Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars

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Amongst medieval philosophers from all three of the Abrahamic traditions, Avicenna is certainly one of the most systematic and proudly independent of thinkers. So it is somewhat surprising when he fails to take full advantage of his original insights in one area of philosophy to solve related problems in another. In this paper I highlight one such cluster of problems that arises from Avicenna's failure to bring his account of individuation—especially the individuation of the human soul—to bear on his discussion of the intelligibility of the singular. My consideration of the latter issue will focus on two rather contentious theses within Avicennian philosophy: (1) his insistence on the human soul's innate self-awareness, highlighted most famously in the "Flying Man" thought experiment; and (2) his controversial claim—for Islamic, Jewish, and Christian readers alike—that God is able to know particulars only "in a universal way." [1]

Of course, questions about the principle of individuation and the intelligibility of the singular are quite distinct philosophically: the first is primarily metaphysical and the second is epistemological. Still, for medieval philosophers operating within the broadly Aristotelian tradition, the link between individuation and intelligibility is a fairly salient one, since it was generally accepted that matter is in some fundamental way a principle of individuation, and that this individuating matter is unintelligible in its own right. The dual role that matter plays as both an individuator and an impediment to intelligibility lurks

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1. Throughout this paper I treat the terms "particular," "individual" and "singular" as synonymous.

behind all of the Avicennian theses that I will be examining, and unless one of these roles is abandoned, the intelligibility of singulars is threatened. Individuals will be intelligible only if the principle that individuates them is inherently transparent to the intellect.

What I wish to argue in this paper is that Avicenna does indeed adumbrate a theory of individuation that breaks away from the traditional peripatetic accounts on a number of key points that in principle should allow him to explain how individual human beings, though not *all* material singulars, are intelligible both to themselves and to other intellectual beings. He is able to do this through his appeal, both in his *Psychology* and in his logical and metaphysical accounts of individuation, to what he refers to as an "individual intention" (*ma'nan shakhsîy*). Though in the end he appears unwilling to exploit fully the possibilities afforded to him by this notion, nonetheless Avicenna's gesture in the direction of a unique individuating principle marks an important development in philosophical discussions of individuation.

1. Avicenna's General Account of Individuation[2]

Although the main focus of my discussion will reflect Avicenna's preoccupation with the individuation of human souls, Avicenna himself is adamant that the principles he invokes in his *Psychology* apply universally for all numerically multiplied species. Since all human souls share a single "species and intention" (that is, they all share the essential nature of "humanity"),[3] the only way there can be numerous human individuals is through the relation of form to matter:

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2. For an overview see Bäck 1994, 40–52.

3. Avicenna, *Psychology* 5.3, 198; *De anima* 223: *muttafaqah fī al-naw' wa-al-ma'nâ*. Note the use of the term *ma'nan* ("intention") as a synonym for *naw'* ("species"). In all the texts that I discuss in this paper, Avicenna's use of the slippery term *ma'nan* contributes to the ambiguities in his account. It has the effect of allowing him to segue from ontological to epistemological issues without clearly demarcating the

> This is because multiplicity of things is either with respect to quiddity and form (*min jihah al-mâhîyah wa-al-s̲ûrah*),[4] or with respect to the relation to the multiple element and matter, through which [the quiddity] is multiplied by the places which comprise every matter in any direction, the times which are proper to each in its origination, and the causes which divide them. But [souls] do not differ in quiddity and form, for their form is one. Therefore they only differ with respect to the recipient of the quiddity or to that to which the quiddity is specifically related, namely, the body. As to whether it is possible for the soul to be existent without a body, [in that case] it would be impossible to differentiate one soul from another in number. This is absolutely the case for everything (*wa hadhâ mut̲laqun fî kull shay'*).[5] For things whose essences (*dhawât-hâ*) are mere intentions and whose species have been multiplied through their individuals, their multiplicity can only be on account of their subjects, their recipients, the things that are affected by them, or some relation to them and to their times. (*Psychology* 5.3, 198; *De anima* 223.)

Given the foregoing disclaimer, then, it is appropriate to begin with an examination of the general account of individuation that Avicenna offers in Book 1, chapter 12 of the *Isagoge* of *The Healing (Al-Shifâ'*), and in Book 5, chapter 8, of its *Metaphysics*.

One striking feature of the accounts of individuation in both these texts is Avicenna's tendency to attribute individuation to a variety of factors, none of which is obviously predominant. While Avicenna always assigns an important role to designated matter[6] in these accounts, matter seems to be one of a number of necessary conditions each of whose individuating function requires the cooperation of the others:

> The individual becomes an individual only through the conjunction of accidental properties, both necessary and non-necessary, with the nature of the species, and the assignment to it of designated matter (*mâddah mushâr ilay-hâ*). It is impossible for intelligible properties, however many they be, to be conjoined to the species so that the

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transition—is a *ma'nan* just a concept, or is it also the ontological foundation for what is conceptualized? This ambiguity also allows Avicenna to gloss over the distinction between principles of intelligibility and sensibility: he often implies that a *ma'nan* is *per se* intelligible, yet some of his remarks on individual intentions suggest that they may be merely sensible.

4. This refers to the separate intellects and other celestial beings, each one of which is the sole member of its species and thus the sole exemplar of its form and quiddity. For further discussion of the problem of individuation as it pertains to these beings, see section 4 below.

5. That is, there are no exceptions within the realm of species which contain multiple individuals.

6. "Designated matter" *(mâddah mushâr ilay-hâ*) is literally "matter to which one can point." The qualification of "designated" is meant to indicate the matter which is a component of extramental corporeal individuals (*this* flesh and blood), in contrast to the "common matter" that is included in the quiddity of any hylomorphic species (flesh and blood as part of the essence of each member of the species "human").

