

THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF MAN AND LEVELS OF EXISTENCE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF IBN SINA

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Abstract

This article examines the ontological status of the human being and the hierarchy of existence in the philosophy of Ibn Sino (Avicenna). The study aims to clarify how the human being is situated within Avicenna's metaphysical system, particularly in relation to the distinction between necessary and contingent existence, the doctrine of essence and existence, and the gradational structure of being. Special attention is given to the human soul as an immaterial substance, its relation to the body, and its epistemological and moral capacities.

The research employs historical-philosophical analysis, comparative methodology, and conceptual reconstruction of primary sources, including Avicenna's major metaphysical works. The article argues that in Avicenna's ontology, the human being occupies an intermediate but privileged position within the cosmic order: ontologically contingent yet oriented toward intellectual perfection through conjunction with the Active Intellect. The hierarchy of existence from the Necessary Existent to separate intellects and the sublunary world provides the framework within which human self-realization and moral development become metaphysically grounded.

Keywords: Ibn Sina (Avicenna), ontology, hierarchy of being, necessary and contingent existence, essence and existence, human soul, Active Intellect, Islamic peripatetic philosophy, metaphysics, philosophical anthropology.

Introduction

The problem of the human being occupies a central position in medieval Islamic philosophy, where metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are conceived as interrelated dimensions of a unified intellectual system. Within this tradition, the philosophical legacy of Ibn Sino (Avicenna) represents one of the most systematic and influential attempts to articulate a comprehensive ontology in which the status of the human being is rigorously defined. His metaphysical framework, grounded in the distinction between essence and existence and in the doctrine of the Necessary Existent, establishes a hierarchical order of being that provides the conceptual basis for understanding human nature.

In Avicenna's philosophy, the human being is not merely a biological entity situated in the sublunary world, but a composite reality whose ontological structure reflects both material and immaterial dimensions. The human soul, as an immaterial and self-subsistent substance, occupies a distinctive position within the gradational structure of existence. At the same time, the human being remains ontologically contingent, deriving existence from the Necessary Existent through a mediated causal order. This dual orientation contingency in existence and transcendence in intellectual capacity forms the core of Avicenna's anthropological doctrine.



The study of the ontological status of the human being in Avicenna's system is significant for several reasons. First, it clarifies the internal coherence of his metaphysics, particularly the relationship between cosmology and anthropology. Second, it illuminates the philosophical foundations of his theory of knowledge and moral perfection, both of which presuppose a specific understanding of the human soul's place in the hierarchy of being. Third, it allows for a reassessment of Avicenna's contribution to later medieval philosophy, including its reception in Latin scholasticism.

This article aims to analyze the ontological position of the human being in Avicenna's philosophy by examining the hierarchical structure of existence and the metaphysical principles that define it. Through a historical-philosophical and conceptual analysis of key texts, the paper seeks to demonstrate that Avicenna's conception of the human being is inseparable from his broader theory of existence and causality. The human being emerges as an intermediate yet privileged entity, capable of intellectual ascent and moral self-perfection within a rigorously ordered metaphysical universe.

Literature Review

The philosophical heritage of Ibn Sino has generated an extensive body of scholarship devoted to his metaphysics, psychology, and theory of knowledge. Research on Avicenna's ontology has primarily focused on his distinction between essence and existence, his doctrine of the Necessary Existent, and the hierarchical structure of being. Within this framework, the problem of the human being has been examined either as part of his psychology ('ilm al-nafs) or as a component of his broader metaphysical system. However, the specific question of the ontological status of the human being within the gradational order of existence remains a subject of ongoing interpretation and debate.

Classical studies of Avicenna's metaphysics have emphasized the originality of his modal ontology and its departure from Aristotelian essentialism. Scholars have shown that Avicenna's theory of necessary and contingent existence provided a new conceptual foundation for understanding substance, causality, and cosmology. In this context, the human being is interpreted as a contingent composite whose intellectual capacity establishes a unique link with the higher immaterial realm. Research on Avicenna's psychology has further clarified the immateriality and subsistence of the rational soul, particularly through analysis of the so-called "floating man" thought experiment.

Modern scholarship has also examined the reception of Avicenna's anthropology in Latin scholasticism, especially in the works of Thomas Aquinas and other medieval thinkers. These comparative studies demonstrate the enduring influence of Avicenna's conception of the soul as a self-subsistent substance and his understanding of intellectual perfection as the fulfillment of human potential. At the same time, contemporary researchers have re-evaluated Avicenna's position in light of broader discussions on philosophical anthropology, metaphysical realism, and the structure of consciousness.

Despite the breadth of existing literature, many studies treat Avicenna's ontology and anthropology as relatively separate domains. The hierarchical structure of existence is often analyzed independently of the specific ontological position occupied by the human being within that structure. This article addresses this gap by integrating metaphysical, psychological, and



anthropological perspectives into a unified analysis. By situating the human being explicitly within Avicenna's gradational ontology, the study contributes to a more systematic understanding of his philosophical anthropology and its internal coherence.

