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Necessary Existence and Necessary Mercy: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Reformulation of Ibn Sīnā’s Ontological Proof

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Abstract: Abū ‘Alī ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1027) is regarded as the most influential philosopher in Islamic intellectual history. Of his numerous contributions, none has garnered more attention than his ontological proof for the existence of God, known as ‘the Demonstration of the Truthful’ (*Burhān al-ṣiddiqīn*). In this proof, Ibn Sīnā argues that only one being can be ‘necessarily existent’ (*wājib al-wujūd*). He goes on to say that all the attributes of God mentioned in the Qur’an are derived from this primary attribute of necessity. The influential mystic, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), is clearly influenced by this proof, but he reformulates it to suggest that the primary attribute of God is mercy rather than existence. However, this is not the type of mercy that entails forgiveness or the bestowal of favors; rather, it is a necessary mercy that brings everything into existence. All of God’s other attributes flow from this primary one of necessary mercy in the same way as all of God’s attributes flow from His necessary existence for Ibn Sīnā.

Keywords: philosophy; mysticism; Ibn Sīnā; Ibn ‘Arabī; necessary existence; mercy



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1. Introduction

We are fortunate enough to have a biography of Ibn Sīnā written by his student, Abū ‘Ubayd al-Juzjānī (d. 462/1070) ([Gutas 2014](#)). The inevitable hagiographical elements notwithstanding, this biography provides a detailed account of Ibn Sīnā’s life. Born in Afshāna in around 370 AH/980 CE, or, most probably, slightly before that ([Gutas 1987–1988](#), pp. 334–36), to a Sāmānid governor who was himself interested in philosophy ([McGinnis 2010](#), pp. 17–18), Ibn Sīnā had gained considerable mastery in Greek philosophy by the time he was eighteen ([Gutas 2014](#), p. 6). He led somewhat of a nomadic existence due to the regional political turmoil that marred his era ([Gutas 2014](#), pp. 8–9). Despite this, however, he was incredibly prolific and is widely regarded as the greatest philosopher in Islamic intellectual history ([Adamson 2013a](#), p. I; [Janssens 2018](#), pp. 1–14). He made contributions to numerous fields and was far from shy about flaunting his achievements, as Al-Juzjānī’s biography makes abundantly clear ([Gutas 2014](#)).

Of all his enviable contributions to myriad sciences, the ones he made in medicine, documented in his *Canon of Medicine* (*Qānūn fi’l-ṭibb*), and in philosophy, dispersed through numerous works, especially *The Cure* (*Al-Shifā’*), stand out as especially significant ([Bertolacci 2017–2018](#), p. 265). Ibn Sīnā draws heavily on Aristotelian philosophy to expound his own philosophical *Weltanschauung* ([Bertolacci 2006](#)), but it is the fourth and final section of *The Cure* that deals with metaphysics (*ilāhiyyāt*) in which the originality of his philosophical outlook is truly articulated. It is for this reason that Ibn Sīnā regarded this section as his ‘crowning achievement’ in philosophy ([McGinnis 2010](#), p. 149).

Perhaps the most popular of Ibn Sīnā’s contributions is what is known as ‘the Demonstration of the Truthful’ (*Burhān al-ṣiddiqīn*) ([Adamson 2016](#), p. 126). Ibn Sīnā asserts that God is at the summit of the existential hierarchy because His existence is unlike anything

else. This is because God is necessary in essence (*wājib bi'l-dhāt*), as opposed to all other entities since He is independent of all things for His existence. All other things have a different modality of existence in which they are, ultimately, contingent on God. Ibn Sīnā goes on to prove that God is the only entity that can have this modality of existence (Bäck 1992, pp. 217–55).

The reason God is independent of all things, argues Ibn Sīnā, is that His essence assures His existence. He, therefore, does not need anything else to bring Him into existence. This is because Ibn Sīnā believes that essence (*dhāt*) and existence (*wujūd*) are separate.¹ Since God is the only entity in which this is the case, all other things need something to bring them into existence because this task is not performed by their essence, or, in Ibn Sīnā's parlance, all other things need preponderation (*tarjīh*) to exist (Lizzini 2003, pp. 11–38). So it is only God who is 'necessarily existent' (*wājib al-wujūd*). Yet Ibn Sīnā does not stop there. As God's necessary existence is His primary attribute, Ibn Sīnā believes that all His other attributes, like simplicity and oneness, derive from this one (Ibn Sīnā 1998, p. 29; Inati 2014, pp. 119–30; Adamson 2016, p. 131; McGinnis 2022, pp. 98–101). The mystical theorist, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), is evidently quite taken with this proof, but disagrees that God's primary attribute is necessary existence.