> individual thereby would become subsistent to the mind, without their having in the end reference to an individuated intention (*ma'nan mutashakhass*). For if you said that Zayd is the tall one, the writer, the handsome man, and so on, [giving him] as many descriptions as you wish, Zayd's individuality would not become specified for you in the intellect. Indeed, it is possible for the meaning which is assembled from the totality of all these [descriptions] to belong to more than one individual. Rather what so specifies it [as an individual] is existence (*al-wujûd*) and reference to an individual intention (*al-ishârah ilâ ma'nan shakhsîy*). This is exemplified by your saying that he is the son of a certain person, that he exists at a certain time, that he is tall, and that he is a philosopher, when it so happens that no one at that time sharing these descriptions exists and when you have had previous acquaintance with this concurrence through apprehension of the kind that is indicated through the senses by way of pointing to a specific person and a specific time. It is then that the individuality of Zayd becomes ascertained and the above statement would indicate his individuality. (*Isagoge* 1.12, 70; trans. Marmura 1979, 50–51, slightly modified.)

Here in the *Isagoge* Avicenna approaches individuation from the perspective of the problem of universals and his own resolution of that problem in terms of the two modes of existence of the quiddity or "common nature." In order for any species to be instantiated, the properties characteristic of concrete extramental existence must be added to those intrinsic to the nature of the species itself. While these additional properties can be conceptualized intellectually as universals, like the species they are also indeterminate in themselves with respect to universality or particularity. Moreover, they can *only* exist in the mind as intelligible concepts inasmuch as they are universals. So attaching the universalized, intelligible conceptions corresponding to an individual's properties to the concept of her essential nature will not serve either to individuate the nature of humanity in reality, nor to make the extramental individual intelligible *qua* individual. Rather, some other factor must already be presupposed as a substratum or receptacle in which both the nature and the individual's properties are instantiated extramentally. Avicenna first mentions designated matter as the obvious candidate for an individuator here, but he also refers to "existence" and the "individual intention" later in the passage, without elaborating on the relations amongst these three principles. Nor are we told exactly what

an "individual intention" is, nor what metaphysical or epistemic status it has. Instead, Avicenna expends most of his effort attempting to show the inadequacies of what we now would call "bundle theories" of individuation. His argument is that no series of purely universal, intelligible properties, however exhaustive, can produce a definite description of an individual that cannot, at least in principle, be applied to another similar individual.

It is important to note that Avicenna is not rejecting bundle theories of individuation outright here. Rather, he is pointing out some of their obvious insufficiencies while recognizing that they do have considerable explanatory power.[7] Avicenna's point is that it is impossible for an individual to be nothing but the collection of its properties, even if in fact every individual should turn out to have something like its own definite description. But it remains the case that some individual particular must already exist in order for any description to count as hers. For this reason, Avicenna admits that definite descriptions can succeed in giving us quasi-definitions of individuals, but he denies that the individual *as such* thereby becomes intelligible. While the intellect can grasp an individual's description through her properties, those properties only succeed in picking

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7. On this see also *Metaphysics.* 5.8, §§7–8, 188–89, where Avicenna argues that while the addition of universal B to universal A may indeed yield a concept that is more particular than the concept of A alone, the end result remains a universal: "There is, however, no definition of the singular in any respect whatsoever, even thought the composite has some definition. This is because definition is composed of attributive (*nâ'itah*) names that necessarily do not refer to anything concrete (*laysa fī-hâ ishârah ilâ shay' mu'ayyan*). … Since every name confined to the definition of a singular thing indicates an attribution and since attribution has the possibility of being applicable to many, composition not removing this possibility from it, then [it follows that] if A is a universal meaning and B, [also] a universal meaning, is added to it, it is possible that there would be some particularization (*takhṣîṣ mâ*). But, if [this is] the particularization of a universal by a universal, then that which is A and B would remain a universal, having the possibility of sharing (*shirkah*) [a common characteristic with others]. An example of this is if you define this [person] as Socrates, saying, "He is the philosopher" there is a sharing (*shirkah*) [with others]. If you say, "He is the religious philosopher," there also a sharing [with others]. If you say, "He is the religious philosopher unjustly put to death," there is also sharing [with others]. If you say, "He is the son of so-and-so," this [description] also has the possibility of being shared [by others]."

her out for us if we have some sort of prior acquaintance with her through the senses : "If that to which [the description] is attributed is an individual among the group of individuals [belonging to] some species, there is no access to knowing it except through direct observation (*bi-al-mushâhadah*), and the intellect will arrive at knowledge of it only through sensation" (*Metaphysics* 5.8, §9, 189).

Because Avicenna's general account of individuation does retain a central role for designated matter, then, the individual as such remains inaccessible to the intellect unless it is aided by sensation. Yet the individual does not appear to be totally unintelligible: an exhaustive or near-exhaustive enumeration of its properties may function as a quasi-definition. Avicenna even grants in *Metaphysics* 5.8 that the individual has a *quiddity* of sorts just as he asserts in *Isagoge* 1.12 that there is some sort of intention that is proper to it as an individual:[8] "There belongs to genus inasmuch as it is a genus a quiddity, to species inasmuch as it is a species a quiddity, and to the particular singular (*li-l-mufrad al-juz'îy*) there also belongs a quiddity (*mâhîyah*) by way of the concomitant accidents that render it subsistent (*mimma yataqawwamu bi-hi min al-a'râ<u>d</u> al-lâzimah*).[9] [Here,] it is as though, when the quiddity is said of that which pertains to the genus and species and of that which pertains to the singular individual, it is said equivocally" (*Metaphysics*, 5.8, §6, 188). If we now turn to Avicenna's account of the individuation of the human soul in *Psychology* 5.3, we will see that, true to his word, Avicenna makes use of these various

8. It is, of course, possible that the individual intention and individual quiddity are not the same thing, but the parallels between these two accounts, with the attendant claim that the individual has a quiddity only equivocally, suggest that Avicenna intends them as place-markers for the same ontological principle.

