

## Avicenna's account of Creation by Divine Voluntary Emanation

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### **Abstract:**

I defend the claim that Avicenna explains the creation of the universe in terms of emanation modeled on Neoplatonic emanation by exploring Avicenna's account of creation by emanation in detail. I address what appears to be an obvious problem for the application of this model to creation—namely, that creation as emanation seems to be non-voluntary and has been understood to be non-voluntary by several prominent interpreters. I explore how Avicenna contends that God emanates voluntarily and non-necessarily (that is, God's action is subject to no internal or external constraints). Avicenna is able to make this claim because of his distinction between an action done of natural necessity, done voluntarily, and done with an intention. I then address whether this means that God creates *freely*—without any constraint whatsoever—and I conclude that God is not free not to create because God (a) has an immutable will and (b) has already acted to create. While God is not under any initial compulsion to create, from the fact that the universe now exists, God cannot act otherwise than to create.

**Key words:** Avicenna – Creation - Emanation

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I defend the claim that Avicenna explains the creation of the universe in terms of emanation modeled on Neoplatonic emanation. I address what appears to be a problem for the application of this model to creation—namely, that creation as emanation seems to be non-voluntary. I explore how Avicenna contends that God emanates voluntarily and non-necessarily (that is, God’s action is subject to no internal or external constraints). I then address whether this means that God creates *freely*—without any constraint whatsoever—and I conclude that God is not free not to create because God (a) has an immutable will and (b) has already acted to create.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Emanation and Necessity

A popular understanding of Avicenna’s account of the divine act of creation by emanation is that Avicenna asserts that God<sup>3</sup> emanates necessarily. Avicenna notably faces this charge from Thomas Aquinas, who argues at length against what he perceives to be Avicenna’s position: that Avicenna asserts that God emanates *necessarily*, that is, God cannot fail to emanate the First Intellect. In discussions of necessary emanation, the focus is usually on whether God must emanate because of some feature of God’s nature. Aquinas addresses whether God creates due to natural necessity, asserting that Avicenna and Avicenna’s followers are among those who ascribe necessity to God’s action as the efficient cause of the universe.<sup>4</sup> Since God’s will is identical to God’s knowledge and God’s essence, then it seems that God cannot fail to emanate precisely because of what God’s essence is. Aquinas’s line of thought is defended by Beatrice Zedler, among others. Zedler contends that since Avicenna’s God can emanate only one simple thing because God

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<sup>3</sup> Avicenna calls this being the Necessary Existent, but it is clear that by this he intends to denote the type of being typically indicated by the word ‘God’: an immaterial, simple, eternal, changeless, omnibenevolent being, and one that is ultimately responsible for what exists. In what follows, I avoid pronouns about God; though it is standard practice to refer to God using masculine pronouns, such a being would necessarily not have gender.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputate de Potentia* 3.16 resp., ed. Robert Busa, SJ. <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/qdp5.html> (accessed May 20, 2017).

is a simple being, God emanates by nature rather than by will. She also contends that Avicenna specifically denies that God *intends* to emanate, and thus God does not emanate voluntarily.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, on Zedler's account, God's act in creating is not voluntary, nor can God act otherwise. Thus, it seems that God emanates necessarily, but this necessary emanation results not from God's will but from God's nature. God cannot fail to emanate precisely because of who and what God is.

If Zedler's interpretation is correct, then Avicenna faces a serious problem: his account of God's creative act as a necessary emanation directly contradicts his Islamic heritage, which teaches that God voluntarily creates all that exists. What it means for God to create voluntarily is that God's creating is dependent upon God's will to create. It is possible that an agent could will to do something necessarily, though God's will to create is often discussed as a *free* voluntary creation. 'Free voluntary creation' could mean either lack of external compulsion or lack of internal compulsion. Alternately, 'free voluntary creation' could mean that God had the ability to do otherwise than God did. Within Islam, precisely what it means to say that God creates voluntarily has been a source of debate despite the widespread acceptance of the general claim.

Islamic doctrine includes the belief that God cannot be compelled by something external to God to do something. Because God is greater than everything else that exists, it is simply impossible for God to be compelled by something outside of God. Thus, it seems that God creates voluntarily *at least* insofar as God is not compelled to create by some external force.

It is possible, though, that God is also without internal compulsion. In the saying that "Allah creates what [God] wills," it seems that God is not bound by any internal compulsion because God's will guides whatever God does.<sup>6</sup> God's will is powerful,

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<sup>5</sup> Beatrice H. Zedler, "Saint Thomas and Avicenna in the *De Potentia Dei*," *Traditio* VI (1948), 105-159. For others assuming that a thing emanating by its nature implies necessity, see any of the following: Rudi Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Brill, 1995), 110-11; Thomas Aquinas, *Aquinas on Creation: Writings on the 'Sentences' of Peter Lombard, Book 2, Distinction 1*, trans. Steven Baldner and William Carroll (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), "Introduction" by translators, 1-20; Wayne Hankey, "*Ab Uno Simplici non est nisi Unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas's Doctrine of Creation*," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Reverend Dr. Robert D. Crouse*, eds. Michael Treschow, et. al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 325.

<sup>6</sup> Qur'an 24: 45.

powerful enough to guide what happens in the universe.<sup>7</sup> Since God determines what God wills, it seems that God might also be without internal compulsion. Thus, creation is free insofar as God wills it without external or internal constraint.

The mere lack of internal and external compulsion, however, is not universally taken to qualify God's creating as a voluntary action. Al-Ghazali understands the Qur'an to say not *only* that God lacks internal and external compulsion but that God also is able to create or not create.<sup>8</sup> Ghazali condemns other Muslims for denying that God could either create or not create.<sup>9</sup> He seems to say that because God's will is powerful enough to determine the outcome of human actions on earth, God's will is powerful enough to determine *not* to do something that would be in accordance with God's character. For Ghazali and those like him, 'free voluntary creation' would mean an act of creation that God could opt not to perform.

The potential problem for Avicenna and his account of divine creative activity is that, if Aquinas and Zedler are correct, God neither wills to emanate nor could have refrained from emanating. Avicenna refers to God's apprehension of Godself—not God's will—as the origin of the emanative act. Further, Avicenna's account makes clear that God is a necessary being, which implies that God could not be different than God is. If so, God would not emanate voluntarily; instead, God would emanate necessarily because God is *the* necessary being.