So ubiquitous is Ibn 'Arabī in the Western imagination that he may be viewed as Ibn Sīnā's successor, if not in thought then certainly in influence (Addas 1993; Knysh 1999; Dagli 2016). Further, there are a number of similarities between Ibn Sīnā's life and that of Ibn 'Arabī: both came from affluent backgrounds and had fathers who had governmental posts, both traveled extensively and lived in numerous places, and there are detailed biographies for both. Claude Addas provides an excellent biography of Ibn 'Arabī in which the physical stages of the Sufi's life are delineated alongside his spiritual stages of development (Addas 1993). Born in 560 AH/1165 CE in Murcia, Spain, to a man who was politically influential, Ibn 'Arabī, like Ibn Sīnā, had a good education. After completing his studies, he became the secretary to the governor of Seville and married a high-born woman (Austin 1980, pp. 1–2). However, at the age of twenty, he renounced his comfortable life and embarked on the Sufi path (Ghurāb 1983). He traveled through Tunisia, Egypt, Mecca, Anatolia, Iraq, and finally settled in Syria, where he passed away in 634AH/1240 at the age of 75. Unlike his predecessor, who was known for his extravagant lifestyle, Ibn 'Arabī was a Sufi known for his renunciation (Chittick 1992, pp. xii–xiii; De Cillis 2014, p. 169).

Even though Ibn 'Arabī attributes all his mystical insights to a form of spiritual unveiling, or *kashf*, that is afforded to the spiritual elite among humankind (Morrissey 2020, pp. 763–94), it is evident that his conception of divine mercy draws heavily on Ibn Sīnā's proof of God's necessary existence. Indeed, it may be viewed as a reformulation of necessary existence in conformance with Ibn 'Arabī's emphasis on divine mercy (Nettler 1978; Nettler 2003; Hirtenstein 1999). This is because Ibn 'Arabī's notion of God's necessary mercy, or the 'mercy that is freely given' (*raḥmat al-imtīnān*) (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, pp. 191–96), which he also refers to as 'the mercy of existence' (*raḥmat al-wujūd*) (Ibn 'Arabī 1999), holds the same status of being the primary attribute of God as necessary existence does for Ibn Sīnā.

Ibn 'Arabī thus bifurcates divine mercy into the emotive kind of mercy that is restricted and only bestowed in accordance with praiseworthy actions, or the 'mercy that is compelled [by actions]' (*raḥmat al-wujūb*), and the mercy of existence (*raḥmat al-wujūd*) that is given to all entities by God. All entities that exist are thus recipients of this type of mercy purely by the fact that they exist (Nettler 1978, pp. 219–29). It is because all existing things have received this mercy, just by existing, that this is God's most universally applied attribute and, argues Ibn 'Arabī, most primary (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 191). In the same way as his predecessor, Ibn 'Arabī believes that all of God's other attributes proceed from this primary attribute, which is not necessary existence as it is for Ibn Sīnā, but necessary mercy.

In this study, how Ibn Sīnā's conception of necessary existence is redeployed by Ibn 'Arabī as necessary mercy is explored. The way in which this is achieved is to (1) interrogate what necessary existence actually means for Ibn Sīnā and how he contrasts this

modality of existence with other modalities of existence, and then (2) to present how Ibn Sīnā extracts God's other attributes from this primary attribute of necessary existence. After this, the same methodology is employed for Ibn 'Arabī, so (1) the modalities of existence as a result of necessary mercy in the philosophical outlook of Ibn 'Arabī are scrutinized, then (2) how Ibn 'Arabī extracts all of God's other attributes from the primary attribute of necessary mercy is investigated. The first order of business, then, is to elucidate the different modalities of existence in the ontology of Ibn Sīnā.

2. Modalities of Existence in Ibn Sīnā's Ontology

Ibn Sīnā begins his disquisition on the modalities of existence by dismissing the common but false perception that existence is restricted to that which is sensible (*maḥsūṣ*). He explains that, contrary to what most people think, they already implicitly accept the existence of things that are 'not grasped by the senses' (*mā lā yanāluh al-ḥiss*). In order to elaborate, he adduces the case of 'Amr and Zayd, who are both given the appellation 'human being' (*insān*), but all people agree that 'humanness' is not something that is amenable to the senses since it has no position (*waḍ'*), space (*ayn*), specific quantity (*miqdār mu'ayyan*), or specific quality (*kayf mu'ayyan*) (Ibn Sīnā 1993, pp. 7–8). This means that there are things that all of us acknowledge are beyond sensory recognition (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 9).

If it is the case that there exist things beyond the physical world, then we must delineate what modalities of existence they have, says Ibn Sīnā. He thus moves to partition existence into two primary categories: necessary (*wājib*) and possible (*mumkin*). He writes,

If every being is considered in terms of its essence (*dhāt*), and not in terms of other things, then its existence is either necessary in itself (*yajib lahū al-wujūd fī nafsih*), or it is not. If [its existence] is necessary, then it is the truth in itself, and it is necessarily existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) in itself, and it is completely independent (*qayyūm*). (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 19)

The first category of existence is thus the type of existence in which something is 'necessary in itself'. Ibn Sīnā describes this modality of existence as 'necessarily existent' because 'it is completely independent' of anything else since its very essence guarantees its existence, and it therefore does not need to depend on anything else for its existence. Ibn Sīnā, through careful argumentation, proves that only God can have this sort of existence (Mayer 2001, pp. 18–20).

In his *Risāla fī'l-'ishq*, Ibn Sīnā asserts that only God can have necessary existence by drawing on the argument from gradation from Platonic and Neoplatonic sources which impose a hierarchical structure on existence in terms of goodness. According to this argument, since all things occupy a certain level of goodness, there must be something perched at the top of goodness (Menn 1992, pp. 543–73; Wippel 2000, p. 469). Ibn Sīnā explains that God is this highest Good, and because He is the highest and absolute Good, His goodness could not have been caused by anything else because that would mean that that entity was a higher good since it was the cause of God's goodness (Ibn Sīnā 1899, pp. 1–27).²

Thus, God is the absolute Good and is necessarily existent. As for all other things, Ibn Sīnā writes,

If it is not necessary, then it is [still] not permissible to say that it is impossible in itself after it was deemed to be existent. However, if in terms of its essence a condition is attached to it, like saying that its cause does not exist, [only] then does it become impossible (*mumtani'*). Or [conversely], if its cause does exist, then it becomes necessary (*wājib*). (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 19)

If something is not necessarily existent, says Ibn Sīnā, the immediate assumption cannot be that it is impossible. This is because it may yet exist due to a cause (*'illa*) that is attached to its essence, even though the essence itself does not ensure its existence. Therefore, if such a condition is found to be attached to the essence, then the entity becomes 'necessary' and it exists. In other words, if the cause ensures existence because the essence is not doing it

itself, then the thing becomes necessary. However, this is clearly not the type of necessary existence that God has. Instead, it is a necessary existence due to the existence of the cause, or necessary through another, but it is contingent in terms of itself because its existence is contingent on the cause (God). This, then, is the next modality of existence: necessary in terms of another, or contingent in terms of itself.

But it could be, says Ibn Sīnā, that a condition is not attached to the essence; now, the essence has nothing to bring it into existence and it is thus ‘impossible’, that is to say, it does not exist. However, this is only due to a lack of a condition to attach to the essence, not because the essence in itself is not amenable to existing, as Ibn Sīnā elaborates,

If no condition (*shart*) is attached to its essence—neither of the cause existing nor not existing—then there remains a third option for its essence: possibility (*imkān*), so in terms of its essence, the thing is neither necessary nor impossible. Therefore, every existent being is either necessary in itself, or possibly existent in itself. (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 19)

Every thing that exists is ‘either necessary in itself’, if its essence ensures its existence, as is the case for God, or it is ‘possibly existent in itself’ if it does not. This means that it *could* exist, but the cause to push it into existence is lacking, not because there is anything intrinsically present in its essence that precludes existence. This is why it is ‘neither necessary nor impossible’ because the essence does not guarantee its existence, so it is not necessary, but neither does it rule out its existence, so it is not impossible. It is significant that Ibn Sīnā says this about all things that exist because even things that do not have the cause to push them into existence, and therefore do not have a sensible existence in the world, still enjoy mental existence because their essence does not preclude existence.

If it is the case that some things do not exist because there is a want of the cause to push them into sensible existence, then there must be others that do not exist on account of their essence. In other words, there must be those things that do not exist, not because there is no cause, but because the essence itself rules out its existence. And sure enough, that is the case, says Ibn Sīnā (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 20). This means that we end up with four modalities of existence in Ibn Sīnā’s ontology:

1. Necessary existence (*wājib al-wujūd*). This is when something exists due to its very essence, which means it is not dependent on anything for its existence; it is a modality of existence that is reserved for God.
2. Possible existence (*imkān*). This is when the essence does not guarantee existence, which means that the being is dependent on a cause to push it into existence. If the cause is present, then the being becomes necessary through another, or contingent in itself. All things that exist in the sensible world, like humans, animals, plants, and physical objects, have this modality of existence.
3. Impossible (*mustahīl*) existence due to another (Ibn Sīnā 1993). This is the impossibility of existence in the sensible world due to a lack of cause. Things of this type are contingently impossible and have essences that *could* accept existence if there was a cause. Therefore, they have mental existence, like a centaur, a pegasus, a minotaur, etc.
4. Impossible in itself. This is when something does not exist in the physical world or the mental world because its essence itself rules out its existence, such as a square circle. This modality of existence is diametrically opposed to necessary existence because in necessary existence, the essence guarantees a thing’s existence, whereas in this type of existence, the essence precludes a thing’s existence (Ibn Sīnā 1985, pp. 547–49; Black 1997, pp. 425–53; Thom 2008, pp. 361–76; Druart 2012, pp. 51–74).

After positing that God has necessary existence—a modality of existence that is distinct from all other things—Ibn Sīnā begins to extract all of God’s other qualities from His primary attribute of necessity (Ibn Sīnā 1993, pp. 21–240; McGinnis 2010, pp. 168–72; Adamson 2013b, p. 219).

