

# The Grounding Problem of Divine Attributes

Ibn Sina's Alternative Solution to Contemporary Problems

by Ayşenur Ünügör Tabur

The present paper aims to show that Ibn Sina's (Avicenna) analysis of existence in modal terms and his theory of concomitance concerning God's properties can solve the problems faced by those contemporary theories that are committed to a non-nominalistic and non-Platonic realistic framework. In doing so, it first analyzes three contemporary views on abstract objects, namely divine conceptualism, theistic activism and divine simplicity, then addresses the problems that they are confronted with, with a particular focus on the grounding problem of divine attributes in God. Afterwards, it examines a prominent *Mu'tazilite* theory of predication, namely, the states (*ahwāl*) theory, as it foreshadows Ibn Sina's solution to the grounding problem. Finally, it analyzes how Ibn Sina's account of predication, which bears considerable similarities to the states theory, can help the theist solve the grounding problem without violating divine aseity or sovereignty, nor resulting in the bootstrapping problem.

## 1. Starting the Problem

The problem of abstract objects originates in the controversy concerning the nature of abstract objects such as properties, necessary truths, propositions and relations, and their relations to God's sovereignty and aseity. It has caused not only a fierce debate in the contemporary philosophy of religion, but also can be said to have shaped the discussions about God's unity and nature after the eighth century in Islamic theology and philosophy. The problem has various facets, but the core of it can simply be described as follows: According to Abrahamic theistic tradition, there is only one God who is eternal and necessary. The same tradition ascribes to God multiple properties such as being omniscient and omnipotent. Two questions arise: whether these properties are themselves real entities that are eternal and necessary along with God and whether they ontologically precede God's existence in a way that God exists by exemplifying them. These questions prompt serious theistic dilemmas. On the one hand, to consider God's properties to be eternal and necessary would not only violate God's sovereignty over all objects, but also threaten his aseity coupled with the assumption that God's existence is dependent on the properties that he exemplifies. On the other hand, to regard his properties as created and finite entities would imply essential change and contingency in God's nature. Furthermore, this would lead to the notorious "bootstrapping problem" which brings about the dilemma that God must create his properties such as omnipotence. This, in turn, implies that God has creative power before creating

the property of omnipotence. The core issue that is included in all these theistic problems seems to pertain to the relation between God and his properties, and particularly to the question “how God is said to ground his attributes”. In the present paper, I aim to show that Ibn Sina’s analysis of existence in modal terms and his theory of concomitance concerning God’s properties can solve the problems faced by those contemporary theories that are committed to a non-nominalist and non-Platonic realistic framework. In doing so, I will first analyze three contemporary views on abstract objects, namely divine conceptualism, theistic activism, and divine simplicity, then address the problems that they are confronted with, with a particular focus on the grounding problem of divine attributes in God. Afterwards, I will examine a *Mu’tazilite* theory of predication, namely, the states theory, as it foreshadows Ibn Sina’s solution to the grounding problem. Finally, I will analyze how Ibn Sina’s account of predication, which bears considerable similarities to the states theory, can help the theist solve the grounding problem without violating divine aseity or sovereignty or resulting in the bootstrapping problem.

## 2. Theistic Conceptualism, Theistic Activism, and Divine Simplicity

Theistic conceptualism is regarded as a theistic interpretation of Platonic realism concerning the ontology of the abstract objects. Platonic realism is the view that abstract objects have an objective ontological reality outside the human mind or God’s mind. That is, it proposes a tripartite ontology that incorporates the physical world, the mental world, and the third ontological realm where the abstract objects exist independently of the former two and are uncreated by God. Theistic conceptualism rejects the external and independent reality of the third ontological realm and reduces it to the constitutive parts of God’s mind. By doing so, it aims to preserve the eternal and necessary status of the abstract objects. Being the constitutive elements of God’s mind, abstract objects are uncreated and causally inert and by the same token have no ontological independence outside of God. This view emphasizes the “uncreatedness” of the abstract objects. Alvin Plantinga expresses this intuition as follows:

“What God has created are the heavens and the earth and all that they contain; he has not created himself, or numbers, propositions, properties, or states of affairs ... . To suppose that they have been created is to suppose that although they exist now, there was a time at which they did not; and this seems clearly false.”<sup>1</sup>

Consider the property of being human. The individual human beings like Socrates or Plato exemplify this property and by way of exemplification they are said to have it. It, like all other properties, inheres in God’s mind eternally and necessarily as the blueprint of all individual human beings. The divine conceptualist argues that properties cannot be created entities. For her, if abstract entities are created by God, this would imply a temporal beginning for their existence and this, in turn, would entail that God’s knowledge concerning the

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, New York 1993, 169.

properties would have a temporal beginning. In other words, there would be a time before the creation of the properties when God did not know about them, and therefore was not omniscient. However, the issue becomes more complicated when it comes to the properties that God is said to exemplify. For instance, if the properties were the constitutive parts of God's mind, how would it then be possible for God to exemplify these properties for his existence before already existing? In other words, if the nature of all properties consists in God's entertaining them as constitutive parts of his thought, then the properties that God exemplifies cannot constitute his essence because they can only exist posterior to the exemplification of God's essence in reality. So, as Bertrand Russell asserts, God's existence cannot depend on his understanding.<sup>2</sup>

For Mehmet Sait Recber, the theistic conceptualist does not have to be committed to such an absurd view. His argument is based on the distinction between the propositional level of existence (*de dicto*) and the actual state of affairs (*de re*). He argues that the proposition that "God exists" is a constitutive part of God's mind on a propositional level and God's mental activity is responsible for the necessary conceptual existence of the proposition but not for his own existence on an actual level (*de re*). For him, the theistic conceptualist regards God's existence to be "the ontologically most fundamental reality", "the first actual state of affairs which grounds the necessary truth that 'God exists'", so this proposition "depends on the divine mind for its existence not for its truth."<sup>3</sup> He claims that a similar reasoning applies to the distinction between God's properties as abstract objects and their actual instances, in that "the exemplification of his properties somehow (logically) precedes their existence as concepts in his mind."<sup>4</sup> Even though Recber is right that theistic conceptualism does not have to be committed to the absurdity that God's existence comes posterior to his concepts, the core of the problem concerning the relation between God and his attributes still seems to remain unaddressed. The core problem is about the ontological status of God's properties and how to explain the relation between God's existence and his properties in ontological terms, namely, by the virtue of what God grounds his properties / attributes, and, whether properties exist as entitative realities within God or not.

For the theistic conceptualist, the essence has a temporal priority to the existence of the individuals in the case of contingent beings as in the example of humanity and Socrates. Apparently, there cannot be a temporal priority relationship between God's properties and existence, yet the unavoidable problem of ontological priority between them forces the theist into an "either / or choice". In other words, were a theist to presume a distinction between God's existence and his properties, she would become confronted with the question *whether* God exists by exemplifying the properties including omniscience, omnipotence etc. *or* his properties are entailed by his existence. The former view can be understood in two ways. According to the first way, properties such as omnipotence and omniscience exist independently of God and he exemplifies these properties from all eternity. This would lead one to a sort of Platonic realism. Alternatively, one can claim that God's prop-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Bertrand Russell, A Critical Exposition of Leibniz's Philosophy*, London 1937, 179.

<sup>3</sup> *M. Sait Recber, Necessity, Logic and God*, London 1998, 218.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

erties refer to entitative realities within God. As a third option in accordance with the second view mentioned above, one can deny the independent ontological reality of the properties. This view can be interpreted in different ways. The properties, as they are entailed by God's existence, can be taken to allude to pure linguistic descriptions without any ontological reality or to the states of existence that do not have entitative existence, yet involve some ontological reality.