Given that Avicenna describes himself as a Muslim and describes God's causation in creation in terms of Neoplatonic emanation, Avicenna faces a difficult choice: either jettison the Islamic conception of voluntary creation or deny that a Neoplatonic emanationist account of creation entails that creation is necessary. Avicenna opts for the latter; he describes a role for God's will in emanation, and he denies that God creates due to some necessity, specifically a necessity owing to God's nature. Avicenna directly address whether God emanates by will or by nature, and he indirectly addresses whether God emanates voluntarily or necessarily. To see how Avicenna includes a role for God's will in

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<sup>7</sup> 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abdul-Hamīd al-Athari, *Islamic Beliefs: A Brief Introduction to the 'Aqīdah of Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattāb (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005), 120; Qur'an 81: 29.

<sup>8</sup> David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 152.

<sup>9</sup> Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 152.

emanation, I first explore what divine creative emanation is like for Avicenna. After this exploration of Avicenna's account of the divine emanative act, I address what the divine will is like according to Avicenna. I then discuss the distinction Avicenna draws between an agent acting from its nature or from its will. Avicenna draws a further distinction between a willing an action and intending an action that plays an important role in the debate regarding whether God wills to create. Finally, these concepts are brought together in a discussion of whether God *willing* to create means that God creates *voluntarily* in that God wills to create without compulsion.

## 2. Avicenna's Account of Emanation

Having explained that there is a necessarily existing being that is immaterial, entirely simple, and self-subsisting, Avicenna discusses how beings come to exist which are material, complex, transient, and not self-subsistent. "The being of all things which exist is from the [Necessary Existent]".<sup>10</sup> God, who is an immaterial being, acts to create by an act of God's intellect, specifically by apprehending God's own essence. Because God exists necessarily, God has the best possible existence; here Avicenna clearly follows his Neoplatonic forerunners.<sup>11</sup>

God apprehending God's essence is identical to God apprehending "the order of the good in existence" because God's essence *is* the principle of the order of good in existence.<sup>12</sup> As the best possible being—that is, a being which exists necessarily—God's essence includes all possible goodness, meaning that all goodness is present in God. God recognizes that God's own necessary existence is the best sort of existence, but God also recognizes that things which would exist dependently would also be good. God is able to consider the potential goodness of possible beings, that is, any being which could possibly

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<sup>10</sup> Avicenna Latinus, *Liber de Philosophia Prima, sive, Scientia Divina V-X* IX.4, translated by S. Van Riet (Lieden: Brill, 1980); the translation from the Latin is mine. *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.1.

<sup>11</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.6.3.

<sup>12</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.4.

exist.<sup>13</sup> So, when God apprehends God's existence, God recognizes the goodness of what exists and the order of goodness in what could possibly exist.<sup>14</sup>

God apprehends both that the order of good in what would exist dependently and that these beings could possibly exist; in addition, God apprehends that the best thing would be for all of these possible beings to exist. God apprehends God's own existence (and, therefore, the good in existence) in one intellectual act. God's apprehension does not move from potentiality to actuality or apprehending intelligible things in sequence. If God's apprehension involved multiple intellectual acts, then God's apprehension would not be fully actualized. God lacks any potentiality, and thus God's actions must be as well. So, God must apprehend God's own existence and all corollary information about God's own goodness and the potential goodness of possible beings in one intellectual act.<sup>15</sup>

Having apprehended the order of good in what would exist possibly, that these possible beings could come to exist, and that it would be good for these things to exist, God brings about the existence of those beings. This single intellectual act is the ultimate cause of all other beings which exist because God's will is the same as God's knowledge and power. If God apprehends the order of good in possible beings, the fact that possible beings could come to exist, and the goodness of them existing, God wills for these things to be so. If God wills for these things to be so, God makes these things so. Thus, God brings about the existence of these possible beings "by way of a necessity of his existence," and it is a "necessary consequence of his existence."<sup>16</sup> God cannot fail to know that (a) God is maximally good, (b) God is the principle of the order of good in possible beings, (c) such possible beings could come into existence, and (d) it would be good if such beings did exist. As a necessarily existing being, God necessarily has all of the aspects of God's existence. Since for God to know is to will is to do, and since God cannot be otherwise than

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<sup>13</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.4.

<sup>14</sup> Avicenna does not consider whether this apprehension of the principle of the good of the order of existence entails multiplicity in God, probably because he does not believe that to be the case. McGinnis suggests that "the complexity that is in the cosmos is in God but again in a unified and noncomposite way", perhaps because complexity can reside within a homogenous entity (204). God is a simple being but contains in its simplicity the knowledge of all other possible beings in the knowledge it has of itself. See Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna, Great Medieval Thinkers*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.4.

<sup>16</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.4; *Liber de Philosophia Prima sive Scientia Divina* V-X A402 89-90 p. 479: "secundum viam comitandi", "necesse esse omnibus siuis modis".

God is, God necessarily brings about the existence of the universe—separated intellects, the celestial realms, the terrestrial realm, and all material beings.<sup>17</sup>

God brings about the existence of the universe via the emanation of something distinct from God's own essence. This act of emanating does not directly produce all other beings. Instead, what is emanated is something like God.<sup>18</sup> God is a unified, simple being, so what is emanated directly by God must also be a unified, simple being. A simple being cannot immediately produce a being which can be divided into parts—either into matter and form or into multiple distinct beings.<sup>19</sup> In order for a multiplicity or for a composite being to be produced, those new beings must come from a producer that has different aspects to its essence. It is these different aspects of an agent's essence that accounts for the diversity in the effect(s).<sup>20</sup> If an agent has a unified being, that agent can directly produce neither multiple beings nor composite beings. Because God's essence is unified, God cannot be a producer of a multiplicity or of a composite being.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, God can

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<sup>17</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.4. That God emanates as a result of its essence is a theme developed by Beatrice H. Zedler in "Saint Thomas and Avicenna in the *De Potentia Dei*" *Traditio* VI (1948): 105-159. See section B of this paper for a more detailed discussion of this point. Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.18. "Concomitant" is a technical term; the meaning and usage of this term will be discussed in detail below. For now, suffice it to say that as long as God exists, the universe also exists. The universe is *sempiternal* because it is ontologically posterior to God. So, while it is true that the universe always exists, God nonetheless is the ontologically superior being. See Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IV.1 p. 124-126; Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation: Avicenna's and Thomas Aquinas' Positions*, Vol. 58, *Islamic Philosophy Theology and Science: Texts and Studies*, eds. H. Daiber and D. Pingree, 144 (Boston: Brill, 2005), 90-91.