3. Necessary Existence as the Source of All Other Divine Attributes for Ibn Sīnā

Ibn Sīnā is clear that God's primary attribute is His necessity (McGinnis 2010, pp. 168–70). If that is the case, reasons Ibn Sīnā, then all the divine Names mentioned in the Qur'an, such as The Merciful or The Compeller (Harris 1989), inasmuch as they are descriptions of God's qualities (Stade 1970), must derive from this one. Case in point are the divine Names *Al-Wāḥid* and *Al-Aḥad* (The One). Ibn Sīnā agrees with his predecessor, Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. 259/873?), that implicit in God's Names for The One is His simplicity (Ahiwānī 1948, pp. 105–7). He writes,

If the essence (*dhāt*) of the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) were composed of two things (*shay'ayn*), or many things that came together, it would be made necessary through them. One of these things, or all of them, would be prior to the Necessary Existent, and it would be a component (*muqawwim*) of it/them. Thus, the Necessary Existent is indivisible (*lā yunqasam*), both conceptually (*fi'l-ma'nā*) and quantitatively (*fi'l-kamm*). (Ibn Sīnā 1993, pp. 44–45)

An inevitable corollary of necessary existence is indivisibility, asserts Ibn Sīnā. This is because were the Necessary Existent composed of parts, those parts would be ontologically prior to the Necessary Existent (even if they were not necessarily temporally prior), and His existence would be contingent on those parts, which would violate His necessary existence. The faithful commentator of Ibn Sīnā, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) (Adamson and Noble 2022), adds that Ibn Sīnā 'rejects composition (*tarkīb*) and division (*inqisām*) of the Necessary Existent in every way' (*'alā wajh al-kull*) (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 44). This is due to an entailment of composition being to be made up of multiple parts or elements, or because something is constructed from

... a primary part (*juz' aṣl*), which is prior to the composed thing, such as the wood of a bed, and another part (*juz' ākhar*) is attached to it so that the composed thing is made due to its attachment, like the form of the bed. (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 44)

It is not just an amalgamation of different parts that constitutes composition, says Ṭūsī, but also the composition of one part, like wood that a bed is made from, which is attached to a certain form, that is, the form of the bed. In this latter case, even though there is only one thing that the bed is made from, i.e., wood, the form of the bed is still dependent on the wood for its existence. Ibn Sīnā, therefore, not only rejects composition that entails multiple parts for the Necessary Existent, but also composition that entails a hylomorphic combination of matter and form (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 45).

The upshot of this, says Ibn Sīnā, is that because God is necessarily existent, He cannot be (1) more than one, or (2) divisible. Hence, Ibn Sīnā proves the divine Name The One from God's necessary existence. In the same way, Ibn Sīnā demonstrates that all of God's most beautiful Names (*Al-Asmā' al-ḥusnā*) from the Qur'an (Qur'an 7:180) are derived from His necessary existence. Ibn 'Arabī seems to be impressed with this line of argumentation, but he believes that God's primary attribute is not His necessary existence but rather His necessary mercy. Prior to discussing this, however, it behooves one to familiarize oneself with the modalities of existence according to Ibn 'Arabī so that the way in which God's necessary mercy brings forth these modalities can become clear.

4. Modalities of Existence in Ibn 'Arabī's Ontology

There is a general correspondence between the modalities of existence Ibn Sīnā delineates and those of Ibn 'Arabī. Both also agree that only God has necessary existence. Ibn 'Arabī writes in his magnum opus, *The Meccan Revelations (Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya)*, in language redolent of his predecessor, that God is the only 'being necessary of Himself' (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 6, p. 317). He also agrees with Ibn Sīnā that the physical world is only one of the modalities of existence and that there exist other beings that do not have physical existence because God did not preponderate them to exist in the phenomenal world. Ibn 'Arabī classifies all these as contingent in the same way as Ibn Sīnā because in themselves

they have the possibility to exist or not since their essence is amenable to both possibilities (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 6, p. 317). Ibn Sīnā writes,

That which has possibility (*imkān*) does not exist due to its essence (*dhāt*), for its existence is not more apt for it than its nonexistence because it is simply possible. Thus, if one of these states [existence or nonexistence] becomes more appropriate for it, it is due to the presence or absence of something. Therefore, the existence of every possible thing is due to another. (Ibn Sīnā 1993, p. 20)

Ibn Sīnā explains that after taking out the essence as a cause for the existence of something, as long as the essence is not self-contradictory like a square circle, the entity may or may not exist—both possibilities are equally plausible because 'its existence is not more apt for it than its nonexistence'. This means that if it exists in the sensible world, there has to be something that has swung the balance in favor of phenomenal existence, as opposed to only its existence in the pre-phenomenal world, and this thing is God. Ibn Sīnā explains that the pre-phenomenal realms include the purely spiritual world of the angels (Ibn Sīnā 1998, p. 435), which Ibn 'Arabī classifies as the world of determinations of the angels (Corbin 1997). Then comes the world of the souls for Ibn Sīnā, which Ibn 'Arabī also calls the world of the souls, or the determination of the souls (Corbin 1997, p. 225). And finally, Ibn Sīnā speaks of the world of the heavenly bodies, which corresponds to Ibn 'Arabī's world of the exemplars or *mithāl*, before the appearance of the sensible world (Corbin 1997, p. 225).

