THE DISTINCTION OF ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE IN AVICENNA’S METAPHYSICS: THE TEXT AND ITS CONTEXT*

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In his groundbreaking monograph *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* and in many other magisterial essays, Dimitri Gutas has underscored the key role that metaphysics plays in Avicenna’s philosophical system. Gutas’ account of metaphysics (as well as of the other main philosophical disciplines), in Avicenna’s *œuvre* is based on a full fledged methodology resulting from the critical evaluation of the assumptions of previous scholarship, an insightful analysis of the fundamental texts, and a thorough reconstruction of their doctrinal and historical context. All scholars interested in Avicenna’s metaphysics (not to say of his psychology, noetics and epistemology) and Arabic metaphysical speculation in general, can only be thankful to Gutas’ pioneering research for having explored and mapped what had been, to a large extent, virgin territory and for having provided a solid, brilliant and comprehensive outline of the whole, thus paving the way to subsequent, more specific investigations.

As a sign of personal heartfelt gratitude and in the footsteps of Gutas’ masterly approach outlined above, the present contribution wishes to provide the analysis of a crucial issue of Avicenna’s metaphysics. The

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issue in question is the famous doctrine of the distinction of essence and existence, as expressed in Avicenna’s masterpiece on metaphysics, the Ilāhiyāt (Science of Divine Things) of the Kitāb aṣ-Ṣifāʾ (Book of the Cure). The present paper will discuss the state-of-the-art, the most relevant textual evidence, and the main features of this doctrine in its context. Avicenna’s distinction of essence and existence in created beings is well known: a triangle or a horse, for example, have a determinate essence (to be a three-sided geometrical figure, to be a four-legged solid-hoofed animal with flowing mane and tail, respectively), regardless of their existence in external reality or in the human mind. In the Ilāhiyāt, the doctrine in question represents the core element of the more general treatment, in chapter I, 5, of the primary concepts “existent” and “thing”, and of their mutual relationship. Since “existent” and “thing” are *grosso modo* equivalent to the notions of “item having existence” and “item having essence” respectively, the account of their distinction (and connection) in this chapter encompasses, in its turn, the distinction of essence and existence.

1. The Distinction of Essence and Existence: The Current State of Research

The scholarship on this doctrine is abundant and has a long history, which cannot be accounted for in detail here. Previous studies, however, show similar methodological and doctrinal assumptions worthy to be recalled briefly. With regard to method, the texts of Avicenna dealing with the distinction at hand have not been properly classified: in a few instances (the main texts on the issue), Avicenna deals with the distinction as such (there is one such case in metaphysics and