<sup>18</sup> See *Liber de Philosophia Prima sive Scientia Divina V-X* IX.4, p. 481; *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.5; Wayne Hankey, "Ab Uno Simplici non est nisi Unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas's Doctrine of Creation," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Revered Dr. Robert D. Crouse*, Michael Treschow, et. al, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 323-328.

<sup>19</sup> God cannot produce a being that is composed of matter and form because such a being would have composite parts. The being which God creates must be permanent; the so-called permanent part of a material being is its form, so even if a material being could cause the existence of other beings, the material being would be doing what, properly speaking, only its form can do. See *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.8.

<sup>20</sup> *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.5.

<sup>21</sup> See *Metaphysics of the Healing* I.7 for Avicenna's arguments regarding why God must be one simple being. See also chapter 38 in Avicenna's *Metaphysica*, in *The Metaphysica of Avicenna: A critical translation-commentary and analysis of the fundamental arguments in Avicenna's Metaphysica in the Danish Nama-i 'ala'i*, trans. Peter Morewedge (New York: Colombia, 1973) (henceforth, *Metaphysica*) for further discussion. Hankey argues that Avicenna emphasizes the likeness—certain properties in common—between the emanator and what is emanated. God can only have certain properties: it must be self-subsistent, simple, and a single, unified being. Because it is emanated, what is emanated cannot be self-subsistent. It must be simple and a single unified



emanate one simple being—a being which is one in number, simple, and immaterial. This being is the First Intellect.<sup>22</sup>

The First Intellect is a being whose existence depends upon another being, namely God. This type of dependent being is a being that is possible. Because the First Intellect is dependent upon something else for its origination, when considered in itself, the First Intellect could either exist or could not exist. It does not have the power to bring itself into existence.<sup>23</sup>

Avicenna also considers the First Intellect's existence from the perspective of God. The First Intellect is necessary through another because it is dependent on God for its existence—God cannot fail to bring about its existence. It is possible in itself because it exists but does not have the power to bring itself into existence or keep itself existing.<sup>24</sup> The First Intellect contemplates its own existence and God's existence. As a result of this contemplation, plurality arises in the First Intellect.<sup>25</sup> When it considers its own existence,

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being if it is to be like God at all. So, Avicenna argues that from a simple, unified being, only one thing—another simple, unified being—can be produced (Hankey, 323-326). This principle, *ab uno simplici non est nisi unum*, deviates from Farabi's understanding of the emanation from the First [being]. Farabi stated that the First directly emanates all that exists, and many of these beings are *unlike* the First in that they are corporeal (and thus not simple). See Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State: Abu Nasr Al-Farabi's Mabadi' ara' ahl al-medina al-fadila*, transl. R. Walzer (Oxford: Oxford, 1985), 95, 112.

<sup>22</sup> Such an agent cannot produce multiple beings because this would involve multiple actions, and multiple actions imply multiplicity in the agent. A being composed of form and matter would be produced because the form and the matter correspond to distinct aspects of the agent's essence; since the agent in question is unified, it cannot have such distinct aspects (*Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.5.). A composite being produced by a unified being would belong to a different class of beings than the agent, for no material being can be a unified being (See *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.18).

<sup>23</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* I.6 p. 31 7-38-p. 33 1-20.

<sup>24</sup> Avicenna distinguishes between two modalities of being: those which are necessary and those which are possible. A being can be necessary through itself or through another. A being that is necessary through itself is a being that cannot fail to exist. It exists and subsists through its own power. A being that is necessary through another is a being that is brought about by another agent and is sustained by that agent. A possible being can be a being that can either exist or fail to exist. A possible being is a non-necessary being. According to Avicenna's schema, a being that is necessary through another is *also* a possible being insofar as it could theoretically not exist. Its essence is dependent on another, just like any other possible being. A being that is necessary through another, though, will not fail to exist.

<sup>25</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.19. I disagree with McGinnis, who asserts that God *made* the First Intellect with multiplicity inherently in it. Avicenna contends that the First Intellect is a simple being. The multiplicity of the First Intellect does not come from God but is a result of the ontological status of the First Intellect. The First Intellect is originated by another being—is necessary through another—but it is still a possible being because when considered in itself, it could either exist or not. When the First Intellect cognizes this fact, it emanates. From the



the First Intellect apprehends that its existence is necessary through another but possible in itself; its emanation of a celestial body, namely the outermost sphere of the stars, results from this cognition. Avicenna associates matter with potency, so the material celestial sphere arises from the First Intellect's apprehension of its own (limited) potency.<sup>26</sup> Apprehending its existence as necessary through another, the First Intellect emanates the soul of this outermost sphere. The First Intellect recognizes that it is a dependent being, but it also cannot fail to exist. As a result of this recognition, the First Intellect emanates something immaterial, namely the soul inhabiting the outermost sphere of stars. This immaterial soul reflects the circumscribed necessity of the First Intellect's existence; God cannot fail to bring about the existence of the First Intellect, and thus the First Intellect is necessary through another.<sup>27</sup>

Apprehending the existence of God, the First Intellect emanates the Second Intellect.<sup>28</sup> It emanates an immaterial, simple being that has powers of intellection; however, because the First Intellect apprehends the existence of God imperfectly, this Second Intellect is a lesser being than the First Intellect. From this initial plurality—which does not arise because of any plurality in the essence of God or the First Intellect—it is possible to derive the multiplicity of qualitatively different things found in the universe including what is found in the terrestrial realm.

Although the First Intellect emanates a multiplicity of things with qualitative differences, this emanation results in the existence of each of the celestial spheres or the terrestrial universe after a chain of emanations from the Intellects. The Second Intellect, also being intellect, goes through a process of intellectual apprehension similar to that of the First Intellect. When the Second Intellect considers itself as a possible being, as a being

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perspective of the First Intellect's essence, it is simple. From the perspective of the First Intellect's ontological status, it is not simple. The First Intellect's ontological status is what leads to the First Intellect emanating both its sphere and the soul of that sphere. Complexity in the First Intellect is dependent on perspective rather than its essence. Avicenna is clear that the multiplicity in the universe originates *from* the fact that the First Intellect has this dual ontological status not *with* the fact that the First Intellect has this dual ontological status. The First Intellect being both necessary (in one way) and possible (in another) gives rise to multiplicity and qualitative difference; the First Intellect's ontological status is not presented by Avicenna to *be* that multiplicity and qualitative difference. See McGinnis, 204.

<sup>26</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysica*, §53 p. 99.

<sup>27</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.11.

<sup>28</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.11.

necessary through another, and then considers God, it emanates a second sphere of the heavens, the soul of that sphere, and a Third Intellect, respectively. This process continues until the Agent Intellect, also known as the Giver of Forms, is emanated.<sup>29</sup>

For Avicenna, the metaphysical distance, so to speak, between the Agent Intellect and God is so great that the Agent Intellect cannot emanate a heavenly sphere.<sup>30</sup> The later emanations have less reality and more dependence than the former emanations. Thus, the Agent Intellect lacks the reality to emanate a heavenly sphere and instead emanates a terrestrial sphere, the lunar sphere. It also emanates the soul of the lunar sphere. The Agent Intellect does not have the ability to emanate something entirely immaterial, so it emanates mixed beings that are both material and immaterial.<sup>31</sup> These possible beings require a substrate to exist, which accounts for the matter/form composite.<sup>32</sup> These possible beings are subject to change.<sup>33</sup> The emanative process cannot continue *ad infinitum* because lesser emanations lack the ability to emanate immaterial beings.

The existence of multiple beings and qualitatively different beings and the universe which they populate can be traced back to God.<sup>34</sup> God is the ultimate but not direct cause of all that exists. God does not directly produce everything existing, but God does produce the being that initiates the chain of production. Each of the Intellects is a cause in its own right, for each produces either a celestial or terrestrial realm along with the soul of that realm. The Giver of Forms directly produces not only the lunar realm and its soul but also the

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<sup>29</sup> Avicenna only sometimes numbers ten intellects. In his *Danishnama 'alā'i*, for example, he does not number the emanations. Avicenna, *Metaphysica*, §39 p. 78-79. Avicenna does not use the name "Giver of Forms" regarding the Tenth Intellect in *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.5; however, Avicenna describes the work of such a being as giving forms in *Metaphysics of the Healing* VI.2. Thus, it seems that the principle who bestows forms must be the same principle as the Agent Intellect. See Kara Richardson, "The Metaphysics of Agency: Avicenna and his Legacy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2008), 6-7. Richardson is responding to Jules Janssen's article "The Notions of *Wāhib al-Suwar* (Giver of Forms) and *Wāhib al-'Aql* (Bestower of Intelligence) in Ibn Sīnā," in *Actes du XIe Congrès International de Philosophie Médiévale de S.I.E.P.M., 2002*, eds. M. Pacheco et J. Meirinhos. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 551-562.).

<sup>30</sup> In the *Danishnama 'ala'i*, Avicenna states that the more potentiality a being has, the farther it is from the primary being. Avicenna, *Metaphysica*, §53 p. 99.

<sup>31</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4; IX.5.

<sup>32</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IV.2.

<sup>33</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4.19.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of how God is ultimately responsible for all that exists in the texts of the Arabic Plotinus, see Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the Theology of Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 2002), 137-149. Contrary to Adamson's reading of the *Theology of Aristotle*, Avicenna does not expressly state that God is directly responsible for all that exists; instead, he states that God is *ultimately* responsible for all that exists.

beings that populate that realm. God is the ultimate but not immediate source of all that exists—immaterial beings, celestial realms, the terrestrial realm, and material beings. Everything other than God exists as the result of God's action and the unfolding of that action.<sup>35</sup>

Avicenna's account closely matches the account of medieval Neoplatonic emanation. An emanation from God explains the origins of beings other than God; God, a simple being, can emanate only one simple being; the Intellects act as intermediaries, and it is through the emanation of these intermediaries that the physical universe is created. Further, it appears that God's emanation is necessary: God emanates because it apprehends its own goodness, which, as an intellectual being who is maximally good, it cannot fail to do.

### **3. Emanation as Voluntary**

Given Avicenna's account of divine emanation explained above, it may seem that Aquinas's and Zedler's interpretation of Avicenna's account is correct: divine emanation is necessary because it is a byproduct of God being the Necessary Existent. Avicenna seems to have endorsed the claim that emanation is a natural necessity for God; God cannot fail to emanate as the result of God's nature. However, Avicenna makes a number of distinctions regarding the divine will and what it means to will something as a part of one's nature. I examine Avicenna's account of the divine will and his account of acting volitionally (rather than by nature); with this clarified, I then apply these questions specifically to God's emanative activity in creating. Avicenna does understand God's activity in emanating to be voluntary—due to will rather than nature—which raises questions regarding whether God can act otherwise than God did in emanating.

#### **a. Divine Will**

For Avicenna, the attributes of God are identical to the being of God. So, God's intellect is identical with its knowledge, and both are identical to its essence. God's will is

also identical to its knowledge and intellect and essence.<sup>36</sup> Since God is simple, God has one intellectual act, which is also God's act of will. God knows God and wills God's own existence.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, God's will is (a) simple, meaning that God has one (and only one) act of will; (b) eternal; (c) immutable, meaning that God's will cannot change; (d) self-directed, meaning that God wills only itself; (e) unique, meaning that God's will, unlike human wills, has no final cause and depends upon nothing external to itself.<sup>38</sup>

The simplicity, eternity, and immutability of the divine will are relatively straightforwardly related to the other divine attributes. Avicenna explains that God's will must be simple because God is simple. God has one act of will, and because God is eternal, God's act of will is eternal. The fact that God's will is immutable follows from the fact that God is pure act. Were God's will to change, God would move from potency to act in some way.<sup>39</sup>

The self-directedness and uniqueness of the divine will deserve further exploration. Regarding the self-directed nature of the will, Avicenna notes that divine knowledge is self-directed. In God's one intellectual act, God intellectually apprehends Godself. Insofar as God knows other beings, God knows them as the effects of God's causation, for to know the cause is to know its effects.<sup>40</sup> This knowledge of other beings is not separate from God's self-knowledge: by knowing Godself, God knows God as the principle of existence of everything that exists.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the will is entirely self-directed. God wills God's own existence.<sup>42</sup> Just as God knows other beings by knowing Godself, God wills the existence of other beings by willing Godself. God does not explicitly or directly will anything except God's own existence, but as a result of willing God's own existence, God causes the

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<sup>36</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7 p. 295 29-36.

<sup>37</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7 p. 291 7-11; see also VIII.7 p. 292 5-9.

<sup>38</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7, passim. In constructing this list, I used Acar's analysis in "Avicenna's Position on the Divine Creative Action," *The Muslim World* 94 (2004), 67 and his book, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7 p. 291 7-15; VIII.6 p. 288 1-4.

<sup>40</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.6 p. 287 15-17; Avicenna, *Metaphysica* §29-32, p. 60-66; § 38 p. 76-78; Michael Marmura, "Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory of God's Knowledge of Particulars," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82.3 (1962), 302.

<sup>41</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.6 p. 288 8-14.

<sup>42</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7 p. 292 1-9.

existence of other beings. God's will is entirely self-directed, and any additional effects of that volitional act are ancillary.<sup>43</sup>

The self-directedness of the will helps explain how the divine will is unique. Unlike humans, who will something for a particular end or benefit, God is not influenced by such desires. God's will has no final cause—some reason or good for which something is willed that is external to God.<sup>44</sup> God does not will God's own existence for some purpose, for if God's will had some purpose, then God would be seeking to complete some deficiency it had. But because God is perfect—beyond perfect, Avicenna says—God cannot (by definition) be in need of any completion.<sup>45</sup> Because God wills and loves Godself, God's will has only God as an object. Having only God as an object, God's will is independent of any other being.

#### **b. Acting from Natural Necessity versus Acting from Volition and Intention**

I now examine the role God's will plays in emanation. From the first few paragraphs of Avicenna's explanation of divine emanation, some—like Aquinas and Zedler—have argued that God's will does not play a role in emanation at all.<sup>46</sup> Instead, they argue that Avicenna presents emanation as though it was necessitated by God's nature. Their case rests upon a confusion of the distinctions Avicenna draws between an act done by nature, an act done voluntarily, and an act done by intention.

An agent performs an action by way of its nature when the agent's nature is the principle of its action. An act performed by nature has two characteristics. First, such an act does not involve the agent's knowledge (*ma'rifa/cognitionem*). Second, such an act does not involve the agent's approbation or consent (*ridā/beneplacitum*).<sup>47</sup> Instead, the agent produces its effect in a manner similar to how fire begets fire. When fire spreads, it does so by its nature: fire devours combustibles whenever the appropriate circumstances (enough oxygen, sufficient airflow, *etc.*) arise. Fire can neither know nor consent to its act; fire does

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<sup>43</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7 p. 295.1-14.

<sup>44</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7 p. 292 1-8.

<sup>45</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.6 p. 283 9-10.

<sup>46</sup> Zedler, 105-159.

<sup>47</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 327 1-3; *Liber De Philosophia Prima* IX.4.

what it does because it is what it is. When an agent acts by nature, it neither knows nor consents to the action it performs.

In contrast, an agent performs a voluntary action when the agent (a) has knowledge of the action and (b) consents to the action.<sup>48</sup> Only cognizant or intellectual beings can possibly perform voluntary actions. If an agent is incapable of having knowledge of the action it is performing, then the agent cannot act voluntarily. Avicenna denies that plants can act voluntarily. He also implicitly denies that an intellectual agent acts voluntarily when that agent is not cognizant of the action it performs. An example that illustrates this difference is as follows: a dog is not acting voluntarily when, while sleeping, the dog's nose twitches or paws move. If that dog—in a particularly deep sleep—barks while asleep, awakens suddenly, and begins searching for that barking dog who woke him, it quickly becomes obvious that the dog had no knowledge of his action. The dog does not know that *he* woke himself up by barking. On Avicenna's analysis, the dog's action cannot be voluntary. While only cognizant or intellectual beings can meet the knowledge requirement, not every cognizant being (or every cognizant being's action) does so.

Along with knowledge of the action, an agent performing a voluntary action must consent to the action being performed. This second criterion clarifies that coerced actions—someone being forced to assist bank robbers, for example—are not voluntary actions. While the agent may have knowledge that they are helping rob a bank, the agent likely does not consent to or approve of the act of helping rob a bank. Avicenna links the lack of impediment or aversion in an agent's essence to consent.<sup>49</sup> If an agent's essence does not include any impediment or provide any aversion to an action and the agent performs the action, then the agent consents to the action.<sup>50</sup>

In light of this distinction between natural and voluntary actions, one can see how actions performed by nature can be associated with necessity.<sup>51</sup> An agent who performs action by nature cannot control her action unless she can also control her nature. Her nature determines which actions she performs, so it seems that her actions are necessitated by her

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<sup>48</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 327 1-3; *Liber De Philosophia Prima* IX.4.

<sup>49</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 327 9-10; *Liber De Philosophia Prima* IX.4.

<sup>50</sup> McGinnis offers a similar explanation of Avicenna's notion of consent. See his *Avicenna*, 207.

<sup>51</sup> It might yet seem like an action could be voluntary but also necessary—an agent could know and consent to an action but that action had to be performed nonetheless. This possibility is discussed in section 3 below.



nature. A volitional action, however, is performed by an agent when the agent has knowledge of the act and the agent's essence lacks any impediment or aversion to that act. The agent's nature is important when the agent acts voluntarily, but the agent's knowledge is equally important.<sup>52</sup>

Although Avicenna writes that a volitional act, generally construed, occurs when an agent has knowledge of the act and consents to the act, Avicenna distinguishes volitional acts from intentional acts. An intentional act is a specific type of volitional act. Avicenna lists three criteria for forming an intention; the intentional act is simply the action that carries out this intention. First, there must be something distinct from the agent.<sup>53</sup> An agent cannot form an intention without intending  $x$ ,  $x$  being something distinct from the agent. Intention cannot be self-reflexive. This thing which is the object of the intention is said to be the cause of the intention in this sense: without that  $x$ , the agent would not intend  $x$ . For example, in the case of a human agent, a person intends to learn a language with the object of acquiring knowledge of this language.

The second criterion for intending is simply that the agent actually forms the intention in question. Avicenna writes that there must be some act by which the intention is acquired by the agent. This criterion seems obviously—almost trivially—true, for in order to intend something, an agent must form an intention. In the case of our human agent, the person must form an intention to learn a language.<sup>54</sup>

The third criterion for intending is that there is some benefit for which the thing is intended. So, Avicenna asserts that if an agent intends something, that agent does so because the agent will benefit in some way from the intention being carried out. A person who intends to learn a language will acquire some benefit from learning the language—a good grade in a class, a new way to impress potential romantic interests, or the ability to translate an interesting text. Intentions always have an object of the intention, an act by which the intention is acquired, and a benefit toward which carrying out the intention aims.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Zedler is one who speaks of “natural necessity.” See 105-159.

<sup>53</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326 32-35.

<sup>54</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326 32-35.

<sup>55</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326 31-35.

These three types of actions—an action done by nature, a volitional action, and an intentional action—are the potential ways in which God could have brought about its creative emanation. Avicenna considers whether God emanates either by intention, by nature, or by will. He is quick to dismiss the notion that God emanates by nature, and he also dismisses the notion that God emanates by intention.<sup>56</sup>

God does not emanate by nature. Since an action performed by nature is an action occurring without the agent's knowledge and without the agent's consent, God would have to emanate without knowledge of the emanation and without consenting to the emanation. God intellectually apprehends Godself, which includes the apprehension of God as the principle of everything else that might exist. God knows Godself, and in knowing Godself, God knows God to be the cause of the existence of anything which might exist. In knowing Godself, God knows everything that is a concomitant<sup>57</sup> of God's existence.<sup>58</sup> Because God has this knowledge, God fails to meet the first criterion of an act by nature.<sup>59</sup>

God also fails to meet the second criterion of an act by nature, for God consents to the emanation. God is free from any impediment to emanating, and thus God consents to the emanation.<sup>60</sup> Avicenna notes that God, knowing God's own perfection and goodness, knows and loves Godself. Because knowing God's own essence entails knowing the necessary concomitants<sup>61</sup> of God's essence, God also loves the necessary concomitants of God's essence by extension. God's object of knowledge and love is God, but God is aware of and approves of those things which follow from God's essence.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, God consents to and approves of God's emanation.

If God has knowledge of God's emanation and consents to God's emanation, then, by Avicenna's definition of 'voluntary,' God emanates voluntarily. However, this voluntary emanation is not an intentional emanation. Intending is the manner in which human beings will something by having an object of their willing, forming the intention, and aiming to

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<sup>56</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326-327 17-35; 1-17.

<sup>57</sup> 'Concomitant' is a used here in Avicenna's technical sense. See 3b below for a discussion of what Avicenna means by 'concomitant.'

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of whether the universe being a necessary concomitant of God's means that God creates necessarily, see the following section.

<sup>59</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 327 5-9.

<sup>60</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 327 12-15.

<sup>61</sup> Again, this is a technical term that is explained below.

<sup>62</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326 32-35.

gain some benefit from their act. In contrast, intending does *not* describe how God wills. God does not form intentions. Given the essence of God, God cannot have an object of God's will that is distinct from God. Were God to intend, God would have to (1) intend something distinct from God and (2) intend some benefit to occur because of God's action. God would then have to will multiple objects—God would will God's own existence, God would will the existence of the universe, and God would will some benefit from the existence of the universe. Avicenna asserts that were God to will both God and some object distinct from God, then multiplicity would be introduced into God.<sup>63</sup> As Rahim Acar notes, “since God primarily knows, wills, and loves himself, God's will cannot be directed to an end other than God” and have God's unity be preserved.<sup>64</sup>

God intending would also introduce multiplicity by requiring multiple actions of the will. God, according to the definition of intention, would have to form God's intention. This intention formation is in addition to willing God's own existence. Avicenna asserts that it is impossible for God to will multiple things because God is entirely simple, meaning that God has *one* act of will.<sup>65</sup>

Emanation is the result of the divine will.<sup>66</sup> God acts by volition when God emanates, but this volitional act does not involve intention. God does not act by nature when God emanates. God emanates because God wills to emanate. Thus far, Avicenna's account of creation by emanation aligns with the Islamic conception of creation as voluntary insofar as it is willed by God. What deserves further exploration is whether this voluntary emanation is a *free* voluntary emanation.

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<sup>63</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326 20-29.

<sup>64</sup> Acar, “Avicenna's Position on the Divine Creative Action,” 69.

<sup>65</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326 20-29. Avicenna maintains that to have multiple acts of will introduces multiplicity into God. Marmura interprets Avicenna to be saying that self-knowledge does not imply a multiplicity because the self is the only true object of knowledge. God is the only object of God's knowledge, but in knowing the self, God gains knowledge of distinct beings because God knows Godself as the cause of the universe and therefore knows the effects as well (See Marmura, “Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory of God's Knowledge of Particulars,” 301-2). So, *mutatis mutandis*, Avicenna might argue that God has one object of God's will—God—but willing Godself entails willing the effects of God's existence. Thus, God has only one object of God's will.

<sup>66</sup> Zedler commits two major errors in her explication of Avicenna's cosmogony: she (a) conflates Avicenna's disavowal of God creating intentionally with a disavowal of God creating voluntarily; (b) follows Aquinas's reading of Avicenna, who viewed God's creation as the result of the necessity of God's nature. As my analysis has shown, neither Zedler nor Aquinas are accurately representing Avicenna's thought. See Zedler, 105-159.

### **c. Volitional, but Necessary?**

It is clear that Avicenna asserts that God emanates as the result of volition and not the result of nature or intention. While scholars who assert that emanation is necessary according to Avicenna focus primarily on arguing that God emanates by nature for Avicenna, it is worthwhile to explore whether God's voluntary emanation is a *free* emanation. Freedom in its broadest sense implies a lack of either internal or external constraint. If God emanates voluntarily and freely, then nothing in God's nature or outside of God would necessitate God's emanating. If God emanates voluntarily and necessarily, then something in God's nature or outside of God necessitates God's emanating. In order to explore whether God emanates freely or necessarily, this section will address possible external compulsions and possible internal compulsions, including whether God being a necessarily existing being entails that it emanates necessarily.

#### **i. External Compulsions**

It is clear that Avicenna does not believe that God's action is necessitated by anything external to God. God wills Godself and knows Godself.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, God is not beholden to things external to God. God does not act for any reason other than God. If there is anything that necessitates God's emanation, it would have to be something internal to God.

#### **ii. Internal Compulsions**

Whether God's emanation is necessitated by something internal to God is still unclear. Given what Avicenna says about the universe being a necessary concomitant of God's essence and the fact that God's will is identical to its knowledge and essence, it seems that God must create.<sup>68</sup> God's essence seems like it determines Necessary Existent's actions. There are two issues to be discussed here: first, whether God having concomitants

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<sup>67</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.7 p. 292 1-13.

<sup>68</sup> Acar articulates this sentiment only to argue against it. See Acar, "Avicenna's Position on the Divine Creative Action," 70.

entails that God has an internal compulsion; and second, whether God's lack of intention entails that God has an internal compulsion.

Because God has necessary concomitants, it seems that God must bring about those concomitants. If this is true, then God has some internal compulsion to create. To see whether this is true, a fuller discussion of concomitants is required. In Avicenna's *Annotations*,<sup>69</sup> he defines concomitant as “a thing that necessarily follows something because of what it is that [the thing] is”.<sup>70</sup> So, if  $x$  is a concomitant of  $y$ , then  $x$  necessarily follows  $y$ . However, it is not the case that  $y$  subsists through  $x$ .<sup>71</sup> Avicenna asserts that the existence of  $y$  does not depend on  $x$ , and  $y$  does not depend on  $x$  to be what  $y$  is. Despite  $x$  being its concomitant,  $y$  is still independent of  $x$ . Acar offers an analogy to friendship. Friendship, which can be understood as love between people, cannot be gained simply by people helping each other. If Marisol and Fatima help each other but do not love each other, they have a business relationship not a friendship. But friends help those they love; helping each other follows necessarily from friendship. In this case, benefit—specifically, being helped by a friend—is a concomitant of friendship but is not constitutive of friendship.<sup>72</sup> Although  $x$  is a necessary concomitant of  $y$ ,  $x$  follows from  $y$  but is not constitutive of  $y$ .

Avicenna distinguishes two types of concomitants. The first type is a concomitant of some other thing because the concomitant stems from the nature and substance of that other thing. Examples of this type of concomitant include light as a concomitant of the sun and burning as a concomitant of heat.<sup>73</sup> If the cosmos is this type of concomitant of God, then God would have some internal compulsion to create. God, being what it is, must bring about the existence of the universe.

A concomitant stemming from the nature of a thing is only one type of concomitant. The second type stems from the self-knowledge of some other thing. It is this concomitance

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<sup>69</sup> The work is titled *Ta'liqāt*, which means 'collection,' and this work appears to be a collection of Avicenna's lectures.

<sup>70</sup> Avicenna, *Ta'liqāt*, ed. Abdularahman Badawi (Iran: Miktab al-Ilam al-Islami, 1983), 180; trans. and quoted in Rahim Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation: Avicenna's and Thomas Aquinas's Positions*, Vol. 58, *Islamic Philosophy Theology and Science: Texts and Studies*, eds. H. Daiber and D. Pingree, 144 (Boston: Brill, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Avicenna, *Ta'liqāt*, p. 103; translated and quoted in Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 144.

<sup>72</sup> Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 144.

<sup>73</sup> Avicenna, *Ta'liqāt* p. 103; translated and quoted in Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 144.

that follows from God. God is “perfect, complete, loved, and he knows himself,” and the things which exist because of God are concomitants of God’s self-knowledge.<sup>74</sup> Unlike light and heat, which have no will or knowledge, God has knowledge, and God’s concomitants exist because of God’s knowledge.<sup>75</sup>

One might object that the identity of divine attributes means that the divine knowledge is identical to the divine will and essence. Thus, the concomitant of God is a concomitant because of God’s essence as much as God’s knowledge. The concomitants of God follow from what God is. So, both types of concomitants follow from the nature of the thing of which they are concomitants; however, in the case of God, the divine knowledge is essential to what God is.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps one could respond thusly to this objection on Avicenna’s behalf. An action stemming from a being’s nature depends only on that being’s nature, not on its intellect or will. An action that involves an agent’s will (and, accordingly, its intellect) is a voluntary action. The involvement of the will, even though it is identical to God’s essence, means that God’s action is voluntary rather than natural. What it takes for an action to be voluntary is for God to have knowledge of the action and to consent to the action, which means that God’s faculty of will is involved in any voluntary action. The identity of God’s will, knowledge, and essence does not negate that God’s will is involved in God performing the action in question.

While there are potential difficulties arising from Avicenna’s distinction between these two types of concomitants, Avicenna straightforwardly denies that concomitance follows from God’s nature.<sup>77</sup> Instead, concomitance follows from God’s knowledge. Accordingly, the universe is a concomitant of God, but God is not compelled to create it. The universe exists because of God’s knowledge rather than because of some feature of God compelling God to create.

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<sup>74</sup> Avicenna, *Ta’līqāt* p. 103; translated and quoted in Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 144.

<sup>75</sup> Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 145.

<sup>76</sup> Avicenna, *Ta’līqāt* p. 103; translated and quoted in Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 144; Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 145. Avicenna does not consider this sort of objection.

<sup>77</sup> Avicenna, *Ta’līqāt* p. 103; translated and quoted in Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 144.



From Avicenna's discussion of intention (and subsequent denial that God intends to emanate), one can garner support for the notion that God has no internal compulsion to create. God cannot intend to emanate; otherwise, God would be required to have something other than God as an object of God's will. While this fact supports the earlier claim that God suffers no external compulsion to create, it also supports the claim that nothing within God compels God to create. Were God to hold something else as an object of God's will, some imperfection would be implied in God.<sup>78</sup> God wills what is supremely good, so if God wills something other than God, then God is not supremely good. Hence, God holds only God as the object of God's will and is not compelled to create by some internal feature of God. So, it seems that for some agent,  $x$ , to be compelled by some object of its will,  $y$ ,  $y$  has to be distinct from  $x$ . Since God wills God's existence, the object of God's will is not distinct from God. Thus, God's will is not compelled.

Further, in describing the notion of generosity, Avicenna specifies that generosity is giving what is proper without pursuing one's desires or expecting remuneration.<sup>79</sup> Since Avicenna describes creation elsewhere as an act of God's generosity, it is important to note that if God were to pursue some desire or to expect repayment for some action, God would be imperfect.<sup>80</sup> Any agent who can gain something in return for its actions is imperfect either with regard to its being or one of its perfections.<sup>81</sup> Avicenna explains that God is perfect—above perfection, Avicenna says when speaking most carefully—and thus God's emanation must be an act of generosity.<sup>82</sup> Because God is perfect, God gains nothing from the act of creating. Since God gains nothing from the act of creating, Avicenna concludes that there is nothing in God that compels God to create.

