

## Muslim Philosophers on the Relation between Metaphysics and Theology

Mohammad Saedimehr \*

Received: 01/07/2019 | Accepted: 05/09/2019

### Abstract

In different parts of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle presents different (and apparently, conflicting) views on the nature and subject matter of the discipline in question. These different characterizations led to wide-ranging interpretations of the relation between metaphysics and philosophical theology. Muslim Philosophers adopted two different views. Al-Kindi and al-Farabi (in some of his works) endorsed the view that metaphysics is the same as theology as far as its subject matter is the First Cause (God) and it deals essentially with incorporeal entities. After Avicenna, however, a second view became dominant according to which metaphysics has a broader realm that embraces theology as its most noble part. The rationale behind this view is that the subject matter of metaphysics is “being qua being”, or unconditioned existent, in its broad sense so that philosophical theology can be taken as discussing some of the proper accidents of the unconditioned existent. This view requires that metaphysics cannot be a secular discipline and should be totally consistent with theology. It also provides us with a certain interpretation of what is usually called “Islamic philosophy.”



### Keywords

Metaphysics, Theology, Ontology, Aristotle, Avicenna, Mulla Sadra.

---

\* Professor. Department of Philosophy, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran. Iran. | saeedi@modares.ac.ir

---

■ Saedimehr, M. (2019). Muslim Philosophers on the Relation between Metaphysics and Theology. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, 21(81), 103-118. doi: 10.22091/jptr.2019.4723.2201



## Introduction: Historical background in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*

As far as we know, Aristotle never used the term “metaphysics” as the title of his fourteen books compiled on a branch of philosophy, nowadays, however, it is known by that name. Most of the scholars maintain that it was Andronicus of Rhodes who, about one hundred years after Aristotle's death, gathered his works and, putting those fourteen books after the physical books, called them “*Ta meta ta phusika*” – “*the after the physicals*” or “*the ones after the physical ones*”s What Andronicus meant by “the physical ones” apparently is nothing but what is known today as Aristotle's works on physics.

Aristotle himself named this area of philosophy in several ways including *ho prote filosofia* (the first philosophy), *sofia* (wisdom) and *theologike* (theology). Moreover, he determined different notions as the subject matter of the first philosophy. In *Alfa*, *Sophia* “must be a science that investigates the first principles and causes”. (Aristotle, 982b9) In the beginning of the fourth book (*Gama*), however, Aristotle described metaphysics in this way: “There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to. this in virtue of its own nature.” (Aristotle, 1003a, pp. 21-22) According to this passage, the subject matter of metaphysics as a universal science is “being as such” or “being as being” in contrast with the “so-called special sciences” which investigate just a part of being. In the sixth book (*Epsilon*), however, Aristotle first distinguished between three branches of theoretical philosophy, namely mathematics, physics and the first science. This distinction is illustrated based on the characteristics of the discussed objects. Physics deals with objects which exist separately from matter but are not immovable. Mathematics (or at least some parts of it) investigates things which are immovable but presumably do not exist separately, but rather as embodied in matter. The first science, in contrast, deals with things that both exist separately and are immovable. It is here that Aristotle calls the first philosophy or metaphysics “theology”. The reason is that “since it is obvious that if the Divine is present anywhere, it is present in things of this sort”, (Aristotle, 1026a, pp. 20-21) namely the immovable and separated immaterial things.

According to Aristotle's description of the nature and subject matter of metaphysics in *Alpha* and *Gama*, metaphysics has a broader realm than that of theology and thus, they cannot be the same. However, according to *Epsilon*, it seems that Aristotle sees the first philosophy as being identical with theology while the latter is restricted to immaterial or divine entities.

Assuming that Aristotle in all fourteen books, known today by the title of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, is talking about a single science and his different descriptions refer to a single branch of theoretical philosophy, his idea about the relation between metaphysics as the science of “being as being” and theology as the science of divine beings becomes obscure. It seems that

Aristotle himself was worried about this apparent inconsistency. He writes: “One might raise the question whether first philosophy is universal, or deals with one genus, i.e. some one kind of being....” (Aristotle, 1026a, pp. 24-25) By “one genus”, he seemingly means the immovable immaterial entities which can be regarded as a part or a genus of being in general.

