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Abstract: The metaphysical system of Avicenna (Ibn Sina) (d. 1037 CE) was strongly influenced by Neoplatonic and Aristotelian ideas. In works such as the *Danish Nama-i* and in the *Kitab al-Shifa' (al-Ilahiyyat)*, amongst others, Avicenna often speaks in an Aristotelian *parlance* about the interdependence of matter and form, focusing particularly on the nature of prime and proximate matter. He also discloses a Neoplatonic understanding of the nature of evil which he examines both in ontological and moral terms.

This article surveys Avicenna's view of matter and evil, and explores how the philosopher employs Qur'anic hermeneutics in order to show that his positions on the above concepts are rooted in the Qur'an. The focus is placed on the exegesis of Qur'an 41:11-12 and 113. Avicenna interprets these verses in a way which allows him to demonstrate that questions mainly influenced by Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought – such as the notion of '*isyan al-madda* (the disobedience of matter) and the ontological nature of evil – are 'Islamic' concepts, found in the source of Islamic revelation and perfectly reconcilable with 'orthodox' dictates.

This article highlights how Avicenna attempts to achieve this goal by setting his discourse within one of the most discussed topics in classical Islamic thought: the issue of Divine decree and Destiny (*qada' wa'l qadar*).

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Dr Maria De Cillis

A Survey of Avicenna's View of Matter and It's Role in the Emanative Order

Avicenna generally believed in the traditional Aristotelian analysis of existents divided into the constituent elements of matter (*madda*) and form (*sura*) which are joined together to form the substance, which Aristotle called *ousia*. Avicenna even adopts the Aristotelian definition of substance as 'that whose essence does not exist in a subject [of inhesion]'¹ and explains substance as 'what subsists without any 'foreign' *mawdu* (subject), but is the subject of inhesion itself'.² In contrast to the Stagirite (an epithet of Aristotle), however, Avicenna stresses that the reciprocal combination of matter and form on its own does not lead to the existence of the substantial compound. Existence is ultimately granted by God, the only Being who is necessarily existent by Himself (*Wajib al-wujud bi-dhatihi*) and whose Nature, according to a Neoplatonic perspective, makes the existence of the world a necessary product of His self-knowledge.

God, in fact, knows Himself as the ultimate Cause of all existents and as an eternal cause the product of Divine emanation (the world) is itself eternal. Avicenna's emanative theory, inherited by al-Farabi in its main traits,³ speaks of an emanatory process that, starting from God, progresses through a series of intelligences till the lower and tenth intelligence, the Agent Intellect or *Dator Formarum* (*Wahib al-Suwar*), so called because it is able to bestow 'forms' upon the matter of this world.

It is worth noting that the first intelligence, together with all the intelligences following it, is perceived as having a three-fold contemplation:

- a) on God as the reason of its existence, this leading to the production of another intellect;
- b) on itself as a necessary existent, this leading to the production of the soul of the first heaven;
- c) on itself as a possible existent, this leading to the production of matter or the heavenly sphere⁴

The whole process of emanation is said to occur through a determinism which makes the components of the supra-lunary world necessarily what they are. Their perpetual activities of cogitation (as acts of self-knowledge) are considered sufficient to emanate their direct descending effect in the hierarchy of the emanative scheme. This equals saying that the emanatory actions of Intellects are compelled by their own nature. When Avicenna speaks of emanation, he speaks also of determinism exactly because he considers that Intellects emanate and are necessarily what they are *due to their nature*.

The *Dator Formarum* (Active Intellect) emanates the world of generation and corruption. Once it has reached this level, it does not emanate another intellect but prime matter (*hayula*) which in order to exist, must have a form. Avicenna explains that prime matter is a receptacle for the receiving of existence⁵ and that, in actuality, it never separates itself from the form; matter exists only through the form which subsists as existent in actuality. The combination of matter and form is said to be supervised by the Agent Intellect: more specifically, since corporeal matter cannot exist by itself, Avicenna states, it 'acquires' one of the forms of the four basic elements: earth, water, air and fire.

Formed matter then acquires from the Agent Intellect higher forms and this leads to the formation of bodily humoral compositions. According to the proportion through which the bodily humors combine, there is emanation on behalf of the Agent Intellect of forms suitable for the matters of those corporeal bodies.⁶ This means that, in actual fact, it is the *Wahib al-Suwar* which, by complying with the

Divinely-established world's order imposed by the emanation scheme, 'determines' the acquisition of a form by a specific matter.

In reality, however, when Avicenna stresses that the Agent Intellect is responsible for the combination of a specific form with a specific matter, he is implicitly cutting off any 'independent' efficient causal initiative on behalf of the form. Form, in effect, is not assigned to a generic matter but to a specific and suitable one so that when the Agent Intellect produces a corporeal constitution, it also emanates in it the correspondent form by positioning a generic matter in its species.

It has to be remembered that the attribution of *that* form to *that* matter is ultimately always the result of the Divine power which is delegated, through emanation, onto the effective causality of the secondary causes.

The material substratum of all beings becomes a *dispositive cause* which spurs the separate causes (i.e., celestial intellects, souls and spheres) to produce forms. Matter is perceived not just as a passive and receptive element, but as a 'substance', a 'remote cause'⁷, and as a 'force' which, potentially, even has the property to 'disobey' the purpose embedded by the divine decree (*qada'*) in the nature of things. By stressing matter's disposition to receive the form, Avicenna accommodates his idea on matter within the notion of Aristotelian substantiality: following Aristotle and the Peripatetic tradition, he assigns prime matter with a 'causative' role⁸ in facilitating the existentiality of things and the determination of their future conditions.