The view of absolute creationism, which was proposed by Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel in 1986, appears as a quite mind-provoking alternative for the explanation of the ontology of abstract objects, particularly that of God's properties. It claims that "God is absolute creator of necessary as well as contingent reality, and thus that literally all things do [causally] depend on him."<sup>5</sup> According to this view, abstract objects, like in divine conceptualism, are mental entities existing within God's mind. However, they are not inert entities existing as brute facts, rather they are the products of an on-going act of divine conceiving. In other words, God is creating abstract objects *ex nihilo* by his thinking activity. So, a property like being a human is a mental creation of God, whereas its individual instances such as the existence of Socrates is a physical creation. Morris and Menzel assume a significant distinction between these two types of creation. While the physical creation is a temporal event, God's mental creation does not involve any temporal priority-posteriority relation to God's existence. That is, the act of mental creation is eternal along with God's existence. Unlike the divine conceptualist, Morris and Menzel do not render the theory restricted to the abstract objects that are apart from God's own properties but claim that God creates *his own nature*, as well. They explain this rather strange claim with an analogy to "a materialization machine" that is capable of creating matter out of nothing and the products that it creates are dependent on the continual creation of the machine to retain their existence.<sup>6</sup> This part of the analogy explains the relationship between God and the abstract objects apart from God's own properties. Morris and Menzel take the example one step further and ask the reader to imagine that the machine not only creates the products outside it, but also itself by continually renewing its own parts. They claim that we can imagine God as creating his own properties in an analogical fashion with having in mind two important reservations: God's creation of his own properties implies no temporal relation and there is a distinction between God's existence and his nature. With regard to the latter point, the relation between God's existence to his nature and his nature to his existence are not symmetrical. More precisely, God's nature is taken to be causally dependent on his existence, whereas his existence is only logically dependent on his nature. This suggests that God's existence is metaphysically prior to his nature, and that his creation of his own nature does not entail that God is "causally dependent on himself", i. e., that he is "self-created"<sup>7</sup>.

Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower argue that theistic activism involves an "objectionable circularity" which was not clearly elaborated by Morris and Menzel in their study. They address two main points of criticism. In their second point, they contest Morris

<sup>5</sup> Thomas V. Morris, Christopher Menzel, *Absolute Creation*, in: APQ 23 (1986) 353–362, at 354.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 359.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

and Menzel's claim that God's existence is only logically dependent on his nature and his nature stands in a causal relation to his existence. For them, theistic activism entails a mutual *asymmetrical* dependence relation between God's existence and his nature, being committed to the following two presumptions:

"C1: God's creating an exemplifiable is logically prior to the exemplifiable *being able to create an exemplifiable*.

C2: The exemplifiable *being able to create an exemplifiable* is logically prior to God's creating an exemplifiable."<sup>8</sup>

The property of *being able to create an exemplifiable* is one of God's properties by which he creates all the properties such as humanity, justice, and also the property of *being able to create an exemplifiable*. C1 implies that God's creative activity, as the source of the existence of all exemplifiables, must hold logically prior to the existence of any property including the property of *being able to create an exemplifiable*. So, God creates his properties, and this is what Morris and Menzel consider as the causal dependency of God's nature on his existence. At this point, theistic activism encounters the objectionable circularity. For God to create the property of *being able to create an exemplifiable*, he must already exemplify this very property. That he must exemplify this property before creating any property implies the logical priority of this property to God's creative activity. For Bergmann and Brower, God's dependence on the property of *being able to create an exemplifiable* cannot be considered as a logical (symmetrical) dependence in such a framework, since this property needs to have a logical priority to God's exemplifying it. And they conclude that theistic activism's commitment to C1 and C2 renders it also committed to the contradiction that "*a is logically prior to b and b is logically prior to a*"<sup>9</sup>.