Different interpretations of Aristotle’s view have been proposed on the relation between theology and metaphysics. Expressing the problem as one that relates to the relation between ontology and theology, Bertolacci distinguishes between five interpretations as follows:

1. Since ontology and theology are two incompatible dimensions of metaphysics, Aristotle’s view would imply a kind of inconsistency since the conflict between ontology and theology can never be solved.
2. Aristotle’s view evolved from theology to ontology or vice versa. According to this interpretation, Aristotle’s thought would not involve any contradiction.
3. In *Metaphysics* there is no proper ontology distinct from theology since being as being as the subject matter of ontology amounts in a way to the Divine Being as the subject matter of theology.
4. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* really contains a theology that encompasses an ontology in so far as the study of the Divine Being implies the study of being in general.
5. The fifth is that ontology and theology are two distinct but interrelated parts of *Metaphysics*.

Bertolacci then attributes a “strong” version of the fifth interpretation to Avicenna, according to which *Metaphysics* is constitutively an ontology, whose most relevant part is a theology.<sup>1</sup>

## The Problem

It is sufficiently clear that the abovementioned diverse interpretations can lead to different (and even conflicting) perspectives about the relation between metaphysics and theology. At the moment, putting the historical background aside, we may pose the problem in this way:

---

1. Referring to the ground of the fifth interpretation, Bertolacci writes: “the study of “being qua being” includes the study of the Divine Being in so far as every science is concerned with investigating the principles of the sector of reality it takes into account.” (Bertolacci, 2006, p. 112) This expression of the ground of the fifth interpretation, in my view, makes the difference between it and the third interpretation somehow obscure, since he says a very similar point about the third interpretation when he writes: “...since “being qua being” amounts ... to Divine Being.” (Bertolacci, 2006, p. 112).

Rejecting the thesis of unsolvable conflict between metaphysics and theology<sup>1</sup> and assuming that they are really interrelated, we may distinguish between two main views among the Muslim philosophers. The first is to regard the scope of theology so comprehensive and its principles and statements so fundamental that it comprises or implies metaphysical issues. We may regard this view as a type of *theologizing* the metaphysics. The second view is to insert theology into metaphysics so that the former becomes a part or sector of the latter. One initial justification for this view is that the scope of metaphysics, as the science of “being as being”, is so broad that it encompasses the realm of philosophical theology. As I will try to show in the following sections, it seems plausible to distinguish between three phases of the history of the Islamic philosophy. In the first phase, mostly represented by al-Kindi, the first view was accepted. After a while, and in the second phase, represented by al-Farabi, there appeared a kind of hesitation to definitely choose one of these two views. And finally, in the third phase, started by Avicenna and continued until today, the second view became dominant. In what follows I shall briefly explore the views of some of the Muslim philosophers as representatives of the leading views in each one of these three historical phases.

## Al-Kindi

In contrary to most of his successors, Al-Kindi tries to theologize Aristotelian metaphysics. In his *Treatise on the First Philosophy*, al-Kindi identifies first philosophy as our knowledge of the *First Truth* (*al-Haq al-Awal* or God) who is the cause of every truth (al-Kindi, 1974, p. 56). For him, first philosophy (i.e. metaphysics) is the greatest and most noble human art, since its goal is to gain knowledge of the true nature of things through knowledge of their causes. Since the first cause of all beings is the “First Truth” or the “First One”, it must be the subject matter of the first philosophy as the noblest branch of knowledge.

Elsewhere, he makes a contrast between natural philosophy as the knowledge of mobile things, and metaphysics or “the knowledge of what is beyond nature” as the knowledge of non-mobile things (al-Kindi, 1974, p. 56). This view on the nature and subject matter of metaphysics may seem a reductionist one

---

1. It is worth noting that in this paper I mean by “theology” the so-called philosophical or rational theology as is contrasted to revealed or scriptural theology. In recent centuries, many Muslim philosophers would call this field “*al-Ilahiyyaat al-Khas*” (Divine science in its proper sense) as contrasted to “*al-Ilahiyyaat al-'Aam*” (Divine science in its general sense) which is the same as metaphysics.

since by identifying God as the subject matter of the first philosophy; this view actually reduces metaphysics to philosophical theology.<sup>1</sup>

## Al-Farabi

Al-Farabi's discussion of the nature of metaphysics differs from Al-Kindi's from at least two aspects. First, Al-Farabi deals with the issue in a much more detailed way and in various works. Second, he seems to adopt more than a single account of the subject matter of metaphysics. We may say that the unclarity of Aristotle's final view is somehow present in Al-Farabi's view too.