9. That is, the bundle of properties that seems to function as a quiddity.

features from his general account of individuation to explain the special case of the human soul.

2. Individual Human Souls: Psychology *5.3*

Avicenna's concern in the *Psychology* is, of course, to explain how the human soul can be self-subsistent and hence immortal, while at the same time sharing its quiddity with other individuals of the species "human." Yet he is also constrained in this context by his desire to refute the theory of the pre-existence and transmigration of souls.[10] These two aims tend to pull Avicenna's accounts of human individuation in opposite directions: the subsistence thesis favors the downplaying of the traditional identification of matter as the principle of individuation, whereas opposition to transmigration depends upon a strong link between each individual soul and its corresponding material body.

For this reason, Avicenna's general views on the merits as well as the shortcomings of bundle theories of individuation become important. Given the soul's subsistence and independence from the body, Avicenna cannot fall back on appeals to designated matter alone to explain its individuation, so the capacity of bundles of properties to individuate, whatever its limitations, will be important in the human case. Yet Avicenna cannot simply identify the individual human soul with the collection of its properties in the light of his own acknowledgement of the inadequacy of bundle theories. The need for some further unifying factor beyond matter becomes especially urgent in this context, and it is here if anywhere that we would expect the elusive individual intention to take on a more central role in explaining individuation. Yet Avicenna makes no mention of it at all in his account of the soul's initial origination, preferring to focus instead on the individuating

10. Druart 2000 brings out clearly Avicenna's concern to waylay the upholders of transmigration.

function played by such properties as spatial location, temporality, and the causal relations that befall the soul through its con-creation with the body.[11] And even when he does allude to an individual intention in the course of establishing the soul's separability from the body, its individuating function seems almost indistinguishable from that played by the conglomeration of accidents that is peculiar to one soul to the exclusion of any other:

> After the separation of souls from bodies, without a doubt all of the souls would have existed as an essence singled out through the differences of their matters which had been, through the temporal differences of their origination, and through the differences of the states which they had in relation to their different bodies. For we know certainly that what makes the universal intention exist as a designated individual cannot make it exist as an individual unless it adds to it an intention beyond its specificity (*ma'nan 'alâ naw'îyati-hi*) from among the intentions which attach to it at the time of its origination and cling to it, by which it becomes an individual, whether we know this [intention] or not. (*Psychology* 5.3, 200; *De anima* 225–6.)

Here, as in the *Isagoge,* Avicenna claims that in order for any species to be concretely instantiated, something further must be added to the nature of the species. Avicenna's purpose in referring to this additional individuating feature as an "intention" (*ma'nan*) as well is not clear. The term is inherently ambiguous and may simply be an indication of Avicenna's reluctance to assign the individuating feature a determinate ontological status (hence, a little later he uses the even vaguer term, *amr*—'thing'—to refer to what is presumably the same item as the individual *ma'nâ*).[12] But Avicenna often uses the term *ma'nan* to indicate that a property or characteristic is not *per se* material, as he does in its

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11. See the text from *Psychology* 5.3, 198; *De anima* 223 cited above, where Avicenna refers to "the multiple element and matter, through which [the quiddity] is multiplied by the places which comprise every matter in any direction, the times which are proper to each in its origination, and the causes which divide them."

12. See the beginning of the passage cited below from *Psychology* 5.3, 200–201; *De anima* 226.

application to the objects of the internal sense faculty of estimation.[13] Hence, to call a characteristic or property an "intention" does not of itself indicate that the property is intelligible, but it seems to allow for that possibility at least in principle.

Avicenna's refusal to say anything more precise about the ontological status of individual intentions introduces considerable ambiguity into his subsequent attempts to explain the relation between the individuating functions of the individual intention and the set of properties which uniquely picks out *this* individual human. He continues to trace individuation to some special principle whose exact nature remains hidden from us, yet he now implies that this individuator may nonetheless turn out to be one or more items from among the individual's bundle of proper characteristics:[14]

> And there is no doubt that it is through some thing (*bi-amrin mâ*) that [the soul] was individuated, and that this thing is not its impression in matter. For the falseness of saying this has been made known.[15] Rather, this thing belonging to it is one of the dispositions, powers, and spiritual accidents, or a collection of them through their combination, even if we are ignorant of them. After it is individuated as a single thing, it is not possible for it and another soul to be numerically one in essence. (*Psychology* 5.3, 200–201; *De anima* 226.)[16]

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13. I am not asserting that Avicenna means to indicate that individual intentions are examples of the sorts of intentions that are the objects of the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). Although some of the functions Avicenna assigns to the estimation do seem to involve the grasping of individuals as such, I do not think Avicenna can intend that all individuating intentions are of this sort. For an overview of the cognitive functions that Avicenna does attribute to estimation, see Black 1993.

14. One recurrent note that Avicenna sounds in his accounts of both general and human individuation is the idea that while we can be certain that there *is* an ultimate individuating principle, it remains hidden to us. This sort of hesitation is unusual for Avicenna, and it indicates that individuation was a difficult problem for his philosophical system to confront.