This means that, for both thinkers, besides the necessary existence of God, there exist four contingent modalities of existence. The three before the sensible world do not have materiality since they have not been preponderated to exist in the sensible world, but all of them are contingent on God for their existence (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 6, p. 317). Even though Ibn 'Arabī was equivocal in delineating these modalities of contingent existence, thinkers of his school systematized these realms into five 'divine presences (*ḥadarāt*)' of existence, as they are all contingent on the divine (Chittick 1982).

Ibn 'Arabī argues that all these realms, or all modalities of contingent existence, are not only dependent on God, as Ibn Sīnā asserts, but are actually manifestations of God. He explains in the opening passage of his most popular work, *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)*, that the reason for the existence of all the contingent worlds is the divine 'yearning' to be known (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, pp. 48–49) because God described Himself as a 'hidden treasure' (*kanz makhfiyy*) that wanted to be discovered (Ibn 'Arabī 1999, vol. 3, p. 260). The reason this results in the existence of all the realms of contingent existence, asserts Ibn 'Arabī, is that 'seeing something itself in itself (*nafsah bi nafsih*) is not like seeing it in something else (*fī amr ākhar*) that becomes like a mirror for it' (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 48). One of the most renowned later expositors of Ibn 'Arabī's mystical worldview, Nūr al-Dīn al-Jāmī (d. 898/1492), who was, nevertheless, highly original in his methodology and observations (Rizvi 2006), explains that this does not mean God was lacking any knowledge about himself because God knew Himself without the emergence of all the levels of contingent existence, so His knowledge of Himself was not ontologically or temporally posterior to the existence of contingent beings. However, the existence of contingent beings, and particularly humans, furnished God with 'a dissimilar vision' (*ru'ya mughāyara*) so that He could see Himself in something different, not as He is in His essence (Jāmī 2009, p. 52). He goes on to explain that the simile of a mirror is fitting because the reflection one sees in the mirror *is* oneself insofar as its source is the one reflected, yet seeing a reflection is not seeing the self as it truly is in itself (Jāmī 2009, p. 52; Sells 1988, pp. 121–49). God, thus, did not lack any knowledge of Himself that seeing Himself reflected in the realms of contingent existence perfected; He is perfect in terms of His essence (*dhātiyyan*) and in terms of His divine Names (*ismiyyan*), but He nevertheless desired to see His divine Names manifested in the realms of contingent existence (Jāmī 2009, p. 52). All the realms of contingent existence, therefore, are loci of manifestation of God's divine Names.

The conduit for this 'yearning' to see the divine Names to be fulfilled, says Ibn 'Arabī, is the divine attribute of necessary mercy, or 'mercy of existence' (*raḥmat al-wujūd*) which

brings forth all the realms of contingent existence in which God is able to ‘see’ Himself in a ‘dissimilar vision’. He juxtaposes this form of mercy that, by definition, is all-pervasive, since all realms of contingent existence that exist are, by the very fact that they exist, recipients of this type of mercy, to emotive mercy that is restricted to the phenomenal realm, and only to those that merit it (Izutsu 1983, pp. 121–22; Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 151–60). This means that, since all contingent realms of existence are nothing but the manifestation of God’s divine Names, all His divine Names are derived from God’s necessary mercy in the same way as they are derived from God’s necessary existence for Ibn Sīnā. The next section shows how necessary mercy brings about the manifestation of all of God’s other Names.

5. Necessary Mercy as the Source of All Other Divine Attributes for Ibn ‘Arabī

Ibn Sīnā argues that an ineluctable entailment of God’s necessary existence is the emergence of the ninety-nine divine Names mentioned in the Qur’an, like The Compassionate (*Al-Raḥmān*), as stated above. For Ibn ‘Arabī, however, the divine Name, The Compassionate (*Al-Raḥmān*) is not an entailment of His necessary existence but rather the source of all the other divine Names, like The Merciful (*Al-Raḥīm*), and others (Izutsu 1983). This is on account of the primary motivation for the emergence of the realms of contingent existence being God’s ‘yearning’ to ‘see’ Himself in another form (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 48–49). It is this ‘yearning’ that brings about the mercy that God has, which, in turn, leads to the realms of contingency existing.

Since God is overflowing with this type of mercy, there was an effusion from Him that brought about the existence of all the realms of contingent existence (Izutsu 1983, p. 116; Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 49). In this sense, it is true that all the realms of existence are contingent on God as they are for Ibn Sīnā, yet their existence is not an entailment of God’s necessary existence as it is for Ibn Sīnā, since He could have existed on His own without the existence of anything else according to Ibn ‘Arabī. Nevertheless, Ibn ‘Arabī argues that God’s necessary mercy precipitated the realms of contingent existence as a manifestation of His divine Names in a form that was not Him (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 3, p. 260; Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 48–49). It is in this way that necessary existence for Ibn Sīnā can be thought of as being equivalent to necessary mercy for Ibn ‘Arabī because they are the respective sources of the realms of contingent existence.

Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the divine Names of God, like The Merciful and The Avenger, postulate the existence of contingent beings through whom and on whom these Names can be manifested (Ibn ‘Arabī 1983, p. 5). There can be no manifestation of God’s mercy or His revenge if there are no contingent being in whom and for whom this mercy and revenge is manifested. Ibn ‘Arabī makes his point in the following way:

The world is manifested through the breath (*nafas*) of The Compassionate (*Al-Raḥmān*). God released the divine Names from [the torture] they were going through because they could not manifest themselves. (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 145)

It is only through the divine Name, *Al-Raḥmān*, which is the Name Ibn ‘Arabī employs to refer to God’s necessary mercy (Izutsu 1983, pp. 116–40), that all the other divine Names were relieved from the constraint of non-existence that they were suffering from. It is for this reason, observes Toshihiko Izutsu, that God’s Name *Al-Raḥmān* contains all the other divine Names (Izutsu 1983, pp. 116–40). Izutsu writes,

There is a difference of ranks among the Divine Names, and that a higher Name virtually contains in itself all the Names of lower ranks. If such is the case, then it is natural for us to suppose that there must be in this hierarchy the highest, i.e., the most comprehensive, Name that contains all the rest of the Names. And in fact, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, there actually is such a Name: . . . *Raḥmān*. (Izutsu 1983, p. 116)³

The Name *Al-Raḥmān* is thus the most comprehensive of the divine Names since it contains all the others in it. Ibn ‘Arabī says as much when he states that the two Names, Allah and *Al-Raḥmān*, have the rank of ‘encompassment’ (*iḥāṭa*) and ‘perfection’ (*kamāl*)

which none of the other Names have (Hakīm 1981, p. 528). *Al-Raḥmān* is, therefore, the only one of the divine Names that is employed by Ibn ‘Arabī as a synonym of the Name Allah, as Su‘ād Ḥakīm correctly observes (Hakīm 1981, p. 528). This is because it denotes God’s most comprehensive attribute, which is the mercy that envelops all things, in the same way as the Name Allah refers to the all-encompassing essence of God.

Ibn ‘Arabī says that the type of mercy that is bestowed through the divine Name *Al-Raḥmān* is necessary mercy, which he also calls ‘the mercy that is freely given’ (*raḥmat al-imtinān*) since it is not ‘earned’ in any way (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 151). The existence of this type of all-pervasive mercy is intimated in the Qur’an itself, argues Ibn ‘Arabī, because God proclaims, ‘My mercy envelops all things’ (Qur’an, 7:156). This proclamation means that there can be no contingent being that is not touched by this form of mercy (Ibn ‘Arabī 1999, vol. 2, p. 239). It cannot refer, therefore, to emotive mercy, which is restricted and only bestowed on some contingent beings. If the divine declaration is true—as it must—then *all* things are recipients of divine mercy since there is no exception in the declaration. Ibn ‘Arabī proves that all things are indeed recipients of divine mercy and we know this because they exist. Their very existence is a testament to their acceptance of divine mercy (Nettler 1978; Izutsu 1983, pp. 116–40). The all-pervasiveness that is the defining feature of this kind of mercy is the reason, according to most commentators of the *Fuṣūṣ*, that Ibn ‘Arabī associates it with Prophet Sulaymān because he was freely given all-pervading sovereignty (Qāshānī 1892, p. 190; Qayṣarī 1955, p. 910; Jandī 2007, p. 443; Jāmī 2009, p. 360; Qūnawī 2013, p. 86).

In the chapter of Sulaymān, Ibn ‘Arabī clearly differentiates between the two types of mercy:

The mercy that is freely given (*raḥmat al-imtinān*) and the mercy that is compelled [by human actions] (*raḥmat al-wujūb*). These [two types of mercy proceed from the Names] The Compassionate (*Al-Raḥmān*) and The Merciful (*Al-Raḥīm*) [respectively]. Therefore, God gives freely through the Name The Compassionate and He is compelled through the Name The Merciful, but the compulsion is from what He gives freely, therefore, The Merciful is contained within The Compassionate. (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 151)

The divine Name The Merciful being contained within the Name The Compassionate is a clear indication that emotive mercy only becomes operational once there exist entities upon whom the emotive mercy of God can act, which is only made possible by the Name The Compassionate. Izutsu explains this point in the following way:

Mercy in this sense is nothing but bestowing upon everything existence *qua* existence. And this is done by the Absolute’s manifesting itself in the creaturely forms. This ontological act has in itself nothing to do with moral judgments. In other words, it does not matter essentially whether a thing as an object of the Mercy be good (*khayr*) or bad (*sharr*). Things assume these and other evaluational properties only after having been given existence by the act of the universal Mercy. (Izutsu 1983, p. 123)

Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), who was ‘a key figure in disseminating the teachings of the school of Ibn ‘Arabī in Anatolia’ (Rustom 2005, p. 53), elaborates that in this passage, Ibn ‘Arabī distinguishes between the mercy that emanates from God’s essence (*dhāt*) and the mercy that is the result of His attribute (*ṣifa*). The mercy that is due to His essence is ontologically prior to and the cause of the mercy that is then differentiated into the mercy of His attribute. It is the mercy of God’s essence that Ibn ‘Arabī refers to by the mercy that comes from the Name *Al-Raḥmān*, which then becomes differentiated into the mercy of His Name *Al-Raḥīm* (Qayṣarī 1955, pp. 910–12).