In some of his works, Al-Farabi is apparently inclined to accept the view that the subject matter of metaphysics embraces just the incorporeal entities including God. He goes on, however, to admit that metaphysics also discusses material objects, not from all aspects but just as far as they are caused by ultimate immaterial causes. In his *Kitab al-Huruf (Book of Letters)*, after making a distinction between the objects that lie under the categories and those that are beyond categories (i.e. immaterial objects), Al-Farabi establishes the need for a branch of knowledge as the knowledge of what is beyond the natural things, which "considers the things beyond the categories ... and considers the things under the categories inasmuch as they [i.e. the things beyond the categories] are their causes..." (Al-Farabi, 1986, p. 69).

Elsewhere he defines metaphysics (or "al-Hikmah" in al-Farabi's own terminology) as 'the knowledge of the remote causes by which all other beings come to existence and of the near causes of caused things and this is to become certain about their existence and know what they are and how they are and that they, though multiple, ascend in an order to reach to a single being which is the cause of the existence of those remote things and the near things under them...' (Al-Farabi, 1405a, p. 53). According to this view, metaphysics is almost identical to a system of philosophical theology with a wide realm that primarily includes the immaterial things and secondarily the material objects, i.e. as far as they are related to their incorporeal causes.

In some of his other works, Al-Farabi comes closer to Aristotle's view in

---

1. Peter Adamson makes a link between al-Kindi's view and the Aristotelian view of the nature of metaphysics as the science of being qua being: "While this may not sound like it has much to do with Aristotle's understanding of first philosophy as the science of being, al-Kindi closely associates being with truth ("everything that has being has truth"). For Him, to say that God is the cause of all truth is tantamount to saying that God is the cause of all being, a point made more explicit at the end of what remains to us of *On First Philosophy*" (Adamson, 2018). This analysis, though useful for noticing the relation between truth and being in al-Kindi's philosophy, cannot form any bridges between the two abovementioned views.

*Gama* and depicts metaphysics as the science of being *qua* being. For instance, in *Al-Jam' bayna Ra'y al-Hakimayn*, he explicitly says that “philosophy by definition and nature is the knowledge of beings qua beings” (al-Farabi, 1405b, p. 80). Moreover, in the treatise *Fi Aqrad Ma Ba'd al-Tabi'a (On the Aims of the Metaphysics)* he first distinguishes between the particular sciences and the universal sciences. Then he argues that universal science must only be one which is the same as the metaphysics (McGinnis, 2007, pp. 78-79). He then goes on to show that theology as the science of divinity ought to be seen as part of metaphysics. He writes:

[Now, since there is only one universal science], theology should fall under this science, because God is a principle of the existent in the absolute sense, not of one existent to the exclusion of another, and the part of [the universal science] that provides the principle of the existent [absolutely] should itself be theology (McGinnis, 2007, p. 79).

Al-Farabi's *Fi Aqrad* had a strong impact on Avicenna's view on the very essence of metaphysics, its final goal and its relation to theology. As it is reflected in his well-known autobiography, Avicenna himself acknowledged his great debt towards this work (Gohlman, 1974, pp. 32-35). This impact shows itself especially in the first chapters of the first book of *Ilahiyyaat Al-Shifa'* where Avicenna presented a mature, coherent and well-organized view on the nature of metaphysics. Providing a comprehensive picture of this view is beyond the scope of this article. Thus, I shall explore briefly the most important parts of his theory as far as they are relevant to our main issue, i.e. the relation between metaphysics and theology.