Research Methodology

This study is based on a historical-philosophical and conceptual-analytical approach to the metaphysical system of Ibn Sino (Avicenna). The research relies primarily on the analysis of classical texts, including his major metaphysical and psychological treatises, with particular attention to the structure of arguments concerning existence, essence, causality, and the nature of the human soul. The methodological framework integrates textual hermeneutics, comparative analysis, and systematic reconstruction of philosophical concepts.

First, a historical-contextual method is employed in order to situate Avicenna's ontology within the broader tradition of Islamic peripatetic philosophy. This allows for a clearer understanding of the conceptual continuity between earlier Aristotelian interpretations and Avicenna's original contributions, especially regarding the distinction between necessary and contingent existence and the hierarchical organization of being.

Second, the research applies conceptual analysis to key ontological categories such as essence (*mahiyya*), existence (*wujud*), substance, intellect, and soul. Through close reading and terminological clarification, the study reconstructs the internal coherence of Avicenna's metaphysical system and examines how these categories function within his account of the human being. Special attention is given to the logical structure of Avicenna's arguments concerning the immateriality and subsistence of the rational soul.

Third, a comparative method is used selectively to highlight the originality of Avicenna's anthropological model in relation to earlier Aristotelian thought and subsequent medieval interpretations. This comparative dimension serves not as an independent line of inquiry, but as a tool for clarifying the specificity of Avicenna's ontological claims.

The overall methodological orientation of the article is systematic rather than merely descriptive. It seeks not only to summarize Avicenna's views, but to reconstruct the philosophical logic that underlies his conception of the human being within the hierarchy of existence. By combining historical fidelity with analytical precision, the study aims to provide a coherent interpretation of the ontological status of the human being in Avicenna's metaphysics.

Analysis and Results

The analysis of Ibn Sino's metaphysical system demonstrates that the ontological status of the human being can only be understood within the broader hierarchy of existence structured around the distinction between the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) and contingent beings (*mumkin al-wujūd*). In this framework, existence is not a homogeneous category but a graded reality, extending from the absolutely necessary source of being to the multiplicity of contingent entities in the sublunary world. The human being belongs to the domain of contingency; however, this contingency does not imply ontological insignificance. On the contrary, it situates the human being within a dynamic structure oriented toward intellectual actualization.

The first result of the analysis concerns the dual constitution of the human being. Avicenna conceptualizes the human as a composite of body and rational soul, yet he assigns ontological



primacy to the soul as an immaterial and self-subsistent substance. The rational soul does not depend on matter for its essential operations, particularly intellection. Through arguments such as the “floating man” thought experiment, Avicenna establishes the immediate self-awareness and immateriality of the soul. This demonstrates that the human being possesses a level of existence that transcends purely material determination, even while remaining embodied in the physical world.

The second result relates to the hierarchical structure of intellect. Avicenna’s doctrine of the intellect ranging from potential intellect to acquired intellect and culminating in conjunction with the Active Intellect reveals a teleological dimension of human existence. The human being occupies an intermediate ontological position: materially grounded yet intellectually oriented toward higher immaterial realities. The process of intellectual actualization represents a movement within the hierarchy of being, whereby the human soul progressively realizes its ontological capacities.

The third result concerns the integration of metaphysics and ethics. Since the perfection of the human soul consists in intellectual and moral actualization, ontology provides the foundation for ethical development. The hierarchical order of existence is not merely cosmological but normative. Human fulfillment is achieved through alignment with the intelligible order of reality, culminating in intellectual union and contemplative knowledge. Thus, anthropology in Avicenna’s system is inseparable from metaphysical structure and ethical teleology.

Conclusions

The examination of Ibn Sino’s metaphysical system confirms that the ontological status of the human being is inseparable from his hierarchical conception of existence. By grounding all contingent beings in the Necessary Existent and structuring reality as a graded order of emanative causality, Avicenna establishes a coherent metaphysical framework within which the human being acquires a clearly defined position. Although ontologically contingent, the human being occupies a distinctive and elevated rank due to the immaterial and self-subsistent nature of the rational soul.

The study demonstrates that Avicenna’s anthropology is not an isolated psychological doctrine but an integral component of his ontology. The dual constitution of the human being, composed of body and rational soul, reflects the intersection of the material and immaterial domains. Through intellectual actualization and conjunction with the Active Intellect, the human being realizes a teleological movement within the hierarchy of existence. This process reveals that human perfection is metaphysically grounded and directed toward intelligible and spiritual fulfillment.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that Avicenna’s conception of the human being integrates metaphysical structure, epistemological capacity, and ethical purpose into a unified philosophical model. The hierarchy of existence serves not only as a cosmological scheme but also as a normative order that defines the conditions of human self-realization. In this sense, Avicenna’s doctrine anticipates later developments in medieval philosophical anthropology while preserving the systematic rigor of classical Islamic metaphysics.



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