In their second objection examined above, Bergmann and Brower seek to show that power as predicated of God cannot be explained in terms of exemplifiables without encountering a contradiction. This first point of criticism is closely connected to their second objection and underpins their metaphysical position concerning God's properties. According to it, the major difficulty that the theistic activist faces is caused by the endorsement of "a unified account of predication in terms of exemplifiables."<sup>10</sup> As pointed out earlier in the present paper, the exemplification relation requires a logical priority between the thing exemplified and the entity that exemplifies it. Concerning the nature and existence of contingent beings, such kind of predication can be provided without a great theistic challenge since it is not a problem for a theist that the essence of a contingent being precedes its existence, and it can exemplify the properties that are logically prior to it. However, the theist cannot apply the same predication theory to God's case and assume that God's

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bergmann, Jeffrey E. Brower, A Theistic Argument Against Platonism and in Support of Truthmakers and Divine Simplicity, in: Dean Zimmerman (Ed.), Oxford Studies in Metaphysics, Vol. 2, New York 2006, 357–386, at 367.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 365.

properties are logically prior to his existence. This would violate divine aseity and sovereignty.

As an alternative to the exemplification account, Bergmann and Brower propose their own version of *the truthmaker theory*. They explain the notion of the truth maker and its relation to predications as follows:

“TM: If an entity *E* is a truthmaker for a predication *P*, then ‘*E* exists’ entails the truth expressed by *P*.”<sup>11</sup>

“P\*: The truth of all true predications, or at least of all true predications of the form ‘*a* is *F*’, is to be explained in terms of truthmakers.”<sup>12</sup>

So, in the case of the predicative statements about God, such as “God is divine” or “God is omnipotent”, the truth maker is God. In this theory, the existence of a single individual precedes the truth of the relevant proposition that states the individual’s essential features.<sup>13</sup> However, it seems to me that the truthmaker theory falls short of addressing the core problem concerning the ontological status of God’s properties. The claim that God, as a single entity or substance, is the truth maker of all predicative statements concerning his nature would be disagreed neither by the theistic conceptualist nor by the theistic activist. Yet, the essential question to be answered and that causes controversy is not that “what makes the essential predicative statements about God’s nature true”. As already pointed out previously, the divine conceptualist replies to this question in a similar way by making a distinction between God’s actual existence and abstract concepts and claims that God’s actual existence does not depend on any abstract property or proposition, but vice versa. However, the central question is to be dealt with is that “by virtue of what is God omnipotent, omniscient etc.?” The divine conceptualist seems to remain silent concerning this question while the theistic activist proposes their circular creative account. Bergmann and Brower claim to have their truthmaker theory *ontologically neutral*<sup>14</sup> in this regard, but this seems to have pushed the problem one step further without offering any explanation that holds between God and his properties, and one can justifiably ask the question “what is the truth maker of the statement that ‘God is the truth maker of the statement that God is omnipotent’?” Is it an entitative reality such as “the entity of omnipotence” that inheres in God? If it does not refer to any reality within God, then one can ask why God is the truth maker of the statement that “God is omnipotent” and not of the statement that “God is unjust”.

Even though the proposed truthmaker theory as such does not offer any solution to the problem in question, the way Bergmann and Brower combine it with the doctrine of divine simplicity aims to do so. Before examining how they associate the truthmaker theory with the doctrine of divine simplicity as to solve the problem concerning the relation between God’s existence and his nature, a brief explanation of the doctrine of divine simplicity is in

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough critique of the truthmaker theory see: *Trenton Merrieks*, *Truth and Ontology*, New York 2007, 64–98.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Bergmann; Brower*, *A Theistic Argument Against Platonism* (see fn. 8), 379.

due. Divine simplicity can be regarded as an alternative way of understanding the relation between God and his properties. The main motivation of the doctrine is the very theistic motivation that was stated at the beginning of the present paper, namely, to preserve God's unique status, his aseity and sovereignty despite the predication of various attributes of him. Simply put, the doctrine presumes an identity between God and his attributes as well as between each of his attributes. The relation between God and his properties has been interpreted in different ways by the proponents of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Brian Leftow's formulation of it within the framework of his "Identity Thesis" is one of the most prevalent interpretations. The Identity Thesis appeals to the account of predication in terms of exemplifiability by arguing that there must be a non-empty set of attributes *S*, and each attribute that is incorporated in *S* must be exemplified by God. Presuming any attributes in *S* that is not identical with God would mean that God exemplifies an attribute that is not identical with him. This would entail either that God is the creator of this attribute or that this attribute has an independent existence, and God exemplifies it. Since it is impossible for God to create his nature or be dependent on something outside of him, Leftow concludes that each attribute in *S* must be identical with God.<sup>15</sup>