## Avicenna

In the two first chapters of the first article of *Ilahiyyaat al-Shifa'*, Avicenna undertakes the task to overtly identify the subject-matter of metaphysics. Here he claims implicitly that no philosophers before him had carried out this task perfectly, when he addresses his reader and says: “But now you still have not truly ascertained what is the subject matter of this science – whether it is the essence of the First Cause, so that what one seeks here is knowledge of His attributes and acts, or whether the subject matter is some other notion” (Avicenna, 2005, p. 3).

It is worth noting that, according to Avicenna; the subject matter of a science is the notion of proper accidents (*al-'Awarid al-Dhatiyya*) which are discussed in that science. Assuming that metaphysics, like any other discipline, ought to have one single (though compound) notion as its subject matter whose essential properties or accidents are to be investigated in it,



Avicenna examined two alternative views held by some thinkers about the subject matter of metaphysics; According to the first view the First Cause (namely God) is the subject matter while the second view considers the ultimate four causes as the subject matter of metaphysics. Then he sets out some subtle demonstrations to show that neither of these can be correctly regarded as the subject matter of metaphysics.

First, he argues that the notion of God cannot possess the status of being the subject matter of metaphysics. His argument can be summarized as follows: No science proves the existence of its subject matter. Metaphysics proves the existence of God. Thus, God is not the subject matter of metaphysics. (Avicenna, 2005, p. 4) He then proposes several arguments to show that the ultimate four causes cannot be the subject matter of metaphysics either (Avicenna, 2005, pp. 5-6).

In the second chapter and in accordance with Aristotle's *Gama*, Avicenna argues for the claim that the subject matter is nothing but the existent as existent.

The primary subject matter of this science is, hence, the existent inasmuch as it is existent; and the things sought after in [this science] are those that accompany [the existent,] inasmuch as it is an existent, unconditionally (Avicenna, 2005, p. 10).

The key phrase here is “existent inasmuch as it is existent.” What does Avicenna really mean by this modifier, i.e. “inasmuch as it is existent?” According to the above passage, this phrase is interpreted as existent without any condition or, let's say, unconditional existent (*al-Wujud al-Mutlaq*). Regarding different contexts, the latter phrase, i.e. “the unconditional existent”, has been used in entirely different meanings by Muslim philosophers and mystics. In the context wherein the philosopher wants to identify the subject matter of metaphysics, however, this phrase has a somehow *relational* meaning. As it is adequately clear, mathematics and physics, as two branches of theoretical philosophy other than metaphysics, investigate specific kinds of existents and their subject matters consist of special or conditional existents. The same goes for practical sciences such as ethics. The relevant conditions can be called “mathematical”, “physical” and “practical” (or “moral”)<sup>1</sup> respectively. So what Avicenna and other Muslim

---

1. Following his predecessors, Avicenna identifies practical wisdom or practical philosophy with that branch of philosophy (in its broad sense) which discusses just the existents that are our actions inasmuch as they are our actions: “And [it has also been stated] that practical [philosophy] is that wherein one first seeks the perfection of the theoretical faculty by attaining conceptual and verifiable knowledge involving things that are [the things] they are in being our actions...” (Avicenna, 2005, p. 2). Thus, in this context, what is meant by “practical or moral condition of the existent” is the condition of being our action as far as it is our action.

philosophers have in mind by “unconditional existent”, in its relational sense, is the notion of “existent” as far as it is not conditioned by any mathematical or physical or practical conditions.

Though rather implicitly, Avicenna refers to this interpretation in several passages of *Ilahiyyaat al-Shifa’ (The Metaphysics of Healing)*. For example, he writes:

Some of these are akin to proper accidents, such as the one and the many, the potential and the actual, the universal and the particular, and the possible and the necessary. For, the existent, in accepting these accidents and in being prepared for them, does not need to become specified as natural, mathematical, moral, or some other thing (Avicenna, 2005, p. 10).