Avicenna, *de facto*, reduces the importance of form as the absolute cause of the substance of matter and postulates the existence of a certain cause extrinsic to both matter and form (ultimately God) which makes them subsist with and through each other.

Avicenna does that because he is required to explain why God is necessary for the coming together of matter and form: as a Muslim, he is compelled to divert from what is readily associated with Aristotle, namely the belief that matter and form together suffice in putting any being into existence. When Avicenna speaks of the third element, external to form and matter which acts as an ontological link between the two, he speaks not simply of the Agent Intellect's supervisory function but, ultimately, he refers to God and His action of bringing beings into existence. It has to be borne in mind, however, that Avicenna views the Necessary Existent as a deity who operates through the natures of things: God ensures existence to matter and form through a necessary relation, through which cause and effect works as a model for a necessary and efficient causation.⁹

In the end, God grants existence because He endows matter and form with their specific natures: their connection occurs through the complementarity of the receptivity of Matter and the activity of Form (which is due to what can be called a causal efficacy) and their reciprocal matching up which is 'administered' by the Agent Intellect.

The Disobedience of Matter: a Qur'anic Perspective

Avicenna, as an heir to Aristotelian and Neoplatonic teachings, as a Muslim and a connoisseur of Islamic speculative theology, felt compelled to reconcile apparent inconsistencies between topics derived from Greek metaphysics and apply these to Islamic religious subject matters. Amongst his concerns, there was the need to harmonise the theological truths present in the Qur'an with some metaphysical standpoints on matter, matter's relation to forms, and matter's function in the emanative scheme. So, for instance, he endeavours to reconcile the philosophical phenomenon called 'the disobedience of matter' (*'isyan al-madda*) with the Qur'anic view of God to whom all things pay absolute obedience.¹⁰

Plotinus was probably the first philosopher who spoke of the resistance of matter to its ideal-form and employed this concept to explain the nature of evil as privation or lack of perfection.¹¹ Avicenna extensively borrows from Plotinus, but he also draws attention to his personal understanding of the

disobedience of matter and presents it as a phenomenon which is inscribed in the decree of the Qur'anic omnipotent God. Avicenna comments on *Sura* 41: Verse 11 from the Qur'an:

“God said to it [the sky/smoke-matter] and to the earth ‘Come ye together, willingly or unwillingly’. They said: ‘We do come (together) in willing obedience’”.¹²

The philosopher explains that this verse:

‘Refers to what is constant (*taqarrar*) in so that the matter of the [celestial] sphere (*falak*) differs, by its quiddity, from the matter of the elements as its reception (*qubul*) of the form of the sphere is done willingly (*taw'an*). This is because prime matter (*hayula*) desires the form (*mushtaqa ila al-sura*) and since in it there is no reception for any other form, its reception is orientated towards only one form (*sura wahida*). Since at a specific moment, in that matter, there is no other form, the preceding form being an obstacle (*'a'iqā*) for the successive form, the reception of the form by the matter of the [celestial] sphere is done willingly’.¹³

In the above comment, Avicenna employs an Aristotelian *parlance* which stresses the relationship occurring between matter and form, but it also alludes to the Neoplatonic emanative scheme which acknowledges a quidditative difference between the matter of the celestial spheres and the matter of earthly elements.

In his *Mafatih al-Ghayb*,¹⁴ Fakhr al-Din al-Razi has interpreted Avicenna's explication of Qur'an 41:11 and has emphasised that the first goal of such a verse is to demonstrate the perfection of divine omnipotence to which there is no resistance because everything is and will always be in accordance to God's eternal decree (*qada'*) as stated in the Qur'an.¹⁵

Avicenna certainly believed in the truthfulness of the Qur'anic revelation as well as the validity of the Aristotelian principle according to which ‘in nature nothing occurs in vain’; notwithstanding these views, he also admits that, on a few occasions, the natural powers embedded in the essences of things, established by the divine decree may sometimes fail to attain their goals, namely, fail to move matter towards specific forms and this occurrence is exactly due to the disobedience of matter. With regard to Avicenna's expositions on this phenomenon, one meets difficulties in understanding what he actually means; scholars who specialise in medieval Islamic philosophy like Catarina Belo, for instance, have stressed that such disobedience has to be taken metaphorically.¹⁶

A metaphorical interpretation is necessary since, in Belo's view, Avicenna has an overall negative conception of matter and consequentially, it is always the form which acts as a cause for motion and changes, leaving no room for any material actual disobedience. This article, however suggests that, in contrast to Belo's position, Avicenna's exegesis of Q. 41:11 reveals that matter, with its accidental shortcomings, has potentially the power to tackle the purposes embedded by the decree of God in the nature of things.

The first step to be taken in this direction is to bear in mind that matter - as the material element of the substantial compound - determines its specific relation with forms according to its level of receptivity and compatibility, and this underlines implicitly a kind of independence resting on the side of matter. A clear reference to matter's role is highlighted in Avicenna's interpretation of Q. 41:11; in this verse, the philosopher observes:

‘The mention of the sky precedes that of the earth and this is due to the fact that the mention of obedience precedes that of the aversion in a way that obedience refers to the matter of the sphere and aversion to the matter of the earth’.¹⁷

This statement can be explained if it is read with references to the emanation theory adopted by Avicenna outlined earlier: in the celestial realm, in fact, there cannot be any form of disobedience because all acts are necessarily determinate; they are what they are due to the permanent emanating

cognisance of the intellects and the movements of their celestial spheres which do not encounter any variation.

