

Necessary Existent Theology

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Preliminaries

In “Metatheology and the Ontology of Divinity”¹, Jon Kvanvig outlines the project of “meta-theology”: this is a project which begins with a single, fundamental claim about God, and derives other standard theological claims from the fundamental claim. For example: a proponent of “Perfect Being Theology” begins with the fundamental claim that God is the most perfect being, and then derive from this fundamental claim that God is all-powerful, on the grounds that anything that is less than all-powerful would fail to be the most perfect being. In general, while an ordinary theology articulates the claims that are true of God, a meta-theological project structures the theological truths, by identifying one claim as fundamental, and others as non-fundamental, or derived, truths.

Kvanvig is well aware that endorsing a meta-theological project is not obligatory, since one could hold that there are theological truths, but no single, fundamental truth. (Kvanvig p. 2) He does claim, however, that *if* one is to endorse a meta-theology, there are three options that are both “major” and “promising”:

[M]y goal is to investigate the relationships between what I take to be the major metatheological competitors. As I see it, among the most promising beginnings are conceptions of God which make one of three initial assumptions about the nature of God. In brief, I will label these three approaches as “Creator Theology”, “Perfect Being Theology”, and “Worship Worthiness Theology” (Kvanvig pp. 1-2)

It is clear, however, that Kvanvig is careful not to rule out the possibility of additional alternatives. In this paper, we will argue that there is indeed a fourth alternative, which is both a central player in Medieval Islamic philosophy, and has a serious philosophical pedigree. We call this meta-theological view *Necessary Existent Theology*. The primary claim of Necessary Existent Theology is that God is the Necessary Existent, and its most prominent proponent is Avicenna. In what follows, we will argue that Avicenna’s view meets the conditions for a meta-theology that Kvanvig sets out and, moreover, that Necessary Existent Theology is distinct from the three meta-theological views that Kvanvig discusses. But first, a few clarifying remarks on the meta-theological project in general will be helpful.

¹ In *The Divine Nature: Personal and A-Personal Perspectives*, edited by Simon Kittle, Routledge: forthcoming.

What is a meta-theology?

Kvanvig makes several claims about what a meta-theology involves. It will be important to be clear on what these are, as in the next section we will argue that Avicenna has a view which counts as a meta-theology, in Kvanvig's sense. But moreover there are some details which need to be cleared up, in order to make the concept of a meta-theology clearer, especially in light of some of the central claims in Avicenna's view of God.

a. A meta-theology identifies what is fundamental to the nature of God. Kvanvig puts this point as follows:

To assume one of these three standpoints (viz., Creator Theology, Perfect Being Theology, or Worship Worthiness Theology) is to assume that one of these three is fundamental to an adequate account of the nature of God, that moving from bare theism to a more substantive theology begins from one of these standpoints, with the additional claim that what is valuable in the other approaches can be derived from what is fundamental. (Kvanvig, p. 1)

For a theological realist, who accepts that God exists, and that true claims can be made about God's nature, we assume that talk in general of what is metaphysically fundamental, and what is not, will be unproblematic. (Metaphysical notions related to fundamentality can be found in Lewis 1983, Fine 2001, Sider 2011, and elsewhere.) It makes sense, for example, to claim that God's commandments are more fundamental than our obligations, or that the occurrence of a sea battle on such-and-such a date is not more fundamental than God's knowledge that there will be a sea battle on such-and-such a date. Fundamentality-skepticism is not, we will assume, a live possibility here.

However, even if talk of what is fundamental is in general a well-disciplined and contentful, there are special issues that arise when applying it to claims about the nature of God. As is well-known, Avicenna, and a significant portion of the subsequent philosophical and theological tradition, held that God is *simple*. The doctrine of simplicity prohibits divisions or disunity in God. A meta-theological distinction between the fundamental and derived claims about God, however, risks a kind of division between the fundamental and non-fundamental. In other words, if necessary existence is, as Avicenna held, fundamental to God's nature, then it would seem to follow that eternity, or perfection, is not fundamental. Hence God's eternity is distinct from his necessary existence, because they differ in the following respect: necessary existence is fundamental, whereas eternity (or perfection) is not fundamental. This appears to conflict with the doctrine of simplicity.

This is a sketch of a general problem, which affects any meta-theological project which aims to be consistent with the doctrine of simplicity. We do not mean to endorse this line of argument here. In the concluding section, once we have sketched the case for Necessary Existent Theology as a legitimate candidate as a (distinct) meta-theology, we will revisit the argument to sketch

how Necessary Existent Theology, as a meta-theological project, can claim to be consistent with the doctrine of simplicity.

b. Meta-theological claims are metaphysical, not epistemological. Kvanvig insists that we distinguish between the epistemology of theology and its metaphysics. In particular, how we come to *know* that God is timeless, all-powerful, and the like, need not begin with God's fundamental nature, and involve a derivation of timelessness, omnipotence, etc. As far as our knowledge is concerned, we might come to know the fundamental fact about God by first knowing some metaphysically non-fundamental claims, and then inferring the metaphysically fundamental.

In his discussion of Creator Theology, which takes the central claim about God to be that God is the source of all that exists, Kvanvig says the following:

[O]ur question is a metaphysical one, not an epistemological one. [Creator Theology] is not an account of the nature of God that limits the divine nature to those attributes that can be supported by cosmological and teleological considerations. Instead, it is the view that God is the asymmetrical source of all else, a starting point on which the fundamental nature of God involves aseity and independence from all else. The idea is to start with the characterization of God that is central to [Creator Theology] and see what can be learned about God from that fundamental starting point. The mistake in the literature is to conflate the metaphysical project with an epistemological one, where what is involved in being the asymmetrical source of all else is the minimal conditions generated by cosmological and teleological considerations. (Kvanvig, p. 6)

Suppose one cannot *know* that there is an all-powerful, all-good God simply on the grounds that God is the creator of the universe. Kvanvig has in mind critics who point out that the inference is not very strong: a somewhat powerful, or somewhat devious creator could have created what the universe. But a meta-theologian can properly ignore these epistemological puzzles here, since a meta-theologian is making metaphysical claims: that God's being a creator is more fundamental than God's being all-powerful, good, etc.

In fact the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology is even more important, since we will rely on the distinction between in making the case that Necessary Existent Theology is a distinct meta-theology. Avicenna's proof for the existence of God begins from the premise that *things exist*. The proof goes on to show that, even if these things are merely contingent—in Avicenna's language "possible in themselves" yet "necessary through another", it follows that there must be a necessary existent—i.e., God. If Necessary Existent Theology is to even get off the ground, there must be a distinction between the means by which God is known (existence, broadly conceived) and God's essence (the necessary existent in itself).

c. Meta-theological theories are assessed by comparison. How would we come to know *which* meta-theological view is correct? Kvanvig says that this is by a comparative assessment with competing theories:

There is the obvious question concerning the degree to which each position is able to account for what its competitors claim is fundamental to an adequate theology. Can CT [viz, Creator Theology], for example, show that God is worthy of worship and a perfect being? If not, is this a weakness for CT? Can PBT [viz., Perfect Being Theology] show that God is the creator of all and worthy of worship? If not, is this a weakness? And can WWT [viz., Worship-Worthiness Theology] show that God is the creator of all and the greatest possible being? If not, is this a weakness? (Kvanvig, pp. 2-3)

Although Kvanvig does not try to address these questions directly, it is worth pointing out that comparative questions are more complex than this passage lets on. Take the claim that God is the creator of all. There can be debate about whether a view succeeds in accounting for the claim that God is the creator of all, on the grounds that there is debate about *what it is to be* the creator of all. Avicenna again provides a crucial test case here: while Avicenna holds that God is the first cause, he does not mean that God is the first cause, in these sense of God being the creator of the world *ex nihilo*. Instead he denies that anything is the cause of the world in this sense, holding instead that the world is eternal. (citation here)

Below we will get to the positive claims that Avicenna makes about the priority of God, but already we have enough to make the point that comparative assessments between competing meta-theologies will be more difficult than Kvanvig lets on. Does Avicenna capture the central claim of Creator Theology? If the Creator Theologian claims that God is the first efficient cause of a world that had a beginning in time, then Avicenna denies this, and so fails to capture the central claim of Creator Theology.

On the other hand, Avicenna does demonstrate that God is the first cause in another sense, since he says that God is the source and sustainer of all other beings. Perhaps this is enough to count as having captured the Creator Theologian's central claim, or perhaps not. Here the point is that we might not be able to assess whether this is good enough without already taking a stance on the correct meta-theology. What it is to account for a competing view's central claim requires an understanding on what that central claim *is*, and competing meta-theologies will give different answers to this question. While we are not going to argue that Necessary Existent Theology is the best out of the alternatives, understanding it as a plausible rival will require appreciating the potential for leeway in how to understand central claims about God.

To summarize: competing meta-theologies, even when they agree on which *sentences* about God are true, do not agree on what *makes* them true, or what the sentences *mean*. As with complications owing to simplicity, we will revisit in the conclusion the consequences for the possibility of comparative assessment when evaluating a candidate meta-theology. In the intervening sections, we will set these issues aside. Where Avicenna claims to explain God's perfection, causal priority, etc., we will explain his position by spotting (or at least not contesting) Avicenna's understanding of what perfection, causal priority, etc., amount to. This is not, however, to be understood as the claim that Avicenna, or other proponents of a particular meta-theology, have free reign over how to understand such claims.

Avicenna's ontology and proof of God's existence

Here we turn to arguing that Avicenna provides us with a view that meets the conditions for counting as a meta-theology, subject to the above provisos. We call this view *Necessary Existent Theology*. In this section, we outline the central notions and core claims of Avicenna's view. In the next section, we will argue that these claims constitute a unique and distinctive meta-theology.

Avicenna's modal ontology: necessary and possible existence.

Avicenna's basic ontology divides everything into one of four categories, which involve two pairwise distinctions. The first is the distinction between *necessary* and *possible* existence. Avicenna says "the necessary existent is the existent which, when posited as not existing, an absurdity results. The possibly existent is the one that, when posited as either existing or not existing, no absurdity results." (*Salvation* VIII.II.I.1, McGinnis Reisman trans. p. 211)

Avicenna also distinguishes between those things which have their modal status *in themselves* from those which have this status *through another*. He says, "the necessarily existent through itself is that which is owing to itself not to any other thing [...] the necessarily existent not through itself is that which becomes necessarily existent if something other than it is set down." (*Salvation* VIII.II.I.2, McGinnis Reisman trans. p. 211)

Conjoining these distinctions, we get four categories of existents: the necessary in itself, the necessary through another, the possible in itself, and the possible through another. What we would call ordinary contingent objects occupy, for Avicenna, two of these categories. Take Giles the cat: Giles is possible in itself since there is no absurdity in positing that Giles exists, and not absurdity in positing that Giles does not exist. Giles is also necessary through another, on Avicenna's view: if we do posit the (perhaps very complex) causes of Giles then an absurdity does result if we posit the causes without Giles. In this sense, Giles is necessary through another, where the "other" is the complex set of causes of Giles.

Note that, for Avicenna, the concept of necessity is not the modern concept of existence in all possible worlds. A necessary existent *in itself* cannot fail to exist in any possible world, because it does not depend on anything outside itself for its existence. But Giles is also necessary, in a sense, because an absurdity results from positing the existence of the causes through which Giles exists, without also positing the existence of Giles himself. It does not follow, however, that Giles exists in all possible worlds; in worlds where the causes of Giles don't exist, Giles doesn't either. This is the sense in which Giles is necessary, but *through another*.

Avicenna identifies God with the necessary existent through itself. We will save discussion of Avicenna's proof for the necessary existent through itself for later. Here, we simply note that Avicenna thinks that there is a necessary existent through itself, and that this is God. The relationship between God and necessary existence through itself is very strict, as he says that

necessary existence through itself is not God's essence; strictly speaking, God has no essence. Rather, necessary existence through itself *is* God's very self (*dhāt*).²

The category of possible existence through another is empty: for Avicenna, things are possible (or not) in virtue of their own essences. What makes Giles possible is that, as a cat, Giles there is no absurdity in supposing that Giles exists, or deny that Giles exists. Giles does not need another for possible existence; others are needed, informally, to make his existence *actual*.

Although we use compound English (or, in Avicenna's case, Arabic) expressions to express these categories—necessary existence through itself, necessary existence through another, etc.—it is best not to think of these as metaphysically derived, or complex, categories on Avicenna's view. Instead there are four simple, basic categories, which are not explained in further terms (Avicenna is clear elsewhere that the test of whether an “absurdity” results is not intended as a definition, but instead functions like a heuristic (citation here)).³ These can be thought of as *fundamental* metaphysical categories; there is no sense, for Avicenna, in which the essence of Giles is composed of *possibility* and *through otherness*, and likewise there is no sense in which God is composed of *necessity* and *through itselfness*. This will become evident as we discuss God's simplicity below. For now, we simply note that conceptual structure does not map on to metaphysical structure.

Avicenna's proof of the necessary existent

Avicenna does not rely on a simplistic assumption that an infinite regress of causes that are merely necessary through another is impossible, in order to establish the necessary existent. Rather, he allows that each possible existent may be such that it is necessary through another—i.e., it has a cause—and in each case the cause is another possible in itself. If this is the case, then there is an infinite series of existents that are made necessary (“actual”) through another that is only possible in itself. Of course Avicenna does not outright assert that the series of possible-in-themselves is infinite; rather, his argument is independent of the truth on this matter, since the same questions about the necessity or possibility of the series can be asked independent of the facts on this matter:

² *Healing*, 8.4. Avicenna says that God's necessary existence cannot strictly speaking be God's quiddity, which would require the existence of something (necessary existence through itself) which is distinct from God's self. In that case there would need to be a further cause of the God's being a necessary existent through itself, which is a contradiction. The conclusion is that God is unique in not only being the necessary existent through itself, but in addition in that God, strictly speaking, has no quiddity:

[E]verything that has a quiddity is caused. The rest of the things, other than the Necessary Existent, have quiddities. And it is these quiddities that in themselves are possible in existence, existence occurring to them externally.

The First, hence, has no quiddity. (*Healing* 8.4, 12-13, Marmura trans., p. 276)

³ For further discussion see Amos Bertolacci, "'Necessary' as a primary concept in Avicenna's metaphysics" in *Conoscenza e contingenza*, edited by Stefano Perfetti, Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2008, 31–50, especially the concluding summary on p. 50.

As for their [i.e., the contingent, possible-in-themselves, existents] existing all together, and none is a necessarily existing being, then either the totality, insofar as it is that totality, *whether finite or infinite*, exists necessarily through itself or possibly in itself. (*Salvation* II.I 2.2, McGinnis trans. p. 215, emphasis added)

The central claim in Avicenna's proof is that there are three possibilities concerning this (possibly infinite) totality of existents that are possible in themselves. One is that the totality is necessary in itself, which Avicenna says is absurd because *ex hypothesi* it is composed only of existents that are possible in themselves. The second is that the totality is possible in itself, and is made necessary through another cause which is internal to the totality. However, Avicenna says, the totality can only be caused by a cause which is responsible for the existence of each member of the totality. Thus if a member of the totality causes the existence of the totality, then that member would be causing its own existence. This is a contradiction, since it entails that a member of the totality is necessary in itself, but *ex hypothesi* that totality consists only in things which are necessary through another. Finally, Avicenna says that the cause could be external to the totality. In this cause, the cause must be necessary through itself because the totality, we have assumed, includes all of the existents that are merely possible in themselves. So the only coherent option entails that something which is necessary through itself exists. (*Salvation* II.I 2.3-4, McGinnis trans. p. 215)

A few preliminary notes regarding the relationship between Avicenna's proof of a necessary existent, and its relation to the concept of a meta-theology, are in order.

The proof clearly begins with a premise about the existence of things.⁴ Its conclusion is the claim that there is a necessary existent, which is established on the grounds that God, as the necessary existent in itself, is the cause of other existents. The relationship between God and what God causes, on Avicenna's view, is clearly central to epistemology: when we follow his proof, we come to know that God exists by first knowing that some things exist, and inferring God as a cause. As Kvanvig has warned, however, we must distinguish between the epistemological and the metaphysical claims of a meta-theological project. Simply because God's status as first cause is central to his epistemology, it does not follow that God should, metaphysically, be identified primarily as the cause of things that are possible in themselves. As we will argue below, Avicenna's metaphysics does not treat the claim that God is a cause as fundamental.

A second point is that the proof makes use of a notion of causation that is not what we would call *material* causation, which in a modern sense is the kind of causation that falls under the laws of physics. Avicenna is not arguing that any totality of material causes of things that are possible in themselves must have a necessary existent as their material cause. In fact he rejects that there must be such a first cause in the order of material causes, since he denies that the world was created *ex nihilo*. Rather, Avicenna's premises apply to the cause of an existent in the sense of that which explains, and sustains the fact that the existent, which is merely possible in itself, has

⁴ It is natural to read Avicenna as assuming the a posteriori premise that contingent things exist. But see Michael Marmura, "Avicenna's proof from contingency for God's existence in the metaphysics of the *Shifa*" *Mediaeval Studies* 42 (1980), 337–352.

existence rather than non-existence. For Avicenna, the essence of something which is possible in itself cannot explain why it exists rather than doesn't exist, at this very moment. A possible in itself can be coherently supposed not to exist. Adding a preceding material cause doesn't provide the needed explanation: it might explain why its effect comes into existence, but the fact that there was a material cause at time t does not explain why its effect exists at a later time, t^* . Since the essence of the thing hasn't changed, there must be another existent now, at this very time, which explains why it exists rather than not.

Avicenna's notion of a cause is much more closely related to what a contemporary metaphysician would call a *ground*. (Fine 2001, Schaffer 2009) This is why Avicenna thinks the totality of possible in themselves cannot contain a circular explanation of the existence of each:

To set down a finite number of possible existents, each one of which is a cause of the others in a circle, is as absurd and obvious as the first problem. Particular to it, however, is that each one of them would be a cause and an effect of its own existence, where x comes into existence from y only after y itself comes into existence, *but anything whose existence depends on the existence of what exists only after its own later existence cannot exist.* (*Salvation* II.I 3.2, McGinnis trans. p. 215, emphasis added)

Avicenna's notion of dependence is central to the absurdity of a circular chain of causes. When a grounds b , where both a and b are merely possible in themselves, a explains why b exists (is "necessary" in Avicenna's terminology) and is not among the non-existent. What would be absurd is for a to provide this explanation for b 's existence in conjunction with the fact that b is a part of the same kind of explanation of a 's existence. Avicenna's notion of dependence, like the contemporary notion of ground, is *asymmetrical*. But a circular chain of grounding-relations among the possible-in-themselves would require a symmetrical grounding relation, and is absurd. b cannot be part of the grounds of a if a must already be supposed to exist as the ground of b .⁵ Note that the plausibility of this argument decreases significantly if, instead of dependence, the causal relation at issue is material causation. It is much more plausible that a circular chain of material causes is possible since, while odd, it is not absurd to suppose backward causation is possible.⁶

The metaphysics of Necessary Existent Theology

A meta-theology identifies a single *fundamental claim* about God. Any particular meta-theological picture is compatible the existence of additional truths about God, but these are not fundamental. Instead, the additional truths are *derived claims*, as they are claims which

⁵ The ban on circular grounding chains in the contemporary literature is usually connected to the claim that grounding is transitive, asymmetric, and irreflexive. See Rosen "Metaphysical Dependence" (2010) and Fine "Some Puzzles of Ground" (2010). For the exception that proves the rule, see Bliss "Viciousness and Circles of Ground" (2014).

⁶ See, for instance, Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel" (1976).

(allegedly) follow from the fundamental claim. Competing meta-theologies differ over which claim about God is fundamental, and the manner of derivation of the derived claims.

According to Necessary Existent Theology, the fundamental theological claim is:

God is the necessary existent

There are many derived claims according to Necessary Existent Theology; in what follows we will focus on the derivation of only a few derived claims within Necessary Existent Theology, which include:

God is simple

There is only one God

God is the first cause

God is perfect

Each derived claim can be shown to be true in one of three ways. First, a derived claim might be shown to be *identical* to the fundamental claim, in the sense that the derived claim states the same fact as the fundamental claim: that God is the necessary existent. Second, the derived claim could follow from the fundamental claim. One way to show this is to show that the negation of the derived claim is inconsistent with the fundamental claim. Finally, a derived claim might state a fact about God's relation, as ground, to other existents that are not necessary in themselves. In this case, the derived claim does not follow from the fundamental claim alone, but instead follows from the fundamental claim in conjunction with facts about other existents.

Below we will begin by showing how Necessary Existent Theology accommodates the derived claims in one of these three ways.

God's simplicity

Avicenna says that it follows from the fundamental claim that God is simple. In particular, God cannot be composed of parts, cannot be a genus or have a species, and cannot have accidents. In each case the proof is similar. If God is necessary existence in itself, then a part, which is not numerically identical to God, must be something distinct from, and additional to, necessary existence in itself. The part is then only possible in itself, and so must have a cause, which secures its existence. This contradicts the fundamental claim, that God is the necessary existent in itself. God, by having a part, a specific difference, or attribute, would then have a cause, and so would only be necessary through another. (*Metaphysics* Book I Ch. 7; Marmura pp. 34-38)

Here it is clear that the simplicity of God is a consequence of the fundamental claim, namely that God is necessary existence in itself. Avicenna has argued that the denial of God's simplicity is

incompatible with the fundamental claim. So, Necessary Existent Theology includes the claim that God is simple, as a derived claim. In this case the derived claim follows from, but is not identical to, the fundamental claim of Necessary Existent Theology.

There is only one God

Avicenna argues that there is only one God, and also does so on the basis of the fundamental claim, that God is the necessary existent in itself. Here the simplicity of God, established above, serves as a lemma in the argument. Avicenna argues that the supposition that there are multiple necessary existents in themselves is incompatible with the simplicity of the necessary existent(s). The reason is that, if there were two necessary existents, then there must be something to distinguish them. But then at least one of the necessary existents must have something that distinguishes it from the other necessary existence in itself—if not, there would be nothing to make them distinct, and so there would not be two necessary existents. However, any distinguishing feature requires a cause, and hence the distinguished existent must be distinct from God, because God is simple. So there can be at most one necessary existent in itself. (*Metaphysics*, Book I Ch. 6 para. 11)

The uniqueness of God is therefore a second derived claim that follows from the fundamental claim of Necessary Existent Theology. As with the derivation of the simplicity of God, it follows from the fundamental claim that God is the necessary existent.

God is the first cause

The priority of God as a first cause follows from the simplicity and unity of God, plus the status of every distinct existent as something that is merely possible in itself. Avicenna says:

Since nothing other than Him is a necessary existent, He is the principle of the necessitation of the existence of everything, necessitating [each thing] either in a primary manner or through an intermediary. If the existence of everything other than Him derives from His existence, He is [the] first. (*Metaphysics*, Book VIII Chapter 4, part 1)

It is noteworthy that Avicenna, in what immediately follows, is explicit that God's being the first cause is not part of the essence of God, but rather is a relation between God's essence and other non-necessary beings. God is the cause of, e.g., Giles the cat, and since there is no further cause of God, this relation between God and Giles is a part of God's being the first cause. (Avicenna allows that God, while being absolutely simple, can be related to other things—a point Maimonides would dispute later.⁷) The upshot is that God's status as the first cause is not grounded merely in God's essence. Rather, in addition to God's essence, the grounds include the fact that all other existents, such as Giles, are possible in themselves. What distinguishes the

⁷ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I Ch. 52: "There is, in truth, no relation in any respect between Him and any of His creatures. For relation is always found between two things falling under the same—necessarily proximate—species, whereas there is no relation between the two things if they merely fall under the same genus." (Pines trans., p. 118) Since, for Maimonides, God does not even belong to a genus, there can be no relations proper between God and creatures. Here Maimonides appears to be applying Avicenna's principles to what (Maimonides takes to be) their logical conclusion, though we will not pursue the question of whether he is right about this here.

things that are possible in themselves that actually exist, from those that are possible but do not exist, is a necessitating cause, or ground, and Avicenna thinks that the grounds must ultimately terminate in the necessary existent in itself.

This means that the fact that God is the first cause is, for Avicenna, a distinct fact from the fact that God is the necessary existent. Its grounds include the fact that God is the necessary existent, but also include God's relation to other existents, as the reason why these possible-in-themselves are necessary through another. At the same time, God's status as the necessary existent is clearly the more basic fact: it is only in virtue of his status as the necessary existent that he is eligible to be the first cause of other existents.

God is perfect

Avicenna holds that God's perfection consists in his necessary existence:

The Necessary Existent is thus perfect in existence because nothing belonging to His existence and the perfections of His existence is lacking in Him. Nothing of the genus of His existence is extraneous to His existence, existing in another in the way, for example, it exists extraneously in another in the case of a human being. (*Healing*, tr. Marmura, 8.6, sec. 1, p.283.)

In subsequent passages Avicenna adds that God is "above perfection" because "not only does He have the existence that belongs only to Him (since God is necessary in itself), but every [other] existence also is an overflow of His existence and belongs to Him and emanates from Him." (*Metaphysics* VIII Ch. 6 pt. 2 p. 283)

Avicenna's account of God's perfection is particularly interesting in the present context, as he not only thinks that the perfection is a consequence of necessary existence, he seems in addition to think that perfection (or being "above perfection") is *identical* to the kind of self-sufficiency that only the necessary existent in itself can possess. That is, there is a contrast with Avicenna's proof of God's perfection and his proofs of other non-relational claims about God, including his uniqueness and simplicity. When giving the latter proofs, Avicenna relies on substantive claims about the relationship between simplicity or uniqueness, and necessary existence. For example, in proving uniqueness, Avicenna relies on the claim that, if there were two necessary existents, there would have to be some distinguishing feature that makes them distinct. But Avicenna relies on no auxiliary premises in proving perfection; all he relies on is the definitional claim that the self-sufficiency characteristic of the necessary existence suffices for perfection. We will return to this aspect of Avicenna's meta-theology in the concluding section.

It is also worth noting that, when arguing that God is pure good, Avicenna adds a relational conception of goodness. The good, Avicenna says, is "that which everything within its [own] bound desires and through which its existence is completed." (*Metaphysics* VIII Ch. 6 pt. 3 p. 284) Since everything desires existence, they desire God. This is a claim that partly depends on the previous argument that God is (beyond) perfection. God's perfection consists in the fact that

God is the single, unique necessary existent; that is, God is the perfection of existence. The relational fact—that everything desires perfection—thus amounts to the relational fact that everything desires God.

We won't try to settle how Avicenna thinks of the relationship between these two arguments for God's perfection. Avicenna may have had two distinct concepts of perfection; or, alternatively, may have held God as perfect because he is desired is a consequence of God's intrinsic perfection. There are clear differences between these arguments: one identifies an intrinsic feature of God's necessary existence; the other rests on a relation between God and other creatures. However they both share a distinguishing mark of a meta-theology: they derive God's perfection from a single fundamental claim about the nature of God. If there are auxiliary premises in the argument, they are not further claims about God's nature, but rather are claims about creatures, or are definitional claims about perfection.

Comparisons with other meta-theological approaches

Distinct meta-theologies

Kvanvig, in articulating what it takes to be a meta-theology, identifies three substantive meta-theologies: Creator Theology, Perfect Being Theology, and Worship-worthiness Theology. Although he does not explicitly say that there can be no fourth alternative, he does say that they represent “the most promising beginnings”, and are “the major metatheological competitors”.

We have already outlined the essentials for an argument that Necessary Existent Theology meets the criteria to count as a distinct meta-theology: it has a metaphysical framework, which carves out ontological space for God as the necessary existent in itself. Moreover, the nature of God on this picture can clearly be distinguished from the epistemological steps through which we know that God exists. Avicenna holds that some key claims about God, including his simplicity, uniqueness, status as the first cause, and perfection, follow from God's necessary existence. Since Avicenna is a prominent and influential figure in the history of philosophical theology, his view should count as a major player in the meta-theological debate.

One remaining possibility is that, while Avicenna clearly relies on a central fundamental claim about God's nature, Necessary Existent Theology is not a *distinct* alternative, since its fundamental claim is not substantially different from that of one of the standard meta-theological views. Thus, it is worth pausing to note the reasons why the fundamental claim of Necessary Existence Theology is not plausibly identified with any of the fundamental claims of the alternatives.

We take it to be clear that Worship-worthiness Theology is not the same as Necessary Existent Theology. Worship-worthiness is a relational property, as it related God to humans, or other potential worshippers. A relational property like this has no place in Avicenna's modal ontology, and so cannot feature in the fundamental claim of Necessary Existent Theology. Some *derived* claims are relational, in Avicenna's scheme. But the fundamental claim, that God is the

necessary existent in itself, is not a relational claim, and is only used to derive relational claims in conjunction with facts about the possible-in-themselves.

The fundamental claim of Perfect Being Theology is that God is perfect. Avicenna agrees that God is perfect. But this claim, on Avicenna's view, is derived: Avicenna claims that it follows from God's status as the necessary existent in itself. As the discussion in the previous section shows, the derivation relies on a definition of what perfection consists in, and in particular defines perfection as consisting in the self-sufficiency that is characteristic of the necessary existent. For Perfect Being Theology, on the other hand, God's perfection is not a derived claim; moreover, the conception of perfection as self-sufficient existence is not one the perfect being theologian is likely to share—a point we return in the conclusion.

We can turn next to Creator Theology. Perhaps the closest resemblance between Necessary Existent Theology and Creator Theology lies in the explanatory priority assigned to God on each view. According to Creator Theology, the fundamental claim is that God is the creator of the universe—that is, the cause of everything that is not God. Necessary Existent Theology, we have seen, includes the fundamental claim that God is the necessary existent in itself. This claim is partly a claim about what explains God's existence, as the explanation is “through itself” rather than “through another”. The priority of God as first cause is closely related to the way in which God exists, according to Necessary Existent Theology.⁸

As Avicenna argues, the fact that God's existence is necessary in itself implies that God is the cause, or explanation, of the existence of all other things. His proof of God's existence proves that God exists because there must be a first cause in this sense. But Avicenna's sense of “cause” in which God can be said to be the first cause is not that which is traditionally associated with God as creator in Creator Theology. In this sense, God is an *material* cause. But Avicenna does not think that God is a material cause; rather on Avicenna's view, God grounds the existence of everything else. This is a difference between Avicenna's official view and standard versions of Creator Theology. Still, it would not be unreasonable to treat a view which treats God as the ground of the universe as an unorthodox variant of Creator Theology, rather than a distinct meta-theology.

The central reason why Avicenna's view is not a variant of Creator Theology is rather different. A meta-theology is not an account of the epistemology whereby we come to know that God exists; the metaphysically fundamental claim of a meta-theology can, in principle, be separated from the premises in an argument for the existence of God. In Avicenna's case, this is precisely what we need to do: the argument that God exists, even though it establishes God as the first cause, does not commit Avicenna to the metaphysical claim that God is, fundamentally, the first cause.

The metaphysics of God must instead be read off from Avicenna's modal ontology. This ontology includes the category of necessary existence in itself—that is, existence which is explained through the one existing, and not another. While we employ the notion of a first cause to establish the existence of God, God's essence does not involve any relation (including the relations of being *first* or *prior to*) to the possible-in-themselves which God causes. Instead, the

⁸ See Kara Richardson “Avicenna and the Principle of Sufficient Reason”, *Review of Metaphysics* 67, pp. 743-768.

fundamental claim about God, for Avicenna, locates God in the modal category of necessary existent through itself. Once we separate epistemological claims from metaphysical claims about what is fundamental to God, it is clear that Necessary Existent Theology is not a variant of Creator Theology.

Simplicity and meta-theology

As we have seen, the doctrine of simplicity plays a central role in Avicenna's derivation of the other theological claims about God, including those that are the fundamental claims according to competing meta-theologies. In the context of characterizing Avicenna's views as a distinctive meta-theology, this raises special problems. Avicenna's commitment to a strong version of simplicity entails that God is not composed of parts, is not composed in part by a form, does not belong to any genus, and does not possess attributes that are distinct from each other, or from God's self or essence. This is not an idiosyncratic commitment of Avicenna's view: divine simplicity is a doctrine that looms especially large in any discussion of Avicenna, but is also endorsed in some form by Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Averroes, Maimonides, and many others.

A meta-theology involves a commitment to a distinction between what we have called *fundamental* and *derived* theological claims. Here we will briefly sketch how this distinction appears to conflict with divine simplicity. This is not a decisive consideration: we will also sketch one way in which a meta-theological view can be reconciled with simplicity. There may be additional options for dealing with the difficulty; we will not try to canvass all of them here. The upshot of this discussion is that any reconciliation will require us to refine, to some extent, what a meta-theology amounts to.

Take a claim about God's nature that, according to one's favorite meta-theological view, is not fundamental. For example, assume that the claim

God is timeless

is not a fundamental claim about God's nature. What does it mean to say that *God is timeless* is less fundamental than some other claim about God's nature? Here we have several options for understanding what *less fundamental* amounts to. On some ways of understanding what fundamentality amounts to, this follows from the fact that there is a further fact about God's nature which grounds the fact that God is timeless. These are *ground-centric* conceptions of fundamentality, as they explicate the notion of fundamentality in terms of the notion of ground.⁹

From the perspective of a theological view that includes a commitment to divine simplicity, these distinctions are potentially important. Take the idea that the distinction in fundamentality follows from a grounding relation between *facts* that concern God's nature. This view entails that there are distinct facts about God's nature, as for example the fact that God is timeless is distinct from some other, more fundamental, fact about God. This appears already to conflict with a strict view of divine simplicity, but the conflict is made even worse if we adopt a standard formulation of facts as structured entities involving real-world constituents. If the fact that God is timeless

⁹ See Fine 2012, "Guide to Ground", for more on these, and related, distinctions.

involves an entity—*timelessness*—this entity must be distinct from other facts about God, because the fact that God is timeless is, by Leibniz’s Law distinct (because grounded by) the fundamental fact about God. This is a straightforward conflict with simplicity.¹⁰

One way out is implicit in the discussion of *relational* claims about God’s nature in the last section. For example, we pointed out that God’s status as the first cause is, for Avicenna, a relational fact which holds between God and distinct existents that are merely possible in themselves. God is the first cause because, as the necessary existent in itself, God makes other things which are merely possible in themselves, necessary through another. There is no conflict with simplicity when the derived claims are relations between God and other entities, since the derived fact, which concerns God’s status as the first cause, is partly grounded in things outside of God’s nature. Here there is no pressure to reject simplicity in order to account for the distinctness of the derived facts. One option is to adopt a similar strategy for other derived claims, by construing them as relational facts.

Another option, which is compatible with simplicity, is to abandon the ground-centric conception of fundamentality. It is not obligatory to explicate the fundamental and derived facts in terms of the grounding-relations which hold between distinct entities. Instead we can hold that there is one, single fundamental fact about God, and that this fact can be *represented* in different ways. This is a representational approach to fundamentality, which is to be contrasted with the ground-centric approach. (See Fine 2012, Sider 2012, and Dunaway 2015 for different versions.) A non-relational derived fact about God, on this approach, is another way of representing the fundamental fact. For instance, Sider 2012 holds that the fundamental facts are those that are expressed with “perfectly” structural vocabulary, while statements of non-fundamental (i.e., derived) fact represent the same fact, with “non-structural” vocabulary.

Applied to the theological claims involved in a meta-theology, the representational strategy goes something like this. If *God is the necessary existent through itself* is the fundamental claim, then the term ‘necessary existent through itself’ is a perfectly structural term. Derived claims, such as the claim that *God is unique*, represent the same fact that *God is the necessary existent through itself* represents. But this is not a statement of fundamental fact because ‘unique’ is not perfectly structural. Thus it is not the case that there are distinct facts in play: that is, there are not two facts, one involving necessary existence, and another involving uniqueness. Instead, what is going on is there is one fact—God’s necessary existence—and two ways of representing it.

We do not need to adopt Sider’s terminology to make this point: all it requires is that some representations better capture God’s essence (self) than others. If we have a distinction along these lines in hand, we can use it to make the fundamentality-claims that are central to a meta-theology, without contradicting divine simplicity. Our point here is that the meta-theological project *must*

¹⁰ This is simply a sketch of an argument that a grounding-relation between facts about God’s nature entails a denial of simplicity. We do not wish to claim that there is no out here for someone who wishes to conceive of grounding as a relation between structured facts, while at the same time maintaining simplicity. Our point here is simply that there is a prima facie incoherence in maintaining this package of views, and it needs to be resolved somehow. We present some options in what follows.

use a strategy along these lines, in order to avoid ruling out major competitors, including Avicenna.

Comparative methodology and reinterpretation

A final point about the assessment of Necessary Existent Theology is worth mentioning in closing. Kvanvig lays out a framework for assessing a candidate meta-theology, by evaluating the extent to which the meta-theology is able to accommodate show that common claims about the nature of God can be derived from the fundamental claim. To the extent that one meta-theology does this better than others, it is preferable, *mutatis mutandis*. Necessary Existent Theology, however, points to some ways in which this methodology must be more complicated than it first appears.

We need to account not only for *which* claims about the nature of God can be derived, but also how the target claims are interpreted. Avicenna makes use of stipulated definitions about what the terms that feature in derived claims mean, when applied to God. These definitions might not be satisfactory to all parties, even if his derivations of the predicates (so defined) are impeccable.

Here is one example. Avicenna, as we have outlined, treats the fact that God is perfect as a derived claim, which follows from the fundamental claim that God is a necessary existent. God's necessary existence is a self-sufficient existence that distinguishes and, according to Avicenna, makes God more perfect, than other beings which have only a dependent existence. Does this show that Necessary Existent Theology can capture the fundamental claim of Perfect Being Theology? Not necessarily. A Perfect Being Theologian would plausibly reject Avicenna's conception of perfection.

Take a typical version of Perfect Being Theology, which accepts the following schema which holds for an appropriate range of values for F :

What makes it the case that God is F is that God would be better if he were F than if he were not F .¹¹

For Perfect Being Theology, the relevant claims about God covered by the schema include more than claims about God's existence. It is supposed to explain God's omniscience and goodness, for instance.

Thus it appears clear that Avicenna and the Perfect Being Theologian associate different conditions with God's perfection. One takes perfection to be exhausted by necessary existence; the other holds that perfection involves a richer web of connections to knowledge, morality, and the like. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are talking past one another. It does, however, illustrate an additional point of comparison between meta-theologies. Necessary Existence

¹¹ One recent application of this methodology is Leftow 2012. This rough formulation leaves open what the acceptable range of values of the variable F the Perfect Being Theologian's schema applies to, which Speaks 2014 argues makes the view ultimately circular. There may be room for the Perfect Being Theology to maneuver here, by distinguishing applications of the schema as an epistemological tool for learning which claims about God are true, from a metaphysical claim about what makes the relevant predications true.

Theology can show that the claim *God is perfect* can be derived, but it risks using a less-than-ideal interpretation of what perfection requires. In principle, this could be a strike against the view, assuming competing meta-theologies do not rely on similarly non-ideal interpretations of derived claims.

Similar issues arise with other claims that Necessary Existent Theology treats as derived. We do not raise these issues to show that Necessary Existent Theology cannot succeed in the methodological framework the Kvanvig lays out. In fact, we think that these issues are likely to arise when engaging in a comparative assessment of any two meta-theologies, regardless of whether Necessary Existent Theology is a competitor. This is not a disastrous result, but it will make comparative assessments a messy endeavor. Instead of making black-and-white assessments about whether a derivation is sound or not, a project we can engage in by applying the familiar tools of logic, we need to make assessments about the gray area of semantics.