This interpretation surely does not exclude all conditioned beings whatsoever from the realm of metaphysics but just specific conditioned existents namely those that are conditioned mathematically or physically or practically. Thus, for example, the investigation of existent as a cause or an effect remains within the scope of metaphysics since neither “being a cause” nor “being an effect” is a mathematical or physical condition:

Because, in being either a cause or an effect, the existent does not need to be natural, mathematical, or some [similar] thing, it would be fitting to follow [the above] discourse with [a discussion of] causes...” (Avicenna, 2005, p. 20)

Bearing this interpretation in mind, it would be obvious why philosophical theology becomes a part of metaphysics. Theology discusses the existence, the attributes and the acts of God (and of other immaterial entities) and all these issues can be classified under the examination of the proper accidents of the necessary existent (Wajib al-Wujud). Since the necessary existent is still an unconditioned existent (in the above relational sense) theological inquiry turns out to be within the realm of metaphysics.

Thus, Avicenna explicitly considers philosophical theology as one of the main parts of metaphysics:

What adherers necessarily to this science [therefore] is that it is necessarily divided into parts. Some of these will investigate the ultimate causes, for these are the causes of every caused existent with respect to its existence. [This science] will [also] investigate The First Cause, from which emanates every caused existent...<sup>1</sup> (Avicenna, 2005, p. 11).

---

1. Avicenna here clearly pictures philosophical theology as a part of metaphysics and this definitely is in accordance with the abovementioned fifth interpretation of Aristotle’s view on the relation



One may be worried about the apparent inconsistency between saying that the subject matter of metaphysics is “existent qua existent” and saying that metaphysics investigates the First Cause and the four ultimate principles.<sup>1</sup> There are two distinctions in Avicenna’s theory according to which this inconsistency would disappear.

First, he distinguishes between the “subject matter” (*maudu’*) of metaphysics and the “things searched” or “investigated” (*yubhathu ‘anha*) by it. As we have already seen, Avicenna argues that “existent qua existent” is the subject matter of metaphysics: “It is thus clear to you from this totality [of what has been said] that the existence inasmuch as it is an existent ... must be made the subject matter of this art for the reasons we have stated” (Avicenna, 2005, p. 9). Therefore, God and the first causes are just things investigated in metaphysics.

Another distinction is made between the subject matter of metaphysics and its end or aim. While God and the first causes cannot gain the status of being the subject matter of metaphysics, they are its aims in the sense that the final goal of studying metaphysics is to gain the knowledge of supreme beings especially the First Supreme Cause:

Thus, the falsity of this theoretical [argument]- namely, that the subject matter of this science is the ultimate causes- becomes evident. Rather, it should be known that [probing the ultimate causes] is its perfection and what it seeks after (Avicenna, 2005, p. 6)

→

between metaphysics and theology. It is worth noting that in his *Mantiq al-Mashriqiyyin* (*The Logic of the Easterners*), Avicenna surprisingly adopts a different position and divides theoretical philosophy into four sub-sciences: natural, mathematical, divine (*ilahi*) and universal (*kulli*) philosophy. According to the text, by “divine” and “universal” he means theology and metaphysics respectively. Thus, his view in this book entails that philosophical theology is not a part of metaphysics but a separate discipline besides it. He then says that this classification is not well recognized (Avicenna, 1405 AH, pp. 6-7). This view is in contrast to his view proposed in some of his other works such as *Ilahiyyaat al-Shifa’* (*The Metaphysics of Healing*), *Risalat al-Aqdam al-Ulum al-Aqliyyah* (*The Treatise on the Divisions of the Rational Sciences*) (Avicenna, 1326 AH, pp. 105-107), *Uyun al-Hikmah* (*The Fountains of Wisdom*) (Avicenna, 1980, p. 17) and *Danishnama-i ‘Alai* (Avicenna, 1973, p. 12), where he divides theoretical philosophy into three sub-sciences and inserts philosophical theology into metaphysics. In the last book, he explicitly says: “The recognition of the creator of all things, His unity and the union of all things with Him belong to this science [i.e. metaphysics]. That part of this science which investigates the unity of God, in particular, is called the science of metaphysical theology or the science of the sovereignty of God” (Ibid.). To answer the question of “which of these views is Avicenna’s final view”, one needs more historical investigation.

1. It is worth noting that the notion of “the four ultimate principles (causes)” is so broad that it embraces the notion of “The First Cause” since by the former they mean the ultimate efficient cause, the ultimate final cause, the ultimate formal cause, and the ultimate material cause while the latter (i.e. The First Cause) means nothing but the ultimate efficient (and even the ultimate final) cause which is identical to God.