In the world of generation and corruption, however, the status of affairs is different and the activity of any being is dependent not simply on the influence of the heavenly bodies but also on the level of receptivity which any object has due to its material substrate. It is for this reason that, in the sub-lunary realm, it is possible to contemplate the occurrence of disobedience. As al-Razi had highlighted in the *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, the earth, as a locus of changes and as a place of darkness due to its imperfection, naturally inclines for disobedience and aversion to the divine order.¹⁸

When Avicenna continues his comment on Qur'an 41:11, he also explains that matter is shared amongst all non-celestial elements and that common to all elements is the fact that the corporeal forms are non-eternal, having rather the characteristic of being generated (*ka'ina*) and corruptible (*fasida*).¹⁹ It follows that any corporeal form is generated after an antecedent form is corrupted, as also stressed by *kalam's* occasionalistic view on atoms and accidents.²⁰

As long as the preceding form continues to be present (*hasila*) - Avicenna observes - matter becomes receptive of the form which is generated (i.e., the successive form) by coercion and aversion (*bi'l-qahr wa'l-karaha*).²¹ When the matter of the celestial sphere is commanded to 'take on' the form of the sphere, this matter obeys instinctively (*min nafsaha*) since there is no obstacle whatsoever. The matter of earthly elements, however, when commanded to receive another form, is not obedient (*la yakun mutiy'an*), or rather does not obey willingly. In effect, matter's reception and preparation to obey the divine command occurs with aversion and this is because the preceding form acts as an obstacle for the arrival (*husul*) of the successive form.²²

Avicenna suggests that such an aversion is present in earthly matter as long as matter is preoccupied about its preparation for the reception of the divine commandment. Once the successive form is ready and the preceding one has disappeared then, at that time, in the substance of matter, there is no more any obstacle towards the 'new' form and, at this stage, matter's reception occurs naturally and willingly. Avicenna concludes his exegesis with reference to the verse: 'He assigned to each heaven its duty and command' (Qur'an 41:12), and he claims that these divine words are an allusion to the separate intelligences which are the movers (*muharrakat*) of the heavens by way of desire and love (*'ala sabil al-tashuiq wa'l-ta'shiq*).²³

After this preliminary comment, Avicenna furthers his explanations and tackles the argument of matter's disobedience by reminding his readership that even the disobedient material substrate of the earth eventually complies with God's commandment, this occurring following a change in the disposition of the substance of its matter. It is significant however that, despite the final observance to the Divine dictates, matter's initial delay to obey the divine commandment is well emphasised and meticulously structured by Avicenna.

He speaks of the aversion present in earthly matter when the latter is concerned about its preparation in the reception of the Divine commandment. But what is intended here by 'preparation' and what by 'Divine commandment'? Avicenna had stated that in its substantiality, 'Matter has been created receptive of all the forms'²⁴; despite this position, he 'justifies' matter's disobedience by taking into account the fact that the combination of matter with a new form occurs only when such matter is rightly prepared for receiving a new substantial form.

This means that when matter - which at this stage acts as a proximate matter (*madda*) because it has already acquired lower level forms like the elemental forms of earth, water, air and fire - is not suitable to acquire a higher form (either because it is too moist or too dry, etc.), then the Agent Intellect does not emanate any inadequate form. Before the emanation of another form, matter has to be prepared by the *wahib al-suwar* adequately and only once it has reached a stage of preparedness, matter's resistance towards the new form is overcome.

The Aristotelian necessary relation occurring between matter and form which, for the Stagirite ensures their existence, is here complemented by the presence of the Agent Intellect and its role: the *Dator Formarum*, as the last constituent of the emanative order, ensures that the divine commandment (as the divine disposition of things) is ultimately obeyed.

In addition, when Avicenna states that matter's aversion occurs only at the moment of its preparedness in receiving the Divine command, he seems to refer to the distinction existing between prime and proximate matter: on the one hand prime matter, considered as a substance, is open to the receptivity of any possible form; on the other hand, proximate matter can only welcome and acquire one new form assigned and made suitable for it by the *Dator Formarum*.

Furthermore, Avicenna states that matter's reception and its preparation to obey the divine command occurs with aversion because '*the preceding form acts as an obstacle for the arrival (husul) of the successive form*'. The presence of one form precludes the possibility of co-existence of two forms in the same matter so that with the assignment of a new form, the preceding one has to be annihilated to leave space to what follows it.

It is, therefore, the antecedent form that acts as an obstacle for the arrival of the successive one, this being an evident *kalamic* occasionalistic view. Avicenna, however, shifts his discourse on the topic of matter from a *kalamic* standpoint to a metaphysical angle when he speaks of matter as a potential substance which shows aversion probably because it is 'afraid' (preoccupied - *mashghul*) of experiencing the transition from one form to the other, namely, the transition from the security of one present form to the unpredictability of a successive one.

It is not accidental that, at the very beginning of his exegesis, Avicenna had claimed that part of the verse in question '*refers to what is constant (taqarrar)*'; certainly he has in mind the difference which exists between celestial matter on the one side, and earthly matter on the other side. More specifically, Avicenna must have been aware that the relation occurring between heavenly matter and the unique celestial form of the spheres is characterised by certainty of obedience and perfection due to a lack of alternatives (the form of the sphere is one and one only); and he must have also been conscious that the relation existing between form and earthly matter is of an irregular nature due to the plurality of forms which prime matter can potentially acquire.

The initial aversion of proximate matter is said however to be superseded at the moment of existentiatio of the new form, that is to say, at the very moment matter becomes (ready and) aware that it has been made suitable to acquire another specific form. Matter, then, is no longer preoccupied to be left without its own proximate guarantor of existence (form).

When Avicenna deals with the other part of the Qur'anic verse "*they said: 'we do come (together) in willing obedience'*",²⁵ he is compelled to deal with the problem of reconciling: (1) the idea that matter is disposed not to obey the divine commandment; with (2) the Qur'anic view of God who is omnipotent and towards whom sky and earth are obedient. A kind of harmonisation between these apparent contrasting positions is achieved because, ultimately, matter obeys the dictates of the *Dator Formarum* which establishes form's conjunction with matter exactly as ultimately ordered by God's command in the emanative schema.

The contrast between the disobedience of matter and the divine order is eventually won by the latter. This shows that the discrepancy existing between 'prime matter' - which is naturally disposed to escape non-existence - and the Divine commandment - which requires obedience - is in the end resolved because the two coincide within the act of existentiatio (existence, to be remembered is ultimately granted only by the Necessary Existent). Avicenna fashions his *Wajib al-wujud* in the cloak of a benevolent Provider and Sustainer of existence able to 'tame', with His omnipotence, defiance and disobedience.

Matter's obstructionism is ruled out by the divine commandment and matter's final obedience is obtained with the security of its perpetuation in existence offered by its acquisition of a specific form in

a specific instant, as spurred by the Agent Intellect. It is to be highlighted that the divine victory over the disposition of matter is not occasioned by a direct divine intervention of God, as it would be expected in the *Kalam*ic idea of *qadar*, but it is entrusted to the Agent Intellect and its surveillance over the form-matter's reciprocal matching. Eventually, even the initial disobedience of prime must be thought as being necessarily enclosed in the divine plan, with matter ultimately complying with the dispositions coming from God as the ultimate Cause of all existents.

Avicenna's ability to accommodate his metaphysical views within the Qur'anic frame allows him to remain firmly situated on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysical ground. The necessary causal liaison between matter and form on the one side, matter's initial disobedience and its final compliance to the divine command on the other side, are ultimately linked to the Divine emanationistic plan since emanation is said to work through delegated causalities carried out from intelligence to intelligence down to the Agent Intellect.

The innovative element of the discourse is here given by the fact that Avicenna explains the phenomenon of *'isyan al-madda* by referring to his metaphysical stances on matter and matter's place in the emanative scheme: metaphysics becomes an instrument for Qur'anic exegesis. The 'foreign' (inherited from Greek thought) metaphysical idea of the disobedience of matter is recognised as being implicitly asserted in the divine revelation and ready to be grasped by means of a philosophical interpretation. This is also evident when Avicenna refers to the verse: '*He assigned to each heaven its duty and command*' (Qur'an 41:12); with it the scholar reiterates the idea that divine *qada*' decrees the role of the heavens and of the celestial spheres whose movements influence matter's receptivity and disposition on earth, as claimed by the Peripatetic philosophers.

Avicenna's Position on Evil and its Qur'anic Interpretation

Metaphysical (and particularly Neoplatonic) connotations are evident also in Avicenna's exegesis of *Sura* 113 in the Qur'an which relates to the problem of evil. According to Ash'arite doctrine, God - as an omnipotent Being - has to be credited with the creation of both goodness and evil.²⁶ In order to set his metaphysical ideas closer to such a stance, Avicenna comments on the verse '*Say I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn*' (113:1)²⁷ and distinguishes between a primary and a secondary intention in God's will. Avicenna comments:

'The daybreak shatters the darkness of privation by the light of existence (*bi'l-nur al-wujud*) which is the Necessary Existent and this is a necessary act in God's ipseity, intended by a primary intention (*bi'l-qaṣd al-awwal*). The first emanation of existents is from Him and this is His decree (*qada'hu*) and there is no absolute evil (*la sharr aslan*) in it with the exception of what emanates hidden under the radiance of the first light. [...] Evils (*shurur*) do not occur according to a primary intention but according to a secondary one (*bi'l-qaṣd al-thaniyya*).'²⁸

Initially, the discourse on evil is addressed with references to the emanative scheme: evil (or impurity - *al-kadurat*) emerges with the first emanated being and is said to be attached to its quiddity (*mahiyyat*) and to be generated by its ipseity (*huwiyya*). All causes in the emanative process are said to be led by their collisions towards evils which are necessary to themselves; this, Avicenna stresses, is nothing but God's *qadar* and His creation (*khalq*).²⁹ Interestingly, Avicenna uses the term creation rather than emanation in order to link his metaphysical idea on evil with the content of the successive Qur'anic verse (113:2): '*[I seek refuge] from the evil of created things*'. With reference to this verse, the philosopher explicates that evil is placed in an aspect (*nahiyya*) of creation, according to a specific determination (*taqdir*). This is so because, Avicenna explains, such evil is generated only from the materiality (*ajsam*) of things which is due to divine destiny and not due to God's decree (*kanat al-ajsam min qadarhi la min qada'hi*).³⁰ This statement reveals a clear Neoplatonic undertone: in effect, Avicenna states that evil emerges in those beings that need to receive measure and determination (*al-shurur al-lazima fi ashya' dhuat al-taqdir*) that is to say, those beings that possess a body (*badan*) and are therefore connected to matter.³¹

It is significant that, as Jules Janssens has emphasised,³² Avicenna discusses the issue of evil in both a moral and an ontological sense; it is the second connotation which has greater importance for the purpose of this article since the ontological perspective which explores evil is in relation to the Qur'anic treatment of the subject. As mentioned earlier, Avicenna observes that the primordial divine decree (*qada'*) is free of evil and that it is exclusively when such a decree finds its concrete realisation, i.e., on the level of destiny (*fi suq' al-qadar*), that evil appears. Avicenna generally conceives the divine decree (*qada'*) and destiny (*qadar*) as, respectively, the necessitating primary act of God - corresponding to the first stage of His emanatory process - and as the causal unleashing of beings following God's first causative act.³³

More specifically, in his *Risala fi'l-qada'*, Avicenna speaks of God's *qada'* as His first and unique *hukm* which encompasses all things and from which all things derive till the end of time. God's *qadar* is described as His arrangement of things descending (and entering existence) from His decree 'one after the other'.³⁴

Avicenna's 'Islamicity', as Janssens calls it, safeguards the vision of a Necessary Existent who allows the occurrence of evil only at the level of individual destinies; in other terms, evil can occur generally in the sub-lunary world (the only dimension in which disobedience can befall), and specifically in relation to those things which have a connection with matter (namely, all earthly beings as every being is nothing but a material compound). This means that in Avicenna's estimation, God does not get 'involved' in the direct creation of evil even if the latter is included in His decree. This demonstrates that the omnipotence of God is generally not threatened.³⁵

In the exegesis of *Sura* 113, Avicenna gives the general impression that matter, connected with corporeal creatures, is able to determine the contours of the destinies of those things which are related to it. Avicenna, in fact, consistently specifies that the presence of evil is to be found in the 'region' of destiny, namely in the realm of existent beings whose future conditions are influenced by matter's dispositions. The potentiality of matter and its nature as a substrate and a receptacle previously discussed in metaphysical terms have shown that matter can be seen as contributing to the bringing into existence of the compound. This stance is linked to the notion of natural Divine determinism: if matter facilitates the existence of the compound then, in Aristotelian terms, the nature of the material substance can be regarded as being responsible for determining what the material compound is in actuality, independently from any direct Divine intervention. From a Qur'anic perspective, however, the authority of matter is simply apparent, as any degree of disobedience or any manifestation of evil are part of the predetermined Divine decree responsible for the creation of everything that exists. Avicenna states:

'The daybreak shatters the darkness of privation by the light of existence (*bi'l-nur al-wujud*) which is the Necessary Existent, and evils are not at the primary level of His divine decree but at a secondary level of His destiny by order of the providence of the Lord of Dawn (*fa-amr bi'l-isti'adh bi- rabb al-falak*), evils depending on what is created (*al-khalq*)'.³⁶

In this explanation, evil clearly falls within the confines of the divine plan for creation; creation, which in Avicennan terms means entrance into existence, implies a connection with corporeality and materiality. God's primary intention of creation leads to an inevitable connection with matter and evil, the latter, it has to be remembered, only wanted by a secondary intention.

In some of his metaphysical works, Avicenna, adopts a Neoplatonic standpoint when he emphasises that existence, as a result of the divine act of creation, clearly contrasts with the idea of nothingness ('*adam*') which is synonymous with 'privation of existence'.³⁷ The latter comes to be identified with evil in contrast to the concept of goodness which is linked to existence. Given that there is no good except in existence, evil comes to simply mean that perfection is not realised. This reasoning implies the fact that if something is in the status of mere possibility it can be classified as evil (only what is in actuality being classifiable as good). Predictably, this principle affects matter: when considered as prime matter, therefore removed from any form, matter is an 'abode of non-existence'; it can be seen as privation and, as such, a principle of evil.³⁸ Evil is, however, overruled by the Necessary Existent who sets possible things into existence: evil-potentiality evanesces into divine goodness-existentiality.³⁹

Avicenna employs the Qur'an to theoretically substantiate the above view: he looks at Qur'an 13:3 '[I seek refuge] from the evil of darkness' and explains the term darkness herewith present as the shadows of non-existence of the possible quiddities which are overturned by – as the philosopher states - '*the [divine] overflowing (ifada) of the Light of existence*'.⁴⁰ With this statement, Avicenna implicitly links the inner possibility of matter to both darkness and non-existence which are replaceable by the Divine emanation of Light- existence.⁴¹

Avicenna continues his comment on *Sura* 113 referring to the verses 4 and 5. In this context, he tackles the notion of evil from a moral perspective by explaining that evil finds its abode in the dispositions of the human soul and its incapability to detach from bodily matter and its dictates. Avicenna believes that the subject which in the Qur'anic verses is seeking refuge is the human soul; he explains this by saying that the human *nafs* (soul; ego) inclines to liaise with the dusky (*ghasaq*) and murky (*mutakaddira*) animal powers, thus connecting itself with matter which is the source of darkness, evil and privation (*al-madda hiya manba' al-zulma wa'l-sharr wa'l-'adam*).⁴² In the analysis of the above verses, Avicenna implicitly employs his metaphysical perspective on the nature of the human soul and its faculties: the human soul can stay pure if it manages to tame the internal material senses which belong to the animal soul – amongst which are the common sense (*al-hiss al-mushtarak*), imagination (*mutakhayyila*), and estimation (*wahm*)⁴³ - and if it can make knowledge of the intellect to prevail over lower faculties.

The 'light' mentioned in Avicenna's exegesis which is said to overflow from the Necessary Existent can be read from a moral and a gnoseological standpoint: the Qur'anic revelation calls upon the human souls and encourages them to escape the powers of 'darkness'; but to achieve this the human souls cannot simply rely on the first three levels of thought which in men are linked to the animal powers (sensation, imagination and estimation); willing to flee the darkness of ignorance (or non-knowledge), the human soul must strive in order to detach itself from the injunctions of materiality and use intuition (*hads*). Intuition occurs when the soul is able to subjugate 'the objective data of the common sense and the two commemorative powers to the judgment of the intellect'.⁴⁴

Intuition can be attained only when the soul is in conjunction with the Agent Intellect and such a conjunction can be reached exclusively through the human rational faculty.⁴⁵ The reason for this is that the human rational soul is, like all intellects, immaterial and immortal; intelligibles like the Agent Intellect can only be perceived by faculties deprived of any material substrate.⁴⁶ It is exactly through intuition that knowledge (*'ilm*) becomes authentic gnosis (*ma'arifa*); only once the human soul has liberated itself from the imprisoning legacy of the body (and its materiality) can it engage in a communicative liaison with the intelligences that are ready to share with the soul their knowledge which pertains to them as cognisant beings in the emanative order. Clearly, by removing themselves from the limiting dictates of matter and its inclination towards evil, human souls are invited to morally choose light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance as maintained in the Qur'an.

Conclusions

Avicenna's attempt to harmonise the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic underpinnings of his metaphysical stances with the Revealed Word is reasonably successful. The Qur'an serves as the edifice upon which Avicenna weaves his personal philosophical discourse which is scattered here and there with *Kalamitic* reminiscences, in his attempt to provide his readers with a product that is certainly open to criticism and dissent, but also undeniably 'Islamic'.

In a masterly manner, Avicenna draws attention to his unconventional idea of the disobedience of matter by integrating Qur'anic dogmas (God is omnipotent and obeyed by heavens and earth) with metaphysically-based theories (the relation of matter and form within the compound and the emanative order). He presents the phenomenon of '*isyan al-madda* as being embedded in the Qur'anic discourse on divine *qada' wa'l-qadar*: the divine decree deterministically unravels through the elements of the emanative scheme and it encompasses everything including the initial matter's disposition not to comply with the divine command.

When Avicenna adopts the Qur'anic perspective which identifies evil as being part of the divine creation, he accentuates the influence of his Neoplatonic heritage by way of addressing the problem of the theodicy from a moral and an ontological perspective: on the one hand he speaks of the human souls' need to remit their salvation to divine guidance (of the Agent Intellect); on the other hand, he connects the concept of evil with that of privation through their common link with matter.

It might be argued that Avicenna's metaphysical discourse does not simply find legitimacy within the Qur'an, but it succeeds in attaining something unexpected: the arguments adopted and the techniques employed for the Qur'anic exegesis lead the reader to think that the revealed Scripture could, or rather, should be interpreted through Avicenna's personal metaphysical perceptions.

References

¹ Avicenna, *Danish Nama-i 'ala'i: Ilahiyyat*, ed. E. Mu'in, Tehran: Intisharat-i Anjuman-i Asar-i Milli, 1952, p. 10, translated by Parvaiz Morewedge in *The Metaphysica of Avicenna*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York: Columbia University Press, 1973, p. 15. Aristotle explains substance in similar terms at the beginning of his *Categories*, Chapter 2. Avicenna understands substance as what subsists by itself and as what is not in a subject (*mawdu'*), and he distinguishes between the notions of subject and receptacle (*mahall*); the former is understood as what has become subsistent by itself and becomes a cause through which something, different from it, comes to be.

The latter is seen as something in which some other thing inheres, so as to acquire a certain state (*hal*) through it. Avicenna explains: 'the substance of hayula [...] is a substance disposed (*musta'id*) to receive things. The substantiality it has does not make it actual, but only prepares it to become something actual through form. [...] The meaning of saying that it is a substance is nothing but to say that it is a 'something' which is not in a subject. The affirmation is that it is 'a something' [and] its character is that it is prepared [for the reception] of all things. Its form consists in its being prepared, receptive.' See Avicenna, *Al-Shifa': al-Ilahiyyat: The Metaphysics of the Healing*. A parallel English-Arabic Text. Translated and edited by M. E. Marmura, Provo (Utah): Brigham Young University Press, 2005, p. 54. According to Avicenna, forms exist only in a receptacle but not in a subject – hence, the primary substantiality of form as that which is not in a subject – whilst matter has a negative sense of substantiality as 'a something' which is a receptacle. A similar view is advanced in Avicenna's *Kitab al-Hudud*, *Le Livre des Définitions*, edition and translation by A. M. Goichon, Cairo: Publications de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1963, p.17, note 6. The relation between form and actuality, matter and potentiality is clearly expressed by Avicenna in *Risala fi'l-'ishq*, in A. F. M. Mehren (ed.), *Traité Mystiques d'Abou 'Ali al-Husain b. Abdallah b. Sina*, Leyde: E. J. Brill, III fascicule, 1889-1899, p. 6; English translation by E. L., Fackenheim, 'A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sina,' *Medieval Studies*, 7 (1945), pp. 214-15.

² A. M. Goichon, *La Distinction de l'Essence et de l'Existence d'après Ibn Sina (Avicenne)*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1937, p. 20.

³ Al-Farabi, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State: Abu Nasr al-Farabi's Mabadi' ara' ahl al-Madina al-Fadila*, a revised text with introduction, translation, and commentary by Richard Walzer, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 101-35.

⁴ Elements of the emanation scheme are traceable in all the major works of Avicenna. See *al-Ilahiyyat*, pp. 330-34; *Al-Najat fi al-Hikma al-Manṭiqiyawa'l-Tabi'iyawa al-Ilahiya*, Tehran: Muhyi'l-Din al-Kurdi, 1967, p. 274.

⁵ Avicenna, *Al-Mubahathat*, Bidarfar (ed.), Qum: Intisharat-e Bidar, 1992, pp. 92 and 94. In this text Avicenna argues that what belongs properly to matter is the quality of reception (*qabul*).

⁶ On this argument see M. Marmura, 'Some Questions regarding Avicenna's Theory of the Temporal Originations of the Human Rational Soul', *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 18 (2008), pp. 124-25.

⁷ The philosopher states that matter does not contribute in the existence of each form except (*illa*) for the fact that it is indispensably needed for form to exist with it, this being the specific characteristic of a receptive cause (*al-illa al-qabiliyya*). Ibid., p. 66-7.

⁸ Avicenna, *Kitab al-Hidaya li-Ibn Sina*, M. 'Abduh (ed.), Cairo: Maktabat al-Qairat al-hadita, 1974, pp. 243-44. For a classification of causes in Avicenna see J. Jolivet, 'La Repartition des Causes chez Aristote et Avicenne: le sens d'un Déplacement', in *Lectio-num Varietates: Hommage à Paul Vignaux* (1904-1987). J Jolivet, Z. Kaluza, A. De Libera (ed.), Paris: Vrin, 1991, pp. 49-65.

⁹ B., Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985, pp. 36-7, and 88-9. Avicenna, following the Aristotelian distinction between material and formal cause, distinguishes matter and form as being causes responsible for the subsistence of a thing. He refers to the wood and the form of the bed as parts responsible for the existence of the bed; the wood is nothing but the potential to constitute the bed (potential-material causality); the form of the bed is that by which the bed is what it is. See, *Kitab al-Hidaya*, pp. 243-44.

¹⁰ Qur'an 2:117; 16:40; 16:48-50; 36:82; 40:68.

¹¹ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by S. MacKena, B. S. Page, London: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 67-78.

¹² References to Qur'anic verses are from Yusuf 'Ali, 'The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an', Amana Publications: Maryland, USA, 10th edition, 1999, reprinted in 2004. References to Avicenna's interpretation of chapter 41, verses 11 and 12, are from J. Michot 'Le Commentaire Avicennien du Verset: "Puis Il se Tourna vers le Ciel"', *Mideo*, 14 (1980), pp. 317-28, Arabic text pp. 319-21.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ References are to Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's *Mafatih al-Ghayb (al-Tafsir al-Kabir)*, Cairo, 1890, part VII, p. 343.

¹⁵ See for instance Qur'an 16:48-50. In the Qur'an the term *qada'* is used to indicate a measure, a judgment and a decision. Its verbal form *qada'* is usually employed to signify 'to decree', 'to judge', and 'to accomplish'. Speculative theology (*Kalam*), in particular, embeds this term with a sense of predetermination, by referring to it as a Divine 'universal' decree; *qada'* is conceived as a perfect and precise divine plan, projected by God *in aeternitate*, determining all things and occurrences (on these arguments see 'Abd al-Qahir Jurjani, *Kitab al-Ta'rifat*, Flügel (ed.), Leipzig, 1845). *Qadar* generally refers to the Divine decree operating in time; it is often understood as fate, destiny and as being determined or fixed. In the Qur'an it appears often in the verbal form of *qaddara* meaning to determine (something) ineluctably or according to a specific measure. See, L. Gardet 'Al-Kada' wa'l-kadar' in *Encyclopaedia Islamica* 2nd edition.

¹⁶ C. Belo, 'Ibn Sina on Chance in the Physics of As-Shifa'', in J. McGinnis and D. C. Reisman (ed.), *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004, pp. 25-41; See also idem, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007, p. 47.

¹⁷ Li-yakun al-ṭaw'ū 'ai'd ila madda al-falak wa'l- karaha 'ai'd ila madda al-ard. 'Le Commentaire Avicennien du Verset', Arabic text p. 320.

¹⁸ *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, p. 343.

¹⁹ 'Le Commentaire Avicennien du Verset', Arabic text, p. 317.

²⁰ Avicenna's position is particularly reminiscent of the Ash'arite view on atoms and accidents usually referred to as 'occasionalism'. Based on the idea that everything in the world consists of atoms (*jawahir*) and accidents (*a'rad*) which are combined in the bodies (*ajsam*, sing. *jism*), Ash'arite occasionalism

intended to vindicate the absolute power of God and to ascribe to His direct intervention not only the coming into being of things, but also their persistence in existence from one instant to another. The Ash'arites found in the most characteristic feature of atoms - their perishable nature - a perfect tool to fulfil their intent to depict God as both the ultimate provider and sustainer of existence. Following al-Ash'ari's claim that *'everything in the world comes into existence through God's fiat [...] and ceases through His commanding it to cease'* ('Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, Istanbul: Maṭba'at al-Dawla, 1928, p. 50) the Ash'arites believe accidents are, like atoms, perishable by nature and that they belong to the class of the 'transient things' of this world, referred to in the Qur'an.

The existence of the bodies is made contingent upon the inherence in them of the accident of being (*kawn*) whilst their endurance is seen as dependent on the accident of duration (*baqa'*) which, not being capable of duration *per se*, presupposes the existence of other accidents of duration *ad infinitum*.

Because of this infinite dependence, according to the Ash'arites, the durability of either bodies or accidents has to be referred to a different principle of durability (beyond accidentality). The Ash'arites identify this principle with God's own decree to preserve in being or destroy at will the atoms or ultimate components of the world. Accordingly, both the accidents and the atoms depend for their duration on God's decree to repeat the process of their creation as long as He pleases. Any possibility of a transitive action between two bodies is denied and the changes inherent in the bodies are explained only as the result of God's will ceasing to create the same accident in the body. On these arguments see R. M. Frank, 'Bodies and Atoms: the Ash'arite Analysis', M. E. Marmura (ed.), *Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York press, 1984, pp. 39-53; idem, 'The Structure of Created Causality according to al-Ash'ari. An Analysis of the *Kitab al-Luma'*', *Studia Islamica*, 25 (1966), pp. 13-75.

²¹ Avicenna explains the case of heated water in which the heat present in the water is generated with aversion on behalf of the water; this is the time in which water is commanded (*ma'mura*) to receive, for example, the form of air. 'Le Commentaire Avicennien du Verset', Arabic text, p. 319.

