NOTES ON AVICENNA’S CONCEPT OF THINGNESS
(ŠAY’IYYA)*

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In an article published in 1984, Jean Jolivet suggested that the origins of Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence lay not in ancient Greek philosophy, as has generally been supposed, but in early Islamic dogmatic theology (*kalām*), and specifically in the ninth- and tenth-century-CE debates between Muslim dogmatists (*mutakallimūn*) over how the terms “thing” (šay’) and “existent” (mawgūd) relate to each other.¹ The present article provides evidence that gives qualified support to Jolivet’s hypothesis. I argue that Jolivet is correct in highlighting the *kalām* background to Avicenna’s essence-existence distinction, but that an important and previously overlooked testing-ground for that distinction, Avicenna’s analysis of the relation between efficient and final causes, arose from an entirely Aristotelian problematic.

This article has three parts. Part 1 is an introduction to the problem. I shall survey early *kalām* discussions of things and existents and present evidence supporting Jolivet’s hypothesis that these *kalām* discussions were the backdrop against which Avicenna made his distinction between essence (māhiyya, literally “whatness,” and often Latinized as “quiddity”) and existence (wuġūd).² While it is easy to imagine a progression from

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² It is true that māhiyya, “quiddity,” is only one of several terms – including ḥaqiqā, dāt, sūra, ṣabi’a and, as we shall see, šay’iyya – which, taken as a whole, constitute Avicenna’s idea of “essence” (cf. A.-M. Goichon, *La distinction de l’essence et de l’existence d’après Ibn Sinâ (Avicenne)* [Paris, 1937], 48). As will become clear, māhiyya is first among equals in this cluster of terms. Goichon sees dāt as the essential term for essence, following the lead of its Latin translation as *essentia*; māhiyya, by contrast, was rendered as *quidditas*.
the *mutakallimün*’s use of *mawguḍ* to Avicenna’s use of *wuqūd*, the route from *šay’* to *māhiyya* seems less direct. I explore the possibility that the concept of thingness, *šay’iyya*, served to link the *mutakallimün*’s use of *šay’* and Avicenna’s use of *māhiyya*. In Parts 2 and 3 of the article, I discuss some previously unexamined passages where Avicenna uses the term *šay’iyya* to explain how the final cause, *al-‘illa al-ğā’iyya*, can be seen to be prior to the efficient cause, *al-‘illa al-fā’iliyya*. More particularly, Part 2 addresses a philological problem: whether or not these passages should be emended to read *sababiyya*, “causality,” instead of *šay’iyya*, “thingness.” I argue that *šay’iyya* should be retained. In Part 3, I discuss what *šay’iyya* means in the context of Avicenna’s analyses of final and efficient causality. In so doing I hope to cast some light on how exactly the concept of thingness bridges the *mutakallimün*’s discussions of things and existents on the one hand, and Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence on the other.

**PART 1: *ŠAY’IYYA BETWEEN ŠAY’ AND MĀHIYYA***

Given the opaque and scattered nature of most of the early sources available to us, we cannot know for sure when and where thinkers writing in Arabic first used the terms *šay’* and *mawguḍ*. It is fairly certain, however, that the *mutakallimün*’s first discussions of things and existents arose not out of some general and spontaneous interest in ontology, but out of a desire to marshal Qur’ānic evidence in favor of their own positions and against their opponents’ on two basic theological topics: God’s attributes (in this case, whether or not God could be correctly spoken of as a *thing*, and if so, how) and God’s creative power (in this case, whether or not it is *things* which God causes to come into existence and pass out of existence, and if so, how). In order to buttress their arguments the *mutakallimün* had to address the question of what *šay’*, “thing,” refers to when it is used in the Qur’ān.

The term *šay’* appears in many places in the Qur’ān, and mainly refers, in a general and undifferentiated sense, to the objects of God’s attributes. God is all-powerful (*qadir*); over what is God all-powerful? Things, or, more precisely, every thing. Similarly, things are the objects of God’s knowing (*‘l-m*), creating (*h-l-q*), witnessing (*š-h-d*), being in charge of (*w-k-l*),
preserving (ḥ-f-ẓ), encompassing (ḥ-y-ṯ), reckoning (ḥ-s-b) and supervising (r-q-b).³

Despite the Qur’ān’s straightforward, quasi-pronominal use of ʿsayʾ (amr is used as an all-purpose direct object in much the same way), early commentators and mutakallimūn nevertheless tried to determine what precisely it meant to be a thing. For example, it seems clear enough that because things are the objects of God’s attributes, they are other than God. The distinction between thing and God is reinforced by the famous verse 42:11, laysa kamitliḥi ʿsayʾ, “No thing is [even] like a likeness of Him.” Believers are also instructed not to verge towards polytheism by associating things with God (3:64; 4:36; 6:151; 12:38; 22:26; 60:12). Finally, the divine act of creation is described in two famous verses, 16:40 (inna-mā qawlunā li-ṣayʾin idā aradnāhu an naqūla lahu kun fa-yakūnū) and 36:82 (inna-mā amruhu idā arādā ṣayʾan an yaqūla kun fa-yakūnū), as consisting in God’s saying “Be!” to a thing, at which point the thing then is.

But the strong suggestion that things are other than God weakens slightly when one takes into account a number of verses that seem to indicate that God Himself is a thing. For example, 6:19, “Say: Which thing is the greatest in terms of witnessing? Say: God is witness between you and me” (qul ayyu ʿsayʾin akbaru ʿahdatan qul Allāhu ʿahḏun bayn wa-baynaka), implies that God is a thing, and 28:88, “Every thing will perish save His face” (kullu ʿayʾin hālikun illā waḏhahu), implies that at least the divine countenance is a thing.

This ambiguity was reinforced by the early grammarians, who held that ʿsayʾ was the most generally applicable of terms (aʿammu al-ʿāmm), applying to all that may be placed in relation to a predicate (yaqaʿu ʿalā kulli mā ṣḥbira ʿanhu).⁴ That is,


⁴ Sibawayhi (d. ca. 796), al-Kitāb I, ed. I.B. Yaʿqūb (Beirut, 1999), 47,7; and ap. al-Zabīdī, Tāḡ al-ʿarūs min ǧawāhir al-qāmūs I, ed. A. Śrī (Beirut, 1994), 185a20-21 and 27-28. The formulation al-ṣayʾ huwa mā yaḡūzu an ʿyuḥbara ʿanhu is also found in al-Ḥwārizmī (d. 997), Mafāth al-ʿulūm, ed. G. van Vloten (Leiden, 1895), 22,14-15; in that same work al-Ḥwārizmī reports (199,14-200,1) that ʿsayʾ is also used by the “Algebrists” as a kind of universal variable.
śay’ refers to every mubtada’ (subject) in relation to which one could place a ḥabar (predicate). If we want to predicate any attributes of God, therefore, we will be forced to maintain that He is a thing. This grammatical consideration seems to have overridden the weight of Qur’anic evidence, and apart from the arch-unitarian Ġahm ibn Ṣafwān, who – as we shall see – held to a strictly understood interpretation of thing (namely, that it was synonymous with mahlūq, “created,” and that therefore God was not a thing), consensus arose around the fence-straddling assertion that God was a śay’ là ka-al-ašyā’, “a thing not like [other] things.”

But whether or not it is right to call God a thing was not the only problem which the term śay’ forced the early mutakallimūn to confront. More seriously, the mutakallimūn had to contend with the implication of verses 16:40 and 36:82 (mentioned above) that things were somehow there before God said “Be!” to them; for otherwise, what would God be saying “Be!” to? It seemed perfectly sensible to draw the conclusion, as most Mu’tazilites did, that thing applies not only to what exists (al-mawgūd) but also to what does not exist (al-ma’dūm); and that what does not exist in turn applies not only to what did not exist and now exists, such as the world, but also to what does not now exist but will exist, such as the Day of Resurrection.

Other mutakallimūn, by contrast, held that śay’ applies solely to what exists. This was partly because the Mu’tazilite view could be seen as leading to two unsavory alternatives. The first arises from the premise that even before it exists one particular thing – my great-great-grandson – is and always has been distinct from another particular thing – my great-great-granddaughter. In 68 years God will say “Be!” to one non-existent thing, my great-great-grandson, and in 72 years God will say “Be!” to another non-existent thing, my great-great-granddaughter. The same premise can be applied to things that have existed but now do not. Thus my great-great grandfather, even though he is non-existent now, remains one thing, and my great-great-grandmother remains another thing, and both will

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6 The term amr is used synonymously with śay’ to refer to the things which God is saying “Be!” to, at 2:117, 3:47, 19:35, 36:82 and 40:68. In his Tafsīr (ad 2:117) Tabari (d. 923) describes the positions of various “interpreters” (mu’awwilūn) on this issue (Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī II, ed. M.M. Šākir [Cairo, 1954], 542,1-550,7).
remain distinct things up to, including and (presumably) beyond the Day of Judgment. The problem is that all these pre- and post-existent individual things must be or subsist somewhere before and after they exist. Let us say they are all located somewhere outside God’s mind; in that case they will share the attribute of eternality with God, and the precept of tawḥīd, understood as divine uniqueness, will be violated. Let us then say that they are all located within God’s mind; in that case they will introduce multiplicity into God, and the precept of tawḥīd, understood as divine simplicity, will be violated.

Alternatively, and just as problematically, the Mu‘tazilite conception could be understood as implying that before and after they exist, things were and will be undifferentiated, just one great eternal blob of Thing. In other words, when things are non-existent, they are undifferentiated; when things are existent, they are distinct one from the other. But this conception would expose the Mu‘tazilites to the charge that an eternal and undifferentiated non-existent Thing was, for all intents and purposes, equivalent to the eternal and (in itself) undifferentiated prime matter of the Eternalists (al-dahriyya). God’s sole possession of eternality is infringed upon, and the precept of tawḥīd, understood as divine uniqueness, will again be violated.⁷

To some extent the arguments just articulated are conjecture, for as I mentioned above, contemporaneous evidence of early kalām discussions of things and existents is hard to come by. Aš‘ari’s Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn contains a few typically terse descriptions of the views held by early mutakallimīn:

1) A thing is something created which has a likeness (Ǧāhm ibn Ṣafwān and various Zaydis);
2) a thing is a body (Anthropomorphists – al-mušabbīha);

3) a thing is what can be pointed to (Hishām al-Fuwaṭī);

4) a thing is a thing before it comes into being (‘Abbād b. Sulaymān; certain Baghdadi Mu‘tazilites); saying “X is a thing” is the same as affirming X. Affirming X covers the time before X came into being as well as the time after it came into being (al-Khayyāṭ); a thing is all that can be known, and all that can be called to mind and of which predication is possible. Things are knowable as things before they come into being. Things can be called things before they come into being (al-Ǧubbā‘ī);

5) a thing is an existent (al-ʾAṣ‘ārī); a thing is a thing only when it exists (Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Šāliḥī; Ibn al-Rāwandi).

From the end of the ninth century to the end of the tenth – the period, that is, just before Avicenna started writing philosophy – the mutakallim‘n holding positions 1, 2 and 3 became increasingly isolated, and the debate about things polarized into positions 4 and 5, with most Mu‘tazilites holding position 4 and virtually everyone else – ʾAṣ‘ārites, Māturīdites and most Shi‘ites – holding position 5.8

8 See al-ʾAṣ‘ārī (d. 935), Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn I, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1929), 158,1-163,8 and 181,1-182,4; al-ʾAṣ‘ārī, Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn II, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1930), 518,4-519,8. Perhaps our earliest source regarding the debate over things and existents is the Zaydi Shi‘ite al-Ǧāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 860), Kitāb al-dall al-kabīr, ed. B. Abrahamov (Leiden, 1990), 74,10-76,7.

9 Mu‘tazilites: al-Khayyāṭ (d. ca. 913), Kitāb al-intiqād, ed. H.S. Nyberg, (Cairo, 1925), 60,4-14; 107,6-108,8; 126,1-2; Sa‘diyā al-Ǧayyūmī (i.e. Saadīa Gaon, d. 942), Kitāb al-amānāt wa al-i’tiqād, ed. S. Landauer (Leiden, 1880), 11,10-12 and 213,13-15; ‘Abd al-Ǧabbār (d. 1025), al-Muṣnī fī aḥwāl al-tawḥīd wa al-ʿadl, ed. M.M. Ḥilmī et al. (Cairo, 1955f.), IV 247,12-13; V 202,8-203,9; 249,4-8; 251,3-4; 252,4-6; VII 179,17-80,15; VI/2 75,5-77,7 and 135,3-136,9; VIII 74,1-82,12; XII 20,1-3 and 48,5-6. ʾAṣ‘ārites: Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015), Muğarrad maqālāt al-ʾAṣ‘ārī, ed. D. Gimaret (Beirut, 1987), 42,7-18 and 252,4-256,22; and al-Baqqillānī (d. 1013), Kitāb al-tamhīd, ed. R.J. McCarthy (Beirut, 1957), 193,17-194,6; 195,6-196,12; 266,4-9. (In fact, al-ʾAṣ‘ārī admitted in his Kitāb al-ʾamād that he himself had originally held the Mu‘tazilite position: “We wrote a book on the topic of “thing,” namely, that things are things even if they be non-existent. We have retreated from it [i.e. the position articulated in this book] and [now] contradict it, so whoever comes across it [the book], let him not place any store by it”; reported by Ibn ʿAsākir, Tabyin kadīb al-muṣṭarī fī-mā nusiba ilā al-Imām Abī al-Ḥasan al-ʾAṣ‘ārī, no ed. [Damascus, 1928], 133,5-6.) Māturīdites: al-Māturīdī (d. ca. 944), Kitāb al-tawḥīd, ed. F. Kholeif (Beirut, 1970), 39,20-43,21; 86,2-92,20; 104,8-106,18; 242,3-16; and Abū al-Layṯ al-Samārqandī (d. ca. 990), Šarḥ al-fiqh al-ʾabsaṭ li-Abī Ḥanifa, ed. H. Daiber (as The Islamic Concept of Belief in the 4th/10th Century, Tokyo, 1995), 119,1-2 (= lines 426-7). Shi‘ites: al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 1022), Awa’il al-maqālāt fī al-madāhīb wa-al-muḥtārat, ed. M. Muḥaqiq (Tehran, 1993), 42,14-19. See also R.M. Frank, “Al-ma’dūm wal-mawjūd,” MIDEO, 14 (1980): 185-210; and now his “The ʾAṣ‘ārite ontology: I Primary entities,” Arabic Sciences and Philosophy, 9/2 (1999): 163-231; A. Dhanani, The Physical Theory of Kalām (Leiden, 1994), 27 n.4 and 29-30; M.J. McDermott, The Theology of al-Šayḫ
plicity at stake, not to mention the nature of His causation of the world, the primitive dogmatic formulae devised to encapsulate these two positions grew into fully articulated school doctrines. The kalâm discussion of things and existents came to encompass general questions of ontology, and the metaphysical notions used in the debate became more sophisticated.

This increase in complexity went hand in hand with the intensifying philosophical activity of the period, activity that involved translating Greek philosophical texts into Arabic as well as composing original philosophical works in Arabic. In his Kitāb fi al-falsafa al-ūlā, Kindī uses the term šay‘ in a brief discussion of essence, existents and non-existents, but for the latter three terms he uses dât, ays and lays respectively. Farabi was the first faylasūf to incorporate the term māhiyya (“whatness,” “quiddity” or simply “essence”) – a term deriving primarily from the rendering of the Greek to ti ḍn einai as mā huwa in the Arabic translations of Aristotle’s logical works – into the kalâm problematic of things and existents.

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11 It is true that to ti ḍn einai (and its variants) was translated as māhiyya only rarely, and primarily in the context of distinguishing definition (al-Ωadd) from property (al-¿®◊◊a): the former is a statement that “indicates the thing’s essence” (al-d®ll ‘al® m®hiyyat al-·ay’), the latter one that does not. See, for example, Top. 101b38-102a1 (= Ṭūbīka, in Manṭiq Aristiū II, ed. ‘A. Badawi [Cairo, 1949], 474,17); 102a21 (= 475,14); 103b10-11 (= 481,11); and 154a30 (= Manṭiq Aristiū III, ed. ‘A. Badawi [Cairo, 1952], 685,12-13).

In the Organon to ti ḍn einai was mostly translated as mā huwa. See, for example, An. Post. 83a21 (= Ṭahlīlat ūnīyya, in Manṭiq Aristiū II, 375,6); 83b5 (= 376,14); 84a26 (= 380,8); 97a25 (= 448,5) and 97b2 (= 449,4); 102a32-33 (= 476,12); 103b21.30.34 (= 482,12.15); 120b21 (= 552,15); 122a5-6.12-19.21.32.36 (= 557,18, 558,6-11.13 and 559,4.8.9.10.11 bis); 128a14.19 (= 581,15 and 582,1) and 148a1 (= 656,8). It is also translated as mā huwa al-·ay’: An. Post. 79a25-27.29 (= Ṭahlīlat ūnīyya, 354,2.4.5) and Top. 101b22 (= Ṭūbīka, 474,1); and as mā al-·ay’: An. Post. 82b37 (= Ṭahlīlat ūnīyya, 373,15) and Top. 101b21 (= Ṭūbīka, 473,17); Top. 103b24.26 (= Ṭūbīka, 482,8.9) and 148a1 (= 656,7). In the Metaphysics, to ti ḍn einai was translated as mā huwa at 994b17 (= Mā ba’da al-τabi’a I, 34,8) and 993a18 (= I, 161,13); as mā hiya and mā al-·ay’ at 1016a33-34 (= II, 536,5-6); as mā huwa al-·ay’ at 994a11 (= I, 17,3); as mā anniyat al-·ay’ at 1024b29 (= II, 685,1); and as mā kaynūnat al-·ay’ at 1013b22 (= II, 487,14). Mostly, however, to ti ḍn einai in the Metaphysics was translated as mā huwa bi al-anniyat: at 1025b29-29 (= II 705,8); 1030a6 (= II 795,10); 1030a17 (= II 798,6); 1030a29 (= II 802,6); 1031a9-10 (= II 818,10); 1031a18 (= II 821,16); 1031b30 (= II 831,7); 1032b7 (= II 860,15-16); 1035b16 (= II 903,8); 1037a21 (= II 936,8-9); 1037a33-b1 (= II 939,15); 1044a36 (= II 1074,1); 1045b3 (= II 1096,13); and 1075a2 (= II 1693,1).
appears at first glance to come down on the side of the Mu'tazilites on the issue of whether or not thing was a more overarching category than existent, but closer examination reveals that his view is more nuanced. Farabi first establishes that his definition of mawğūd as "that which, outside the soul, is set apart by some essence, be it conceived of or not" (mā huwa munḥāzun bi-māḥiyyatin mā ḥāriqa al-naṣīf tuṣuṭuwwirat aw lam tuṭaṣawwar), is broader and hence more basic than the other definitions of mawğūd he suggests. Farabi defines šay', on the other hand, as "all that possesses some essence, in whichever way, be it outside the soul or conceived of in any sense whatsoever, divided up or undivided" (kullu mā lahu māḥiyyatun mā kayfa kāna ḥāriqa al-naṣīf aw kāna mutaṣawwaran 'alā ayyi ḡiḥatin kāna munqasimatan aw ḡayra munqasimatin). Thus defined, mawğūd is not as broadly applicable as šay', because šay' covers essences both outside and inside the mind, whereas mawğūd covers merely those outside the mind. In this sense Farabi appears to be echoing the Mu'tazilite position.

On the other hand, Farabi again follows the Arabic translations of the Organon and argues that mawğūd has one technical use that šay' does not: as the copula (rābiṭ) that connects the subject (here the logical term al-mawḍū' as opposed to the grammatical term al-mubtada') to the predicate (al-maḥmūl as opposed to al-ḥabar) in categorical affirmative propositions (al-aqāwil al-ḡazima al-mūgība). For example, Farabi says, when we wish to state that Zayd is a just person, it might make sense to say, literally, "Zayd is found to be a just person" (Zaydun mawğūdun 'ādilan), while it makes no sense to say "Zayd is thing a just person" (Zaydun šay'un 'ādilan). In this technical, copulative sense, mawğūd is more broadly applicable than šay', although Farabi stresses that the first, non-copulative sense of mawğūd is more basic. As he did with māḥiyya, Farabi has tried to incorporate an Aristotelian notion – here the copulative or predicative sense of to einai, "to be" – into the kalām problematic of šay' v. mawğūd. To sum up Farabi's position, then, šay'
is more broadly applicable than mawğūd in the first, more basic sense, yet less broadly applicable than mawğūd in the second, more technical sense.

The kalām discussions of things and existents and Fārābī’s efforts to Aristotelianize them provide the backdrop for an important discussion in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 of Avicenna’s Kitāb al-šifā’, where Avicenna seems to be making a distinction between essence and existence.\(^\text{16}\) In Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 Avicenna attempts to make the following points. First (29,5-31,2), he argues that thing and existent are primitive, basic and immediately apprehensible concepts. Because there are no terms more broadly applicable than thing and existent, they are indefinable, in the Aristotelian sense of definition at least; that is, there is no genus under which they can be subsumed as species. Second (31,2-32,3), Avicenna shows that thing and existent have different meanings. “Thing” is associated with terms such as “inner reality” (ḥaqiqa) and “whatness” (māhiyya), and appears to refer to an entity viewed in light of essence; “existent” is associated with terms such as “affirmed” (muṭbat) and “realized” (muḥaṣṣal), and appears to refer to an entity viewed in light of existence. Third (32,3-34,14), Avicenna explains that although they have different meanings, thing and existent are co-implied (mutalāzimāni). In this context, Avicenna’s purpose in describing šay’ and mawğūd as co-implied seems to be to convey the idea that although they have different meanings, neither šay’ nor mawğūd is more broadly applicable than the other; the domains of objects to which each term refers fully overlap. The reflexivity inherent in the sixth-form term talāzum has important connotations as far as Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence is concerned. For at least in this context, Avicenna is saying that neither šay’ nor mawğūd is logically prior to the other. There is no hint here that being an existent is somehow subordinate to, or an accident of, being a thing.


huwiyyatin in some sense \textit{is} non-existent (einai mē on = fa-innahu laysa huwiyyatan). Generally speaking, \textit{to on} in the \textit{Metaphysics} was translated into Arabic not as al-mawğūd but as al-huwiyya (“being”). Fārābī’s analysis is discussed by Jolivet, “Origines,” 17; S. Abed, Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Al-Fārābī (Albany, N.Y., 1991), 111-17; F. Zimmermann, Al-Fārābī’s Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione (London, 1981), xliv-xlv, lx-lxii and cxxx-cxxxiv; and F. Shehadi, \textit{Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy} (Delmar, N.Y., 1982), 45-69.
To sum up, then, the debate in the tenth century came to turn on how things and existents relate to each other both extensionally (that is, whether or not the domain of things overlaps with the domain of existents) and intensionally (that is, whether or not thing and existent have the same meaning). Logically speaking, these were the options:

1) thing and existent are mutually exclusive both extensionally and intensionally: “things are never existents and existents are never things; to be a thing and to be an existent have different meanings” (no one from this period seems to have held this view);

2) thing is subsumed extensionally but not intensionally under existent: “things are always existents but existents are not always things; to be a thing and to be an existent have different meanings” (no one from this period seems to have held this view);

3a) existent is subsumed extensionally but not intensionally under thing: “existents are always things but things are not always existents; to be a thing and to be an existent have different meanings” (most Muʿtazilites);

3b) existent is subsumed extensionally but not intensionally under thing*: “existents are always things but things are not always existents (*although mawṣūd can be used as a copula whereas šay‘ cannot); to be a thing and to be an existent have different meanings” (Fārābī);

4a) thing and existent are identical both extensionally and intensionally: “things are always existents, and existents are always things; to be a thing and to be an existent have the same meaning” (Ašʿarites, Maturidites and most Shiʿites);

4b) thing and existent are identical extensionally but different intensionally: “things are always existents, and existents are always things; to be a thing and to be an existent have different meanings” (Avicenna).

The debt Avicenna owes to the kalām discussions of things and existents seems self-evident, given the similarity of his position to that of the Ašʿarites, Maturidites and most Shiʿites (from now on I will use the abbreviation AMS for this position). In this regard Jolivet is surely correct. But more precisely, Avicenna’s position in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 seems to be a compromise between AMS on the one hand, and the Muʿtazilites’ and Fārābī’s position on the other. For although Avicenna advocates the extensional identity of thing and existent just as AMS does,
he also advocates the intensional difference between thing and existent just as the Mu'tazilites and Fārābī do.

Nevertheless, Jolivet reckons that the influence of the mutakallimūn was greater than that of the Aristotelian philosophers because no Greek antecedent can be found for šay' (pragma is the possibility Jolivet explores and rejects), in contrast to mawğūd, whose roots lie in the Greek term to on (and similarly ta onta for mawğūdat, and to einaī for wuğūd).  

Although Jolivet is correct in asserting that to on is the Greek equivalent of mawğūd, and that pragma is not the Greek equivalent of šay', the fact remains that a Greek antecedent for šay' does exist: ti (“something”). In fact, the question of the ontological status of the non-existent – to mé on – and its relation to the something – to ti – has an ancient pedigree. The problem originates with Parmenides, is discussed at length by Plato in the Sophist, is analyzed by Aristotle in the Metaphysics and the Physics, and emerges as a coherent ontology among the Stoics, who – like the Mu'tazilites and Fārābī – put “something” (ti) at the top of their ontological pyramid, above even “existent” (to on).


It would be tempting to assert a Stoic link here, but tracing Stoic influence on Arabic kalām and falsafa has always been a tricky business; many scholars have tried, with varying degrees of success. Less uncertain is the influence Stoicism had on the Greek Aristotle-commentators, whom the Arabic philosophers read carefully. For example, in his commentary on Book 4, Chapter 1 of Aristotle’s Topics, Alexander of Aphrodisias criticizes the Stoics for elevating “something” above “existent”:

Here is a way you can demonstrate how wrong the Stoics are in holding that “something” is the genus under which “existent” is subsumed: if it is a something, it will clearly be an existent as well; and if it is an existent it will be definable as existent. Now they wriggle out of this dilemma by holding that “existent” is said of bodies alone, and on this basis they speak about “something” being a higher genus than it, given that it [“something”] is predicable of incorporeal as well as corporeal entities.

Now any attempt to use this particular passage as evidence of a direct filiation between Stoic and Mu‘tazilite ontology will be frustrated by the fact that only Alexander’s comments on part of Book 1 and Books 5-8 of the Topics survive, at least according to Ibn al-Nadim. But elsewhere in Alexander’s commentary on the Topics, as well as in Simplicius’ commentary on the Categories, the Stoic ontology is articulated, although less starkly than in the in Top. 4.1 passage just translated. To sum up: Jolivet is correct in asserting that the kalām discussions of things and existents were likely to have been the most important (and certainly the most immediate) influences on Avicenna, but wrong in reasoning that this was because ancient philosophers had no such discussions.


19 e.g. F. Jadaane, L’influence du stoïcisme sur la pensée musulmane (Beirut, 1968), 43-98; J. van Ess, Die Erkenntnislehre des ‘Aḍudaddin al-Iṣṭakhrī (Wiesbaden, 1966), 191-200; Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kalam, 355-72; S. Pines, Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre (Berlin, 1936), 116-17; these are reviewed briefly by Gutas in his “Pre-Plotinian philosophy in Arabic (other than Platonism and Aristotelianism): a review of the sources,” Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt, II.36.7 (Berlin, 1994), 4939-73, at 4959-62.

20 Alexander, in Top. 4.1 (ad 121a10), CAG II, 301,19-25.


22 Alexander in Top. 42,37 and 359,12-16; Simplicius in Cat., CAG VIII, 105,7-20; 209,10; 222,30-33; 333,31.
Having briefly dealt with the question of Greek antecedents, I can focus on the question of how exactly the kalām discussions of things and existents influenced Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence. For while it is easy enough to imagine his making the move from mawġūd to wuġūd, less obvious is Avicenna’s progression from šay’ to māhiyya, the term he uses most consistently to describe essence when contrasting it with existence. To some extent Avicenna’s progression from šay’ to māhiyya can be reconstructed by analyzing the Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 passage devoted to showing how thing and existent have different meanings. In that passage Avicenna starts by asserting that every thing (šay’) or entity (amr) has an inner reality (ḥaqiqa) by which it is what it is (31,5-6). This inner reality (e.g. triangularity) is sometimes called “existence that is specific” (al-wuġūd al-ḥāṣṣ); specific, that is, to one class of things (triangles) as opposed to another class of things (cats). Existence that is specific is distinct from the more general type of existence which Avicenna calls “affirmative existence” (al-wuġūd al-iṭbātī) (31,7-8). To predicate affirmative existence of an entity is to assert that the entity is, not what the entity is. To predicate existence that is specific, on the other hand, is to assert what the entity is, not that the entity is. Since existence that is specific is identical to inner reality, and inner reality is identical to whatness (māhiyya), it follows that existence that is specific is identical to whatness (31,10). And since existence that is specific is identical to whatness, and existence that is specific is distinct from affirmative existence, it follows that whatness is distinct from affirmative existence. In other words, essence is distinct from existence.23

A brief remark later on in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 (33,16-18) raises the intriguing possibility that šay’iyya, thingness, served to link Avicenna’s distinction between things and existents on the one hand and his distinction between essence and existence on the other:

According to people who hold this view [that what is predicated can be a non-existent, i.e. the Mu’tazilites], in and among all that is predicated and known are some entities [umūr] that, when non-existent, possess no thingness

23 Avicenna’s discussion of things and existents in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 is related to similar treatments in Aquinas’ work by I. Craemer-Ruegenberg, “‘Ens est quod primum cadit in intellectu’ – Avicenna und Thomas von Aquin,” in U. Tworuschka (ed.), Gottes ist der Orient - Gottes ist der Okzident (Köln, 1991), 133-42.
(šayʿiyya); let the person who is inclined to agree with that go back to whatever dogmatic formulae they babbled out unintelligibly, [formulae] which do not deserve any attention.

In this passage Avicenna is attacking those who maintain that there is a class of non-existent entities that possess no thingness, and hence are not things. A later commentator on the Ilāhiyyāt, Mullā Mahdī Naraqī (d. 1764), advises us that Avicenna’s target here was a group of Muʿtazilites who, in maintaining that some non-existents (those that are impossible, al-mustaḥilāt or al-muntaniʿāt) had no thingness and hence were not things, deviated from the classical doctrine of their school.24

Despite Avicenna’s use of the term šayʿiyya here, any attempt to prove that the term served to bridge the ninth- and tenth-century CE kalām discussions of things and existents on the one hand, and Avicenna’s discussions of essence and existence on the other, will face two difficult challenges. The first challenge is that šayʿiyya would play a bridging role more convincingly if that term had appeared often and in a wide variety of ninth- and tenth-century kalām texts. It does not. In fact, I have not seen a single instance of šayʿiyya where I most expected to find it: in a text written by a Muʿtazilite, a member of the school most infamous for affirming the thingness of the non-existent. Nor does šayʿiyya seem to appear in an Ašʿarite text until Ġuwaynī, that is, not until a generation after Avicenna’s death.25

24 Mullā Mahdī Naraqī, Šarḥ al-ilāhiyyāt min kitāb al-ṣifāʾ, ed. M. Muḥaqiq (Tehran, 1986), 265,2. M. Marmura (“Avicenna on primary concepts in the Metaphysics of his al-Shifāʾ,” in R. Savory and D. Agius (eds), Logos Islamikos: Studia islamica in honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens [Toronto, 1984], 219-39; revised slightly in his “Avicenna and the Kalām,” ZGAIW, 7 [1991/1992], 172-206) argues that what troubled Avicenna specifically was the Muʿtazilite Abū Hāšim’s and his followers’ application of their šayʾ/mawḡūd/maʿdūm paradigm to the problem of bodily resurrection. Also see D. Black’s discussion of the dilemmas that faced Avicenna in distinguishing between fictional entities such as phoenixes, which seem to have some kind of mental existence even though they never exist as concrete objects in the outside world, and impossibilities such as a square circle, which seem to have neither mental nor concrete existence: “Avicenna on the ontological and epistemic status of fictional beings,” Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale, 8 (1997): 425-53.

25 Strangely enough, Ġuwaynī devoted a long section of his Šāmil to reviewing the debate about things and existents, yet does not once use the term šayʿiyya there: al-Šāmil fi ʿusūl al-dīn, ed. ‘A.M. ‘Umar (Beirut, 1999), 23,18-33,24; but see his use of the term in other contexts, at 113,2.4; 161,25.26.27; and 169,6.17. Šahrastānī uses...
But šay‘iyya does make a few appearances in the tenth century. It turns up once (in a passage attributed to Ġa‘far al-Šādiq (d. 765) commenting on the credal formula šay‘ ī lā ka-
al-ašya‘, “[God is] a thing not like [other] things”) in the Kāfī of the Shi‘ite traditionist Ābū Ġa‘far al-Kulaynī (d. 940). It is only in the Kitāb al-tawḥīd of al-Māturīdī (d. 944) however, that šay‘iyya is also used consistently to describe and attack the doctrine of the Mu‘tazilites. Later in the tenth century, Māturīdī’s use of šay‘iyya in the context of anti-Mu‘tazilite polemics was echoed in the Šarḥ al-fiqh al-absāf li-Abī Ḥanīfa of the Ḥanafite scholar Abū al-Layṯ al-Samarqandī (d. 990).

Are these appearances of šay‘iyya the first uses of the term, or are they evidence of earlier Mu‘tazilite use? At this stage of research it is difficult to tell. With such a tiny proportion of what was written by ninth- and tenth-century mutakallimūn now available to us, assertions about the term’s history will inevitably suffer from tentativeness. But the fact that the term seems to be absent from the few Mu‘tazilite and Aš‘arite sources we do have from this pre-Avicennian period indicates that Māturīdī might well deserve the honor of being called Abū šay‘iyya. What is interesting here is that because Avicenna grew up outside Buḫārā – that is, in Transoxania, an area where the Samarqandī Ḥanafism of al-Māturīdī was strong – and because he was taught jurisprudence by a Ḥanafite scholar called Ismā‘īl al-Zāhid, Avicenna may well have come across the term šay‘iyya during his youthful fiqh studies, if not in Māturīdī’s Kitāb

šay‘iyya in several places: Kitāb nihāyat al-iqdām fi ‘ilm al-kalām, ed. A. Guillaume, no date, 33,20; 73,17; 150,7.8.10; and 151,2.7. For an argument that Šahrestānī is more properly described as an Ismā‘īli, rather than an Aš‘arī, see D. Steigerwald, La pensée philosophique et théologique de Shahrestānī (Québec, 1997). Gazālī himself mentions the Mu‘tazilite view without using šay‘iyya: Tahāfut al-falāsifa, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut, 1927), 358,8-11.

26 Abū Ġa‘far Muhammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, al-Uṣūl min al-kāfī, ed. ‘Ali Akbar al-Gaffārī (Tehran, 1961), 82,4-85,9 at 83,6-8. In Ibn Bābawayh’s slightly later collection of Īmām Shi‘ite sayings, šay‘iyya is also used in the context of affirming that God is a thing unlike other things, except this time in a passage attributed to Ġa‘far al-Šādiq’s son, Mūsā al-Kāzīm: Abū Ġa‘far Muhammad ibn Bābawayh al-Šādiq, Kitāb al-tawḥīd (Bombay (?), 1903), 94,9-95,1.


al-tawḥīd, then perhaps in Abū al-Layṭ al-Samarqandi’s commentary on Abū Ḥanifa’s al-Fiqh al-absaṭ. Even if Ismā’īl al-Zāhid himself was not a Māturīdite in kalām (Buḥārān Ḥanafīs tended to be less rationalistic and speculative in kalām than those in Samarqand, and in any case there were Ḥanafīs such as Ibn Fūrak who were Aš‘arī in kalām), it is perfectly possible that Ismā’īl could have used a simple commentary such as Abū al-Layṭ’s when teaching his young student the Ḥanafīte creed.29

Of course it is also perfectly possible that Avicenna came up with the term šay‘iyya all by himself. Others have remarked on Māturīdī’s predilection for abstract nouns ending in -iyya, an extreme example being his grafting of the Arabic -iyya (equivalent to the English “-ness,” or the Latinized “-ity”) onto the Persian hast (“be”) to form hastiyya (“being”).30 Māturīdī’s predilection for abstract nouns was a trait Avicenna certainly shared. But given the presence of the term šay‘iyya in a small number of tenth-century kalām texts as well as in Avicenna’s Ilāhiyyāt 1.5, there is a possibility – nothing more – that the term played a bridging role between the earlier kalām discussions of things and existents and Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence.

The second challenge to my hypothesis still remains to be met. For even if future research is able to establish a firmer link between kalām uses of the term šay‘iyya and Avicenna’s own use of it in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5, the fact remains that the concept of what it is to be a thing (of thingness, in other words) which Avicenna articulates in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5, appears to be inconsistent with his discussions of things elsewhere. More importantly, Avicenna’s concept of thingness in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 does not seem to mesh with his concept of māhiyya, or essence. Despite Avicenna’s clear assertion in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 that thing and exis-


30 Rudolph, al-Māturīdī, 212-13; compare al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-ḥurūf, 111,17-21.
tent are co-implied (mutalāzimāni) and extensionally identical, there are several discussions of essence and existence elsewhere in the Ilāhiyyāt and in other works from Avicenna’s middle period, which suggest that šay’ – and māhiyya, as we shall see – is at the very least logically prior to mawḡūd, and perhaps even a broader category than mawḡūd. If šay’ is logically prior to mawḡūd, then Avicenna’s assertions about the reciprocal nature of the co-implication (talāzum) between thing and existent – so clearly articulated in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 – will be undermined. Even more seriously, if šay’ is a broader category than mawḡūd, then their extensional identity will be repudiated.

The following are summaries of the relevant passages, including Ilāhiyyāt 1.5, in chronological order:

1) Madḥal 1.2: The essences of things (māhiyyāt al-ašyā’) are sometimes found in concrete objects in the outside world, and other times are conceived of in the mind. But essence has three aspects: as a concrete, external existent; as a mental, internal existent; and a third aspect, in which it is unrelated to either concrete or mental existence.31

2) Madḥal 1.12: Genera and species may be divided into those which are before a state of multiplicity (that is, those contained in the active intellect and the other celestial intellects), those which are in a state of multiplicity (that is, those contained individually in sublunary concrete existents), and those which are after a state of multiplicity (that is, those contained as abstracted universals in human intellects). Taken in itself a genus or a species is a thing. “Animal,” taken in itself, is an object (ma’nan), regardless of whether it is a concrete or a mental existent, or whether it is general or specific.32

3) Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 (discussed above): “Thing” and “existent” are primary, indefinable categories. Whatever is predicable of thing will also be predicable of existent, and whatever is predicable of existent will also be predicable of thing. Although they are co-implied, thing and existent have different meanings.

4) Ilāhiyyāt 5.1: A universal (kullū) such as “horseness,”


taken in and of itself (fi nafsihi) – that is, without considering whether it is one or many (lā wāḥid wa-lā kaẓīr), a concrete existent in the outside world or a mental existent inside the soul (lā mawḡūd fi al-ा yan wa-lā mawḡūd fi al-nafs), in potentiality or in actuality (lā bi-al-quwwa wa-lā bi-al-fi’il) – is a thing (šay‘).

5) Ilāhiyyāt 7.1: “One” (al-wāḥid) and “existent” (al-mawḡūd) are equally predicables of things (qad yatasāwiyāni fi al-ḥaml ‘alā al-ा yā’); all that may be characterized by “one” may also be characterized by “existent,” but the two terms do not have the same meaning as each other.

6) Naṣrat/Ilāhiyyāt 1.9: “One” is a necessary accident of things (min al-ا raḍ al-lāzima li-al-ा yā’). Essence is a thing (bal takūnu al-māhiyya šay’an), be it a man or a horse, an intellect or a soul; that thing is only subsequently characterized as being one or existent.

From these passages a discrepancy seems to emerge over the issue of what exactly is it to be a thing; over the question, that is, of thingness. The message from the Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 passage discussed above at length is that thing and existent are extensionally identical yet intensionally different. In other words, while thingness and existence have different meanings, neither term

33 Ilāhiyyāt 5.1, 196,6-13.
34 Ilāhiyyāt 7.1, 303,6-12. Avicenna’s assertion that mawḡūd and wāḥid are extensionally identical but intensionally different almost certainly derives from Aristotle’s discussions in Metaph. 4.2, 1003b22-1004a2 (contained in Tafsīr Mā ba’da al-tabi’a I, 310,1-311,4 and 316,9) where Aristotle discusses how “that which is” (to on = al-huwīyya) and “that which is one” (to hen = al-wāḥid) can be seen to be extensionally identical but intensionally different, in the sense that both are equally predicables of substance (ousia). See also “‘That which is one’ is said of [the same things] ‘that which is’ is said of” (to hen legetai hōsper kai to on = yuqāl al-wāḥid ka-mišī mā tuqāl al-huwīyya ayyān) at Metaph. 7.16, 1040b16-24 (= Tafsīr Mā ba’da al-tabi’a II, 999,14-1000,5); and “‘That which is’ and ‘that which is one’ are the predicates spoken most universally of everything” (to gar on kai to hen katholou katēgoreitai malista pantōn = fa-inna al-wāḥid wa-al-huwīyya maqūlāt kuliyya aḵar dālīka tuqāl ‘alā ğamī al-ा yā’) at Metaph. 10.2, 1053b16-21 (= Tafsīr Mā ba’da al-tabi’a III, 1268,11-1269,3).

35 Kitāb al-naṣrat, ed. M. Fakhry (Beirut, 1985), 245, 20-21. This passage is identical to Ḥikma ʿArūḍiyya, MS Uppsala OR. 364, 2v-10, but given how little we know about the Ḥikma ʿArūḍiyya text, and given the many correspondences between it and the Naṣrat, it is impossible to say if the Naṣrat passage is a copy of the very early Ḥikma ʿArūḍiyya passage, or if what purports to be the Ḥikma ʿArūḍiyya passage is merely a copy of the later Naṣrat. Gutas discusses the Naṣrat’s correspondence to Avicenna’s earliest works in Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, 87-93 and 112-14.
applies to any entity that the other does not apply to. Yet in *Ilāhiyyāt* 7.1 Avicenna implies that thing is a universally applicable subject of which one and existent may be predicated. In other words it is *one* and existent, not *thing* and existent, which are extensionally identical yet intensionally different. Thing therefore seems to be a category which is more basic, and hence logically prior, to the categories one and existent.

This logical priority is reinforced by Avicenna’s implication in *Ilāhiyyāt* 5.1 that properly speaking, thing should be elevated above considerations of existence. There Avicenna claims that a universal is a thing when taken in itself, that is, when it is separated from any consideration of the mode of its existence: one or many, concrete or mental, potential or actual. Not only is a universal taken in itself a thing, but – we are told in *Madḫal* 1.12 – a genus or a species taken in itself is a thing. Even more importantly, Avicenna says in the *Naḡāt* passage that an essence taken in itself is a thing, and that “one” – and, by implication, “existent” – is merely a necessary accident of essence taken in itself. Most starkly of all, Avicenna asserts in *Madḫal* 1.2 that an essence has a third aspect, unrelated to any type of existence whatsoever.

The clear message given in *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5 that thing and existent are co-implied, with neither being prior to the other, is therefore muffled by the many hints from the other passages that thing is logically prior to existent. More serious is the question of extension. For while all the passages are consistent in maintaining that thing and existent have different meanings, two in particular – *Naḡāt/Ilāhiyyāt* 1.9 and *Madḫal* 1.2 – imply that there is a separate category of things – essence taken in itself – to which existence does not apply. In these passages Avicenna seems to have forced himself into advocating the Muʿtazilite position that existent is subsumed extensionally but not intensionally under thing; that is, that existents are always things but things are not always existents. 36

36 Much ink has been spilled trying to determine how Avicenna meant this extra aspect of essence to be understood. Some maintain that it should be understood simply in the context of a thought experiment, in which *māhiyya* can be separated in a purely logical sense from its existence as a concrete individual in the outside world and from its existence as a universal concept in the mind. Others, citing remarks Avicenna makes in *Ilāhiyyāt* 5.2, believe that the passage provides evidence that Avicenna thought existence was attached to essence merely as an accident. Western interpreters in the Catholic tradition have generally understood Avicenna as implying the latter,
Is there any other evidence in Avicenna’s writings to help us understand his concept of thingness? Does that evidence allow us to reconcile Avicenna’s various positions on things and essences? These questions will be addressed in Parts 2 and 3.

PART 2: ŠAY’IYYA OR SABABIYYA?

To get a fuller picture of the subtle tension in Avicenna’s thought between things and essences we must look for other instances of šay’iyya in Avicenna’s writings. After all, the isolated instance of thingness in Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 – the only instance of šay’iyya that Jolivet cites – hardly constitutes a fully articulated concept in Avicenna’s thought. Where else, if anywhere, does šay’iyya appear in Avicenna’s works? It turns out that the Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 passage, the one that so clearly echoes the earlier Mu’tazilite discussions of things and existents, is not the only time when Avicenna uses the term šay’iyya.

Far more often than its lonely appearance there, where the mutakallimûn are hovering in the background, Avicenna uses šay’iyya in a cluster of discussions which have nothing to do with early kalâm debates and which are driven by a problem specific to Aristotelian philosophy: the relation between efficient and final causes. In Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 Avicenna writes:

(292,1) The subsequent objection [to the reality of final causation, viz., “How can the end be anything but posterior to the other causes?”] will be solved by knowing that the end may be taken to be a thing as well as taken to be an existent. Although a thing cannot be other than an existent, the difference between thing and existent is just like the difference between some entity and its concomitant (wa-al-farq bayna al-šay’ wa-al-mawqūd wa-in kāna al-šay’ là yakūn illā mawqūdana kā-al-farq bayna al-amr wa lāzimihī). You have

already come to know and to verify this. Consider, once again, the case of man: man has an inner reality, consisting of his definition and his essence, which is not conditioned upon [his] existence’s being particular or general, concrete or in the soul, or potential or actual.

(292,6) Each cause, insofar as it is that [particular] cause, has an inner reality and a thingness. In its thingness the final cause is the reason why the other causes actually exist as causes. In its existence the final cause is the effect of the other causes’ actually [existing] as causes. It is as if the thingness of the final cause were the cause of the cause of its [own] existence; conversely it is as if its existence were the effect of the effect of its [own] thingness. However its thingness does not become a cause unless it occurs as an image formed in the soul, or as something analogous to that. The only cause of the final cause in its thingness is another cause which is different from the cause toward which one thing sets [another] in motion, or toward which something is set in motion.

Know that something can be caused in its thingness, and caused in its existence. An example of what is caused in its thingness is twoness: contained in the definition of its being twoness is its being caused by oneness. What is caused in its existence is clear, not unknown.

Similarly, one thing might possess another thing that occurs as an existent in its thingness, as twoness possesses numberness; or else one thing might be additional to another thing that is added to its thingness, as wood and stone contain rectilinearity. Natural bodies are causes of the thingness of many forms and accidents (I mean of those [forms and accidents] which can only recur in them), as well as being causes of the existence of some of them [the forms and accidents] without [being a cause of] their [the forms’ and accidents’] thingness, as is sometimes thought to be the case in mathematics.

(293,4) It has thus been easy for you to understand [sic!] that the final cause, with regard to its thingness, is prior to the efficient and receptive causes, and similarly, prior to form insofar as form is a formal cause leading toward it [the final cause]. In addition, the final cause is prior to the other causes in its existence in the soul. As for [the final cause’s being prior to the other causes] in the agent’s soul, this is because it [the final cause] comes to exist first and then agency, seeking out a receptive patient, and the quality of the form come to be represented as images. As for [the final cause’s being prior to the other causes] in the souls of those other than the agent, one [cause] need not follow another in any kind of necessary order. Therefore, in terms of thingness and in terms of existence in the intellect, there is no cause prior to the final [cause]; instead, it is a cause of the rest of the causes’ becoming causes. However, the actual existence of the other causes as causes is [itself] a cause of its [the final cause’s] existence. The final cause is a cause not insofar as it is an existent, but insofar as it is a thing. In the sense that it is a cause, it is the cause of the causes, while in the other sense it is the effect of the causes.

(293,12) This is [so] when the final cause comes about in [the world of] generation; when, however, the final cause does not exist in [the world of] generation, but its existence is more sublime than [that of the world of] generation.
(as will be explained in its place), then none of the other causes is a cause of it [the final cause], nor are they in the case of the One which is Itself occurrence and existence. [In this case] therefore the final cause is uncaused by the rest of the causes not because it is a final cause but rather because it [already] possesses being. [But] even if it did not have being it would still be completely uncaused. When you consider its [the final cause’s] being a final cause, you will find it to be a cause of the rest of the causes’ being causes (viz., being an efficient cause and a receptive cause and a formal cause) but not of their being entities and existents in themselves. So what is essential to the final cause insofar as it is a final cause is being a cause of the rest of the causes, while what is accidental to it (insofar as it [the final cause] is understood to be [actually] occurring in the world of generation) is being an effect in the world of generation. It has thus been made clear to you how something may be cause as well as effect, given that it is [both] an agent and an end, this being one of the Natural Philosophers’ principles.37

Avicenna also mentions thingness in the same context in Naḡāt/ ʿIlāhiyyāt 1.11:

In terms of coming into existence (fi ʿuṣūl al-wuḡūd) the end is posterior to the effect, while it is prior to the rest of the causes in terms of thingness. It is clear that thingness is something other than existence in concrete reality (al-wuḡūd fi al-aʿyan). For an object [al-maʿnā] has an existence in concrete reality and an existence in the soul as well as something common [to both]: what is common [to both] is thingness. The final [cause] insofar as it is a thing is prior to the other causes and is the cause of the causes in terms of their being causes. Insofar as it is an existent in concrete reality its [the final cause] is posterior. When the efficient cause is not itself the final cause, the agent is posterior to the end in terms of thingness. This is because the other causes only become actual causes on account of the final.38

Before I try in Part 3 to explain what Avicenna means when he uses šayʾiyya in these passages, and to determine whether or not this helps us reconcile the apparent tension in his thought

37 ʿIlāhiyyāt, 292.6-294.5.
38 Naḡāt/ʿIlāhiyyāt 1.11, 248.8-15; šayʾiyya occurs on 248,9.10.11.14. As mentioned above, Gutas discusses the correspondence of the Naḡāt to the ʿIḥkma ʿArūḍiyya, Avicenna’s earliest summa, in his Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, 87-93 and 112-14. But unlike surrounding sections of the Naḡāt, the discussion of causes is not identical to the analogous section in the ʿIḥkma ʿArūḍiyya. In the earlier work, under the heading of al-mabdaʿ (“origin”), Avicenna devotes only a very brief section to the causes, in which he combines and summarizes Aristotle’s discussions in Metaph. 5.1 (on arkhē) and 5.2 (on aition). The efficient and final causes are called sababānī muṣāfārīɡānī (the two causes extrinsic to the effect), as opposed to the material and formal causes, which are called sababānī muqārinānī (the two causes intrinsic to the effect). But there is no mention of how the efficient and final causes relate to each other: ʿIḥkma ʿArūḍiyya, 4v16-5r5.
between thingness and essence, I must devote Part 2 to resolving a textual problem. The problem is that there are some indications that *sababiyya*, “causality,” and not *šay‘iyya*, “thingness,” was the word Avicenna used in the passages above. This is in spite of the overwhelming evidence provided by the manuscripts used to come up with the Cairo edition of the *Ilāhiyyāt*, which are unanimous in their reading of *šay‘iyya*.

I shall argue that the balance of evidence compels us to retain *šay‘iyya*.

The textual problem in the *Ilāhiyyāt* might never have come to light had it not been for the fact that the Latin translator Gundisallinus consistently rendered what appears as *šay‘iyya* in the *Ilāhiyyāt* 6.5 passage not as *realitas* or *entitas*, as one would have expected, but as *causalitas*.

For example, the *Ilāhiyyāt* 6.5 assertion that “Each cause, insofar as it is that [particular] cause, has an inner reality and a thingness,” and which reads in Arabic:

\[
\text{wa-kullu ʿillatin fa-innahā min ḥayṭu hiya tilka al-ʿillatu lahā ḥaqiqatun wa-šay‘iyyatun}
\]

was rendered into Latin as:

\[
\text{omnis autem causa, inquantum est ipsa causa, habet certitudine et causalitatem.}
\]

One explanation of this anomaly takes into account the fact that translating Avicenna’s philosophical works into Latin appears to have been a two-step process. A first translator – the Jewish émigré Ibn Dawūd, or Avendauth – would render the Arabic orally into the vernacular Spanish of twelfth-century Toledo; as he went along, a second translator – the Catholic cleric Gundissalinus – would render the vernacular Spanish into proper philosophical Latin.

Given this scenario, it is easy to imagine how the first

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40 Ed. S. van Riet, *Avicenna Latinus: Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina* V-X (Leiden, 1980), 337,88.90.91.92.94.96.97.00.1.3.5 and 338,11 (= *Ilāhiyyāt*, 292,6 bis.8.9 bis.10.12.14.16 and 293,2.3.4.8). On the translators, see ed. S. van Riet, *Avicenna Latinus: Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina I-IV* (Leiden, 1977), 123*.


translator might have tried faithfully to render šay‘iyya into the vernacular Spanish as cosità. The second translator might then have confused cosità, “thingness,” with causità, “causality,” terms which were probably pronounced much the same.43

It appears more likely, however, that tašḥif, a scribal misplacement of diacritical marks, was the cause of the divergence between the Arabic and Latin texts. The tašḥif in this case would consist of a scribe’s having mispointed šay‘iyya as sababiyya (“causality”), a far less mysterious term (I take it as obvious that šay‘iyya is the lectio difficilior here). Confusing the pairs of terms is perfectly understandable. For in a medieval Arabic manuscript, many of whose words would have been without diacritical marks, the skeleton (rasm) is just as easily pointed as as it is as ـسببية شيء. But given the lack of extant Arabic Ilāhiyyāt manuscripts from before 1284 (let alone from before the Arabic-Latin translation movement in the middle of the twelfth century), it is impossible to say whether a scribe mistranscribed šay‘iyya as sababiyya before the manuscript reached Avendauth’s hands and Avendauth then read the mispointed manuscript accurately; whether the manuscript reached Avendauth with these words pointed as šay‘iyya and he then “corrected” the pointing to sababiyya before translating it; or whether the manuscript reached Avendauth with these words unpointed and he then pointed them incorrectly as sababiyya before translating them.

In any case, what inclines me towards attributing the divergence between the Arabic and Latin texts to tašḥif and not to mishearing is that what appears as šay‘iyya in the Ilāhiyyāt 1.5 passage discussed earlier was also incorrectly rendered into Latin but this time as similitudinem, clearly the result of Avendauth’s (or an earlier scribe’s) mispointing (سببية شيء) rather than of Gundissalinus’ mishearing.44

43 This is the theory advanced by d’Alverny with regard to two instances where, as she understood it, cosà had been misunderstood as causa. These are mentioned (without references to the text) in M.T. d’Alverny, “L’introduction d’Avicenne en Occident,” Revue du Caire, 14/141 (1951): 130-9, at 133, and repeated in her “Les traductions latines d’Ibn Sina et leur diffusion au Moyen Age,” Millénaire d’Avicenne (Cairo, 1952), 59-69, at 60. The instances of mistranslation she probably had in mind are S. van Riet (ed.), Avicenna Latinus: Liber de anima seu sextus de naturalibus I-III, 192,20 (= Avicenna’s De Anima – Arabic Text, ed. F. Rahman [Oxford, 1959], 103,11) and 273,11 (= Avicenna’s De Anima – Arabic Text, 154,19).

44 Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina I-IV, 38,21 (= Ilāhiyyāt, 33,17). Jolivet seems not to have noticed this mistranslation; Fazlur Rahman mentions it in...
On the other hand, the specter of *tašīf* raises the chilling possibility that the original Arabic texts – the ones written or dictated by Avicenna himself – should in fact be read with *sababiyya*, not *šayʾiyya*. This concern is heightened by the fact that the oldest manuscript of the Latin translation of the *Ilāhiyyāt* dates from about 1240, while the oldest Arabic manuscript of the *Ilāhiyyāt* dates from 1284. However, I believe that the Latin translation does not, in itself, provide enough evidence to justify concluding that Avicenna wrote or dictated *sababiyya* rather than *šayʾiyya*. First of all, if *causalitas* were an indication that the original Arabic should read *sababiyya*, not *šayʾiyya*, then – by way of consistency – we would also expect to see the instances of *šayʾ* in the *Ilāhiyyāt* 6.5 passage to have been rendered into Latin as *causa*. This is not the case. The Arabic of the *Ilāhiyyāt* 6.5 passage immediately preceding the last quotation:

wa-amnā al-sakku alladhi yalihi fa-yanḥallu bi-an yuʾlama anna al-ġayata tufradu šayʾan wa-tufradu mawġudan

was rendered accurately into Latin as:

*Sed dubitatio quae sequitur hic solvitur hoc modo: scilicet, iam scis quod finis ponitur res et ponitur ens.*

Second, *sabab* would clearly have been out of place in almost every instance where *šayʾ* was mistranslated into Latin as *causa* rather than *res*, so we can be quite certain that in *Ilāhiyyāt* 6.5, at least, the original Arabic text did not read *sabab*.

his “Essence and existence in Avicenna,” 5 (fn. 2), as does M. Khodeiri, “Lexique arabo-latin de la Métaphysique du Shifʿa,” *MIDEO*, 6 (1959-61): 309-24 at 316. Van Riet reckons *similitudinem* derives from *šabiha*, although in my opinion *tašīh* is just as easy to impute from the skeleton. Elsewhere in the Latin translation of the *Ilāhiyyāt*, *bi-sababihi* was mistranslated as *comparisonis* – van Riet sees this as a result of misunderstanding it as *nisbatahu*: 188,80 (= *Ilāhiyyāt*, 166,4) – and *sababun* as *comparationes*: 493,96 (= *Ilāhiyyāt*, 413,12). This confusion also occurs in a passage of the *Fi al-nafs*, where *sabab* was translated into Latin as *comparatio* (ed. S. van Riet, *Avicenna Latinus: Liber de anima seu sextus de naturalibus IV-V* [Leiden, 1968], 20,79 = *Avicenna’s De Anima - Arabic Text*, 174,14).

45 *Liber de philosophia prima sive scientia divina I-IV*, 125*-138*.

46 *Liber de philosophia prima V-X*, 336,84-85 (= *Ilāhiyyāt*, 292,1).

47 In addition to the two instances alluded to by d’Alverny, *šayʾ* is mistranslated as *causa* elsewhere in the Latin version of the *Ilāhiyyāt*: *šayʾayni* becomes *duarum causarum* at 99,62 (= *Ilāhiyyāt*, 86,3), and *sāʾir al-ašāʾ* becomes *ceterae causae* at 394,84 (= *Ilāhiyyāt*, 341,3). In the Latin translation of al-Afāl wa al-infiʾālāt, the fourth book of the *Tabīʿiyyāt*, *šayʾ* was also occasionally mistranslated as *causa*: ed. S. van Riet, *Avicenna Latinus: Liber quartus naturalium de actionibus et passionibus*
All in all, the evidence provided by the Latin translation of the *Ilāhiyyāt* (and the parallels in the translation of the *Fi al-nafs*) allows us merely to hypothesize that *tašhīf* occurred in one or more of the manuscript lines that reached Andalusia. It is not conclusive with regard to the question of whether the original text should read *sababiyya* rather than *šayʿiyya*.

The Latin mistranslation of *šayʿiyya* in the *Ilāhiyyāt* – if it was in fact a mistranslation, as I believe – does seem to explain the absence of analogous concepts in discussions of final and efficient causes by later Latin philosophers, and the presence in those same discussions of *causalitas*.48 Medieval European

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48 The Latin Avicenna’s “theory” that the final cause is prior to the efficient in terms of causality is cited explicitly by Henry of Ghent (d. 1293), *Quodlibet XIII*, ed. J. Decorte (Leuven, 1985), 106,71-78; and by Duns Scotus (d. 1308), *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis I-IX*, Bk. 5, Quest. 1, Para. 51. Avicenna’s “theory” (or the gloss on it contained in the Latin translation of *Gazālī’s Maqāṣid* – see note 51) also seems to inform the opinions of Alexander of Hales (d. 1245), *In duodecim Aristotelis Metaphysicæ libros* (Venice, 1572): *in Metaph.* 1, 12rC (Avicenna’s *Ilāhiyyāt* 6 is mentioned at 12vE and 104rD), *in Metaph.* 3, 54r-D-55rD, and in *Metaph.* 5, 105r-A-D; of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), *Scriptum super libros Sententiarium* 1.8 (= E.M. Macierowski (ed. and trans.), *Thomas Aquinas’s Earliest Treatment of the Divine Essence* [Binghamton, N.Y., 1998], 52,5-6); *in Metaph.* 5 #775 and #782; *in Phys.* 2.3, #186; *Summa contra gentiles* 3.17.9; of Siger of Brabant (d. 1283), *Quaestiones in metaphysicam* 5.9 (Cambridge MS), ed. A. Maurer 3-28 (Louvain, 1983), 203-4; of John Buridan (d. 1358), *in Metaph.* 5, quaeest. 1, fols 26a-27a; of Albert of Saxony (d. 1390), *Expositio et quaestiones in Aristotelis Physicam ad Albertum de Saxonia attributae I*, ed. B. Patar (Louvain, 1999), 111,6-9; and of Francisco Suarez (d. 1617), *Disputationes metaphysicæ* Disp. XXVII, Sect. 2, paras 7-14, (= *Disputaciones metafisicas IV*, eds and trans. S. Rabade Romeo, S. Caballero Sanchez and A. Puigcerver Zanon [Madrid, 1962], 172-77). A. Maier (“Finalkausalität und Naturgesetz,” in her *Metaphysische Hintergründe der spätscholastischen Naturphilosophie* [Rome, 1955], 273-335 at 212-13 and 302-3) discusses Avicenna’s “theory” and relates it to Buridan’s; see also J. Biard, “Le système des causes dans la philosophie naturelle de Jean Buridan,” in A. Hasnawi et al. (eds), *Perspectives arabes et médiévales sur la tradition scientifique et philosophique grecque* (Paris, 1997), 491-504 at 494-5. This is not to say that Avicenna’s concept of thingness was lost forever to European thinkers. In 1907 Horten translated the instances of *šayʿiyya* in *Ilāhiyyāt* 6.5 correctly into German as *Dingheit* (M. Horten [trans.], *Die Metaphysik Avicennas* [Halle, 1907], 428-9), and the instances of *šayʿiyya* in the *Nağāt* passage were translated by Carame into Latin as *entitas*: N. Carame (trans.), *Avicennae metaphysices compendium* [Rome, 1926], 34,21-35,19 (*šayʿiyya* is rendered as *entitas* at 34,23 bis and 35,2.7).
thinkers would probably not have been struck to find Avicenna’s concept of thingness missing from their translations of the Ilāhiyyāt, since šay‘iyya does not appear in Gazālī’s summary of Islamic philosophy, the Maqāṣid al-falāsifa, through which – as Intentiones philosophorum – many Latins were introduced to Avicenna’s thought. The Maqāṣid was popular due to Gazālī’s fluency of style and liberality with examples, qualities which Avicenna painfully lacked. It is an irony of the history of medieval philosophy that during the period before Averroes’ Tahāfut al-tahāfut was translated into Latin – that is, before Gazālī was exposed as a philosophy-hater – “Algazel” was seen by some Europeans as Avicenna’s greatest disciple.49

The non-appearance of šay‘iyya in the Maqāṣid is, on the surface, evidence inclining us towards thinking that the Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 and Nağāt passages should be emended to read sababiyya. But šay‘iyya’s absence in the Maqāṣid has a more straightforward explanation. Gazālī based the Maqāṣid primarily (though not entirely) on Avicenna’s Persian summa, the Dānišnāma-yi ‘Alā‘ī, in which a Persianized equivalent of šay‘iyya does not make an appearance. Avicenna’s Persian statements in the Dānišnāma that:

The end is the cause of all the causes... So when there is an end, it is the cause of all the causes50

were rendered into Arabic by Gazālī in the Maqāṣid as:

Part of what is special about the final cause is the fact that the other causes become causes through it... So when the final exists among all the causes, it is the cause of the causes.51

49 e.g. Giles of Rome, introducing the section on al-Gazālī from his Errors of the Philosophers: Algzel autem, ut plurimum Avicennam sequens et eius abbreviator existens...: Giles of Rome Errores Philosophorum, ed. J. Koch (Milwaukee, 1944), 38,4-5.


51 Maqāṣid al-falāsifa, ed. S. Dunyā (Cairo, 1961), 190,10.13. Interestingly, the Intentiones philosophorum – the Latin translation of the Maqāṣid al falāsifa – contains several extra lines which are in neither the Dānišnāma nor the Arabic edition of the Maqāṣid; these include the assertion “Indeed, the final cause is last in terms of existence, yet first and foremost in terms of intention” (Causa vero finalis est ultima in esse, et est prima et precedens in intencione = Algazel’s Metaphysics, ed. J. Muckle [Toronto, 1933], 38,5-6). My guess is that the extra line is a gloss by Avendauth or Gundissalinus, given their intimate involvement in translating both Gazālī’s Maqāṣid and Avicenna’s Ilāhiyyāt into Latin. S. Stern describes how this precept was applied to the arrangement of topics in philosophy books, in his “The first in thought is the last in action’: The history of a saying attributed to Aristotle,” Journal of Semitic Studies, 7/2 (1962): 234-52.
Since Ġazālī did not allow the straw-man philosopher of the Maqāṣid to apply the concept of šay‘iyya to the question of how efficient and final causes relate to each other, he probably felt no need to criticize thingness in the polemical Tahāfut al-falāsifa. And perhaps as a consequence of šay‘iyya’s absence in the Tahāfut al-falāsifa, Averroes may have felt no need to raise the topic in the Tahāfut at-tahāfut. Nor is Avicenna’s distinction between thingness and existence cited by Averroes in the latter’s long commentaries on any of the most canonical Aristotelian discussions of the four causes, Physics 2.3 and 2.7 and Metaphysics 5.1 and 5.2. Therefore, šay‘iyya’s absence from Ġazālī’s (and hence Averroes’) discussions of efficient and final causes does not by itself constitute evidence in favor of either reading.

Some evidence that appears to favor sababīyya may be found in the writings of two other thinkers trained in the Aš‘arite theological tradition. The Aš‘arite mutakallimūn al-Šahrastānī and Fāhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wrote extensively about Avicenna’s metaphysics, among other topics. If šay‘iyya were to appear in one of their summaries or critiques of Avicenna’s discussions of causality, it might help confirm its inclusion in the Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 and Naṭāt passages. The opposite seems at first glance to be the case. One major piece of evidence tempting us to reject šay‘iyya in favor of sababīyya in the Naṭāt is the fact that in Šahrastānī’s doxography, the Kitāb al-milal wa al-nihal, Šahrastānī paraphrases the Naṭāt passage on final and efficient causes but appears to read sababīyya instead of šay‘iyya. According to the editor’s critical apparatus, however, most of the Milal manuscripts read šay‘iyya. The Milal’s importance as a piece of evidence one way or the other is therefore limited.

More alarming is the evidence pointed to by Rāzī. Rāzī himself wrote a very important commentary on as well as a shorter summary of Avicenna’s Kitāb al-išārāt wa al-tanbihāt, a late work of Avicenna that greatly influenced subsequent Islamic philosophy. In the Išārāt discussions of final and efficient causes šay‘iyya does not make an appearance. Instead, Avicenna uses māhiyya – not šay‘iyya – in the passage from the Išārāt’s

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52 Averroes in Phys. 2.3 and 2.7 (= Aristotelis opera cum Averois commentariis IV [Venice, 1562-1574], 59D-63K) and Averroes in Metaph. 5.1 and 5.2 (= Tafsīr Mā ba‘da al-tabī‘a II, ed. M. Bougyes [Beirut, 1942], 475,1-481,8; 483,7-487,8; 490,1-497,6).

53 Kitāb al-milal wa al-nihal II, ed. M. Badrān (Cairo, no date), 1092,6-1093,4.

54 In Part 3 I briefly discuss Michot’s objections to giving the Išārāt a late date.
metaphysics section (Namaṭ 4: Fi al-wuğūd wa-‘ilalihi) which parallels the Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 and Nağāt passages, as well as the term ‘illiyya (causality):

Something may be caused with reference to its essence and its inner reality, and it may be caused in terms of its existence... The final... is the efficient cause of the causality [‘illiyya] of the efficient cause.55

In another passage from Išārāt 4, Avicenna says:

The final cause – that on account of which the thing is – is a cause, through its essence [bi-māhiyyatihi] and its [being an] object (wa-ma’nāhu), of the causality [‘illiyya] of the efficient cause, while it is an effect of it in its existence. The efficient cause is a cause of its [the end’s] existence if it is one of the ends that actually come into being, but it [the efficient cause] is not a cause of its [the end’s] causality nor of its [being an] object.56

In his summary of the Išārāt, entitled Lubāb al-išārāt, Rāzī has this to say about the Išārāt passages:

How clever the Shaykh was to say that the final cause is an efficient cause of the causality [‘illiyya] of the efficient cause. 57

Now to my mind Avicenna’s use of ‘illiyya in the Išārāt passages devoted to efficient and final causality is simply evidence of what appears to be an almost universal preference for ‘illiyya over sababiyya in his works.58 But a counterargument might run like this. Given šay‘iyya’s absence in the Išārāt passages, and given instances elsewhere in Avicenna’s works where he uses ‘illiyya to describe priority in causality, we would be perfectly justified in emending the Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 and Nağāt passages to read sababiyya instead of šay‘iyya.59 In other words, Avicenna sometimes uses

56 Kitāb al-išārāt wa al-tanbihāt, 140,6-9.
57 Kitāb lubāb al-išārāt, ed. ‘A.S. ‘Atiyah (Cairo, 1936), 80,4-5. Rāzī echoes this in his fully fledged commentary, Šarḥ al-išārāt (= Šarḥay al-išārāt, no ed. [Qum, 1983 or 1984], 193,36-194,20) and in his Mabāḥit mašriqiyya (al-Mabāḥit al-mašriqiyya 1, ed. M. al-Bağdādī [Beirut, 1990], 661,21-662,8).
58 e.g. Ilāhiyyāt 16,3; 166,12; 169,10 bis; and 266,11. The only instance of sababiyya I have come across in Avicenna’s works is in his ‘Uyūn al-hikma (= Avicennae Fontes sapientiae, ed. ‘A. Badawi [Cairo, 1954], 52,8). According to the editor’s apparatus, however, the manuscripts contain many variant readings of sababiyya, and in any case, the term is not applied there specifically to the final cause but to the substrate (mawḍū‘), end and agent collectively.
‘illiyya to describe priority in causality, and other times (e.g. in the Ilahiyyat 6.5 and Naqat passages) uses sababiyya to describe priority in causality; say’iyya need not come into the picture at all.

As attractive as this counterargument might appear, I believe it suffers from flaws graver than those of my own argument. First of all, when Avicenna talks about priority in ‘illiyya it is clear from the contexts in which the term appears that he is referring to the priority enjoyed by any cause – be it formal, material, final or efficient – to its effect. As far as I know, Avicenna nowhere says that the final cause in particular enjoys priority in ‘illiyya to the efficient cause. Second, Avicenna’s assertion in the Isarât that the final cause is a cause through its essence (bi-mahiyyatih) of the causality of the efficient cause (li-illiyyat al-illa al-fâ’iliyya) is perfectly reconcilable with his assertions in Ilahiyyat 6.5 that the final cause is both a cause through its own thingness and of the efficient cause’s thingness. As for the first prepositional phrase, the Isarât passages are meant to show that the final cause’s priority derives from its essence; and essence, as I have shown in Part 1, is conceptually very similar, though apparently not identical, to thingness. Because mahiyya is much closer in meaning to say’iyya than it is to sababiyya, the Isarât passages can just as easily be understood as providing evidence in favor of, rather than against, retaining say’iyya in the Naqat and Ilahiyyat 6.5 passages. As for the second prepositional phrase, the apparent discrepancy between the final cause’s being the cause of the efficient cause’s say’iyya or of its ‘illiyya, is solved by recognizing the simple fact that a cause’s say’iyya is precisely its ‘illiyya.

My confidence in say’iyya is strengthened by turning from the evidence in later Asharisim to that in later Shi‘ite Avicennism. For example, in Tusi’s commentary on the Isarât passages on final and efficient causes, he follows Avicenna’s lead and uses mahiyya as well as ‘illiyya:

The essence of the end and its [being an] object – I mean its being some thing or other (kawnahâ say’an mû) – is different from its existence... [The final cause’s] causality (‘illiyyatuh) consists of the fact that it makes the agent an actual agent and is thus a cause of the agency of the agent. The agent is a cause of the fact that that essence [of the final cause] becomes an existent. Thus the essence of the end is a cause of the cause of its existence not in an absolute sense, but in a certain respect, so no circularity need be implied by this.60

60 Tusi, Sharh al-isarât, 193,31-194,6. Compare similar uses of mahiyya by Avicenna’s pupil Bahmanyar ibn al-Marzuban (al-Tahsil, ed. M. Mutahhari [Tehran,
It seems clear from his gloss on māhiyya and maʿnā – that they refer to the end’s being some thing or other – that Ṭūṣī had read the Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 and Naḡāt passages carefully and was borrowing from them to flesh out the much terser Iṣārāt passage. For it is the distinction between essence and existence, not one between causality and existence, that Ṭūṣī (rightly) sees as underlying Avicenna’s distinction between the final cause’s causality from the efficient cause’s causality.

Like Ṭūṣī, Mullā Ṣadrā – in his commentary on the Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 passage – seems aware of the Iṣārāt passage when he pairs šayʿiyya with māhiyya, and uses ‘illiyya:

Therefore the final cause, through its essence and its thingness, is a cause of the causality of the rest of the causes [liʿilliyya sāʿir al-ʾilāl].

Even in his own philosophical treatises Mullā Ṣadrā occasionally retains šayʿiyya. In the Kitāb al-asfār, for example, he says:

Although with respect to thingness (šayʿiyya) the end is prior to the act, it follows nonetheless that with respect to existence it is posterior to the act and subsequent to it (mutarattiba ʿalayhā).

To summarize Part 2, then, pieces of evidence from the later Latin and Ašʿarite traditions tempt us to reject šayʿiyya and replace it with sababiyya. Nevertheless, I feel the burden of proof still lies with anyone who would advocate such an emendation, in view of the following factors: the apparent unanimity of the extant Naḡāt and Ilāhiyyāt manuscripts in reading šayʿiyya; the inconsistent and scattered mistranslations of sabab, šayʿ and taṣbīḥ in the Latin translations of the Ilāhiyyāt and the Fī al-nafs, which indicate taṣḥīf in the Latin translators’ Arabic manuscripts but not necessarily in the originals those manuscripts were derived from; Avicenna’s use of māhiyya – a term that is far closer in meaning to šayʿiyya than sababiyya – in the parallel Iṣārāt passages; Avicenna’s apparent preference for ‘illiyya over sababiyya when discussing causality;

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1997), 546,1-9), as well as Sabzawārī (d. 1878) (Ṣaḥḥ ʿfur al-farāʾid (also known as Ṣaḥḥ-i manẓūmah), ed. M. Muḥaqiq and T. Izutsu [Tehran, 1969], 161,11-12).


šay‘iyya’s appearance in Avicenna’s Ta‘liqāt and Mubāḥatāt, as we shall see in Part 3; Mullā Šadrā’s equation of šay‘iyya and māhiyya; and finally the principle of lectio difficilior, which clearly favors thingness over causality.

**PART 3: FROM PRIORITY IN ŠAY‘IYYA TO PRIORITY IN MĀHIYYA**

Now that I have argued in favor of retaining thingness in Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 and Naḡāt/Ḥikma Ilāhiyya 1.11, albeit with a few qualms, I must try to explain what exactly the term means in the context of Avicenna’s discussion of the relation between efficient and final causes. Once this is done it will be easier to determine how these discussions contribute to our understanding of Avicenna’s concepts of thingness and essence, and of his progression from the kalām problematic of šay‘ v. mawḡūd to his own problematic of māhiyya v. wuḡūd.

I think that when Avicenna asserts in Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 that the final cause is prior in its šay‘iyya to the efficient cause, he is using the term in one of the two early kalām senses of thing: the notion that a thing (for example, the Day of Resurrection, or my great-great-granddaughter) can subsist mentally in God’s – or anyone’s – mind, before it exists in the real world. Here is an example of how thingness thus conceived works in final causation. I am thirsty and a bottle of soda is in the refrigerator. I want to quench my thirst by drinking that bottle of soda. Quenching my thirst exists in my mind as a final cause. My motion to the refrigerator – the efficient cause of my quenching my thirst – then comes into concrete existence in the outside world. But the quenching existed first in my mind – as a thing – before it existed concretely in the outside world. In this sense the final cause is prior in its thingness (prior as a thing, that is) to the efficient cause. This is why Avicenna asserts in Ilāhiyyāt 6.5 that “its [i.e. the final cause’s] thingness does not become a cause unless it occurs as an image formed in the soul” (292,9) and “In terms of thingness and in terms of existence in the intellect, there is no cause prior to the final cause” (293,8-9). Avicenna’s assertions are echoed in the Ta‘liqāt:

The end is prior in its thingness to all the causes and posterior in the existence it derives from them. The end which is absolutely non-existent (al-
āya al-ma’dūma ‘alā al-iṭlāq) is not a cause. Instead, it must exist in the mind of the agent in order to perform its action.\textsuperscript{63}

When šay‘iyya is used in this way, as the basis for the priority enjoyed by things which are in the mind but which have not yet come into being in the outside world, it helps Avicenna flesh out an Aristotelian assertion: that the efficient and final causes can be seen to be causes of each other. In Physics 2.3 Aristotle briefly discusses the reciprocity between efficient and final causes:

Sometimes things are causes one of the other (\textit{esti de tina kai allēlōn aitia = wa-qaḍ takinu āṣyā‘u ba‘duḥā sababun li-ba‘diḥā}). For example, hard work is the cause of the body’s well-being and the body’s well-being is the cause of hard work, though not in an identical way (\textit{all‘ ou ton auton tropon = ġayra anna dālīka laysa min waḡhīn wāḥidīn}); the body’s well-being is a cause in that it is an intended end, while hard work is a cause in that it is the origin of motion.\textsuperscript{64}

The challenge facing Avicenna here was to uphold Aristotle’s relatively straightforward idea – that the efficient can be seen as the cause of the final and the final can be seen as the cause of the efficient – without falling into the trap of circularity. For if the final cause is \textit{simply} the cause of the efficient cause, and the efficient is \textit{simply} the cause of the final, each will be the cause of the cause of itself, and circularity will result. Avicenna had to find some way defend Aristotle’s assertion by providing a metaphysical basis for the distinction between the ways in which the final cause and the efficient cause operate.

This is where the kalām distinction between šay‘ and mawğūd came in handy. Understood as a thing, the final cause can have a šay‘iyya in the mind before it comes into existence concretely in the outside world. In terms of its being a šay‘ in the mind – in terms of its šay‘iyya, that is – the final cause can be seen to be the cause of the efficient cause. On the other hand, the efficient cause comes into concrete existence in the outside world before the final cause comes into concrete existence in the outside world. My motion to the refrigerator exists concretely before my quenching exists concretely. By distinguishing between the final

\textsuperscript{63} Ed. ‘A. Badawi, \textit{al-Ta’liqāt} (Cairo, 1973), 128,17-19; also see 158,14.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Phys}. 2.3, 195a9-12 (= \textit{Aristiṭālis: al-Ṭabi’a I}, ed. ‘A. Badawi [Cairo, 1964], 103,8-13). This is echoed in \textit{Metaph}. 5.2, 1013b9-12 (= \textit{Mā ba‘da al-Ṭabi’a II}, 486,9-10). In \textit{Metaph}. 1.3, 983a32, Aristotle asserts that the final cause is the “opposite” (\textit{antikeimenē}) of the efficient.
cause’s priority as thing and the efficient cause’s priority as concrete existent, Avicenna has managed to wriggle out of the hole of circularity.

But while Avicenna’s analysis in Ilahiyyat 6.5 helps him flesh out Aristotle’s assertion about the reciprocity between efficient and final causes, it raises two serious problems. The first is this: Let us assume, as Avicenna says, that all final causes are prior in their thingness to the efficient causes with which they are paired. It follows that nothing without priority in thingness will be a final cause; in other words, being prior in thingness will be a necessary condition of being a final cause. But this description of how the final cause works will exclude all natural phenomena from the domain of entities that occur for a final cause. This is because natural things – a tree, or a rock – possess no mind or consciousness in which the say’iyya of an intended end can subsist before it exists in the outside world as a concrete existent. Thus natural processes – a tree’s growth, or a rock’s fall to the ground – will not operate according to final causation, and final causation will be restricted to intentional acts.65

Avicenna appears to be aware of the problematic implications of using say’iyya as the basis on which the priority of the final cause rests when he appeals – again in his Ta’liqat – to another Aristotelian assertion: that form and end are often identical, particularly in natural phenomena.66 In other words, simply completing the natural process by which a form inheres in a properly disposed matter can itself be regarded as a final cause, with the result that there is no need to appeal to intentionality or consciousness:

The form is sometimes the same as the end, as in the case of health: it is a form and it is the same as the end. The ends of natural entities are the same as the existence of the form in the matter, because an individual nature will move only in order for a form to inhere in a matter.67

65 For an example of this line of argument see Rāzī, Ṣarḥ al-išārāt, 194,1-6.
66 Phys. 2.7, 198a25 (= Ṭabi’a 137,20-138,1) and 198b3 (= Ṭabi’a 140,12-13); Metaph. 5.24, 1023a34 (= Tafsir mâ ba’da al-ṭabi’a II 655,9-10) and 8.4, 1044a36-b1 (= Tafsir mâ ba’da al-ṭabi’a II 1074,1-2); and GC 1.7, 324b13-18. Following Aristotle and his commentators, Avicenna uses the notion of perfection (entelekheia = kamāl and tamām) to link the intrinsic causality of the form and the extrinsic causality of the end; on this see my “Avicenna on perfection and the perfect,” in R. Wisnovsky (ed.), Aspects of Avicenna, Princeton Papers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, forthcoming.
67 Al-Ta’liqat, 128,17-25.
But why has Avicenna not felt free to restrict the final cause to intentional action and be done with it? Apart from violating a fundamental Aristotelian belief in natural teleology, restricting the final cause’s causality to intentional action would also undermine almost universal Peripatetic assertions of the priority of the science of final causality. Aristotle is clear in holding that knowledge of the final cause is superior to that of the other causes. Following him, Avicenna not only says that knowledge of the final cause is the most excellent part of metaphysics (al-ḥikma), but implies that teleology can be seen as its sum and substance.

What is more, if final causation were restricted to intentional acts, Avicenna would face a second problem: that of unrealized ends. In intentional acts a final cause need not come into concrete existence for its effect to come into concrete existence. Let us say, for example, that unbeknown to me my son has drunk the bottle of soda in the refrigerator. My motion to the refrigerator will come into concrete existence even if the bottle of soda is not there, that is, despite the fact that my quenching will fail to come into concrete existence. In Mubāḥaṭa 5 Avicenna seems to be grappling with this problem:

If it [the existence of the effect] were to issue as a result of the thingness of something else whose existence is conceived, it [what was conceived] would be a cause whether or not it existed [in the outside world]; yet a thing’s existence will not be causally dependent upon that whose non-existence and whose existence is all the same to it. As long as the cause of existence does not exist, its effect will not exist. Were something to exist regardless of whether some other thing existed or not, [the latter] would have no effect in its existence other than straightforward simultaneity [al-ma‘īyya al-sādīqa]; but causality is more than simultaneity, even though it goes hand in hand with simultaneity.

68 Metaph. 1.2, 982b5-11. At least this is how Alexander of Aphrodisias understood the above passage: in Metaph. 1.2 (CAG I), 14,3-4; cp. in Metaph. 1.3 (CAG I) (ad 983a31-33), 22,7-13; in Metaph. 3.2 (CAG I), 184,21-4; in Metaph. 5.2 (CAG I), 346,14ff. and 350,28-32.


70 Al-Mubāḥaṭāt, ed. M. Bidāfār (Qom, 1992), 116,15-117,2 (= Mubāḥaṭa 5, #277); compare 93,5-8 (= Mubāḥaṭa 4, #177). Concern about how the final cause’s possible
In other words, if it makes no difference whether or not the final cause exists concretely for its effect to exist concretely, the final cause will not fulfill the basic criterion of causality: being that whose existence necessitates the effect’s existence. At best the final cause will be a cause only metaphorically.

Now Avicenna is clear that mental existence fully warrants being called existence. So he could defend himself by saying that even in the case of unrealized ends the final cause did exist and its existence did necessitate the effect’s existence; the final cause simply existed in the mind, not in concrete reality. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in Mu‘tazilite ontology the šay‘ which is in the mind alone qualifies as a ma‘dûm, and not as a mawġûd. Avicenna’s use of šay‘iyya in Ilâhiyyát 6.5 to describe how the final cause operates could therefore be interpreted as implying that an unrealized end – that is, a final cause which only ever “exists” in the mind – was a šay‘ ma‘dûm. And given that only a mawġûd, not a šay‘ ma‘dûm, can be properly spoken of as a cause, the final cause would be seen as not satisfying the basic criterion of causality.

Avicenna seems aware of this problem in the Naḡât/Ilâhiyyát 1.11 passage on final and efficient causes. There he asserts that “an object [al-ma‘nâ] has an existence in concrete reality and an existence in the soul as well as something common [to both]: what is common [to both] is thingness.” Avicenna is implying that for thingness to serve as the basis on which the final cause’s priority rests, we will need to add the condition that the end must be realized concretely. Only then will thingness link the object’s existence in the mind with its concrete existence in the outside world. Things which have a mental existence but no corresponding concrete existence – unrealized ends, that is – will not be much use in pointing to the final cause’s priority.

It is my view that Avicenna moved from šay‘iyya in Ilâhiyyát 6.5 and Naḡât/Ilâhiyyát 1.11 to māhiyya in the Īṣârāt precisely to skirt these various problems. Avicenna starts using šay‘iyya in order to pre-empt one Aristotelian problem – the possibility of circularity in the relation between efficient and final causes – and then later discards šay‘iyya in favor of māhiyya because using šay‘iyya created the two further problems just discussed, each of which undermined the primacy of the final cause.

non-existence affects its causality is also evident in Awhad al-Za'man Abû al-Barakât al-Baghdâdi, Kitâb al-mu'tabar fi al-ḥikma III (Haydarabad, 1938-39), 52,12-53,5.
Avicenna’s chronological progression from šay’iyya to māhiyya can be detected in his discussions of efficient and final causality, for his assertions about the basis on which the final cause’s priority rests change from šay’iyya and haqiqa in the Ilāhiyyāt and the Nağat (middle period), to haqiqa and māhiyya in the Išārat (late period). This becomes even clearer when we look carefully at the progression of Avicenna’s thought within the middle period. According to Gutas’ careful reconstruction, Avicenna started writing the Kitāb al-šifa’ with Ṭabi‘iyyāt 1 (i.e., al-Samā‘ al-tabi‘i) but stopped after finishing only twenty folios; then wrote Manṭiq 1 (i.e., al-Madḥal); then completed Ṭabi‘iyyāt 1; and then wrote the entire Ilāhiyyāt. After completing the rest of the Kitāb al-šifa’ Avicenna wrote the Nağat.

The fact that Avicenna had already written the Madḥal but had not yet started the Ilāhiyyāt is clear from his discussion of the relationship between efficient and final causality in Ṭabi‘iyyāt 1:

The agent is, in a way, a cause of the end; how could it not be so, when the agent is what makes the end occur as an existent? The end is, in a way, the cause of the agent; how could it not be so, when the agent acts only on account of it [the end]; otherwise, why would it be acting? For the end sets the agent in motion towards being an agent... The agent is not a cause of the end’s becoming an end, nor of the end’s essence (māhiyya) in itself; rather it is a cause of the existence of the end’s essence in concrete reality. The difference between essence and existence is as you already know. The end is a cause of the agent’s being an agent, for it [the end, reading fa-hiya] is the cause of [the agent’s] being a cause, whereas the agent is not a cause of the end in terms of [the end’s] being a cause. This will be made clear in First Philosophy.

Having taken into account all the new evidence from Parts 2 and 3, I can make the following additions (in bold) to my earlier...
chart of the progression in Avicenna’s thought about thingness and essence:

1) Madḫal 1.2: The essences of things (mâhiyyāt al-ašyā’ ) are sometimes found in concrete objects in the outside world, and other times are conceived of in the mind. But essence has three aspects: as a concrete, external existent; as a mental, internal existent; and a third aspect, in which it is unrelated to either concrete or mental existence.

2) Madḫal 1.12: Genera and species may be divided into those which are before a state of multiplicity (that is, those contained in the active intellect and the other celestial intellects), those which are in a state of multiplicity (that is, those contained individually in sublunary concrete existents), and those which are after a state of multiplicity (that is, those contained as abstracted universals in human intellects). Taken in itself a genus or a species is a thing. “Animal,” taken in itself, is an object (ma’nan), regardless of whether it is a concrete or a mental existent, or whether it is general or specific (wa-laysa fī nafsihi bi-‘ammin wa-lā ḥāṣṣin).

2.5) Ṭabi’iyyāt 1.11: The efficient cause causes the final cause to exist in concrete reality, that is, to exist in an absolute or affirmative sense; the final cause causes the efficient cause to exist as an efficient cause, that is, to exist in a special sense.

3) Ilāhiyyāt 1.5: “Thing” and “existent” are primary, indefinable categories. Whatever is predicable of thing will also be predicable of existent, and whatever is predicable of existent will also be predicable of thing. Although they are co-implied, thing and existent have different meanings.

4) Ilāhiyyāt 5.1: A universal (kullī) such as “horseness,” taken in and of itself (fī nafsihi) – that is, without considering whether it is one or many (lā wāḥid wa-lā kāṭir), a concrete existent in the outside world or a mental existent inside the soul (lā mawḡūd fī al-ʿyān wa-lā mawḡūd fī al-nafs), in potentiality or in actuality (lā bi-al-quwwa wa-lā bi-al-fī’l) – is a thing (ṣay’).

4.5) Ilāhiyyāt 6.5: The other causes are prior to the final cause in terms of existence; the final cause is prior to the other causes in terms of thingness. The other causes are the causes of the final cause’s existence; the final cause is the cause of the other causes’ thingness. Thing is logically prior to existent (“the difference between thing and existent is just like the difference between some entity and its concomitant” – 292,2-3); thingness is operative only when existent in the soul, i.e. in intentional action.
5) Ilahiyyat 7.1: “One” (al-wâhid) and “existent” (al-muwğûd) are equally predicable of things (qad yatasâwiyâni fi al-ğaml ‘alâ al-aşyâ’); all that may be characterized by “one” may also be characterized by “existent,” but the two terms do not have the same meaning as each other.

6) Nağât/Ilahiyyat 1.9: “One” is a necessary accident of things (min al-a’râd al-lâzima li-al-aşyâ’). Essence is a thing (bal takûnu al-mâhiyya šay’an), be it a man or a horse, an intellect or a soul; that thing is only subsequently characterized as being one or existent.

7) Nağât/Ilahiyyat 1.11: The other causes are prior to the final cause in terms of existence; the final cause is prior to the other causes in terms of thingness; thingness is what is common to both mental existence and concrete existence.

8) Išârât/Fî al-wuğûd wa-îlalihi: The final cause is a cause, through its essence, of the causality (‘illiyya) of the efficient cause; the efficient cause is a cause of the existence of the final cause.

Avicenna’s use of mâhiyya when discussing the final cause’s priority in the Išârât suffered from none of the obstacles strewn across the path of his earlier uses of šay’iyya. Unlike šay’iyya, mâhiyya was clearly identified with form, so natural phenomena with forms but no intentionality could more easily be accommodated in a universal teleology. Unlike a šay’iyya in the mind, which smacked of the Mu’tazilites’ non-existent thing, the mental existence of a mâhiyya was explicitly allowed for, so unrealized ends with mental but no concrete existence could more easily satisfy the basic criterion of causality. And unlike šay’iyya, mâhiyya was clearly held to be logically prior to existence, so the primacy of final causation could be more easily upheld. For all these reasons Avicenna opted for mâhiyya, and in so doing went some way to resolving the tension between his inconsistent uses of the term šay’, and by extension, between his concepts of thingness and essence.

CONCLUSION

Any claims of definitiveness would be presumptuous in an article which focuses on two of the most complex and wide-ranging topics in Avicenna’s philosophy, essence and causality. This is
why my article can only be called “Notes.” I have marshaled enough evidence merely to justify offering the following hypotheses: that the discussions of things and existents by the mutakallimûn and by Fârâbî were the immediate backdrop to Avicenna’s distinction between essence and existence; that šay‘iyya served to link these discussions and Avicenna’s distinction; that despite some indications otherwise Avicenna uses the term šay‘iyya to explain how the final cause is prior to the efficient cause; and that Avicenna’s incompatible ideas about thingness and essence, in the course of their being applied to the problem of distinguishing final and efficient causality, approach resolution.

But offering hypotheses and proving them are different matters. In Part 1, I would need to examine all available works of the early mutakallimûn to determine whether a tradition of using šay‘iyya existed before Mâturîdî and Avicenna. It seems to have begun with Mâturîdî, but I can claim only to have looked for šay‘iyya in what I considered to be the obvious places; perhaps it can be found in less obvious places. In Part 2 I would need to examine all available manuscripts of the Ilâhiyyât and the Naḡât to be absolutely sure that a mistranscription of šay‘iyya for sababiyya did not occur early on in the manuscript traditions of those two works. I feel the balance of evidence which I presented in Part 2 compels us to retain šay‘iyya, but the evidence is far from unequivocal, and my conclusion will necessarily be tentative. In Part 3, I would need to be more certain of the chronology of Avicenna’s writings – and particularly the dating of the Išârât – than is possible now. This will require closer analysis of the entire Mubâḥaṭât and Ta‘liqât. My hypothesis that Avicenna’s thought progresses from šay‘iyya to māhiyya squares more easily with the traditional late dating of the Išârât than it does with an earlier dating. That of course is not in itself evidence for the Išârât’s late dating, for my hypothesis is too contingent on other suppositions to qualify as evidence itself.

But several lessons can still be learned from this story. The lesson from Part 1 is that analysis of the texts tells us that despite their frequent use of the oppositional labels “mutakallim” and “fâylasûf,” and despite our own tendency to see mutakallimûn and falasîfa as naturally opposed categories, Arabic thinkers of the pre-Avicennian period had much in common conceptually as well as terminologically. The lesson from Part 2 is that just as
Arabists should make a distinction between Aristotle’s works in the original Greek and their ninth- and tenth-century Arabic translations, so Latinists must be careful to qualify their claims about Arabic philosophy when they base those claims solely on its Latin versions. Many mistranslations are trivial, but some are crucial. The lesson from Part 3 is that an author as prolific as Avicenna will often defy our attempts to systematize his thought. The corpus of his work is organic and complex, not static and unitary. It contains serious contradictions, and while some may be shown to be irreconcilable, and some may be shown to be superficial, others can be explained as signs of his intellectual development.