In light of these distinctions and clarifications,<sup>1</sup> it seems that Avicenna succeeds to portray three different Aristotelian descriptions of the first philosophy in the *Alfa*, *Gama*, and *Epsilon* as a coherent reasonable picture.

The study of God (His attributes and acts) and other immaterial entities as the final objective of metaphysics bestows on theology a very high status over other parts of metaphysics. Philosophical theology, in a sense, becomes the ultimate end (*al-gayat al-quswaa*) of metaphysical inquiry. Perhaps it is in accordance with this view that Avicenna's detailed treatment of theological problems is postponed to the last books of *Ilahiyyaat al-Shifa'*.

## Mulla Sadra

Mulla Sadra is the founder of the school of *Al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah* which gradually became the prominent school of philosophy in Islamic philosophical tradition after the two prior schools namely, the Peripatetic and the Illuminationist schools. In the time of Mulla Sadra, who was born about five centuries after Avicenna, metaphysics acquired a more well-formed structure than what could be found in Avicenna's and other Peripatetic philosophers' works. Mulla Sadra's philosophical masterpiece called *Al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah fi al-Asfar al-'Aqliyyat al-Arba'* (The Transcendent Wisdom Concerning the Four Intellectual Journeys) was articulated in four main parts each one as an intellectual journey. The first journey is devoted to general metaphysical issues about existence and its divisions and characteristics and embraces ontological issues as well as such topics as causation, motion and time. In the second journey, Mulla Sadra investigates the so-called metaphysical categories namely substance and accidents such as quality and quantity. The third journey contains a comprehensive study of philosophical theology including God's existence and His attributes and acts as well as issues like the problem of evil and the problem of human fatalism and freedom. Finally, in the fourth journey, Mulla Sadra presents a detailed philosophical study on the human soul and its resurrection.

It should be noted that Mulla Sadra uses the term "*al-'ilm al-Ilahi*" (divine knowledge) in two senses; the broad sense which covers philosophical issues about the soul and its resurrection as well, and the narrow sense which is almost restricted to the study of God. Referring to the first sense, he writes:

And it [philosophical theology] contains two noble sciences. The first is the knowledge of The Origin (*mabda'*) and the second is the knowledge of The End (*ma'aad*). The former includes the cognition of Allah and His attributes

---

1. For a more detailed description of these distinction (see Bertolacci, 2006, pp. 114-115).

and acts and the latter includes the cognition of the soul and the resurrection and the knowledge of the prophecies” (Mulla Sadra, 1981, vol. 6, p. 8).

In his book *al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'aad*, however, he adopts the second position and introduces knowledge of soul as the most noble part of natural philosophy: “And there is no doubt that the superior divine science is the cognition of the nature of The First Truth [God] ... and the superior natural science is the cognition of the human soul ...” (Mulla Sadra, 1354, p. 5).

At any rate, the high status of divine knowledge, in its proper sense, and its being the ultimate goal of the entirety of metaphysics is stressed by Mulla Sadra in various passages. For example, he writes in the introduction of the third journey:

You should know that this sector of wisdom which we tried to begin with, is its most noble part and the true faith in God and His signs and the hereafter ... (Mulla Sadra, 1981, vol. 6, pp. 6-7).

Even though Mulla Sadra's view has many similarities to that of Avicenna, there are a few differences between them concerning the realm of metaphysics as opposed to mathematical and physical philosophy. Mulla Sadra, like Avicenna, defines metaphysics as the science of the “existent qua existent” or existence qua existence. However, his interpretation of this subject matter is so broad that he moves some topics like the motion or the soul from physical philosophy to metaphysics while Avicenna and other peripatetic philosophers used to deal with them within their physical works.

### **Some Implications of the Muslim Philosophers' View**

Until now, we have briefly explored the views of some of the most prominent Muslim philosophers on the relation between metaphysics and theology. Roughly speaking, in spite of slight differences, these views can be classified under two main views. According to the first view, endorsed by Al-Kindi and adopted partially by Al-Farabi in some of his works, metaphysics is primarily the knowledge of immaterial entities and especially God as the First Cause of creation and secondarily the knowledge of material objects inasmuch as they are related to and caused by their immaterial causes. The second view has been initially argued for by Avicenna and accepted vastly by his successors including Mulla Sadra. In this view, metaphysics consists of the universal knowledge of the existent *qua* existent. Since the issues of philosophical theology are about the unconditioned existent (in the sense explained above) this discipline must be considered as a part of metaphysics. And further considerations show that this part should be seen as the noblest part which is the ultimate theoretical goal of the other parts.