Leftow's theory seems to have been built upon certain implicit presumptions. First of all, he postulates a set of attributes that compromise God's nature, that is, he posits a conceptual distinction between God's existence and his essence. Then, he seeks to illustrate that this conceptual distinction does not entail a metaphysical distinction between God and his attributes. However, the conceptual distinction implies the possibility of separating God's essence from his existence which would imply a metaphysical distinction between God and his attributes in the absence of The Identity Thesis.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, Leftow seeks to eliminate the consequences of his central assumption throughout his paper. Secondly, he seems to presume a single predication theory that applies both to God and created beings as a consequence of the conceptual distinction that he posits between God and his essence. Accordingly, for each being, including God, there is a set of essential attributes that are conceptually distinct from them, but he distinguishes God's relation to his attributes from that of created beings to their attributes by The Identity Thesis. However, in a sense, all beings can be said to be identical to their essential attributes. For instance, a human being is identical to his essential attributes of being rational and being an animal. Apparently,

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Brian Leftow*, *Is God an Abstract Object*, in: *NOUS* 24 (1990) 582 f.

<sup>16</sup> Being well-aware of the problematic nature of such a presumption entailed by the classical predication theory, philosophers such as William Mann and William Vallicella try to avoid the bifurcation between God's essence and existence by proposing (semi)nominalist approaches to the doctrine of divine simplicity. Both philosophers bring into question the very nature of properties in that they argue that a property can function as a concrete individual at the same time. For instance, Mann argues that the property of F-ness can be an abstract object while God's F-ness can be a concrete individual. Since all divine properties / tropes have God as their truthmaker, they are identical to one individual (cf. *William Mann*, *God, Modality and Morality*, New York 2015, 25–28). On the other hand, Vallicella considers God's properties as self-exemplifying properties with the rationale that omniscience as an abstract object cannot have perfect knowledge, so it can possibly self-exemplify itself only as an omniscient individual. He assumes the same possibility for all divine attributes, so divine attributes become self-exemplifying tropes. In addition to that, he presumes that divine perfection entails the coextensionality of each divine attribute, and therefore, the identity of each divine trope with each other and with God (cf. *William Vallicella*, *Divine Simplicity. A New Defense*, in: *FaPh* 9 (1992) 512–516). For a critique of both views cf. *Ayşenur Ünüğüir Tabur*, *Divine Free Action in Avicenna and Anslem*, Palgrave MacMillan – *forthcoming*, ch. 2.2.

Leftow does not aim to refer to this sort of identity between God and his essence but to a dependency relationship. More precisely, a human being's identity with his essential attributes is not a metaphysical identity in the sense that the essential attributes of being rational and animal would diminish, had a particular human being not existed. Despite their identity, the essence of humanity metaphysically precedes its particular existence by rendering the latter dependent on the former. In God's case, Leftow predicates God's attributes of him in the same way, but he argues that there can be no metaphysical priority of attributes in God's existence, and in order to stop the regress of dependency and to preserve God's aseity, he postulates The Identity Thesis.<sup>17</sup> So again, the regress problem occurs due to the employment of a univocal predication theory for both God and other beings as a consequence of presuming a conceptual distinction between God's essence and existence.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most significant objections against the Identity Thesis was raised by Alvin Plantinga in his book *Does God Have a Nature?*, where he calls the identity thesis into question by arguing that God cannot be identical with an abstract object. For him, since the abstract objects are causally inert entities, they can neither be considered as causal agents nor as possessing knowledge or some other personal qualities.<sup>19</sup> For Bergmann and Brower, this objection arises due to the consideration of the referent of God's attributes to be the exemplifiable abstract objects, which equates God to an exemplifiable abstract object by making a category mistake. They claim to have the truthmaker theory avoid this objection by identifying the referents of the abstract singular terms such as "God's goodness" and "God's divinity" not as exemplifiables but as the truthmakers of the corresponding propositions "God is good" and "God is divine", namely as God himself. By this token, all predicates of God have God as their truth maker, and God's simplicity is preserved.