The reason the essence bestows this mercy of existentiatio that allows the emergence of the universe is that God wanted to ‘see’ Himself in something else. It is this fundamental Name, *Al-Raḥmān*, that ‘breathed out’ existence so that all the other Names could be manifested in existence, as Ibn ‘Arabī explains:

The 'breath' (*nafas*) is ascribed to The Compassionate (*Al-Raḥmān*) because He had mercy on the divine relations (*al-nasab al-ilāhiyya*) through it by bringing forth the forms of the cosmos (*ṣuwar al-'ālam*), which we have said is the manifest aspect (*ẓāhir*) of God since He is The Manifest (*Al-Zāhir*), and He is their hidden aspect (*bāṭin*) since He is The Hidden (*Al-Bāṭin*). He is The First (*Al-Awwal*) since He existed when they did not, and He is The Last (*Al-Ākhir*) since He is their essence when they are manifested. (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 112)

Ibn 'Arabī uses Q57:3, which declares that 'He [God] is The First and The Last, The Manifest and The Hidden', as a paradigmatic example of how the Name The Compassionate brings about all the other Names. It is the 'breath' that comes from The Compassionate that existentiates the cosmos and relieves all the other Names from the 'torture' (*karb*) of non-existence from which they were suffering (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 112). Elsewhere in the *Fuṣūṣ*, he is even more unequivocal about this:

The cosmos (*'ālam*) is manifested in the breath of The Compassionate (*al-nafas al-Raḥmān*) by which God relieved (*naffas*) the divine Names (*al-asmā' al-ilāhiyya*) from what they were experiencing due to not manifesting their traces (*āthār*). (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 145)

The breath of The Compassionate (*al-nafas al-Raḥmān*) brought about the existence of the cosmos which enabled the divine Names—what Ibn 'Arabī describes as 'the divine relations' (*al-nasab al-ilāhiyya*) in the previous passage—to become manifest and relieve them from the 'torture' (*karb*) of non-manifestation. This makes the Name The Compassionate the fundamental Name because all the other divine Names are manifested through this Name.

Ibn 'Arabī is explicit that the Name The Compassionate is primary because God described Himself as 'the Breath of The Compassionate', and it is unavoidable that each thing described by an attribute follows all the entailments of that attribute (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, p. 143). This means it is inevitable that God, insofar as He described Himself as a breath, adopts the attributes of a breath that brings about existence, according to Jāmī (Jāmī 2009, p. 342). Qayṣarī adds that 'the breath of The Compassionate' is the 'manifestation of existence' (*al-tajallī al-wujūdī*) of all contingent beings, whether they exist in the sensible realm or in the pre-sensible ones (Qayṣarī 1955, p. 877). All realms of contingent existence, then, are due to the breath of The Compassionate, which is based on the divine Name, The Compassionate. It is the source of all the other divine Names and realms of contingent existence in the same way that God's necessary existence is the source of all the divine Names and realms of contingent existence for Ibn Sīnā.

Ibn 'Arabī demonstrates his fidelity to lexical semantics when he designates *Al-Raḥmān* as the source of necessary mercy that is all-pervasive, and *Al-Raḥīm* as the source of emotive mercy that is restricted to the righteous (Morris 1987; Sands 2006, p. 41). The highly influential Mu'tazilite linguist and exegete, Abu'l-Qāsim al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) (Ayāzī 2009), writes in his magisterial commentary,

Al-Raḥmān is the *fa'lān* form of the verb 'to have mercy' (*raḥīma*), in the same way as 'anger' (*ghaḍbān*) and 'intoxicated' (*sakrān*) are derived from the verbs 'to be angry' (*ghaḍība*) and 'to be intoxicated' (*sakira*) [respectively]. Likewise, *Al-Raḥīm* is a *fa'il* form of it, just as 'sick' (*marīḍ*) and 'ill' (*saqīm*) are derived from the verbs 'to be sick' (*marīḍa*) and 'to be ill' (*saqīma*) [respectively]. However, *Al-Raḥmān* has exaggeration (*mubālagha*) that *Al-Raḥīm* does not. This is why they say, '[He is] compassionate in the world and the hereafter, and merciful in the world'. And they also say, 'the addition in construction leads to an addition in meaning. (Zamakhsharī 1987, vol. 1, p. 6)

Zamakhsharī gives two reasons that *Al-Raḥmān* is linguistically more forceful than *Al-Raḥīm*: (1) the *fa'lān* form is a more exaggerated form than the *fa'il* form, and (2) there is an 'addition in the construction' of the *fa'lān* form that the *fa'il* form does not have. In other words, *Raḥmān* has more letters than *Raḥīm*, as it has five letters as opposed to four for its counterpart. This 'addition in construction' leads to an addition in the forcefulness of the

term. This is the reason, Zamakhsharī says, that the Name *Al-Raḥmān* applies to the world and the hereafter, whereas the Name *Al-Raḥīm* is restricted to this world.

While Ibn ‘Arabī does not agree on the explanation, he agrees that *Al-Raḥmān* is more forceful than *Al-Raḥīm*. Instead of viewing one as pertaining to the world and the other to the world and the hereafter, Ibn ‘Arabī explains that one is the source of the other. Further, this expansion in denotation allows Ibn ‘Arabī to delineate more than one type of mercy, whereas Zamakhsharī’s explanation refers to the same type of mercy, but suggests that one is more potent because it applies in a place where the other does not. Instead, Ibn ‘Arabī combines different semantic fields in order to expand the denotations of the focal word (Izutsu 1998, pp. 18–26). This is an extension of the semantic range of a term, according to Gustav Stern, which allows an alteration in the signification of the term. In addition, Ibn ‘Arabī’s inclusion of necessary mercy in the conventional denotation of emotive mercy means that the notion of mercy is understood in a different way. Stern explains that this is the second way in which the meaning is changed because the known referent is now comprehended in a new way (Stern 1931, p. 163). Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of necessary mercy, therefore, is a different proposition to emotive mercy: one that is all-pervading with all the divine Names deriving from it in the same way as all the divine Names are derived from necessary existence for Ibn Sīnā.

The significance of this reformulation cannot be underestimated. By making necessary mercy God’s primary attribute, Ibn ‘Arabī articulates that it is the principal characteristic of the divine essence. It is for this reason that *only* the divine Name *Al-Raḥmān*, from among all the Names, is used as a synonym by Ibn ‘Arabī for God’s primary Name, Allah, which is the one that refers most specifically to His essence (*dhāt*) (Ḥakīm 1981, p. 528). Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabī’s foremost disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) (Todd 2014, p. 1), the first to compose an annotation to the *Fuṣūṣ*, associates necessary mercy with the essence of God, as opposed to emotive mercy and all of God’s other traits, which are simply manifestations of his most beautiful Names (Qūnawī 2013, p. 86). In carrying out this reformulation, therefore, Ibn ‘Arabī differentiates necessary mercy from all of God’s other attributes because it is the cause of them, and because none of the other attributes could possibly be manifested without the primary attribute of necessary mercy that brings forth the loci on which all other Names depend for manifestation.

6. Conclusions

Ibn Sīnā asserts that the primary attribute of God is His necessary existence. God’s ninety-nine most beautiful Names mentioned in the Qur’an are derived from this primary attribute. This means that God is *Al-Wāḥid* and *Al-Aḥad*, and all the other Names because He is necessarily existent. Ibn ‘Arabī agrees with Ibn Sīnā that God has a primary attribute, but he believes that this primary attribute is God’s necessary mercy. Ibn ‘Arabī argues that because all things in the different realms of reality are manifestations of God’s Names in the modality of contingency, the impetus for the presence of all contingent existence is God’s primary quality. This impetus, says Ibn ‘Arabī, is divine mercy. However, this is not to be confused with emotive mercy that is itself dependent on this primary, existentiating mercy in the same way as all of God’s other attributes are. In order to circumvent the confusion precipitated by these two very different kinds of mercy, Ibn ‘Arabī associates necessary mercy that allows the emergence of all the most beautiful Names with the Name *Al-Raḥmān*, and he associates emotive mercy that is given in response to deeds with the Name *Al-Raḥīm*. In this way, then, Ibn ‘Arabī reformulates Ibn Sīnā’s primary divine attribute of necessary existence into necessary mercy to accommodate the emphasis on divine mercy in his ontology.

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Notes

- ¹ René Decartes employs a similar ontological proof for God's existence when he writes, 'existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than we can separate from the essence of a triangle that the sum of its three angles adds up to two right angles' (Decartes 2008, p. 66).
- ² This proof was employed and refined by Thomas Aquinas in his magnum opus, the *Summa Theologiae*, as one of the five ways of proving the existence of God through a posteriori argumentation (Aquinas 1997, pp. 18–24). Aquinas attributed not only absolute goodness to the entity at the summit of the hierarchy, but also causation. Therefore, the entity that enjoyed the maximal position of any genus was also the cause of all the things in that genus. Based on this, he asserted that 'there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God' (Cahn 2009, p. 61).
- ³ It is noteworthy that Izutsu translates *Raḥmān* as The Merciful, but we have translated it as The Compassionate and translated the Name that refers to the mercy of God in the more traditional and restricted sense as The Merciful (*Al-Raḥīm*). This is consistent with more recent works that touch on the difference between the two types of divine mercy, referred to by the divine Names, *Al-Raḥmān* and *Al-Raḥīm*. See, for instance, the treatment of the subject by Sachiko Murata (Murata 1992, p. 55).

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