It seems that this second view which became the dominant view among Muslim philosophers particularly in the later phases of the history of Islamic philosophy has some remarkable implications. Hereunder I shall explore briefly some of what I take as the most significant implications of this view.

1. According to this view, metaphysics cannot be a *secular* discipline. A metaphysics whose ultimate goal is to acquire knowledge of God, His attributes and acts would be neither against nor even neutral about religious and spiritual beliefs. Mulla Sadra occasionally insists on this position. To give an example, – before going on to appeal to some Quranic verses in order to confirm the incorporeality of the human soul– he writes in an epical tone: “...that philosophy<sup>1</sup> whose principles are contrary to the Book [i.e. the Quran] and the [Islamic] Tradition (*Sunnah*) should be condemned (Mulla Sadra, 1981, vol. 6, p. 330).

Consequently, this view implies that by practicing metaphysics, the philosopher actually exemplifies a prominent instance of the reconciliation between human reason or intellect and Revelation or faith. From a more general perspective, the so-called Sadian philosophers typically believe that, in an ideal situation<sup>2</sup>, mystical intuition, philosophical argumentation, and religious revelation lead us to the same end; they are three parallel ways to the same destination.

2. Assuming that a single discipline of knowledge should be free of any internal inconsistencies, this view requires a complete consistency between theological issues on the one hand, and other metaphysical issues on the other, since all of these issues are to comprise a single integrated system of philosophical thought. And the Muslim philosophers who defend the dominant view see themselves as successful in offering such a consistent system. Thus, we find that in their discussions devoted to philosophical theology, they frequently refer the reader to the previously mentioned metaphysical principles.<sup>3</sup> The interesting point is that in some texts written

1. To be sure, by “philosophy” here he means metaphysics.

2. By the *ideal* situation I mean that a situation in which our mystical intuitions and philosophical argumentations as well as our interpretations and understandings of Revelation function properly. Normally, in expressing this perspective, the above modification is neglected. Since, however, the Muslim philosophers typically don’t consider our mystical intuitions, our rational argumentations and our understandings of the scriptures to be infallible, this modification seems necessary.

3. One may find numerous examples of this kind of linking of theological issues to metaphysical principles. It usually is made by using phrases like *kama marra* (as it was passed), *lima marra* (because of what was passed), *kama ‘alimta* (as you have known), etc. As an example, we can consider Mulla Sadra’s articulation of the so-called The Proof of the Sincere (*Burhan al-Siddiqin*); a rational argument for the existence of God. In the passage devoted to this argument in *Asfar*, he refers four times to metaphysical principles like the principality of existence, the simplicity of existence and the causal relation between the cause and its effect, and utilizes these principles to provide a well-established rational argument for God’s existence. (see Mulla Sadra, 1981, vol. 6. pp. 14-16).

by the Muslim philosophers several theological issues are discussed in two different places; first, as a pure metaphysical issue and second, as a theological one. For example, Mulla Sadra and his followers usually discuss the dichotomy of necessary/contingent existent as a part of their ontology. Regarding the first type of existent, i.e. the necessary existent, some principles like the principle of the unity of the necessary being are established. When they come to the theological issues, we find they repeat these issues, though with an almost different (but consistent) content and with a theological approach.<sup>1</sup>

3. Nowadays contemporary scholars of the history of philosophy commonly use “Islamic philosophy” as a generic term which refers to the philosophical systems of philosophers such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Avicenna and Mulla Sadra.<sup>2</sup> But what does it mean to call a system of metaphysics “Islamic?” There are different views on how one should interpret this term. It seems that considering theology as the ultimate goal of metaphysics bestows a significant meaning to this phrase and an outstanding status to the property of being *Islamic*. Accordingly, in this view, “*Islamic philosophy*” refers to a comprehensive system of metaphysics (in its broad sense) which aims at presenting sufficient rational grounds for theological teachings of Islam. To be sure, this is not necessarily the single acceptable interpretation but it seems to be a justifiable one, especially when we are talking about the school of Transcendent Philosophy founded by Mulla Sadra.

