity of some sort as the basis for their intelligible being. But if this quiddity or essence does not come from God and the agent intellects themselves, then where is its source except in the human compositive imagination? In order to determine whether Avicenna has any solution to offer to these difficulties, I will now turn my attention to Avicenna's more developed discussions of the nature of universal intelligibles.

3. UNIVERSALS, QUIDDITIES, AND THE ESSENCE-EXISTENCE DISTINCTION

Since Avicenna's principal argument for rejecting a purely imaginal existence for fictional forms is drawn from their capacity to be universalized, Avicenna's explanation of universality is important for his general understanding of the intelligibility of the unreal. Avicenna's argument that the phoenix is an intelligible universal because it is possible to believe in a multiplicity of individual phoenixes generally accords with his more developed account of universals and of the properties peculiar to mental or conceptual existence (*fī al-taṣawwuri*) in contrast to existence in concrete singulars (*fī al-a'yāni*).³² According to that account, a pure quiddity or common nature (such as animality) is simply a "meaning" or "intention" (*ma'nā*) that is neither general (*'āmm*) nor particular (*khāṣṣ*), one nor many, in itself,³³ which only becomes particularized in concrete singulars through the addition of designated matter (*māddah mushār ilay-hi*) to it, and universalized by the addition of the accident of generality to it in the mind's act of predication.³⁴ Thus, as Avicenna's argument regarding the phoenix requires, conceptual existence is a necessary condition for universality: if the phoenix can be a universal, then it must be an intelligible with conceptual existence. Difficulties arise in the case of the phoenix, however, when the requirements of universality itself are considered. For on Avicenna's developed account, universality requires more than just the abstract, intelligible existence that the pure quiddity has in a mind: it is the result of a specific property added to the quiddity by the intellect (just as concreteness is added to the quiddity by designated matter) as an expression of the intellect's understanding of that essence's relation, or potential relation, to concrete singulars.³⁵ Thus, on Avicenna's understanding universality depends in part upon

the nature of the universalized essence or quiddity itself, in part upon the mind's understanding of that essence, and in part upon the essence's concrete instances. The phoenix must be a universal, according to the argument of the *Letter on the Soul*, in virtue of the mind's understanding of it. But its status presents certain difficulties in both of the remaining aspects of universality, that is, in its relation to concrete existence, and in its presupposition of an underlying essence.

These difficulties become apparent from a close reading of Avicenna's two most detailed accounts of universals in his *Shifā'*, the logical account in *Al-Madkhal (Isagoge)*, I, c. 12, and the metaphysical account in *Al-Ilāhīyāt (Metaphysics)* V, cc. 1-2.³⁶ In the *Isagoge* account, Avicenna argues that the real basis for the mind's attribution of universality to any nature that it knows is the nature's own external relation to many concrete, designated individuals:³⁷

Moreover, it would not occur to [animal] extrinsically that it should be general unless there were in fact a single essence which is animal, to which it had occurred in external singulars to be one and the same thing existent in many. As for [its existence] in the mind, it would occur to this intelligible animal form that relations to many things are made for it, and so this thing which is essentially one is truly related to a number of things which are similar with respect to it, in that the intellect predicates it of each one of them. . . . This accidental thing [i.e., the relation], is the generality which occurs to animal.³⁸

Moreover, Avicenna argues in the *Isagoge* that the quiddity taken in itself (called a "natural genus" here) is what provides the real basis for the type of universality that is able to be united with it, that is, which determines which one of the predicables it will become:

As for the natural [genus], namely, animal insofar as it is animal, it is what is suitable to produce for the intelligible derived from it that relation which is generic. For whenever it arises in the mind as an intelligible, it is suitable to have the generic understood of it, whereas this is not suitable for what is posited as conceived of this Zayd, nor of what is conceived of a human being. For the nature of animal existent in the singulars is distinguished from the nature of humanity and the nature of Zayd by this accident, since it is such that when it is conceived, it is suitable to have a generality of this description attached to it. And it has nothing else externally except the suitability for this in this respect.³⁹

According to this passage, the quiddity taken in itself is the only principle capable of explaining not only its own ability to be multiplied in concrete singulars, but also the mode of that multiplication. And this in turn seems to imply that anything that has been universalized))i.e., to which a generic, specific, or other relation to many individuals has been attached in the mind as an extrinsic accident))must have a quiddity capable of explaining the particular type of universality that the mind has applied. Thus, it would seem that the phoenix, a fictional species of animal, must, in order to be conceived specifically, have a quiddity or essence of some sort that determines it as a species, and that determines the genus under which it falls.

In the more detailed discussions of universals in V, cc. 1-2 of the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'*, Avicenna also upholds the view that while universality is proper to intelligible or conceptual existence, it has a real basis in the conceived nature itself and in its extramental existence in concrete singulars.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, in this text Avicenna defines universality in such a way as to allow the possibility of a concept that is universal even though it has no actual multiplicity when existent extramentally. The universal is accordingly defined as “that whose conceptualization itself (*naḥs taṣawwuri-hi*) does not prevent it from being said of many”.⁴¹ In accordance with this broader definition of universality, Avicenna discerns three types of universals: (1) an intention or idea (*ma'nā*) that is actually predicated of many, like “human being”; (2) an intention which it is “conceivable (*jā'iz*) to predicate of many, even if it is not a condition that they be existent in actuality”, like a heptagonal house; and (3) an intention which we are not intrinsically barred from conceiving of as predicated of many, but of which it can be shown by some extrinsic proof that such predication is prohibited, such as the sun and the earth, which are unique individuals of their kinds.⁴² The last two types of universal are superficially akin to universalized unreal forms, since both involve a tension between the universalizability of the nature taken in terms of its own conceptualization and the absence of actual multiplicity in the concrete. They show that Avicenna is consistent in his claim that universals can admit of only a potential, and not an actual, relation to concrete singulars.⁴³ But there are important differences from the universals of fictional forms in both cases. Only multiplicity, and not concrete existence, is lacking from the third type of universal: the sun and the moon are not vain forms, they are simply the sole individuals of their kind. The second type of universal appears more similar to the case of the phoenix, for heptagonal houses too fail to be actually instantiated in the concrete.⁴⁴ Unlike fictional forms, however, these universals are not “impossible”. Indeed, this example, taken together with Avicenna’s generic

definition of the universal as an intention that is in itself capable of predication of many, would seem to preclude the very notion of an impossible universal.⁴⁵

Despite the difficulty of subsuming fictional forms under any of the three types of universals recognized in *Metaphysics* V, c. 1, Avicenna actually uses a fictional form as his example of an instance of a universal a bit later in the same chapter. Before we examine this passage, however, it is necessary to make one further observation regarding Avicenna's understanding of universals. We have already noted the well-known connection between the Avicennian universal and the recognition of the two modes of existence of the quiddity or common nature, conceptual and concrete. But in fact Avicenna recognizes in many places a third mode of existence, which can be viewed as a variation on conceptual existence. In *Metaphysics* V, c. 1, this third mode of existence is introduced as a digression addressing the extent of divine providence (*'ināyah*) with respect to quiddities and their existential accidents. Avicenna argues that prior to its instantiation in concrete particulars, a quiddity like "animal" has a sort of "divine existence" (*wujūd ilāhī*) of which God is the actual cause (*sabab*): hence providence can be said to embrace quiddities as such.⁴⁶ By contrast, however, divine providence cannot be said to be the direct cause of the material accidents and individuality of the nature itself, although these may still be said to occur "through" (*bi-*) God's providence.⁴⁷ This notion of "divine existence" also appears under different terminology in the account of universals in *Isagoge* I, c. 12, where Avicenna argues that the quiddity may exist in three ways, either "prior to", "in", or "after" multiplicity (*qabla al-kathrahūfī al-kathrahūba'da al-kathrah*), where "multiplicity" denotes individual, numerical multiplicity within a species.⁴⁸ Existence "in" multiplicity, then, is simply the realization of a nature in concrete singulars. But the contrast between existence prior to and after multiplicity is explained here in terms of the different causal relations that can obtain between the form as understood and the form as realized in singulars.⁴⁹ When the singulars are prior, they are the cause of the existence of the universal in a mind, as is the case with human cognition. But in divine cognition, these same forms exist prior to multiplicity, and their being understood by God and the angelic intelligences causes the realization of the forms in singulars. In this text Avicenna uses the paradigm of the productive or artistic soul (*al-naḥs al-ṣāni'ah*) to illustrate the nature of divine causal knowledge, and he emphasizes that as understood in divine minds prior to multiplicity, each of these natures is a "single intention" (*ma'nan wāḥid*).⁵⁰ So in both the *Isagoge* and the *Metaphysics*, Avicenna recognizes that those quiddities which become universals in our minds have a prior existence in the pure intellects of God and the separate intelligences.

And this recognition is significant for Avicenna's views on unreal beings, since it seems ultimately to require that God be the ultimate source for any quiddity which can become a universal. But if, according to the *Letter on the Soul*, no unreal beings can be present in the divine minds and emanate from them into us, then they would seem to lack the very "divine existence" that all quiddities require prior to receiving their multiple instantiations.

Despite the apparent difficulty that this prior mode of existence seems to pose for fictional forms, Avicenna, as already noted, proceeds in *Metaphysics* V, c. 1 to allow fictional forms to instantiate a universal and thereby provide it with its requisite relation to many concrete instances. Since Avicenna's principal concern in this passage is to show that any random token of a universal will suffice to exemplify it, and that as a universal the form does not change however many singular correlates are added to its concrete relations, the use of the fictional form is presumably a deliberate device to drive home the arbitrariness of the particular instance to universality as such:

So one form is related to many in the intellect, and it is from this perspective a universal. And it is one intention in the intellect, whose relation to any one of the animals which you might take does not diversify it, whichever one of them whose form you represent in the imagination in some state. And this form is what arises from the abstraction of animality from any individual image whatsoever which is taken from what is existent externally, or from what takes the place of what is existent externally, even if it is not itself found externally, but rather, the imagination invents it.⁵¹

What exactly is Avicenna assuming here when he claims that a form invented by the imagination will do well enough to establish the universal in its relation to its individual instances? The perspective must clearly be from the vantage point of an already invented fictional form. In order for a fictional being, such as our phoenix, to provide a referent for the generic universal "animal", the imagination would already have had to include the properties common to all animals in its original creation of the image. So in this passage Avicenna has not addressed the problem of how the specific universal pertaining to a fictional form arises in the first place. All he is concerned with is the intellect's need to establish some sort of relation to singulars to render a form universal, and any singular representation will do in this regard. Hence, the use of the generic example "animal" begs our question, which is not whether the representation of a phoenix is a sufficient

representation of “animal”, but rather, how “animal” ever comes to be associated with the images of phoenixes to render them intelligibles. We have seen from the *Isagoge* that Avicenna holds that it is the nature taken in itself that determines what sort of predicable it can become, as well as what relation it can have to other universals. So we are still left with the question, how can we know that the phoenix is an animal unless the phoenix has a nature, and how can it have such a nature unless that is in turn a necessary concomitant of divine, creative thought?

4. IMAGINATION AND INTELLECT IN HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

Whatever status the quiddities or essences of unreal forms have in Avicenna, the entire thrust of the argument in the *Letter on the Soul*, and the impasses we have encountered in our examination of Avicenna’s theories of universals, seem to leave no other source for those quiddities than the human imaginative soul itself. The very fact that there are universal intelligible forms in the human mind that have no counterpart in the agent intellects suggests that it is to the material faculties of the animal soul that we must look for the foundation of the intelligible content of the universal form of the phoenix.

Now in the *Letter on the Soul* itself Avicenna tells us that a key premise in his reply is the differences between intellect and imagination in the way that they preserve the forms they have perceived: “And the third premise [of this argument] is that the human soul, so long as it is not turned towards the active intellects, does not apprehend any of the intelligibles, and no intelligible form is preserved in it”.⁵² This means that Avicenna’s reply rests upon one of the mainstays of his emanational account of the reception of intelligible forms. Once we have admitted that the form of phoenix can be universalized and comprehended as an intelligible, the agent intellects must necessarily be called in to explain some aspect of the cognitive process at hand.

But we have also seen that these separate intellects are unable to account for the intelligible content itself of unreal forms, for that content is in no way capable of subsisting in them as an aspect of their self-knowledge.⁵³ The content must come from the compositive imagination (*al-mutakhayyilah*), that is, from the estimative faculty’s manipulation of the images already received through the senses and impressed upon the internal senses through their material organ, the brain. Indeed, Avicenna’s explicit allusion to the estimative faculty in the *Letter on the Soul* and in almost all other contexts where he mentions unreal forms implies a conscious attempt to evoke the creative activities of the compositive imagination, as developed in texts such as Book Four of the *De anima* of the

Shifā'.⁵⁴ The intelligible content of unreal forms must be their imaginal content, composed from the elements of sensible perception stored in the preservative faculties of the brain and manipulated by the estimative faculty into new, non-experiential wholes. The point is easy and familiar enough: the phoenix would be a form composed from the component parts of really existent beings, such as birds, creating a new whole that corresponds to no actual existent. That form is then universalized in some way through the unwitting but inevitable influx of intelligibility from the agent intellects, whose illuminating activity is continual, uninterrupted, and unaffected by the bodily natures which are affected by them.

Unfortunately, this simple picture will not do, at least, not without a radical upheaval of the traditional Avicennian account of intellection as presented in his *De anima* V, 5 and V, 6. For in that account, while generally upholding the practical need for sensation and imagination to precede intellection, Avicenna explicitly denies any causal influence of the imagination upon the intellect, that is, he denies the reality of abstraction as a cognitive process. The imagination functions at most as an occasion for the reception of an influx from the agent intellect, which is the only true cause of the possession of an intelligible form:

When the intellectual power considers the particulars that are in our imagination, and the light of the agent intellect which we mentioned is in us shines upon them, they become abstracted from matter and its attachments and imprinted upon the rational soul))not in the sense that they themselves are transferred from the imagination to our intellect, and not in the sense that the intention, having been obscured by the attachments (since it is in itself and in its essence abstract), produces a likeness of itself, but rather, in the sense that its consideration prepares the soul so that what is abstract should emanate on it from the agent intellect.⁵⁵

Avicenna further argues in chapter six that the human intellect is like a mirror in which the intelligibles are reflected just as long as it is turned towards the agent intellect and away from the body, and that learning is therefore nothing but a search for complete readiness to conjoin with the agent intellect at will and receive simple intelligibles from it.⁵⁶ Now all of these points are well-known elements in Avicenna's cognitive psychology. It is to them that Avicenna alludes in his summary of the main premises of his argument at the end of the *Letter on the Soul*.⁵⁷ Moreover, they are a cornerstone of his theory of intellectual prophecy, which is based upon the real possibility, for at least the highest

prophets, of dispensing entirely with the sensible and imaginative preparations for, and the cogitative and discursive functions which usually follow upon, the reception of simple intelligibles from the agent intellect.⁵⁸ To admit an exception to this account of intellectual knowledge is to threaten the overall coherence of Avicenna's epistemology.⁵⁹ And yet this would seem to be precisely what Avicenna's views on unreal forms require. For if imaginary constructions are the only explanation for the actual content of these forms even as intelligibles, Avicenna will have to allow, in at least this one instance, a real causal connection between imagination and intellection, and a real abstraction of a universal nature from its particular imagined or imaginary instances. The agent intellect would then be reduced in this case simply to actualizing and abstracting the universal intention from its material attachments. For in this one case, Avicenna cannot claim that the intention is "in itself and in its essence abstract", because it has no essence apart from its imaginary representation. But if the imagination can affect the intellect in this one case, then why bother with the counter-intuitive emanative reading of abstraction in the first place? For if we need both abstraction (or something akin to it) and emanation in order to give a complete account of human knowledge, then why not take the more economical route and collapse both accounts into a single theory of abstraction?

Perhaps, in order to avoid such consequences, one could argue that the intellect does not universalize a ready-made amalgam of images, but instead it takes the component, previously universalized concepts that make up the fictional forms and composes and divides them into new universal concepts. Such an interpretation might be supported by Avicenna's emphasis in the *Letter on the Soul* upon "belief" (*i'tiqād*) in the existence of phoenixes as a means of establishing their need for an intelligible counterpart. The intelligible in the case of fictional forms would then be simply the proposition which expresses the existential belief. There would be no real conceptual content to account for, no intelligible "phoenix" apart from its component concepts, but rather, only beliefs about imaginary individual phoenixes. This way we would by-pass the embarrassment of an intelligible without a corresponding quiddity on the one hand, and the violation of the strictures on imagination as a true cause of knowledge on the other.⁶⁰

Such a suggestion is a tempting one, but it is untenable for the same reason as is the effort to draw the content of unreal forms from the imagination itself. For while Avicennian universals involve some understanding of an actual or potential relation to singulars, Avicenna's epistemology requires that relation to be

encompassed within the intellect itself. That is, in Avicenna's epistemology it is meaningless to speak of an intellectual mental act whose content itself is not a mental act of the same order, i.e., intellectual. Avicenna is clear in his logical writings that belief and assent are complex and derivative mental acts. So an appeal to assent or belief, apart from the conceptualization of the contents of that belief, will beg the question, since conceptualization is a necessary condition of assent. One cannot assent to a proposition "S is P" unless one has conceptualized its components, "S" and "P". So how could I have an intelligible belief about phoenixes unless I first possess an intelligible for "phoenix", the subject-term of the proposition?⁶¹

Moreover, to the extent that Avicenna does allow for a combination of mental acts of different orders within a complex belief such as "The phoenix exists in concrete singulars", it is the combinatory functions underlying belief, not the conceptualization of the contents of the belief, that are assigned to the internal sense faculties. Composition and division in Avicenna's psychology always imply the mediation of the cogitative faculty: but this mediation itself presupposes the prior reception of an intelligible emanation from the agent intellects. 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.⁶² 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.

5. CONCLUSION: UNREALITY VERSUS IMPOSSIBILITY

Despite its grounding in the fundamental tenets of Avicenna's philosophical system, then, at every turn Avicenna's resolution of the questions surrounding fictional forms seems to meet some impasse. Ultimately Avicenna's difficulties stem from his insistence on the unreality and impossibility of fictional forms on the one hand, and his desire to "save the phenomenon" of their intelligible as well as imaginary existence in human souls on the other hand. People do believe in phoenixes, and their beliefs imply a universal class, which the imagination on its own is insufficient to account for. Since the phenomenon seems inescapable,

the principal source of the difficulty must rest in the underlying modal assumptions of Avicenna's treatment of fictional forms, that is, in Avicenna's claim that such forms are not only unreal, but also impossible. What is the meaning of "impossible" in this context, and is it appropriately used to describe fictional beings such as the phoenix, just as it is used to describe logical and conceptual contradictions?⁶³

In the famous text on primary concepts or intentions in *Metaphysics* I, 5, Avicenna includes modal notions amongst the primary concepts and discusses them in relation to the concepts of the existence, non-existence, and essence or quiddity. But because of the very thrust of Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence in this chapter, it remains unclear whether modality is primarily an existential or a quidditative property for Avicenna. Although Avicenna argues that the pure quiddity itself is indeterminate with respect to existence, he is insistent that all real "things" are existent things. But the term "thing" for Avicenna indicates the essence, not the existence, of that to which it is applied: to call any object a "thing" is to recognize it as having a quiddity or essence (*māhīyah/quidditas*))such as horseness, humanity, or triangularity))that constitutes its proper reality (*ḥaqīqah/certitudo*).⁶⁴ While this quiddity itself is indifferent to any particular mode of existence, i.e., conceptual or concrete, Avicenna is insistent that the "intention of the existent" (*ma'nā al-mawjūd*) is a necessary concomitant of the intention of the thing: to be a thing entails existence of some sort, be it "in singulars, in the estimation, or in the intellect" (*fī al-a'yān, aw . . . fī al-wahm wa-al-'aql*).⁶⁵ The very terms used to describe the essence highlight our difficulties in the case of unreal beings. To be real (*ḥaqq*), to have a reality (*ḥaqīqah*), is linked here, not to existence, but to the possession of a nature or a quiddity. Existence itself is a necessary consequence of being a thing, so presumably things must have essences even if they exist only in the estimation and imagination, let alone in external reality or in the intellect. So even on a purely imaginal interpretation, Avicenna's fictional beings would seem to require essences, and hence, to be something less than impossible.

Also significant in this regard is the discussion of the non-existent (*ma'dūm*) and the refutation of the position that the non-existent is a thing.⁶⁶ Avicenna argues that it is impossible to make affirmative predications (*bi-al-tjāb*) about what is absolutely non-existent (*ma'dūm muṭlaq*), and even if one makes negative (*bi-al-salb*) predications about such things, something existent must be postulated in the soul as the subject of predication, for the absolutely non-existent cannot be given any sort of description (*waṣf*) at all.⁶⁷ Although the status of fictional

beings is not explicitly addressed here, it is unlikely that Avicenna would include them among the absolute non-existents. For as already noted, the *Letter on the Soul* explicitly describes them as “existent in the soul”; and in *Metaphysics* I, 5 itself Avicenna has already mentioned both estimation and intellect as possible locations for the conceptual existence of a thing.⁶⁸ So once again we are faced with the question of the relation between the external unreality of the fictional beings and their impossibility. If fictional beings are not “absolute non-existents”, how can they be called “impossible”?

This is brought into even sharper focus by Avicenna’s treatment of the modalities. From their introduction into the discussion of this chapter, the modal notions are clearly intended to be existential. In his consideration of the circularity that plagues the definitions usually offered of modal terms, Avicenna consistently refers to existence, not essence. People usually define the necessary, for example, as “that which it is not possible to suppose as non-existent”, and the impossible as “the necessarily non-existent” (*darūrī al-‘adam*).⁶⁹ In arguing that despite such circularity, the notion of the necessary is modally primary, Avicenna once again refers to the existential order to support his view: “This is because the necessary signifies the assurance of existence, and existence is better known than non-existence because existence is known per se whereas non-existence is in some way known through existence”.⁷⁰ The existential focus also predominates in Avicenna’s use of modal concepts in his famous proofs of God as the Necessary of Existence, where it is closely tied to Avicenna’s adoption of the principle of plenitude. For Avicenna, every truly possible being is also an actual being, or rather, a being necessary through another.⁷¹ Thus Herbert Davidson has argued that Avicenna’s modalities divide into the actually existent on the one hand))the necessary of existence through itself or the possible of existence which is necessary through another))and the impossible on the other.⁷² Thus “everything whose existence in itself is impossible does not exist, not even through another”;⁷³ and consequently, what is not necessarily existent does not exist.⁷⁴

Now Davidson has argued that on this view of modality, “the proper way of construing possible existence . . . is to say that during the time the possibly existent actually exists, its existence is necessary, and during the time that it does not exist, its existence is impossible”.⁷⁵ Applying this existential perspective to unreal beings, we could argue that Avicenna has been labelling these forms as “impossible” simply with reference to the fact that they always lack actual existence in the concrete, or with a view to their ultimate disappearance after the soul’s death.⁷⁶

This would be fine if modality were strictly an existential notion for Avicenna, and if existence did not encompass the whole range of cognitive powers in which a form could subsist. But despite the existential characterization of modality that Avicenna usually favours, the determination of necessity, possibility, or impossibility of existence still rests upon an essential and quidditative basis.⁷⁷ It is only by examining the quiddity of anything that we determine if it is necessary or possible in itself; this is not a matter of empirical observation. So to be able to exist at all is still to possess an essence to which existence can be granted, even if only in the intellectual or the imaginative souls; and to be “impossible” by definition, as phoenixes and the like seem to be, precludes all possession of a quiddity and all modes of actual existence.

So even if Avicenna had opted for the easy solution, and claimed that fictional forms existed only in the imagination and estimation, their characterization as “impossible” would remain problematic. Even given the existential thrust of his modal notions, the very breadth and richness of Avicenna’s conception of existence necessitates that the class of Avicennian impossibles will be very small. In order to include fictional forms in this category, Avicenna would have needed to reduce their status to that of pure privations and logical absurdities devoid of any quidditative foundation and known only by negation))a move that may not have been far from his mind when he labelled them as necessary evils.⁷⁸ But such a move would have prevented Avicenna from acknowledging not only the phenomenon of the phoenix’s intelligibility, but even the reality of its imaginal being and the central role that this sort of being plays in Avicenna’s own psychology.

NOTES

¹ This paper was originally presented at the 29th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in Kalamzoo, May 7, 1994, as part of a session on Unreal Being in Thought and Appetite, organized by Professor Martin Tweedale of the University of Alberta.

² See J. R. MICHOT, *Avicenna's 'Letter on the Disappearance of the Vain Intelligible Forms After Death'*, *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale*, 26-27, 1984-85, pp. 94-103 (English translation); *'L'Épître sur la disparition des formes intelligibles vaines après la mort' d'Avicenne*, *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale*, 29, 1987, pp. 152-70 (critical edition and French translation). I have consulted both of Michot's translations, although the renditions of the passages cited in this article are my own. Hereafter this text will be cited as *Letter on the Soul*.

³ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 155.4-5; Fr. trans. cit., p. 161; Eng. trans. cit., p. 98. Avicenna has a number of different labels for these forms, of which these two are the most common. I will use the terms "unreal", "fictional", and "vain" interchangeably in the course of my discussion.

⁴ Ibid., p. 155.6; Fr. trans. cit., p. 161; Eng. trans. cit., p. 98. Thus, these forms are not "absolute non-existents". For this terminology see the discussion at nn. 66-68 below.

⁵ Ibid., p. 155.6-7; Fr. p. 161; Eng. p. 98.

⁶ For the localization of the internal sense faculties in Avicenna, the standard text is *Avicenna's 'De anima', Being the Psychological Part of 'Kitāb al-Shifā'*, ed. FAZLUR RAHMAN, Oxford 1959, I, c. 5, pp. 44.3-45.16; medieval Latin translation ed. S. VAN RIET, *Avicenna Latinus: Liber de anima, seu sextus de naturalibus*, Louvain-Leiden 1977-83. Van Riet's edition provides marginal reference to the pages of the Arabic edition.

I am ignoring for my purposes the ambiguous stance that Avicenna takes on the "imaginal" afterlife and the presence of faculties such as estimation in the celestial souls, since in the *Letter on the Soul* Avicenna clearly assumes that intelligible existence is a necessary condition for the persistence of vain forms after death. On the topic of the imaginal afterlife in Avicenna, see the excellent study by J. R. MICHOT, *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination*, Louvain 1986.

⁷ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 155.6-156.16; Fr. trans. cit., p. 161; Eng. trans. cit., pp. 98-99.

⁸ Ibid., p. 155.11. The criterion of compatibility or association, *shirkah*, is clearly a vestige of the traditional view that like is known by like, as modified by Aristotle and transformed into the doctrine of cognitive identification. See ARISTOTLE, *De anima*, II, c. 5 (416b32-417a20); and III, c. 8 (431b20-32a3). Avicenna himself argues at length against any strong version of the theory of cognitive identification, which he attributes to Porphyry's lost *De intellectu*. See *Avicenna's 'De anima'*, V, c. 6 ed. cit., pp. 239.9-241.4. See also *Al-Ishārāt wa-al-Tanbīhāt*, ed. J. FORGET, Leiden 1892, pp. 178.17-181.2; French translation by A. M. GOICHON, *Le livre des directives et remarques*, Beirut-Paris 1951, pp. 442-50. Goichon's translation contains a long discussion of this point at n. 1, beginning on p. 442.

⁹ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 155.8-11; Fr. trans. cit., p. 161, Eng. trans. cit., p. 98. *Ishārāh* is cognate with the technical term, *al-mushār ilay-hi* ("the thing pointed to") used to render the Greek phrase *tode ti* into Arabic.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 155.10-11.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 155.11-12.

¹² See *ibid.*, pp. 155.12-156.14: "For whoever permits its existence in concrete singulars likewise will admit that there is more than one individual, and so he believes [it is] a universal, and this is an intelligible. Whatever the case may be, the first view, that the form opposed to the real is not at all intelligible, is impossible, so it remains that it is possible for it to be an intelligible".

¹³ I am assuming here that even though Avicenna uses the less technical term *i'tiqād*, he intends to imply the mental act which is technically labelled *taṣdīq* 'assent', and which is contrasted with simple conceptualization, *taṣawwur*. For the defining condition of assent is that it involves an existential, truth-valued judgment, and this is what Avicenna focuses on in his discussion.

¹⁴ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 156.15-157.30; Fr. trans. cit., pp. 161-62; Eng. trans. cit., pp. 98-99. It should be noted that Avicenna uses the term “agent intellect” quasi-generically, to cover all separate intellects other than God, and not just the last of these intelligences on which the human mind directly depends.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 156.15-16. Obviously the eternity here is to be taken in the limited sense of being everlasting in the future, not pre-eternal in the past.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 156.18-19. Avicenna’s account here is very terse, so it is not entirely clear whether “necessary concomitants” and “intermediaries” are alternative descriptions of the objects of a single mode of divine cognition, or whether they denote two distinct aspects of such knowledge. Given Avicenna’s emanational metaphysics and cosmology, the most natural reading would seem to be to take knowledge of the “necessary concomitants” of the agent intellects’ essences to refer to their productive, causal knowing, i.e., to the agent intellects’ knowledge of what is below them in the flow of emanation. Their knowledge of their “intermediaries and preparations” would then refer to the lower intelligences’ knowledge of God himself and the other intelligences above them in the emanational chain. In the ensuing discussion, however, Avicenna focuses only on the separate intellects’ knowledge of their necessary concomitants, but this may be simply because it is the only knowledge relevant to the problem at hand.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 156.19-21.

¹⁸ For a consideration of Avicenna’s doctrine of modality, particularly as it occurs in logical contexts, see Allen BÄCK, *Avicenna’s Conception of the Modalities*, Vivarium 30, 1992, pp. 217-54. The principle of plenitude is discussed in sections IX-X, pp. 231-39.

¹⁹ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., pp. 156.22-157.30; Fr. trans. cit., p. 162; Eng. trans. cit., p. 99.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 156.25-157.29. It is at first unclear whether this passage is meant to refer generally to material singulars, or whether it only applies to fictional forms. Later in the text, however, Avicenna acknowledges that his argument depends upon the recognition of the usual dependence of human intelligibles upon sensible images, so presumably the general reference is intended. See Ibid., p. 159.56-57; Fr. trans. cit., p. 163; Eng. trans. cit., p. 101.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 156.25-157.28; Fr. trans. cit., p. 162; Eng. trans. cit., p. 99.

²² Ibid., p. 157.29-30.

²³ It is also ultimately consistent with his analysis of intellectual memory in *De anima* V, c. 6, where preservation is used to argue for an emanational account of knowing. See RAHMAN, *Avicenna’s ‘De anima’* cit., pp. 244.10-248.8.

²⁴ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 157.31: “And it is known that intelligibles are not impressed in what is divisible, that is, in what has position”. Avicenna offers elaborate proofs of this point in the *De anima* of the *Shifā’*. See RAHMAN, *Avicenna’s ‘De anima’*, V, c. 2 cit., pp. 208.15.-216.15. For an English translation of the *Najāh (Deliverance)* version of this text, see F. RAHMAN, *Avicenna’s Psychology*, Westport, Connecticut, 1981.

²⁵ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 157.32-33.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 157.32-158.45; Fr. trans. cit., pp. 162-63; Eng. trans. cit., pp. 99-100.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 157.46-49.

²⁸ This interpretation is also compatible with Avicenna’s claim that the separate intellects cannot know evil or privation, on the grounds that they admit of no potency at all, and potency is a necessary condition for knowing privations. For privation is knowable only indirectly, through reflection on the changes that occur within one’s own intellectual faculties. On this point see RAHMAN, *Avicenna’s ‘De anima’*, V, c. 5 cit., p. 238.9-18.

²⁹ Avicenna may also be assuming here that the purpose of the intellect is to come to knowledge of the true and the real: hence unreal intelligibles are by definition incompatible with the teleology of the intellect as an apprehending, truth-attaining power.

³⁰ Avicenna’s text does not in fact end here, but rather, Avicenna closes with an analysis of the argument that he has just provided, which he characterizes as a “compound syllogism hinging on three premises”. Avicenna does not provide an explicit formal analysis of the syllogism itself; he

simply discusses the epistemic status of each of the three premises. See AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., pp. 158.50-160.78; Fr. trans. cit., pp. 163-64; Eng. trans. cit., pp. 101-102. The three premises are as follows:

(1) The human rational soul or material intellect, unlike the agent intellects, is dependent upon the mediation of sensation and imagination in order to receive intelligibles. This premise is said to be self-evident to all philosophers.

(2) Fictional forms are among the class of forms that require the mediation of the internal sense powers. This premise too is identified as indubitable for “those who excel in the art of wisdom.”

(3) The human soul can only apprehend intelligibles when it is turned towards the agent intellects, and it cannot preserve intelligible forms when it is not apprehending them. Avicenna recognizes that this premise is not universally accepted nor immediately evident. It is presented as the conclusion of arguments pertaining to the indivisibility of the intellect, e.g., those from the *De anima* of the *Shifā'* cited in n. 23 above.

Presumably, premises 1 and 2 together show that vain intelligibles exist in embodied human intellects but not in agent intellects; premise 3, taken with this conclusion, shows that these intelligibles will thus not remain in even human intellects after their separation from the body.

³¹ In the present context Avicenna's language *need* not imply this: from the fact that the intellect alone can conceive essences, it does not follow that everything conceived by the intellect has an essence. But that this is Avicenna's view is supported by other doctrines that we will examine below, in particular the doctrine that universal intelligibles comprise one of the two modes of existence of essences or quiddities.

³² This terminology is introduced in the *Isagoge* of the *Shifā'*. See AVICENNA, *Al-Madkhal*, ed. G. ANAWATI, M. EL-KHODEIRI, and F. AL-AHWANI, Cairo 1952, I, c. 1, p. 15.1; cf. *ibid.*, I, c. 12, p. 65.11-12; Avicenna's principal discussions relating to quiddities and universals have been translated and discussed by M. E. MARMURA in several articles: *Avicenna on the Division of the Sciences in the 'Isagoge' of his Shifā'*, *Journal for the History of Arabic Science* 4, 1980, pp. 239-50 (*Isagoge*, I, c. 1); *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals in the 'Isagoge' of his 'Shifā''*, in *Islam: Past Influence and Present Challenge*, ed. A. T. WELCH and P. CACHIA, Edinburgh 1979, pp. 34-56 (*Isagoge*, I, c. 12); *Avicenna on Primary Concepts in the 'Metaphysics' of his 'al-Shifā''*, in *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in Honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens*, ed. M. E. MARMURA and D. A. AGIUS, Toronto 1984, pp. 219-40 (*Metaphysics*, I, c. 5). See also *Quiddity and Universality in Avicenna*, in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed. P. MOREWEDGE, Albany, NY 1992, pp. 77-87.

³³ AVICENNA, *Isagoge*, I, c. 12 ed. cit., p. 65.11-12; MARMURA, *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals* cit., p. 47. The discussion of unity and plurality is found principally in the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'*: see AVICENNA, *Al-Ilāhīyāt*, ed. M. Y. MOUSA, S. DUNYA, and S. ZAYED, 2 vols., Cairo 1960, V, c. 1, vol. 1, p. 196.6-16; medieval Latin translation ed. S. VAN RIET, *Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina*, 3 vols., Louvain-Leiden 1977-83; French translation by G. C. ANAWATI, *La métaphysique du Shifā'*, 2 vols., Paris 1978-85. Both the Latin and French translations provide marginal references to the pagination of the Arabic edition.

³⁴ AVICENNA, *Isagoge*, I, c. 12 ed. cit., p. 65.16-66.11; MARMURA, *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals* cit., pp. 47-48.

³⁵ Thus, in *Metaphysics*, V, cc. 1-2, Avicenna argues that for universals to exist actually, they must necessarily be in an intellect; nonetheless intelligible existence alone is not sufficient to render a form universal, since when taken in themselves universals are diverse, particular accidents within individual human souls. See AVICENNA, *Metaphysics* ed. cit., vol. 1, pp. 205.14-206.3; and pp. 209.8-210.3. Without the relation to numerical multiplicity, *real or imagined*, these intentions would not be universals: “For the intelligible of ‘human being’ is that which is universal, and its universality is not because (*li-ajli-hi*) it is in the soul, but rather, because it is related to many existent or imagined singulars (*a 'yān kathīrah mawjūdah wa-mutawahhamah*), whose idea (*ḥukm*) in it is a single idea” (AVICENNA, *Metaphysics*, V, c. 2 ed. cit., vol. 1, p. 209.6-8).

³⁶ AVICENNA, *Isagoge* ed. cit., pp. 65-72; English translation in MARMURA, *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals* cit., pp. 47-52; *Metaphysics* ed. cit., vol. 1, pp. 195-212.

³⁷ Cf. MARMURA, *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals* cit., p. 35: "What seems more likely--although Avicenna does not explicitly state this--is that universality for him is an abstraction of the essence's extramental, terrestrial relation of 'being common to many.' . . . Thus, universality, the second component of the universal concept, like the first, essence, has a foundation in external reality".

³⁸ AVICENNA, *Isagoge*, I, c. 12 ed. cit., p. 66.2-8; cf. MARMURA, *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals* cit., pp. 47-48.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 66.17-67.3; cf. MARMURA, *Avicenna's Chapter on Universals* cit., p. 48. Marmura discusses the terminology of natural (*ṭab ṭy*), logical (*manṭiqīy*), and mental or intellectual (*'aqlīy*) genus on pp. 39-43.

⁴⁰ AVICENNA, *Metaphysics*, V, c. 1 ed. cit., vol. 1, p. 205.4-8: "Just as animal is of more than one mode in existence, so too in the intellect. For in the intellect there is the form of animal abstracted in the way we mentioned. And in this mode it is called an intelligible form. But the form of animal is also in the intellect by way of there being a correspondence in the intellect of one and the same definition to many singulars. So the one form is related to many in the intellect, and from this perspective it is a universal."

⁴¹ Ibid., V, c. 1 ed. cit., vol. 2, p. 196.1-2; conversely, the single particular (*al-juz'īy al-mufrad*) is that "whose conceptualization itself prevents its intention from being said of many, like the essence of this denotable Zayd (*ka-dhāt zayd hadhā al-mushār ilay-hi*)" (p. 196.4-5).

⁴² Ibid., V, c. 1 ed. cit., vol. 1, p. 195.4-15. For a discussion of the third type of universal, see M. E. MARMURA, *Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory of God's Knowledge of Particulars*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 82, 1962, pp. 299-312, esp. p. 308. Avicenna does not make the nature of the proof clear, but presumably it would be cosmological in nature, that is, it would be based upon the mechanics of Avicenna's emanational metaphysics, in which only one celestial body can necessarily emanate from the intelligence above it.

⁴³ Although in the passage cited at note 51 below, Avicenna seems to hold that the imagination may suffice to establish the universal's requisite relation to multiple singulars. Thus there is a certain fluidity in the imagination's role as a locus for the existence of forms in Avicenna. On the one hand, imaginative or estimative existence is often assimilated to conceptual existence in contrast to real existence in concrete singulars, as is the case with fictional forms. But in the aforementioned passage, the particularity and materiality of imaginative representation allows the existence of a form in the imagination to function as a substitute for concrete existence, and thereby to provide the singular referent for a universal.

⁴⁴ Because of the extension in this and other texts of the notion of universality to essences that may never actually exist in multiple singulars, Bäck concludes that "at best, Avicenna admits only a weak principle of plenitude" (*Avicenna's Conception of the Modalities* cit., p. 236).

⁴⁵ The case of the heptagonal house appears to be complicated by the choice of an artificial form as an example. Avicenna's necessary and eternal metaphysics of emanation--which implies the principle of plenitude at least on the level of quiddities or natures--cannot allow for as-yet-unrealized natural forms (since this would involve a change in the creator). But Avicenna might be able to uphold the idea of artistic forms in the human mind that have been conceived and can be executed, but which no one has yet bothered to make. That is, the principle of plenitude for Avicenna might exclude artificial kinds, or be confined in their case to conceptual existence.

⁴⁶ AVICENNA, *Metaphysics* V, c. 1 ed. cit., vol. 1, pp. 204.16-205.4: "But animal taken along with its accidents is the physical thing; whereas taken in itself it is the nature whose existence is said to be prior to natural existence, by the priority of the simple to the composite. And it is that whose existence is characterized as divine existence, because the cause of its existence insofar as it is an animal is God's providence, may he be exalted. As to its being accompanied by matter, accidents, and this individual, even if this is through God's providence, may he be exalted, it is on account of the particular nature".

It is not clear whether divine existence is meant to be equivalent to the notion of “proper/special existence” (*wujūd khāṣṣ/esse proprium*) used to denominate the pure quiddity taken in itself in abstraction from either conceptual or concrete existence, in *Metaphysics* I, c. 5 (ed. cit., p. 31.5-9; MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., p. 226). But it seems clear that the two notions are at least extensionally equivalent, since it is divine existence that is the cause of the quiddity itself. Given Avicenna’s adamant rejection of Platonic ideas, the only sense in which pure quiddities could be said to “exist” in their own right in Avicenna would be in virtue of their eternal existence in the divine mind.

⁴⁷ AVICENNA, *Metaphysics*, V, c. 1 ed. cit., vol. 1, p. 205.3.

⁴⁸ AVICENNA, *Isagoge*, I, c. 12 ed. cit., p. 65.5-6; MARMURA, *Avicenna’s Chapter on Universals* cit., p. 47. Cf. *Ishārāt*, ed. cit., p. 181.1-8. Obviously multiplicity in some sense is involved in any claim that God knows the other intelligences and the genera and species ultimately produced by them. In this regard the *Ishārāt* distinguishes between the effects of God “vertically” and “horizontally” (p. 181.14-17). Cf. MARMURA, *God’s Knowledge of Particulars* cit., pp. 302-303.

⁴⁹ AVICENNA, *Isagoge*, I, c. 12 ed. cit., p. 69.7. Avicenna does use *sabab* here, although in Avicenna’s cognitive psychology singulars are never, strictly speaking, causes, but only occasions, of the intelligible existence for a form in human souls.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I, c. 12 ed. cit., p. 69.7-13.

⁵¹ AVICENNA, *Metaphysics*, V, c. 1 ed. cit., p. 205.7-13. This is essentially the same point that Avicenna makes in the *De anima* of the *Shifā’* in the course of defending an occasionalist role for imagination in the reception of abstract intelligibles. There Avicenna argues that once the imagination has performed its preparatory function, all further acts of imagination are superfluous: there is no privileged relation between the intelligible and the first image which prepared for its reception, so this image is dispensable once the intelligible is present: “For whenever sensation presents some form to the imagination, and the imagination presents it to the intellect, the intellect takes an intention from it. But if the imagination presents to it another form of this species, and it is only other in number, the intellect does not in any way take from it a form other than the one it had taken, except with respect to the accident which is proper to this one insofar as it is this accident, by taking it at one time as abstracted and at another time along with this accident. . . . But the meaning of this is that when the preceding one of these images makes known to the soul the form of humanity, then the second one does not make anything known at all. Rather the intention imprinted from them on the soul is one which comes from the first image; the second image has no effect. But either one of the two would be able to precede the other, and produce this very same impression in the soul. . . .” (RAHMAN, *Avicenna’s ‘De anima’*, V, c. 5 cit., pp. 236.16-20; 237.6-10.)

⁵² AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 159.59-61.

⁵³ But it could be objected that the argument against the presence of unreal forms in the agent intellects does seem to threaten the completeness of those intellects’ self-knowledge, since the agent intellects do function as partial causes of the vain forms in the human soul, a causal function of which they seem to be unaware, even in a universal way.

⁵⁴ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., p. 159.56-57: “And the second premise is that these forms opposed to the real and contrary to it cannot arise in the soul except through the mediation of imagination, sensation, and estimation. For estimation too has an effect in this.” The possibility of the estimative faculty functioning as a locus for the existence of a form is also upheld in *Metaphysics* I, c. 5 ed. cit., p. 32.3-5; MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., p. 227; and in *Metaphysics* V, c. 2 ed. cit., p. 209.6-8.

For the role of the various internal sense powers in the activities of the compositive imagination, see RAHMAN, *Avicenna’s ‘De anima’*, IV, c. 1 cit., pp. 165.19-169.6. I have discussed this and other functions of the estimation in D. L. BLACK, *Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna: The Logical and Psychological Dimensions*, Dialogue, 32, 1993, pp. 219-58, esp. pp. 227-28.

⁵⁵ RAHMAN, *Avicenna’s ‘De anima’*, V, c. 5 cit., p. 235.2-8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, V, c. 6, pp. 245.15-246.2; pp. 247.3-248.4.

⁵⁷ AVICENNA, *Letter on the Soul* ed. cit., pp. 159.59-160.70; Fr. trans. cit., pp. 163-64; Eng. trans. cit., pp. 102-103.

⁵⁸ For Avicenna's views on prophecy see RAHMAN, *Avicenna's 'De anima'*, V, c. 6 cit., p. 248.9-250.4; also RAHMAN, *Avicenna's Psychology* cit., pp. 35-37.

⁵⁹ One must be careful not to take Avicenna's allusion to the necessity of the mediation of sense faculties, in the *Letter on the Soul* and elsewhere, as contradicting the *Shifā'* text cited in n. 51 above. The *Shifā'* text itself allows a role for the sensible and imaginative faculties, but it qualifies any causal interpretation of that role. The text is clearly meant to provide the reader with the most proper and technical description of the relation between imagination and intellect.

⁶⁰ Such a view is suggested by Bäck to account for thoughts about logical impossibilities and contrary-to-fact conditionals: "What inevitably comes to exist *in intellectu* is the mental act of supposing or imagining or intuiting; what is the object or content of that mental act need not exist *in intellectu*" (BÄCK, *Avicenna Conception of the Modalities* cit., p. 236). But I do not think that such an interpretation is consistent with the overall thrust of Avicenna's epistemology. In his own *De anima* Avicenna follows Aristotle's *De anima*, III, c. 6 (430b20-26) to provide an account of our knowledge of non-being and privation. On this model, negations and privations are known only with reference to their corresponding positive states. See RAHMAN, *Avicenna's 'De anima'*, V, c. 5 cit., p. 238.12-18. On such an account, it is difficult to see what the mental act corresponding to a privative or impossible concept would be in Avicenna, other than the correlative positive concept. More generally, a mental act in Avicenna is nothing but the mental existence of a given quiddity within an individual mind. This emerges clearly from Avicenna's claim that the universal form taken as existent within an intellect is a particular, i.e., a particular accident of an individual intellect: "And even if this form, in relation to the individuals, is a universal, in relation to the particular soul upon which it is impressed it is an individual, for it is one of the forms which are in the intellect" (AVICENNA, *Metaphysics*, V, c. 1 ed. cit., p. 205.14-16). Cf. *Ibid.*, V, c. 2 ed. cit., p. 209.8-9: "And insofar as this form is a form in a particular soul, it is one of the individuals among the sciences or concepts". These texts seem to make any individual mental act a function of the possession of an intelligible by an individual mind.

⁶¹ For conceptualization and assent see *Madkhal*, I, c. 13 ed. cit., pp. 17.7-19.7; *Ishārāt* ed. cit., pp. 3.15-4.11; English translation by S. C. INATI, *Remarks and Admonitions, Part One: Logic*, Toronto 1984, p. 49; *Kitāb al-Najāh*, ed. M. FAKHRY, Beirut 1985, pp. 43.1-19; 97.1-11. In the latter text Avicenna holds that even those existential propositions which are thought of without any corresponding judgment remain purely conceptual (p. 7.2-3). Thus it follows that if I can believe in phoenixes, I must be able to conceptualize them.

⁶² This is a central tenet of the theories outlined in Book V of Avicenna's *De anima*, including his psychological account of prophecy. See RAHMAN, *Avicenna's 'De anima'*, V, c. 5 cit., pp. 236.3-237.11; V, c. 6 cit., pp. 241.4-250.4. It is also evident in other texts, such as the collection of notes known as *Al-Mubāḥḥathāt (Discussions)*, edited in A. R. BADAWI, *Aristū 'inda al-'Arab*, Cairo 1947, pp. 75-116; see especially §467-68, pp. 231.3-232.10.

The prominent role of cogitation in complex propositional operations has been noted by several scholars, most recently by H. A. DAVIDSON, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*, Oxford 1992, pp. 96-102; 117-120. P. HEATH, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)*, Philadelphia 1992, p. 102 n. 15, has argued against Davidson on the grounds that Avicenna distinguishes the activity of the internal sense power of cogitation from the "discursive reasoning (*al-ʿilm al-fikrī*) of the theoretical faculty". But Heath's claim appears to be based upon a misreading of §468 of the *Mubāḥḥathāt* (ed. cit., p. 232.11-13). Heath takes Avicenna to be identifying the cogitative power (*al-quwwah al-mufakkirah*) with the intellective power (*al-quwwah al-aqlīyah*); but the text refers to the intellect *using (tastamilu)* the cogitative faculty. Avicenna does allow here that the term "cogitative faculty" (*al-quwwah al-mufakkirah*) is ambiguous: sometimes one may use the label to refer to the rational soul, specifically the habitual intellect, since this is the faculty which is seeking the intelligible through cogitation; other times one uses the label to refer to the imaginative faculty, which actually presents the "moving forms" that prepare

for the intelligible's reception (p. 232.16-18). But it is important in this regard to recall that such an ambiguity is built in to Avicenna's theory of the internal senses themselves, in which the cogitative faculty just *is* the compositive imagination when employed by reason. See RAHMAN, *Avicenna's 'De anima'*, I, c. 5 cit., pp. 45.2-6; IV, c. 1 cit., pp. 165.19-166.4.

⁶³ I have specified the usage here as "metaphysical" to distinguish it from the discussion of modal operators in logical texts, which are the main focus of BÄCK, *Avicenna Conception of the Modalities*, cit. I do not mean to suggest that the two usages are unrelated, but for my present purposes it is the discussions of modal notions in Book I of Avicenna's *Metaphysics* that best captures the difficulties in Avicenna's application of the term "impossible" to fictional forms.

⁶⁴ AVICENNA, *Metaphysics*, I, c. 5 ed. cit., p. 31. 5-10; MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., p. 226.

⁶⁵ Ibid., I, c. 5, p. 32.3-5; MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., p. 227.

⁶⁶ Ibid., I, c. 5, pp. 32.6-34.14; MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., pp. 227-32. For the *kalām* background to this discussion see MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., pp. 228-32.

⁶⁷ Ibid., I, c. 5, pp. 32.12-33.15; MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., pp. 227-29. Avicenna's remarks in this text reinforce the claim made in n. 60 above that the subject-marker existent in the mind would have to be the positive concept corresponding to the privation.

⁶⁸ Moreover, as we saw at n. 3 above, in the *Letter on the Soul* Avicenna refers to unreal beings explicitly as "existent in the soul". But in his logical texts Avicenna vacillates on the suitability of unreal beings to function as subjects of positive predication. In the *Ishārāt* he appears to leave open the possibility of an affirmative statement applying to a subject that is only existent in the estimative faculty, but it is unclear whether this existence has to be specified in the affirmation itself (e.g., "The phoenix is a mythical animal"). See *Ishārāt* ed. cit., pp. 28.14-29.2; INATI, *Remarks* cit., p. 86. In the *Najāh*, however, Avicenna is much more restrictive: the subject of any affirmative statement must be a really existent being. If we wish to talk meaningfully about unreal beings, such as phoenixes (the example is explicitly used here), we should properly confine our discourse to negative statements. Since Avicenna holds that so-called "indefinite" (*ghayr muḥaṣṣal*) terms of the form 'non-X' operate as positive predicates, this means that we cannot say, e.g., "Phoenixes are non-sighted", but only "Phoenixes are-not sighted". See *Najāh* ed. cit., p. 54.19-22.

⁶⁹ AVICENNA, *Metaphysics*, I, c. 5 ed. cit., p. 35.11, 15; cf. MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., p. 233.

⁷⁰ Ibid., I, c. 5, pp. 36.4-6; cf. MARMURA, *Primary Concepts* cit., p. 234. The reference to our knowledge of non-existence through existence recalls the discussion of non-being ('*adam*') earlier in the chapter.

⁷¹ See especially Treatise II of the *Metaphysics* of the *Najāh* ed. cit., pp. 261.1-263.12. For a convenient collection of translated passages regarding necessary and possible being, see G. F. HOURANI, *Ibn Sīnā on Necessary and Possible Existence*, *Philosophical Forum*, 4, 1972, pp. 74-86. (The *Najāh* text is translated on pp. 78-81.)

⁷² This point is made by H. A. DAVIDSON, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation, and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*, Oxford 1987, pp. 291-2.

⁷³ AVICENNA, *Najāh* ed. cit., p. 262.12.

⁷⁴ This is the title of the next chapter in the *Najāh* ed. cit., p. 262.19.

⁷⁵ DAVIDSON, *Proofs* cit., p. 293. I am not taking issue here with Davidson's claim, which I believe is correct. However, Davidson is concerning himself with beings that are "possible in themselves, necessary through another", not with beings which are "impossible in themselves".

⁷⁶ Since the world is eternal for Avicenna, there will also be no time at which unreal forms do not have an imaginal existence.

⁷⁷ Cf. BÄCK, *Avicenna's Conception of the Modalities* cit., p. 239, who bases his claim upon the nature of modal determinations in logic. From the metaphysical perspective, the best example of the quidditative basis of modality is Avicenna's various analyses of the characteristics of the necessary of existence in itself and the proofs for the existence of God based upon these analyses. See, for example, *Metaphysics* I, c. 6 ed. cit. pp. 37.1-42.7; the opening line of this chapter states

that “the necessary of existence and the possible of existence each has properties (*khawāṣṣ*)” (p. 37.6-7), which implies they must differ quidditatively.

⁷⁸ For a consideration of Avicenna’s views on God’s knowledge of evil, see A. IVRY, *Destiny Revisited: Avicenna’s Concept of Determinism*, in *Islamic Theology and Philosophy: Studies in Honor of George F. Hourani*, ed. M. E. MARMURA, Albany 1984, pp. 160-71.