²² 'Le Commentaire Avicennien du Verset', p. 320.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Ash'arites, the theological school which mainly contributed to the shaping of Islamic orthodoxy, believed that God is the Creator of both good and evil. They supported the idea that what is created by God is without a reason (*sabab*) which makes it necessary and that God is not bound to any compulsion or duty towards mankind (what He commands being necessarily right, and what He condemns being necessarily wrong). On these arguments, see McCarthy, R. J. (ed.), *The Theology of al-Ash'ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash'ari's Kitab al-Luma' and Risala Istihsan al-khawd fi 'ilm al-kalam*, Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953, pp. 59-60, 63, 67; Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Ibn Furak, *Mujarrad Maqalat al-Shaykh Abi al-Hasan al-Ash'ari: Exposé de la doctrine d'al-Ash'ari*, D. Gimaret (ed.), Beirut: Dar al-Macher, 1987, p. 131.

²⁷ Al-'Asi, *al-Tafsir al-qur'ani wa'l-lugha al-sufiyya fi falsafat Ibn Sina*, Beirut, 1983, p. 116.

²⁸ Ibid. See also J. Janssens, 'Avicenna and the Qur'an: a Survey of his Qur'anic Commentaries', *MIDEO*, 25-26 (2004), p. 191.

²⁹ Al-'Asi, *al-Tafsir al-qur'ani*, p. 116. In al-Najat (p. 325), Avicenna states: 'God wills (*yuridu*) things and wants evil (*al-sharr*) too, in an accidental way ('*ala al-wajh alladhi bi'l-'arad*) [...] Good (*al-khayr*) is decreed (*muqtadan*) by itself (*bi'l-dhat*) and evil is decreed by accident (*bi'l-'arad*), and everything is according to determination (*bi'l-qadar*).' The Ash'arite view of divine *qada'* encompassing good and evil, predetermining salvation and damnation, recompense and punishments is perfectly respected within Avicenna's construct in which God wills good as well as evil. Nonetheless, in

the above quotation Avicenna significantly uses the word determination (*qadar*) instead of *qada* in order to stress that the philosophical ‘accidental’ evil, although decreed by God, is rooted within the possible nature of evil itself because evil is connected with matter and the secondary causes. This means that all existents cannot be what they are without evil (including forms of bad belief or impiety): evil, in fact, is encompassed within the divine arrangement of creation.

³⁰ Al-‘Asi, *al-Tafsir al-qur’ani*, p. 116.

³¹ Ibid.

³² J. Janssens, ‘Avicenna and the Qur’an’, p. 190.

³³ *Chance and Determinism*, pp. 114-15.

³⁴ Avicenna, *Risala fi’l-qada*, in *Lettre au Vizier Abu Sa’ad*, edition, translation introduction and notes by Y. Michot, Beirut: Al-Bouraq, 2000, pp. 103-05.

³⁵ This perspective underscores the exegesis of the previous *Sura* (41:11-12) in which Avicenna’s Islamic perspective shines bright when he speaks of an omnipotent God who is ultimately obeyed by heaven and earth, as stated in the Qur’an, despite the ‘temporary’ disobedience of matter.

³⁶ Al-‘Asi, *al-Tafsir al-qur’ani*, p. 117.

³⁷ According to Avicenna, ‘privation is not absolute, rather it is privation in relation to existence, for it is the privation of something with inclination and preparation (*tahayyu’ wa’l-isti’dad*) in a specific matter’. *Al-Shifa’: Al-Sama’ al-Ṭabi’i*, p. 92.

³⁸ Avicenna, *Risala fi’l-’ishq*, p. 6; English translation, p. 215.

³⁹ The facts that God is the only Necessary Existent by Himself and that perfection equals existence make God - as ultimate Perfection and Actuality - an uttermost goodness. Goodness is nothing else than the absence of non-realised possibilities in *actuality*: it is a synonym of the perfect actualisation of existence. God is, therefore, ‘willing’ what is good (and best in its being actual) at all given times and from eternity, and this implies that God ‘wills’ emanation over non-emanation, emanation being actuality (or existence) over the possibility (or non-existence). *Kitab al-Hidaya*, pp. 271-72 commented on by O. Lizzini, ‘La Metafisica del Libro della Guida’, Presentazione e Traduzione della terza parte (*bab*) del *Kitab al-Hidaya* di Avicenna’, *Le Muséon, Revue d’Etudes Orientales*, 108 (1995), p. 380.

⁴⁰ Al-‘Asi, *al-Tafsir al-qur’ani*, p. 118.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 116. With these observations in mind, it can be argued that in Avicenna’s analysis of *Sura* 41:11-12, evil might be placed in the instant in which matter’s disposition (prior to its conjunction to any form) makes it disobedient; more precisely, evil can be found in matter’s disposition towards the reception of all possible forms, and consequently, in matter’s inclination towards everything that is not in *actu* but it is merely possible.

⁴² Al-‘Asi, *al-Tafsir al-qur’ani*, p. 118.

⁴³ The first is the faculty which has sense perception; the second has the function to combine and separate images and forms; the third faculty has multiple purposes such as to perceive the non-sensible attributes of things and to determine a course of action. See D. Gutas, ‘Intellect without Limit: the Absence of Mysticism in Avicenna’, *Rencontres de Philosophie Médiévale Intellect et Imagination dans la Philosophie Médiévale*, Brepols: Société Internationale pour l’Etude de la Philosophie Médiévale, 2006, pp. 336-37.

⁴⁴ J. Janssens, ‘Avicenna and the Qur’an’, p. 191.

⁴⁵ *Kitab al-Hidaya*, pp. 293-94.

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 295-96.