15. Avicenna refers here to the proofs of the rational soul's incorporeality that he has just set forth in *Psychology* 5.2, 187; *De anima* 209–210. The chapter is entitled "Proving that the subsistence of the rational soul is not impressed in corporeal matter" (*fī ithbât qiwâm al-nafs al-nâṯiqah ghayr munṭba'ah fî mâddah jismânîyah*). The text begins: "One of the things about which there is no doubt is that there is in the human being a certain thing and substance which is informed by intelligibles through reception. And we say that the substance which is the place of intelligibles (*maḥall al-ma'qûlât*) is neither a body nor subsistent in a body in the sense that it is a power in it, or a form for it in any respect."

16. The term translated here as "essence" is *dhât.* It should not be understood in this context to mean "essence" in the sense of quiddity, but rather, the concretely existent individual. It is one of the terms that Avicenna uses for "self" in the Flying Man experiment and other texts on self-awareness.

Once again, in this passage Avicenna does little to clarify how the individuator—whatever it might be—performs its individuating function. Rather, the principal point here is directly aimed at supporting the soul's capacity to exist apart from the body, and the passage does little more than to reaffirm the generally agnostic character of Avicenna's account of the principle of individuation. We know for certain *that* there must be an individuating principle, and we are now reminded that whatever that individuating feature may be, in the case of human souls it cannot be a property that is essentially material, since this would rob the soul of those cognitive operations that render it rational. The ultimate principle of individuation cannot, then, be a property that is incompatible with the specific quiddity of the resultant individual. Hence no rational soul can be individuated by being impressed in matter, so the abiding principle of individuation here must be among the soul's *spiritual* accidents (*al-aʿrâḏ al-rûḥânîyah*), powers, and dispositions.[17]

A final attempt at clarification is offered at the end of *Psychology* 5.3, where Avicenna provides a list of properties that might serve as candidates for these individuating spiritual accidents:

> But we are certain that it is possible that once the soul has come into being with the origination of some temperament, after that (*baʿda-hu*) a disposition (*hay'ah*) would come into being for it in the rational actions and rational affections which in their totality are distinct from the analogous disposition in another [soul], [just as] the two temperaments in the two bodies are distinct; and that the acquired disposition (*al-hay'ah al-muktasabah*) which is called the intellect in actuality (*ʿaqlan bi-al-fiʿl*) would also have a sort of definition by which it would be distinguished from another soul; and that awareness of its particular essence (*shuʿûr bi-dhâti-hâ al-juz'îyah*) would befall it, this awareness being some disposition in it which is also proper to it and does not belong to any other. It is also possible that there will originate in it, from the side of the bodily powers, a proper disposition as well, and this disposition will attach to the dispositions of character (*al-hay'ât al-khulqîyah*) or simply be them. Or it may also be the case that other

17. On this point see Druart 2000, 265.

> proper characteristics which are hidden from us might cling to souls with their origination and afterwards, just as there clings to the like of them individuals of bodily species, which become distinguished by them so long as they remain. And the souls may be distinguished in this way, through their special characteristics which are in them, whether there be bodies or not, and whether we be acquainted with these states or not, or only with some of them. (*Psychology* 5.3, 201; *De anima* 226.)

Here Avicenna clarifies that while the body and its peculiar temperamental qualities are the occasion for the origination of the soul, once created there occur to that soul characteristics that are: (1) unique to that soul in the same way that characteristics like complexion, height, and hair color are unique to its proper body; and (2) result from the soul's peculiarly *rational* dispositions, the ones that have been shown in the previous chapter of the *Psychology* not to be impressed in the body. More tentative is Avicenna's claim that, (3) the soul's moral virtues and vices, which he admits are in large measure a function of its bodily capacities, could in some way produce individuating dispositions in the soul itself.[18]

Despite these efforts to spell out the sorts of properties that might contribute to human individuation, Avicenna has still left the fundamental question of the role and nature of the individual intention entirely unanswered. In effect, we seem to be left with a simple bundle theory of human individuation, though we now know a good deal more about what Avicenna thinks might belong in the bundle.

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18. This proviso is of course necessary to give any meaning at all to accounts of joy and pain in the afterlife, even highly intellectualized accounts of the sort that Avicenna offers. Avicenna is presumably reasoning that moral dispositions must remain in the separated soul in order to make sense of the claim that it is takes pleasure in its continued intellectual activity, or is pained by the absence of bodily pleasures. For a comprehensive examination of these aspects of Avicenna's philosophy, see Michot 1986.

There is something oddly "existential" about Avicenna's claim here, since it implies that in some sense we *make* our individual essences through our moral choices. In itself, however, this claim is not of special importance for the question of individuation. If Avicenna is wrong about this, we would still maintain our individuality in virtue of the rational soul's other individuating principles. In contemporary terms, however, one might object that without our moral dispositions our personal identity will be lost even though we remain individuated.

Yet even the properties that Avicenna identifies as possible spiritual individuators seem unable to provide a sufficiently robust account of the unity and uniqueness of the individual human soul. This is particularly evident in Avicenna's use of temporal language to describe the relation between the peculiarly rational principles of individuation and the soul's initial origination through the body. The language here seems to suggest that the soul undergoes two moments of individuation: a first one at birth, where the principle of individuation is its bodily temperament; and a second one at some time "afterwards," where the principle of individuation now becomes its rational activities and other acquired spiritual dispositions.[19]

Now, it might be supposed that Avicenna makes this claim deliberately, that he somehow wishes to suggest that the rational soul is not entirely formed as an individual until it "realizes" itself by way of some intellectual development. For in referring explicitly to the "intellect in actuality" as an "*acquired* disposition," Avicenna seems to appeal to those individual cognitive differences that are a function of the fact that we learn different things at different times and develop different degrees of facility for conjoining at will with the Agent Intellect (*Psychology* 5.6, 215–19; *De anima*, 244–48). This clearly occurs *after*—in the fully temporal sense of the term—we first come into being as individual soul-body composites.[20]

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19. Druart 2000, 272, also addresses this issue from a slightly different perspective when she differentiates between Avicenna's accounts of origination—which requires the body—and its "continuous existence while individual"—which does not.