## Conclusion

Due to the obscurity of Aristotle’s identification of the subject matter of Metaphysics in *Metaphysics*, his exact view about the relationship between metaphysics and theology remains unclear. Encountering this obscurity, the Muslim philosophers adopted two different views. According to the first view, represented by al-Kindi, metaphysics is essentially identical to theology whose subject matter is the “First Truth” or God.

The second view which was partially adopted by al-Farabi and seriously defended by Avicenna and his successors is that theology is not identical to metaphysics but is its most noble part. This view is based on a broad

---

1. To give an example, within the ontology of his *Asfar*, Mulla Sadra discusses the claim that the necessary being is beyond having quiddity and presents five arguments (Mulla Sadra, 1981, vol. 1, pp. 96-108). He then comes back to this issue within the theological part of *Asfar* and examines two new arguments (Mulla Sadra, 1981, vol. 6, pp. 48-57).

2. It should be noted that, as far as we know, none of the great Muslim philosophers in the middle ages and modern era have formally called their own philosophies “Islamic.”

interpretation of the subject matter of metaphysics as “existent qua existent” which requires that philosophical inquiry about God, His attributes and His acts would be essentially a metaphysical study. According to this view, metaphysics cannot be a secular discipline and should be totally consistent with theology. It also provides us with a certain interpretation of what is commonly called “Islamic philosophy.”

## References

---

- Adamson, P. (2018). Al-Kindi. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/al-kind/>
- Al-Farabi. (1405a AH). *Fusul al-Muntaze'ah*. (Edited and commented by Fuzi Najar). Tehran: Al-Zahra.
- Al-Farabi. (1405b AH). *Al-Jam' bayn Ra'y al-Hakimayn*, Introduction and Comments by Al-Bair Nasri Nader. Tehran: Al-Zahra.
- Al-Farabi. (1986). *Kitab al-Huruf (The Book of Letters)*. introduction and comments by Muhsin Mahdi. Bairut: Dar al-Mashriq.
- Al-Kindi. (1974). *Fi al-Falsafa al-Ula (Al-Kindi's Metaphysics)*. Translated with introduction and commentary by Alfred L. Ivry. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Aristotle. (1984). *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, The Revised Oxford Translation, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Avicenna. (1326 AH). *Risalah fi Aqsam al-'Ulum al-'Aqliyah*. In *Tisa' Rasail fi al-Hikmah wa Al-Tabi'iyat*. Cairo: Dar al-'Arab.
- Avicenna. (1973). *Danishnama-i 'Alai*. Translated by Parviz Morewedge as *The Metaphysica of Avicenna*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Avicenna. (1980). *'Uyun al-Hikmah*. Introduction by Abd al-Rahman Badawi. Bairut: Dar al-Qalam.
- Avicenna. (2005). *Al-Ilahiyyat min Al-Shifa'*, (*The Metaphysics of Healing*). Translated, introduced and annotated by Michael Marmura, Brigham Young University.



- Bertolacci, A. (2006). *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitab Al-Sifa': A Milestone of Western Metaphysical Thought*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Gohlman, W.E. (1974). *The Life of Ibn Sina*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- McGinnis, J. & Reisman D. C. (Eds.). (2007). *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Shirazi, S. M. (Mulla Sadra). (1354 SH). *Al-Mabda' wa Al-Ma'ad*. Tehran: Anjoman-i Hekmat va Falsafe.
- Shirazi, S. M. (Mulla Sadra). (1981). *Al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah fi al-Asfar al-'Aqliyyat al-Arba'* (The Transcendent Wisdom Concerning the Four Intellectual Journeys), 9 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Ihya' al-Turath.
- Shirazi, S. M. (Mulla Sadra). (2001). *Sharh al-Hidaya al-Athiriyya*. M.M. Fuladkar (ed.), Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi.





پروفیسر شگاہ علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرہنگی  
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی