

AVICENNA'S CHAPTER, "ON THE RELATIVE," IN THE  
*METAPHYSICS OF THE SHIFĀ*

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INTRODUCTION

**A**vicenna in the *Shifā* (*The Healing*) devotes two discussions to the concept of relation—in the *Categories* of the *Logic* and in the *Metaphysics*.<sup>1</sup> These overlap at points, but differ in approach, aim, and to a good extent in content. The first and more extensive treatment, consisting of three chapters, is essentially an interpretive expansion of Aristotle's doctrine in his *Categories*. Its approach is linguistic and logical and, although it discusses some of the ontological questions treated in the *Metaphysics*, its primary aim is to define the term "relation" and to exhibit its semantic features.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the discussion in the *Metaphysics* is specifically concerned with ontology, particularly with the question, not discussed in the *Logic*, of whether relations exist in concrete things (*al-a'yān*): or whether they are merely subjective concepts in the mind.

The chapter in the *Metaphysics* divides naturally into three parts. The first introduces relations as accidents occurring to the categories—here, as the context shows, regarded not so much as terms but as modes of being—and discusses their classification. This classification draws heavily on Aristotle, but exhibits refinements. The second part presents the argument that one and the same relation cannot belong to more than one subject, this holding true of symmetrical as well as asymmetrical relations. The third and longest part is devoted to refuting the argument, encountered in Islamic dogmatic theology (*kalām*), which denies the existence of relations outside the mind.<sup>3</sup> This is the familiar argument that the supposition of such extramental existence leads necessarily to the infinite regress of relations. It is also said to lead—in the version Avicenna reports—to the absurdity of relating an existent to a nonexistent, namely, a state of affairs in the present to a nonexistent one either in the past or the future.

Avicenna, as he tells us in introducing this part, regards the question of the existence of relations as the most important in the chapter. He rejects the argument from infinite regress, affirming quite explicitly that there are relations that exist in concrete things. But the sense in which he holds that they so exist is not altogether clear. Avicenna's language at sensitive points in the argument is ambiguous.

In what follows we offer a translation of the Arabic with a commentary largely on the content, relegating as much as possible discussion of purely linguistic and editorial matters to the footnotes.

## TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

### *On the Relative*<sup>4</sup>

#### RELATIVES AND THEIR CLASSIFICATION

As for discussing the relative and showing how one ought to ascertain the nature and definition of the relative and of relation, what we offered in the *Logic* is sufficient for those who have understood it. Regarding [the supposition] that if relation has existence, then it would be an accident, this is undoubtedly the case since this is something inconceivable in itself, but is always conceived of as something in terms of [another] thing; for there is never a relation which is not an accidental occurrence. (p. 152, lines 4-7)

When Avicenna refers us to the *Logic* for the definition of "the relative (*al-mudāf*) and relation (*al-idāfa*)," he intends a distinction between these terms, a distinction encountered in the *Logic*.<sup>5</sup> "The relative" is the generic term, referring to whatever is related as well as to the category, relation, as such.<sup>6</sup> Avicenna identifies this generic term with Aristotle's first definition in *Categories*, 7, 6a, 35 ff.—in Avicenna's language, that "whose nature is predicated with respect to another."<sup>7</sup> "Relation," on the other hand, is sometimes used as the specific term, referring only to the category, relation. Avicenna identifies this with Aristotle's second definition in *Categories*, 7, 8a, 28 ff., where, to use the language of the Oxford translation, "relation to an external thing is a necessary condition for existence." Avicenna expresses this second definition as follows: "Things belonging to the relative are those for which the existence they have consists in that they are related."<sup>8</sup>

In the above quotation, however, we note that the term, "the relative," is used where one expects the term "relation." Avicenna's terminology shifts and in both the *Logic* and the *Metaphysics* we find him for the most part using these two expressions interchangeably. Still, he uses them in places as distinct terms to convey the difference between the two Aristotelian definitions of relation. In the third part of the chapter, as we shall see, it is the generic, nonrestricted definition that is used to answer the question of whether relations exist in concrete things.

Avicenna also states in this introductory passage that if relations are supposed to exist—that is, to exist objectively in things—then they would have to be accidents. The reason for this is clear in the text. But the statement

carries with it something else, namely, that accidents are part of the furniture of the objective world. One must bear this in mind when it comes to ascertaining what Avicenna means when he affirms that relations exist in the concrete.

The above passage is followed by a discussion of the classification of relations, introduced as accidents occurring to the various categories. This analysis is naturally rooted in Aristotle's discussions of relation in *Categories*, 7, and *Metaphysics*, V, 15. It also repeats some of the things Avicenna states in his *Logic*.<sup>9</sup> But there is development and refinement, perhaps influenced by the literature of commentary available to Avicenna.

Avicenna begins by discussing two-termed relations, dividing them into those that agree and those that differ in their terms.

Its first occurrence is either to substance, as for instance, father and son, or to quantity. Some relations differ in their two terms, while some agree. Those that differ<sup>10</sup> are like the half and the double; those that agree are like the equal and the equal, the proximate and the proximate,<sup>11</sup> the corresponding and the corresponding, the touching and the touching.

With some of those that differ, the difference is definite and ascertainable, as for example, the half and the double; with some it is unascertainable but is based on what is ascertainable, as in the case of the excessive and the deficient, the [indeterminable] part and the aggregate. The same obtains when one relative occurs within another, for example, the more excessive and the more deficient; for the excessive is excessive as measured against something also excessive in comparison with a deficient.

Some of the relatives belong to quality. Of those some agree [in their two terms], as for example, the similar; while some disagree, as for example, the fast and the slow in motion, the heavy and light in weights and the sharp and grave in sounds. Again, in all these one relation may occur to another. [Relations also belong] to place, as, for instance, the higher and lower; to time, as for example, the prior and the posterior; and to [matters] of such description. (p. 152, line 8 to p. 153, line 4)

Avicenna now goes on to discuss relations, not only as accidents occurring to the various categories, but also as types in their own right, as it were, listing them under the divisions of equality, excess and deficiency, action and passion, and resemblance. Here, again, Aristotle is very much in evidence.

It almost seems that relatives are confined to the divisions of equality, excess and deficiency, action and passion, whose source is power, and resemblance. Those pertaining to excess belong either to quantity, as you know, or to power, as in the case of the vanquisher, the conqueror, the repeller and the like. Those pertaining to action and passion are like

father and son, the cutter and [the thing] cut and similar things. Those pertaining to resemblance are like knowledge and the [thing] known, sensation and the [thing] sensed. For between these there is resemblance: knowledge resembling the state of the thing known: sensation, the state of the thing sensed. But the measure and limit of this resemblance is unascertainable. (p. 153, lines 4-11)

The above division of the relatives, however, is not inclusive and leaves out such directional relations as being to the left or to the right of. Avicenna is aware of this and in the concluding section of this part suggests another way of classifying relations.

Relative things, however, may [all] be encompassed in one way. Two relatives may not require any of those things by virtue of which a relation between them would occur. An example of this is that which is to the right of [something] or to the left of [it]. For in that which is to the right of [something] there is neither a quality nor any other state of affairs by virtue of which it acquires the relation of being to the right of. [Nothing makes it so related] other than the very fact of its being to the right of. [On the other hand] it may be required that there should be in each of the two related things something by virtue of which they become related to one another, as in the case of the lover and the loved. Thus, there exists in the lover an apprehending state which is the principle of the relation, while in the loved an apprehended state which renders him loved by the lover. Such a thing may exist in one of the two things, but not the other, as in the case of the knower and the [object] known. The latter became related only because something in the former has occurred, namely, knowledge. (pp. 153, line 12 to p. 154, line 7)

The example of the third type of relation (between knower and object known) has a background in Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, V, 15, 1021a, 30ff.) where we are told, in effect, that the object of knowledge is called relative, not because it itself refers to something else, but because something else refers to it. Aristotle has been understood to be speaking of a unilateral relation and this suggests that Avicenna is doing the same. This is certainly a possible and natural way of reading the Avicennan passage and the Latin text has been so understood.<sup>12</sup> But whether this interpretation accords with Avicenna's intention is not, as we see it, entirely certain.

There is first of all the matter of emphasis. As we read him, Avicenna's primary concern is with a criterion for an inclusive classification of relations, so that, even if in fact he intended to give an example of a unilateral relation, this to him would be of secondary interest. (It should perhaps be observed that the analysis of knowledge as a relation does not assume in Avicenna's writings the significance it assumes in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas,

who, incidentally, refers us directly to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.)<sup>13</sup> Then there is the wording of Avicenna's discussion. Knowledge is that "state of affairs" or "quality" by virtue of which knower and object known become related. The wording reads almost as though knowledge is not the relation between knower and object known, as though it is only that which renders the two related. Finally, there is a lexical consideration. In the *Logic*,<sup>14</sup> Avicenna assigns the term *nisha* to a unilateral relation, a term never used in the metaphysical chapter, and the term *idafa* to a bilateral relation, the term consistently used in the chapter and in association with knowledge.

This first part on the classification of relations sets the stage for the subsequent ontological discussions. The distinction drawn between relations that agree and differ in their terms is of direct relevance to the discussion that immediately follows.

#### RELATION AS AN ACCIDENT BELONGING TO ONE SUBJECT ONLY.

If anything, this second part reveals the total commitment of Avicenna's doctrine of relation to a substance-accident ontology. His main argument is that a relation numerically one and the same does not belong to the related subjects taken together. Thus, if *A* and *B* are related, Avicenna argues in effect, then there are two relations, a relation *P* belonging to *A* and referring to *B* and a relation *Q* belonging to *B* and referring to *A*. True enough, in the case of symmetrical relations there is identity. But this is identity "in species," or kind. It is not numerical identity.

The underlying reason for this view is not difficult to discern. For Avicenna, relation is an accident and an accident can belong only to one subject. As J. R. Weinberg points out, the above view of relation as belonging to one subject only, though not explicitly stated by Aristotle, is implied in his doctrine.<sup>15</sup> Avicenna here is very much the Aristotelian. Interestingly, however, in the opening sentences of this second part, Avicenna tells us that the view he is expounding is not held by the majority. There is an indication in Alfarabi's recently published *Book of Letters* that its author belonged to this majority.<sup>16</sup>

This section of the discussion poses no special problems in exegesis. It speaks for itself and we simply present the translation.

What remains for us here concerning the relative is to know whether relation is an idea, one in number and subject matter, found between two things but having two aspects, as some, indeed most have thought, or whether there is for each of the two related things, in being related, a special property. We say:

Each of the two related things has in itself an idea with respect to the other, which is not the idea the other has in itself with respect to [the first].

This is evident in the things whose related terms differ, as in the case of the father. Its relation to fatherhood, which is a description of its existence, is in the father alone. But it belongs to the father with respect to something else [only as something] in the father. Its being with respect to the other does not make it exist in the other. Fatherhood does not exist in the son. Otherwise it would be a description [of the latter] from which a name for it is derivable. Rather, fatherhood belongs to the father. The same applies to the state of the son with respect to the father. There is nothing here at all which is in both of them. Here there is nothing but fatherhood and sonship. As for a state posited for both fatherhood and sonship, this is something unknown to us and has no name.

If [such a state of affairs] consists in the fact that each of the two has a state with respect to the other, this is similar to the case of the swan and snow, each of which is white. Nor is [this state] rendered identical by the fact that [it stands] with respect to the other; for whatever belongs to each individual with respect to the other, belongs to that individual and not the other; but it [possesses it] with respect to the other.

If you have understood this from what we have given you by way of example, then know that the [identical] state of affairs [obtains] in the rest of the relatives that do not disagree [in their two terms]. It is here, however, that most of the confusion occurs. Thus, [for example], since in the case of the two brothers, one has a state relative to the other and the other has a state relative to the first, and since the two states are of the same species, [these states] have been thought to be one individual. But this is not the case. To the first belongs [the state] of being brother to the second, that is, he has the description of being the brother of the second. [Now] this description is his, but [only his] with respect to the second. This is not the [same] description of the second numerically, but only in species, just as the case would be if the second was white and the first was white. Indeed, the second is the brother of the first because he has in himself a state predicable with reference to the first.

The same applies to touchability in two touching things. Each of the two touches the other in that it has [the state] of touching it which exists only with respect to the other if the other is similar [in its relation to it]. You must never think that an accident, one in number, exists in two substrata. Thus there is no need for you to apologize in this connection by making "accident" a problematic name, as some, who have little discernment, have done. (p. 154, line 7 to p. 155, line 16)

#### THE QUESTION OF THE EXISTENCE OF RELATIONS IN "CONCRETE THINGS"

Avicenna begins this section by posing the question of whether "relation in itself exists in concrete things or whether it is something only conceived

in the mind." He asks, that is, whether it is one of the things that become universal, particular, essential and so on, only when conceived in the mind, thereby giving expression to his conceptualism.

But what is more important than this is for us to know whether relation in itself exists in concrete things or whether it is something only conceived in the mind, being like many of the states that adhere to things when conceived, after occurrence in the mind. For, when conceived, there occur to things in the mind circumstances that did not belong to them [externally]. They thus are rendered universal, particular, essential and accidental: they become genus and differentia, subject and predicate and things of this order. (p. 156, lines 1-5)

He first states that some have held that relations exist only as concepts. He then presents the opposing view, the argument for the objective existence of relations, an argument that has antecedents in Plotinus and Simplicius.<sup>17</sup>

Some people have thus maintained that the reality of relations also occurs only in the soul when it conceives things. Another group has said, "On the contrary, relation is something found in concrete existents." and argued saying: "We know that this is in existence the father of that, and that that is in existence the son of this, regardless of whether this [fact] is conceived or not. We know that plants seek nourishment and that seeking involves relation. Plants do not, in any manner, have intellects, or apprehension. We know [moreover,] that the sky is in itself above the earth and that the earth is below it, regardless of whether or not this is apprehended. Relation is nothing other than these things to which we have alluded and their like. It belongs to things, even when it is not apprehended." (p. 156, lines 6-12)

Avicenna then reports the counterargument from infinite regress and also a shorter argument to the effect that the supposition of real relations leads to the absurdity of relating an existent to a nonexistent. It should be noted that the argument from infinite regress is so formulated that its applicability is not confined to the doctrine that a relation exists only in one subject.

The other party has argued: "If relation were to exist in things, then from this it would follow that relations become infinite. There would exist, [for example], between father and son a relation. This relation would be either [common] to both, belong [only] to one, or to each [separately]. [Now] inasmuch as fatherhood belongs to the father, occurring accidentally to him, he being subject to its occurrence, it would be related; the same being the case with sonship. Thus we would have a connection between fatherhood and the father and between sonship and the son, external to

the connection between father and son. It would then follow necessarily that for [each] relation there is another relation and that this would lead to infinity. [Moreover, if relations were to exist in things, it would follow] that among relations there would be those which are between an existent and a nonexistent inasmuch as [for example] we are posterior to the centuries that have preceded us and have knowledge of [the future] resurrection." (p. 156, line 13 to p. 157, line 2)

Avicenna responds differently to the two arguments in this passage against the reality of relations. In the lengthier answer to the argument from infinite regress, he simply attempts to refute it. But he does not reject the shorter argument concerning relations between existents and nonexistents. As we shall see, he admits that relations between noncontemporaneous events are always ideal. What he strives to do is to explain how such ideal relations obtain.

In his answer to the main argument, he invokes the generic, "absolute" definition of the relative.<sup>18</sup> In so doing, he seems to be giving unqualified support to the argument of those defending the doctrine that relations exist in the concrete. One notices, however, that the opening words of his reply suggest that what he is offering is a resolution of difficulties in both the objectivist and subjectivist arguments, a point to which we will return.

What resolves for us the perplexity in both ways [of argument] is to turn to the absolute definition of the relative. We say: The relative is that whose nature is only predicated with respect to another. Thus anything in the concrete that happens to be such that its nature is only predicated with respect to another belongs to the relative. But among the concrete existents there are many things of this description. Hence the relative in concrete things exists. (p. 157, lines 3-6)

In the sentences that immediately follow something in the wording seems to be amiss. The translation we offer is based on a variant reading in the *apparatus criticus*. This reading helps solve some but not all questions of meaning.

[Now] should the relative have some other nature, then [from this nature] one must separate the idea conceived with respect to another which [the relative] has; for this idea is in reality the thing conceived with respect to another—a thing being conceived with respect to another because of it.<sup>19</sup> (p. 157, lines 6-8)

What does Avicenna have in mind when he speaks of the "other nature" which a relative might have? We can think of two possible answers. The first is suggested by Avicenna's discussion of the term "knowledge" in the

*Logic*.<sup>20</sup> Considered in itself, we are told, it is a qualitative term. But it is also a relative term when asserted with respect to the object of knowledge or to the knower. Thus knowledge would have a qualitative nature and a relational one. The second answer is suggested by a distinction implicit in the discussion that follows, namely, between the relational idea in its function, as it were, of relating one specific subject to another and its being considered in its abstractness: for example, the fatherhood relating *this* father to *this* son and the concept, fatherhood, as such.

But the main point in Avicenna's reply to the argument from infinite regress is that whatever relates to another thing relates in itself, not through something else which is relation. Thus, referring to the idea which is conceived with respect to another, he states:

This idea, however, is not conceived with respect to another for any other cause than itself, but, as you have already learned, is in itself related. Hence, we do not have an essence and something else which is relation, but only that which is related in itself, not by another relation. In this way relations become finite. (p. 157, lines 8-11)

He develops the argument by stating:

As for the fact that this idea, which is in itself related, is present in this subject, then inasmuch as it is in this subject, its nature is conceived with respect to this subject. It has, however, another existence, as for example, the existence of fatherhood. But this [latter relation] is not the [former relation]. (p. 157, lines 12-15)

Here, it should be noted, Avicenna is not necessarily making a distinction between relations in the concrete and abstract relations, existing in the mind. When he speaks of the relational idea as being in "this subject," the reference is to something specific, but not necessarily to something objective and concrete. The distinction between concrete and abstract relations is central to his analysis and is discussed by him shortly after the above. At this stage, however, the distinction he draws is really between (a) the relational idea in its role, as it were, of relating a specific (but not necessarily concrete) subject to which it belongs to something else and (b) the relational idea in its abstractness, having, as he puts it, "another existence, as for example, the existence of fatherhood."

Now the relational idea in its abstractness exists only in the mind. When Avicenna, however, refers to its having "another existence," he is not so much speaking about its existence in the mind (which is taken for granted), but about something else. What he means by "another existence" coincides with what he means by "special existence," *al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ*, in *Metaphysics*, I.5, where we are told that "to everything there is a reality by virtue of which

it is what it is. Thus the triangle has a reality in that it is a triangle and whiteness has a reality in that it is whiteness. It is that which we should perhaps call 'special existence,' not intending by this the meaning given to affirmative existence."<sup>21</sup> As we shall see, Avicenna uses the term "special existence" in the concluding sections of the chapter on relation, in line 17, p. 159.

In other words, the distinction is between a relation, *R*, belonging to a specific subject as it relates this subject to something else and *R* in its special existence and abstractness, its "Rness." This "Rness" we are told is also a relational accident occurring to *R*. *R* and "Rness" are both related to each other. But—and this is the thrust of the argument—each is related to the other in itself, not through another relation. Thus, referring to the abstract relation he goes on to say:

Let then this [latter, i.e., fatherhood] be an accidental occurrence arising from the former relation], existing concomitantly with it, each of the two being related in itself to that to which it is related, without any additional relation. Thus being predicated (*mahmūl*) is in itself related. For this very [state of] being [such things] is related in itself, not requiring another relation by virtue of which it becomes related. Rather, it is in itself a nature conceived with respect to the subject. In other words, it is such that if its nature is conceived, it would require that something else should be brought to the mind, with respect to which it is conceived. (p. 157, line 15 to p. 158, line 5)

Avicenna now applies this analysis to relations obtaining between concrete things, arguing in effect that the supposition of such relations does not lead to an infinite regress.

Indeed, if this is [now] taken as a relation in concrete things, it would exist with another thing, [conjoined to it] in itself, not by some other apprehended conjunction, it itself being the very "with" or conjunction specified by the species of that relation. If conceived, its conception requires the presentation of something else with it [to the mind]. This is similar to the nature of fatherhood, inasmuch as it is fatherhood; for it is related in itself, not by some other connecting relation, although it is up to the mind to invent something between [it and that to which it is related] as though this is a conjunction external to both of them. [This, however, is something] which conception itself is not compelled to do, being one of the aspects which attach to things [after conception] enacted by the mind. For the mind may connect things according to the diverse [possible] ways of considering things, not out of necessity. In itself [fatherhood] is [simply] a relation, not [something related] by a relation, because it is in itself a nature, conceived with respect to another.

There are many relations that adhere in themselves to some essences, not by virtue of some other occurring relation, but only in the manner in which this type of relation adheres to the relation of fatherhood. An example of this is the adherence of relation to the state of knowledge: for it would not be adhering to it through another relation inherent in things themselves,<sup>22</sup> but adheres to it in itself, even though the mind may at this juncture invent some other relation. (p. 158, line 6 to p. 159, line 2)

The main line of argument here is clear: just as with abstract relations where whatever is related is related in itself, not through an additional relation, so it is when the related things are concrete. Any additional relation is something invented or constructed by the mind. But there is no necessity or compulsion for such an added relation. Hence, a regress, to say nothing of an infinite regress, is not a necessary consequence. Furthermore, since such added relations are invented by the mind, they are conceptual or ideal. Hence, if from the supposition of real relations in the concrete an infinite regress of relations were to ensue necessarily, this would be an infinite regress of ideal relations. But, as we have seen, Avicenna denies that such an infinite regress is a necessary consequence. In this he differs from Alfarabi who in *the Book of Letters* argues that such an infinite regress of ideal relations must ensue, but that this kind of infinite is possible and does not render a doctrine of real relations impossible.<sup>23</sup> Hence, although Alfarabi and Avicenna reject the argument from infinite regress for the impossibility of real relations, they do so on somewhat different grounds. The last part of Avicenna's answer to the argument from infinite regress begins as follows:

Since you have known this, you now know that the relative exists in concrete existence in the sense that it has this definition. This definition only necessitates that the relative should be an accident which, when conceived, would have the above-mentioned description; but it does not necessitate that it should be a self-subsisting thing, one in number, connecting two things. (p. 159, lines 3-6)

When Avicenna speaks here of the relative as having "this definition" or "the above-mentioned description," he is again referring to the generic definition. In this passage he also reiterates his basic concept that relation is not something common to the related things but is an accident belonging to one thing but which points to another. He then goes on to state:

As for the predication [of the nature of the relative] with respect to [another] [*wa ammā al-qawl bi al-qiyās*], this occurs only in the mind. Hence it pertains to intellectual relation, whereas existential relation is what we have shown, being namely that which is such that if conceived, its nature is conceived with respect to [another]. Its being in the mind, on the other hand, consists

in its being conceived with respect to another. Thus [relation] in existence has one governing rule (*hukm*) and in the mind another, inasmuch as it is [something] in the mind, not insofar as relation is concerned. It is possible to have invented relations in the mind which the mind enacts by reason of the special property it has with respect to them. (p. 159, lines 7-11)

Needless to say, this is a crucial passage. It is also a very perplexing one. We are first told, in effect, that in the case of two concrete things, *X* and *Y*, if *X* is related to *Y*, the predication of *X* with respect to *Y* occurs only in the mind and belongs to intellectual or ideal relation. Existential or concrete relation consists in the fact that *X* is such that if conceived, it is conceived with respect to *Y*. The existence of the relation seems to depend on its being conceived by the mind. Such language is suggestive of certain theories that were to become current in the medieval Latin West, for example, the doctrine that relations are ideal but that some have a basis in reality, or even the doctrine that some relations exist potentially in concrete things, but in actuality only in the mind.<sup>24</sup> One is perhaps further encouraged to interpret Avicenna's thought as moving in this direction by his statement immediately following his presentation of the arguments for and against the objective existence of relations. As we have seen, he speaks there of resolving "the perplexity in both ways (of argument)," which may well be an indication that his endorsement of the argument for the objective existence of relations is not total.

But then Avicenna makes another statement which, though certainly not very clear, lends itself to a different interpretation. He states that relation in existence has one governing rule and in the mind another, adding the phrase, "inasmuch as it is something in the mind, not insofar as relation is concerned." What does he mean by "relation" in the phrase, "not insofar as relation is concerned?" A possible answer is that he is in fact referring to relation as an objective state of affairs belonging to one concrete thing and pointing to another and as distinct from the concept of this relation in the mind. As such, in the case of the two concrete things *X* and *Y*, *X*'s relation to *Y* is not dependent on its being conceived by the mind. Rather, *X* is such that if conceived it is conceived with respect to *Y* precisely because *X* stands with respect to *Y* in objective reality. But whether this is what Avicenna means is far from being certain.

There is one consideration which at first sight seems to give support to the second interpretation. This is Avicenna's conception of relation as an accident. His statement in the opening sentences of this chapter to the effect that if relations exist in the concrete they must be accidents indicates there that he regards accidents as part of objective reality. But when we examine this concept further, its support for the second interpretation becomes

less than it first appears to be. Relation for Avicenna is a special kind of accident. It is not a sensible accident but an accident whose apprehension requires a conceptual act. Is this requirement a purely epistemological one, as the second interpretation suggests, or is it included as part of the very definition of relation, as suggested by the first interpretation? Avicenna does not give a clear answer to this question and his position, to our mind, remains ambiguous.

In any case, in summing up this part of the discussion, he begins by asserting once more that the relative exists in concrete things:

Thus the relative in concrete things exists. Moreover, it has become evident that its existence does not necessitate that for [each] relation there should be another [relation] *ad infinitum*. Nor does it follow from this that whatever is conceived as related should have a [corresponding] relation in existence. (p. 159, lines 12-14)

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The final part of the chapter takes up the problem of relating what exists in the present to what has ceased to exist or to what is yet to exist in the future. The problem is discussed by Avicenna in greater detail in the *Logic* in an expansion of Aristotle's statement in *Categories*, 7, 7b, 15-8a, 12, concerning the question of the temporal coexistence of correlatives. A fundamental point Avicenna makes in the *Logic*<sup>25</sup> and repeats in this chapter is that in the case of things or events that do not coexist in time the relation is not between the things themselves but only between the concepts of these things. Thus, for example, the relation is never between what exists in the present and what has existed in the past, but between the concept of what exists in the present and the concept of what has existed in the past. These concepts when related coexist in the mind. As such relations of this sort fulfil the condition of coexistence and are always ideal.

Avicenna begins this section as follows:

As for [the question] of the temporally prior and posterior, one being nonexistent and so forth, [the answer is that] priority and posteriority are relations obtaining between existence when conceived and the conceived that does not derive from special existence. Know this. (p. 159, lines 15-17)

The wording of this passage leaves something to be desired. But from what comes immediately after, it becomes clear that when Avicenna speaks of "existence when conceived," he means the concept of what presently exists. It also becomes clear that "the conceived that does not derive from special existence" refers in part, but only in part, to what does not exist in the present. In fact a variant reading for the clause, "does not derive from special existence," *laysa ma khūdhān an al-wuqud al-khāsy*, given by three

manuscripts is "does not derive from present existence," (*laysa ma khudhan an al-wujūd al-hādīr*). This reading makes very good sense and the temptation to adopt it is very strong. The reading, "special existence," which the editors have adopted, however, should stand, not only because most of the manuscripts give it, but also because the *Logic* supports this reading, as we shall show. Accordingly, the point Avicenna wishes to make in his reference to "special existence" is that the relation is not between the concept of what presently exists and an abstract quiddity or special existence. Rather, it is the relation of a concept that has a counterpart in the concrete at present to a concept that either had a concrete counterpart in the past or will have one in the future. The passage in the *Logic* supporting this has to do with knowledge of such a future event as the resurrection:<sup>26</sup>

As for knowledge of the resurrection, it belongs to the category (*ḥukm*) of [what] will be. For the knowledge that it will be is [(a)] knowledge of its state existing in the mind together with [(b)] knowledge that it will be [knowledge, that is], existing in the mind, not when [the resurrection] comes into being, but prior to that, when it is nonexistent in the concrete, existing in the soul. As for the conception of the quiddity of the resurrection in abstraction, this, inasmuch as it is conception, is not related to anything in existence.

To return then to the text of the *Metaphysics*, the concluding part of the chapter on relations is as follows:

For a thing in itself is only prior in terms of something existing with it. This type of priority and posteriority exists for both terms [of the relation] in the mind; for when the concepts of the prior and the posterior are presented to the mind, the soul conceives this comparison as existing between two existents in it, since such a comparison obtains between two existents in the mind. Before this, a thing in itself cannot be prior; for how could it be prior to nothing existing? Hence, whatever relations are of this order, their relation to each other is in the mind only, having in existence no subsisting idea with respect to this priority and posteriority. Indeed, this priority and posteriority is in reality one of the intellectual ideas, one of the relationships imposed by the mind and one of the aspects that occur to things when the mind compares them and refers to them. (p. 160, lines 1-9)

This passage affirms Avicenna's distinction between what exists in reality and what exists in the mind, a distinction fundamental to his ontology.<sup>27</sup> He invokes it here to resolve the difficulty of relating what exists at present to what does not. In so doing, he concedes to those who maintain that all relations are ideal that in these instances the relations are always

ideal. For, as we have seen, he has argued that when, for example, we relate a present existent to one that existed in the past, we are not relating an existent to a nonexistent. What we are really doing is relating the concept of what exists at present to the concept of what had existed in the past.

Avicenna, in other words, is reducing relations between noncontemporaneous events to ideal relations between coexisting concepts. Does not this reduction lead him to a subjectivist theory of time? This is one of the questions posed by this passage. Another, by no means a less important one, pertains to the kind of relations obtaining between an existent and its conceptual counterpart in the mind. Are these ideal or real? Avicenna, however, does not discuss this question at all.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Sina (Avicenna), *al-Manṭiq (Logic) II: al-Maqūlāt (Categories)*, ed. G. Anawati, A. F. Ahwani, M. Khudayri, and S. Zayid, rev. ed. (Cairo, 1959), pp. 143-64; *al-Ḥāḥīyyāt (Metaphysics)*, ed. G. Anawati, S. Dunyā, and S. Zayid, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Cairo, 1960), pp. 152-60. These two works will be referred to in the notes as *Maqūlāt* and *Ḥāḥīyyāt*, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> This is clear from the context. But Avicenna in introducing the discussion makes the following explicit remark: "It is not for the logician to prove the existence of the relative and to show its state in existence and in conception. Whoever undertakes to do this, undertakes, inasmuch as he is a logician, that which is neither his concern nor his special task." *Maqūlāt*, 143, lines 15-16.

There are two main ontological questions discussed in the *Logic* as well as the *Metaphysics*. The first (*Maqūlāt*, 153-55) is the problem of relating noncontemporaneous events (this is discussed more exhaustively in the *Logic* than in the *Metaphysics*). In the *Logic* it is a natural development of Avicenna's expansion on Aristotle's discussion in *Categories*, 7, 7b. 15-8a, 12. The second (*Maqūlāt*, 163-64) is a brief statement of the doctrine that the relative belongs only to one subject.

<sup>3</sup> See I. Madkur's Arabic and French introduction to the *Logic (al-Maqūlāt)*, 12-13, xvi-xvii, and the references given there; also, J. R. Weinberg, *Abstraction, Relation and Induction* (Madison and Milwaukee, 1965), pp. 78, 90, 91, for parallels between Stoic and *kālam* subjectivist views on relations and the probability that Avicenna had also the Stoics in mind in this third part of the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> *Ḥāḥīyyāt*, Book III, Chap. 10, pp. 152-60. The pages and lines that appear after each translated section refer to the *Ḥāḥīyyāt*.

<sup>5</sup> This distinction, for example, is conveyed by the following statement: "It is easier for the mind to know relatives (*al-mudafāt*) than to know pure relations (*al-idāfāt*) that constitute the category." *Maqūlāt*, 144, lines 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 158, lines 5-15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ḥāḥīyyāt*, 157, line 4. Avicenna prefaces this statement by referring to it as the absolute definition of the relative. What he means by "absolute definition" is perhaps clarified by the fuller definition in the *Logic* where he states: "Things belonging to the relative are those whose natures are predicated with respect to other [things] either absolutely or through some other mode of connection (*nisba*)." *Maqūlāt*, 144, lines 2-3. Those predicated absolutely, he goes on to explain, are those whose names denote their full meaning, giving "brother"



as an example. Those predicated through some other mode of relation are terms which in themselves may be relatives but only become so through a linguistic connection. *Ibid.*, 144-45. "Those things which in themselves are not relatives, but become so "by some other mode of relation," acquire another nature than the one they originally had. *Ibid.*, 147, lines 16-18.

The definition as it occurs in the *Logic* differs from other medieval Arabic versions only in its use of the term "absolutely," in word order and some of the vocabulary. But the key terminology and sense remain essentially the same. See, for example, Khalil Georr, *Les catégories d'Aristote dans leur versions syro-arabes* (Paris, 1948), pp. 332; Alfarabi, *Kitāb al-Hurūf* (Book of letters), ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut, 1969), pp. 87, lines 20-22, and the editor's comment referring to this section on p. 228, giving Hunayn Ibn Ishaq's version. All these versions define the relative as that whose "nature" (*māhiyya*) is "said of" or "predicated" (*maqūl* "with respect" *bi al-qiyās*) to another.

Throughout the translation and commentary we have rendered the Arabic *yuqal* or *tuqal* as "predicated," an accepted meaning which is less cumbersome than the more literal, "said of." The more specific term for "predicated" or "predicate," *al-mahmul*, is used in this chapter only once: *Hāhiyyāt*, 158, line 1; in a context where it is equivalent to *maqūl*, the passive participle of the passive imperfect *yuqal*.

<sup>8</sup> *Maqūlat*, 157, line 6. Book v, Chap. iv, of the *Logic* (*Maqūlat*, 155-64) is devoted to a discussion of the difference between the two Aristotelian definitions, interpreting the second as referring to the category, relation. For Alfarabi's parallel but shorter explanation see Alfarabi, *Book of letters*, 87-88. For a brief statement of the treatment of this distinction by the Latin scholastics, see J. R. Weinberg, *Abstraction*, 72-73.

<sup>9</sup> *Maqūlat*, 146-48.

<sup>10</sup> The Cairo edition reads *bi al-mukhtalif*, clearly a printing error. The expression should read *fa al-mukhtalif*.

<sup>11</sup> The text reads, "the proximate and the proximate and the proximate," an editorial slip which we have emended.

<sup>12</sup> J. R. Weinberg, *Abstraction*, 92.

<sup>13</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 12 and *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 13, a. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Maqūlat*, 145-46.

<sup>15</sup> J. R. Weinberg, *Abstraction*, 71, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Alfarabi, *Book of letters*, 85, lines 9-17.

<sup>17</sup> J. R. Weinberg, *Abstraction*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> For a comment on the use of the term "absolute," see n. 7 above.

<sup>19</sup> The clause, "for this idea is in reality the thing conceived with respect to another" is a translation of, *fa dhālika al-ma na huwa bi al-haqīqa al-ma nā al-ma qūl bi al-qiyās ila ghayrihi*, given by the Tehran printed text and the *Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya* MS. no. 144. This reading with slight variations is also given by the *Dār al-kutub al-Miṣriyya* MSS. nos. 826 and 894 and by the British Museum MS. no. 7500, the first two having the word, *al-haqīqa*, instead of *bi al-haqīqa*, the third adding the word *wa ghayrihi* at the end.

The editors adopted the reading of the *Bakhtī* MS. that omits the clause, giving simply *wa ghayrihi* instead. The *Bakhtī* version of the above passage reads somewhat as follows: "(Now) should the relative have some other nature, then from [this nature] one must separate the idea conceived with respect to another and another which [the relative] has, a thing being conceived with respect to another only because of this idea."

<sup>20</sup> *Maqūlat*, 144. See above n. 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Hāhiyyāt*, 31, lines 5-8. A possible relationship between Avicenna's use of this term in the *Shifa'* and his use of the Persian term *hasṭi*, "being" is in need of inquiry. On *hasṭi*, see P. Morewedge, "Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sinā's 'Essence-Existence' Distinction."

*JAOB*, 92 (1972), pp. 425-35. In the *Hāhiyyāt*, immediately after the passage translated above, Avicenna seems to speak of a thing's "special existence" as its nature. Thus he states: "The expression, 'existence,' is also used to denote many meanings, one of which is the reality a thing happens to have. Thus, [the reality] a thing happens to have is, as it were, its special existence. . . . It is evident that each thing has a reality proper to it, namely, its nature. It is known that the reality proper to a thing is something other than the existence corresponding to what is offered." *Ibid.*, 31, lines 8-11.

<sup>22</sup> *Fi nafī al-umūr: al-umūr*, "things," "matters," probably refers to knowledge and its correlatives.

<sup>23</sup> Alfarabi, *Book of Letters*, 92, lines 3-8. Alfarabi refers the reader to an earlier section pp. 61-66, for a fuller discussion of the possibility of this kind of infinite.

<sup>24</sup> The first of these theories is associated with William of Ockham who distinguishes between rational and real relations. Real relations for him, however, are conceptual, but, unlike mere rational relations, have a basis in reality. The second theory is associated with Petrus Aureoli. Cf. J. R. Weinberg, *Abstraction*, 103-106, 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Maqūlat*, 153-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 154, lines 15-17.

<sup>27</sup> See *Hāhiyyāt*, Bk. I, Chap. V, 29-36; also for the relevance of this distinction for Avicenna's analysis of causation, *ibid.*, 167-9.