20. It is not part of my purpose here to address the question of whether Avicenna's choice of possible candidates to act as human individuators is compatible with other elements in his psychology, such as his denial of intellectual memory. This is a difficult problem for Avicenna to overcome, since it is hard to see how the rational soul could be permanently altered by its acquisition of intelligibles in this life, given that for him there is no such acquisition (on this point see also Druart 2000, 266, 273). Perhaps Avicenna could respond that while the human soul may not "store" intelligibles in an intellectual memory, it does develop a

Yet I cannot see why Avicenna would want to appeal to the intellect in actuality in this way. Surely there is no philosophical impediment to his claiming that upon my origination with my body, my rational soul itself—in the form of my potential intellect—exists in its own right as an individual. Since the rational soul is not impressed in matter and needs no corporeal organ to operate (a point argued for at length in *Psychology* 5.2), why can't we posit that it is present, as one of those "hidden" properties to which Avicenna has alluded throughout, *prior* to my acquisition of any personal knowledge of my own?[21]

Indeed, Avicenna's naming of the intellect in actuality as the most likely candidate for an individuator of the rational soul is all the more surprising given the allusion to the soul's awareness of itself as one of the rational properties that is utterly unique in each individual. While Avicenna does not explicitly identify self-awareness here as a function of the intellect in actuality, the close association of the two points is disturbing. For Avicenna's own accounts of self-awareness, as exemplified in the famous Flying Man thought-experiment, clearly require self-awareness to be prior in every respect to the soul's acquisition of other intelligibles. So if self-awareness offers one of the strongest pieces of evidence that the human soul has its own "particular essence" (*dhât juz'îyah*), that should suffice for Avicenna to make the further claim that the human soul must also

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facility for conjunction with the Agent Intellect, as established in *Psychology* 5.6. So perhaps this facility or disposition is something that affects the soul's individual nature and thereby determines the level of its disembodied intellection.

21. While one might think that Avicenna is evoking the account of the rational soul's development and ultimate perfection that underlies traditional theories of conjunction and the acquired intellect, this is prohibited by Avicenna's denial of intellectual memory, which entails that for him, in contrast with Fârâbî and Averroes, conjunction with the Agent Intellect is merely episodic.

be individuated, insofar as it is rational, from the first moment of its existence, and that its individuation persists so long as it continues to exist.

3. Individuation and Self-Awareness

The internal tensions within Avicenna's attempts to apply his theory of individuation to the particular case of the human soul have brought me to the question of the relation between Avicenna's accounts of human individuation and self-awareness. As I have just shown, in his appeal to self-awareness as an individuating factor in *Psychology* 5.3, Avicenna seems to indicate that self-awareness is a disposition or activity that the soul only acquires subsequent to its initial embodiment. Yet this claim appears to fly in the face of one of central pillars of Avicennian psychology, namely, the affirmation that the soul has an innate and unwavering awareness of itself, as evidenced in the famous thought experiment commonly known as the Flying Man. In this experiment, Avicenna claims that even if we imagine ourselves born all at once but fully mature, and suspended in a void so that we cannot sense either our own bodies or the external world, we would not hesitate to affirm the existence of our individual selves.[22] Now while the Flying Man itself may not make the explicit assertion that self-awareness is innate, a number of other texts in which Avicenna elaborates on the nature of self-awareness insist upon its primitive character. In the following text from the *Notes,* for example, Avicenna is

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22. For an analysis and overview of the various versions of the Flying Man argument, see Marmura 1986. The latest version, from Avicenna's *Ishârât wa-Tanbîhât (Pointers and Reminders),* is as follows: "And if you imagine your self (*dhâta-ka*) to have been at its first creation mature and whole in mind and body and it is supposed to be in a generality of position and physical circumstance where it does not perceive its parts, where its limbs do not touch each other but are rather spread apart, and that this self is momentarily suspended in temperate air, you will find that it will be unaware of everything but the "fixedness" (*thubût*) of its individual existence (*anniyyati-hâ*)" (As translated in Marmura 1986, 391).

unequivocal in declaring that self-awareness is concomitant with the soul's very existence as an individual:

> Self-awareness is essential to the soul (*al-shu'ûr bi-al-dhât dhâtî li-l-nafs*), it is not acquired from outside. It is as if, when the self comes to be, awareness comes to be along with it. … Our awareness of ourselves is our very existence (*shu'ûr-nâ bi-dhât-nâ huwa nafs wujûd-n*â). ... Self-awareness is natural (*gharîzah*) to the self, for it is its existence itself, so there is no need of anything external by which we perceive the self. Rather, the self is that by which we perceive the self. (*Notes* 160–161.)[23]

The account of self-awareness expressed here, according to which the human soul is in some way aware of itself at all times, from the first moment of its existence, would seem to be the natural counterpart to a theory of individuation that favors a central role for the individual intention, and antithetical to any version of the bundle theory. Oddly enough, however, even in those few places in which Avicenna attempts to articulate the cognitive content of this primitive form of self-awareness, he appears to reduce it to the very type of definite description that is associated in the *Isagoge* and *Metaphysics* with bundle theories of individuation:

> If this self-awareness is not called an "intellection" (*'aqlan*), but rather, the term "intellection" is proper to what belongs to the awareness of the abstract universal, then one could say that my awareness of myself is not an intellection and that I do not understand my self. But if every perception of what is abstract in subsistence [i.e., separate from matter] is called an "intellection," it need not be granted that every intelligible of everything is a universal intention subsisting through its definition. … For not everything has a definition, nor is every intelligible just a simple concept, but rather, the thing may be understood through its states, so that its definition is perceived mixed with its accidents. In this way, when I understand my self I understand a definition to which is conjoined an inseparable accident (*'ârid lâzim*). (*Investigations* 1947, §372, 208–9; 1992, §§283–84, 118–19.)

In the same way that we expect Avicenna's goals in the *Psychology* to lead him to identify the individual intention as a simple, spiritual property that is added to the essence

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23. For a fuller consideration of this and other texts pertaining to self-awareness, see Black forthcoming.

of humanity to produce *this* singular human, so too this passage leads us to anticipate the identification of an individuating intention which is both intelligible and abstract, though not universal, as the object of self-awareness. Yet Avicenna stops short of identifying any simple intelligible corresponding to the individual self, taking refuge instead in the intellect's ability to grasp the individual through complex quasi-definitions composed of a series of universals, after the model of an essential species-level description like "laughing rational animal."[24] By the same token, when Avicenna argues elsewhere in the *Investigations* that it is materiality, not individuality or singularity, that is the impediment to intellectual understanding (a point familiar to readers of Aquinas), he again stops just short of asserting that there is a uniquely individual intention that constitutes the object of the soul's self-awareness.[25] Rather, the condition that Avicenna stipulates as necessary for self-awareness could easily be met by my grasping any abstract, spiritual property or set of properties unique to me as an individual but independent of my physical embodiment:

> It has not been shown that the particular cannot be apprehended at all without a body, nor that the particular cannot be converted into the judgement of the universal. Rather, when the particular is not individuated by means of magnitude, place, and the like, then there is no hindrance to [the intellect] being aware of it. The impossibility of this has not been shown anywhere. And there is no impediment to there being a material cause of this individual, and to its being a material thing in some respect, so long as the concomitant individuating form is not itself a material [form], but is instead one of the forms

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24. It is difficult not to hear the echo here of the remark in *Psychology* 5.3, 201; *De anima* 226 cited above, that attributes to the individual's intellect in actuality "a sort of definition (*'alâ ḥadd mâ*) by which it would be distinguished from another soul." On this point one may also compare similar remarks made by Avicenna in response to questions concerning the relation between my knowledge of my own individual essence and my knowledge of the essential nature of humanity which I share with Zayd: "When you understand the soul or humanity absolutely and abstractly, you understand part of your essence; whereas when you understand the humanity of Zayd , you have added something else to the part of your essence which you join to it, so that you perceive part of your essence [and] part of another essence" (*Investigations* 1947, §426, 222–23; 1992, §892, 318).

25. While this Avicennian text is not available to Aquinas, one notes the obvious similarity to Aquinas's claims in *ST* 1.86.1 ad 3m, that materiality, not singularity, is what impedes the intellect.

> characteristic of that whose individuation is not through a body. (*Investigations* 1947, §371, 208; 1992, §§279–80, 117.)

Indeed, even in Avicenna's account of the separated soul's awareness of itself after the body's death, individual intentions receive no mention at all. We are left, in the end, with nothing but an indirect grasp of a cluster of individuating forms or dispositions:

> He was asked whether we are aware of our particularized selves (*al-mutakhassasah*) after separation, just as we are aware of them now; or are we aware of ourselves absolutely and not as particularized (*lâ mutakhassasah*), in the way that we now understand, for example, the intention of the soul and the intention of human being? The reply: We will be aware of our selves by means of the dispositions (*bi-al-hay'ât*) by which they have been individuated by a necessary individuation. (Ibid., 1947, §427, 223; 1992, §893, 318.)

Avicenna's own intuitions on self-awareness expressed in the Flying Man hypothesis, and in the passage from the *Notes* cited above, would seem to demand that the object of self-awareness be a simple, unique, intelligible individuator which can be grasped directly and non-discursively by the intellect. Individual intentions would seem to be the ideal candidates to play this role. But this is a move which Avicenna, for whatever reason, declines to make. For all his protestations that it is immateriality, and not universality, that is the mark of intelligibility, Avicenna never succeeds in liberating what is intelligible about individual humans from the realm of universals. Even if I am individuated by a unique cluster of spiritual properties and dispositions, the intelligible concept that corresponds to me will be entirely composed of universals, and any set of universals, however exhaustive and complex, is itself a universal. Still, if the individual human soul *is* intelligible to itself in the way described in the preceding texts, one would expect it to be intelligible in the same way to all other intellects. Once again, however, this is a conclusion which Avicenna is reluctant to draw.

4. God's Knowledge of Particulars

While Avicenna's failure to exploit the possibilities that individual intentions might offer for his accounts of the soul's subsistence and self-awareness is perhaps surprising, it is equally remarkable that he fails to take advantage of the parallels between the soul's awareness of itself by way of concomitant spiritual forms as just described, and his controversial account of the way in which God can be said to know certain privileged particulars, though only "in a universal way" (*Metaphysics* 8.6, §15, 288). While most discussions of this notorious claim focus on its implications for God's lack of providence over particulars in the sublunar world, including human souls, my interest is instead on the similarities between human souls and the class of particular beings whom Avicenna declares to be knowable by God "in a universal way."[26]

Admittedly, this class of beings is a relatively small one, namely, those individuals who are the sole members of their species; no sublunar individuals, but only celestial phenomena, are included among them. In *Metaphysics* 8.6, the examples Avicenna gives of such particulars are heavenly bodies like the spheres of Jupiter and the sun, each of which, according to Ptolemaic cosmology, is "the only one of its species and has no similar" (Ibid., 8.6, §17, 288). Also included in this class are the astronomical phenomena that depend upon the motions and interactions of such individuals, and it is one of these phenomena, the eclipse, upon which Avicenna focuses most of his attention (Ibid., §§18–22, 288–290). Such individuals appear to constitute an intermediate class of entities which are temporal and corporeal like material individuals, yet unique in kind like the

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26. For discussions of Avicenna's accounts of God's knowledge of particulars, see Marmura 1962; Adamson 2005.

separate intellects with which they are affiliated.[27] Like human individuals, these particulars are corporeal beings, individuated at least in part by their spatial, temporal, and causal properties and relations. Hence, they remain indefinable and unintelligible *qua* individual.

Moreover, while Avicenna's positive assessment of God's ability to know such particulars in a universal way turns on the fact that, unlike human souls, they *are* the sole instances of their species, it is nonetheless important to recognize that on Avicennian principles the heavenly spheres are not essentially unrepeatable. Indeed, two heavenly bodies, the sun and the earth, are the examples that Avicenna chooses in *Metaphysics* 5.1 to illustrate the third of his three types of universals, those whose quiddities admit of the possibility of being multiplied, though external factors impede this from actually happening.[28] This is perhaps the reason why Avicenna acknowledges that the same difficulties that beset attempts to define other sorts of individuals by means of definite descriptions will also apply in these celestial cases. It may indeed be that in grasping the nature of their species the intellect in fact has a determinate description that applies to one individual to the exclusion of all others, but this holds only incidentally. The definitions of these beings are still composed of universals, since they involve the grasp

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27. In *Metaphysics* 8.6, §§14–15, 287–88, Avicenna emphasizes that God cannot understand the mutable and temporal in a temporal way, since this would involve change in God himself. But his focus is again on the material basis for temporal properties and the fact that such properties require a corresponding material organ in order to be perceived.

28. *Metaphysics* 5.1, §1, 148–49 (translation slightly modified): "'Universal' is [also] said of the intention whose very conception does not prevent its being predicated of many. It is only prevented if some cause prevents it, and proof indicates [such prevention]. An example of this is [the case of] 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 intention 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, not by reason of its very conception."

of the various attributes which these individuals possess, attributes which as such are predicable of many:[29]

> [God] would thus apprehend particular things inasmuch as they are universal—I mean, inasmuch as they have attributes (*ṣifât*). If these [attributes] become specified individually in [the particulars], [this takes place] in relation to an individuated time or an individuated circumstance. If this circumstance is also understood with its attributes, it will have the same status as [the particulars]. But inasmuch as [these attributes] would depend on principles where the species of each is [confined] to its individual [instance], they are attributed to individual things. We have said that such a dependence may give these individuals a description and a characterization confined to [each of] them. If that individual is one of the things that are for the intellect also an individual, then the intellect would have access [for apprehending] the thing described. This is the individual which is the only one of its species and to which nothing is similar—as, for example, the sphere of the sun or Jupiter. If, however, the species is dispersed in individuals, the intellect will have no access to that thing's description, unless this [individual] is directly referred to initially, as you have learned. (*Metaphysics* 8.6, §§16–17, 288.)

By the same token, in the famous analysis that ensues, Avicenna treats the eclipse as an event that is potentially duplicable and whose individuality is therefore in some sense incidental. The cosmologist who knows, on the basis of astronomical calculations, that an eclipse will happen at a particular time in the history of the cosmos, nonetheless possesses purely universal knowledge "because this notion could be predicated of many eclipses, each one of which is in this state." Even if such an astronomer were to "know through some argument that that eclipse will only be a certain concrete one (*bi-'ayni-hi*)," this "would not remove universality" from his knowledge. Only direct observation of the

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29. Avicenna also discusses the limited definability of this class of unique particulars at the end of *Metaphysics* 5.8, §9,189 (translation slightly modified): "If that to which it is attributed is one of the individuals of which each individual fulfills the reality of the species so there is nothing similar to it, and if the intellect understood that species through its [sole] individual instance, then, if the description (*al-rasm*) is attributed to [such an individual], the intellect will have knowledge (*wuqûf*) of it. The mind will not fear any change of state resulting from the possibility of the thing's corruption, since what is like this thing is not corrupted." Note that while Avicenna admits corruptibility is not a problem here, and while he acknowledges that such singulars are cognizable to the intellect in some fashion, he employs the vague and atechnical term *wuqûf* for the cognitive state that is produced, a choice that indicates he is unsure exactly how to classify it.

eclipse at the time it is occurring, by an observer who is himself temporal, will render this knowledge particular (Ibid., §18, 288–89).

From the foregoing overview of Avicenna's discussion of God's knowledge of particulars, it is hard to see what it is that makes such particulars as eclipses and heavenly spheres any more knowable "in a universal way" than are human individuals. For while humans are not the sole members of their species, the account that Avicenna has given us of the individuation of human souls seems to require that each one of us has her own unique definite description that picks out her and her alone. Such a definite description would seem to have same epistemic merits and deficiencies as does the universal knowledge that God possesses of Jupiter, the sun, and eclipses. It is, of course, difficult to apply Avicenna's account of how we can have universal knowledge of a particular eclipse to the case of individual human souls, since the principle of individuation for eclipses is unclear. As temporal events whose subjects are the sole members of their species, one suspects that time of occurrence—both absolute and relative to other eclipses—is the only individuating factor here. But if that is so, immaterial human souls, once created, would seem to have a greater claim to simple intelligibility *qua* individuals than temporal events befalling uniquely exemplified celestial individuals.

Indeed, to the extent that rational human souls are immaterial individuals, they would seem to have a greater claim to intelligibility than do any of the celestial bodies, since human individuality is ultimately traceable to "spiritual" dispositions and properties that are not subject to direct sensible observation. In this respect, human souls would appear to be more akin to the souls and intellects of the spheres than to the spheres themselves. So if the heavenly spheres fall under the scope of divine providence to a limited extent, *a*

fortiori so should individual human souls. They too are intermediate entities, essentially immaterial individuals who are nonetheless dependent in some way on matter for their multiplicity.[30]

5. Conclusion

Tantalizing though they may be, Avicenna's appeals to individual intentions remain disappointing and underdeveloped. While he seems to recognize the need for some additional ontological principle beyond matter to explain intra-species individuation, especially in the case of human souls, Avicenna seems never to have accorded individual intentions any determinate ontological status. Sometimes they appear to be distinct and special properties—perhaps supervenient ones—that emerge from the concatenation of accidents that comes about when an individual instance of some species is created. At other times these intentions seem simply to be one or more properties from amongst the bundle peculiar to *this* individual that happen to mark it out as distinct from all the rest of its kind. In these contexts, individuation seems to come about almost incidentally, and to admit of no essential core.

While both these models of individual intentions preserve important aspects of a bundle theory of individuation, their consequences for the intelligibility of the individual that is thereby realized are radically different. On the latter picture, the individual may *de facto* be unique and knowable with reference to the set of properties that happens to belong to it alone, but there is no guarantee of this, as Avicenna himself points out in

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30. Avicenna does not mention the individual intentions to which he alludes in his accounts of individuation when he discusses God's knowledge of the particular heavenly spheres. Since their individual natures fully exhaust the reality of the species, perhaps Avicenna assumed there would be no need for such intentions in these cases, though once again, the potential multiplicity of the spheres would seem to require the positing of some additional individuating properties.

Metaphysics 5.8. Still, such an individual should at least be intelligible "in a universal way," and Avicenna's failure to note this possibility is perhaps an indication of how little philosophical importance he himself accorded to the limited version of providence he defended.[31] By contrast, on the former supervenience model—which seems to foreshadow the Scotistic account of individuation by means of the *differentia individualis*—the resultant individual is rendered unique and unrepeatable, despite being one of many.[32] A foundation for the intellectual cognition of singulars is at least present in this account, since there is some new and unique property to be grasped in grasping the individual, one that is truly intelligible without being merely universal.

It seems to me, then, that Avicenna had all the pieces that would be needed to present both a new ontology of individuals and a new account of their intelligibility—at least where those individuals are humans. It is unclear why he failed to take the final step. Perhaps his main preoccupation lay elsewhere: perhaps he was too concerned with defending the subsistence the human soul to give sufficient attention to refining the general metaphysical picture of individuation from which his account of that soul was

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31. On this point see also Adamson 2005, 274.

32. I am not aware of Scotus citing Avicenna's views on individuation in any of his accounts of the individual difference, nor do I know of any secondary literature suggesting Avicennian inspiration for Scotus on this point. Scotus's most famous accounts of the individual difference cite approvingly the Avicennian theory of the common nature, outlined in *Metaphysics* 1.5 and especially 5.1–2, but they do not invoke any Avicennian precedent for the individual difference itself.

It is interesting to note in this regard that one finds in Scotus an echo of Avicenna's ubiquitous references to the hiddenness of the individuating principle. While the Scotistic individual difference is intelligible in itself, it is not intelligible to us in this life. See *Ordinatio* 2, d. 3, q. 6, ad 2m (n. 192), translated in Spade 1994, 108: "To the second main argument, I grant that the singular is *per se* intelligible as far as it itself goes. But if it not *per se* intelligible to some intellect—say to ours—more on that elsewhere. At any rate, there is for its own part no impossibility that it can be understood, just as on the part of the sun there is no impossibility of seeing it, or on the part of vision in the owl, but only on the part of the owl's eye." For discussion of this point see Wolter 1990, 95–97. In the Avicennian case, however, it remains odd that the individual intention should be opaque not only to the human intellect, but even to the divine!

derived. But a more plausible explanation was that Avicenna (erroneously in my view) believed that any effort to elevate individual intentions to the status of independent ontological features of the world would render all particulars equally intelligible and equally under the scope of divine providence.[33] While this may have been appealing to someone like Duns Scotus, it may have been a step that in Avicenna's view would pose too much of a threat to the boundaries between the intelligible and sensible realms.

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33. It seems to me that Avicenna could have offered a general account of individual intentions along supervenience lines that need not have entailed their intrinsic intelligibility. It would be plausible to hold, for example, that the materiality of individual intentions is a function of the underlying principles on which they supervene. While in each case a new property unique to *this* concrete particular would supervene upon its collected features, individual intentions would be immaterial or spiritual *just in case* they emerged from a set of properties that included at least one spiritual or immaterial disposition. But there are additional and more abstract worries that such a theory might raise. For example, one would have to confront the issue of whether individual intentions are universally present in *all* existents, and then issues of explanatory economy might pose problems. Does God possess an individual intention? Do the separate intellects require distinct individual intentions in addition to their quiddities? What about beings that are unique in their species but nonetheless multipliable in principle, such as the heavenly spheres?

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The following abbreviations have been used for the works of Avicenna; except where otherwise stated, English translations are my own:

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