In the preceding chapter I have argued that for Avicenna chance is not a cause in its own right and thus plays no efficient role in the unfolding of natural affairs. On this account, chance consists in a rare occurrence in nature. One of the related issues in the discussion of chance is the material cause: at the close of chapter fourteen of the *Physics* of *al-Shifa‘*, Avicenna discusses matter and its participation in the development of natural substances. Certain rare occurrences in nature, such as physical deformations, are attributed to an insufficient quantity or a surplus of matter, to the ‘reluctance’ of matter to receive a certain form; or to the incapability of corporeal nature to ‘force’ form upon matter.¹ Moreover, there is a suggestion that matter ‘deserves’ a form.² These related notions—of matter’s ‘reluctance’ to receive form, and its ‘right’ to have a form—suggest that matter may be independent of the formal determining powers, and fly in the face of Avicenna’s repeated insistence that everything is strictly determined from above. Combined, these notions suggest that matter might bring about random effects. If the expression ‘the disobedience of matter’ is to be taken literally, matter has a ‘choice’ not to follow orders sent from above. It is termed ‘disobedient’ or ‘recalcitrant’ presumably when it fails to obey; but in order to disobey, matter has to have an independent active power of its own. This expression does not occur isolated but is followed by controversial assertions about matter’s behaviour; for Avicenna says that nature is not always able to move matter to an end, rather this is only the case with ‘compliant’ matters.³ It goes without saying

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² Ibid., p. 63. (Āl Yāsīn, p. 119).
³ Earlier in the *Physics* of *al-Shifa‘* uses the expression ‘obedient matter’ (*al-mādda al-mufāṣṣala‘a*), *al-Samā‘ al-Tabri‘i*, p. 22. (Āl Yāsīn, p. 94). Stating the reason why in certain cases substances composed of matter and form are not corrupted, he says:
that if this power of matter were truly autonomous it would be a serious stumbling block to the notion of God's omnipotence. Moreover, it would entail a world where matter would play havoc with individuals. If matter were indeed a principle independent of higher powers, it would represent an obstacle to the claim that all substances and events in the world are determined, a theory that Avicenna presses upon the reader throughout chapters thirteen and fourteen of his *Physics* as well as in his *Metaphysics of al-Shifā*. Even if he does not explicitly ascribe matter an active role, is it possible that this is implicitly suggested in his philosophy? And is there a contradiction in his treatment of this issue between his metaphysical and his physical writings?

The abovementioned remarks about matter made by Avicenna could justify an imputation of inconsistency or wavering in his views. One scholar, Alfred Ivry, attributes what he deems to be Avicenna’s indeterminism to what he terms his twofold conception of matter:

[Avicenna] entertains two models of matter: one of matter as pure receptivity, a mere receptacle of forms, that mirrors them faithfully...and the other of matter as a real principle of being, the source of chance and privation/evil, unknowable in itself and hence unpredictable in its relation to form.¹

Consequently, the question we must address is: does Avicenna, openly or covertly maintain a twofold theory of matter? Does he admit that matter is a real principle of being? What is the relation of matter

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¹ 'Destiny Revisited: Avicenna’s Concept of Determinism', p. 167. Ivry rightly identifies the pivotal role of matter for the debate as well as the links with Avicenna’s metaphysics: Avicenna’s theory of providence as well as of determinism thus depends upon a cluster of related concepts, viz., potentiality, possibility, matter and evil, and above all upon the concept of the necessity of existence as we know it', p. 162. Ivry does not quote passages from the chapters on chance of the *Physics of al-Shifā* in support of his thesis, and it is not clear how he infers that Avicenna endorses an underlying positive view of matter, but it is important to assume this hypothesis for the sake of this enquiry.