Therefore, Avicenna denies that there is any external or internal compulsion which requires God to emanate. God wills only God, so nothing external to God could compel God to create. God is not compelled by anything internal to God, either. Avicenna

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<sup>78</sup> See Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.4 p. 326.15-35; Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 145.

<sup>79</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VI.5 p. 231 36-40- p. 232 1; Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 142.

<sup>80</sup> See Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VI.5 p. 232 27-28; Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 142.

<sup>81</sup>; Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation*, 142.

<sup>82</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.6 p. 283 9; Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* VI.5 p.232 29-36.

vigorously affirms God's perfection, which entails that God could gain nothing from creating. There is no internal feature of God that is improved by creating, and, by implication, there is nothing about God that would be diminished by refraining from creating. If God is not compelled to create—and Avicenna seems to think that God is not compelled—then God, if God emanates, emanates freely. Not only does God emanate voluntarily—that is, because it wills to emanate—but God also emanates freely. Avicenna's account of creation as emanation, then, fits with the Islamic conception of creation as voluntary. However, Avicenna's account of creation as emanation reveals that Avicenna conceives of emanation in creation as occurring voluntarily.<sup>83</sup>

### iii. A Necessary Being: necessary in all respects

Avicenna's defense of a voluntary and free creation is not yet complete. He understands God's emanation to be the result a divine volition free of either internal or external compulsion. However, Avicenna insists that the universe exists necessarily; that is, given the fact that God exists, the universe cannot fail to exist.<sup>84</sup> Avicenna's claim that the universe is necessary must be reconciled with his claim that God creates freely. If the universe must exist, then God cannot fail to bring about its existence. So, it seems that Avicenna might be asserting that God creates freely—that is, without internal or external constraints—and necessarily. How Avicenna understands the meaning of God creating necessarily must be explained along with the relationship between necessary and free creation.

The discussions above have focused on how the attributes of God relate to it emanating, but God's ontological status is also important for explaining why God emanates.<sup>85</sup> Because of what God is—a simple, eternal, changeless being—God can

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<sup>83</sup> A related question is whether any emanation occurs naturally. It seems that, given Avicenna's definition of a voluntary action being an action of which the agent has knowledge and to which the agent consents, the emanations of the Intellects are likely voluntary emanations because they arise from each Intellect's self-reflection and reflection upon God.

<sup>84</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.1 p. 300 6-11.

<sup>85</sup> As Acar notes, Avicenna does not directly address the differences between God's attributes and ontological status with regards to God's emanation. However, Avicenna's insistence that God emanates voluntarily is otherwise difficult to square, so to speak, with his insistence that the universe is a necessary concomitant of God. See Acar, "Avicenna's Position on the Divine Creative Action," 73.

emanate one simple being in one act of knowledge and will. Because of how God is—an ontologically necessary being—God is necessary in all of God’s respects.<sup>86</sup> God is a being devoid of potentiality; God is fully actualized, complete, and perfect. Thus, God can neither change nor be different than what God is. Lacking potentiality, God cannot become different than what God is now, so at least at this point, it seems that there are not options now for what God could be like or what God could do. Given the facts that (a) God is the way God is and (b) God has emanated the universe, there are options now that are simply not available to God.<sup>87</sup> God is what God is and cannot be otherwise, and this fact—coupled with what already exists—limits what actions are available to God at this point.

Accordingly, God freely wills to create, but God does not freely *decide* to create.<sup>88</sup> God’s will cannot be otherwise: it, too, is necessary. God, then, cannot will otherwise than what God does. Because God cannot be or will otherwise, there are only certain actions that God could perform that would have conformed to what is willed. God can will only one thing—God—and it is not possible for God’s will, knowledge, or essence to be different than what it is. Since will leads to act, it seems that because God’s will could not have been different, God’s action could not have been different. This statement is too strong, however, because while God’s action could not have been different *now* given what already exists, it is conceivable that God’s action could have, at least theoretically, been carried out in a number of ways, that is, that God’s will could have produced a certain range of actions that would have fulfilled that willing.<sup>89</sup> God, having acted, cannot now act differently or else God would not be a fully actualized being. Before acting, though, God could have theoretically acted differently to bring about the effect willed by God. God brings about the

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<sup>86</sup> Avicenna, *Metaphysics of the Healing* IX.1 p. 300 6-11; Acar, “Avicenna’s Position on the Divine Creative Action,” 74. Marmura asserts that the logical order is identical to the ontological order for Avicenna. If Avicenna judges it to be logically necessary that *x* exists, Avicenna will also judge *x* to be a necessary being. See Marmura, “Some Aspects of Avicenna’s Theory of God’s Knowledge of Particulars,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82.3 (1962), 302.

<sup>87</sup> I do not wish to argue that there never were options for what God could do; it seems that there could be a number of ways God behaves. However, given how things are now, there are a number of things that are no longer options for God. For example, life on earth is carbon based. It is not an option for God at this point to make human life sulfur based instead because humans already exist as carbon based life forms.

<sup>88</sup> Acar, “Avicenna’s Position on the Divine Creative Action,” 75.

<sup>89</sup> My thanks to Ed Hauser for helping to clarify this point.

existence of the universe voluntarily and freely, but God could not *now* have done otherwise.

Avicenna concludes that because God is a necessary being, God cannot fail to bring about the existence of the universe. Given the facts that God exists, God is a necessary being, and the universe exists, Avicenna can conclude that the universe must exist as long as God exists. Precisely *why* the divine knowledge and will entail God's emanation is not explained. There is no explanation outside God why God wills to emanate. One can know that God wills to emanate because the universe exists, and one can know that God wills to emanate because the universe exists.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Emanation, then, is the result of a free act of will by God. While emanation can theoretically occur either because of the nature of the emanator or because of the will of the emanator, God emanates by will. God suffers no internal or external compulsion to emanate, but God cannot now opt to act differently because God is necessary in all respects, and once God acts, according to Avicenna, God will continue to act in that way. Avicenna presents Neoplatonic emanation as a theory which encompasses both natural and voluntary emanation. It is not emanation, *per se*, which is necessary; instead, it is God which is necessary, and thus all of God's attributes and acts are necessary. Emanation is the act performed by God, but God's emanation is voluntary (insofar as God emanates freely as a result of its will) and necessary (insofar as God lacks potentiality and thus will not change God's action after having begun that action).

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