It seems to me that Bergmann and Brower's account has still the burden of answering the question "what is the truth maker of the statement that 'God is the truthmaker of the abstract singular terms about his nature'" in order to offer a satisfying explanation and a

<sup>17</sup> The concern of avoiding the regress problem was and still is one of the very motivations of the proponents of the doctrine of divine simplicity. In this regard, Leftow's Identity Thesis is one of the leading theories that has had a considerable influence since its formulation on the subsequent theories; so, it still preserves its significance despite being more than a thirty-year old reconstruction of the doctrine of divine simplicity.

<sup>18</sup> In his paper "Theistischer Aktivismus und Gottes Selbstaffirmation seiner Natur", Thomas Schärfl points towards a similar problem concerning the identity between God and his essence presumed by the doctrine of divine simplicity. He argues that the conceptual distinction between God and ideas cannot be eliminated by the identity thesis unless the relation of ideas to God is understood in terms of a sort of creative activity, which in turn, as he acknowledges, brings about other problems mentioned previously in the present article. He offers an alternative way of understanding this relationship based on a Hegelian view of self-reflective and self-affirming divine substance. According to his Hegelian alternative, the distinction between God and his Being originates in his self-relation. God is a self-reflecting and self-affirming soul (*Geist*). Through self-reflection and self-affirmation, he knows that he is identical with himself and thereby those things that he is not identical with. According to him, the eternally on-going activities of self-reflection and self-affirmation does not involve any real dichotomy in God and talking about a causal relation between God's essence and existence would be a category mistake; cf. *Thomas Schärfl, Theistischer Aktivismus und Gottes Selbstaffirmation seiner Natur*, in: ZTP 143 (2021) 55–85. For Schärfl, God's self-relation cannot be understood in terms of his exemplification of (certain) properties nor of his creation of them but divine substance "carries and enlightens its own content" by his activity and becomes self-transparent by making property-ascription possible. So, he considers God as an inseparable "unity of being and reflection" (id., *Divine Simplicity*, in: EJPR 10 (2018) 51–90, at 77).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Alvin Plantinga, Does God Have a Nature?* Milwaukee 2003, 47.



viable alternative concerning the relation between God and his properties as well as about their ontology. In other words, the question why God is the truthmaker of the abstract singular term “God’s goodness” rather than “God’s injustice” requires a fuller answer than that God is the truthmaker of the abstract singular terms about his nature. One might reply to this objection with the claim that God is the perfect being and must possess the properties of perfection. So, he is the truthmaker of certain singular terms rather than others in terms of having all perfect making properties. However, this reply seems to imply a circularity, by bringing us back to the question “what is the ontological relation of perfect making properties to God?” which we attempt to answer in the very first place. Our purpose is to explain how God’s existence grounds divine properties without being ontologically grounded upon them.

### 3. Divine Attributes in the States (*Ahwāl*) Theory

As will be briefly examined in the following, the *Mu’tazilite* theologians and philosophers, particularly between the ninth and eleventh centuries, put in a great deal of intellectual effort to reply to this question. This effort resulted in various ontological attitudes within the Islamic tradition and paved the road for Ibn Sina’s account of predication that, as will be argued, offers a satisfactory explanation for the question “by virtue of which God grounds divine attributes” without violating divine aseity or sovereignty as well as without implying circularity.

The early Islamic discussions concerning the nature of divine attributes derive from two main concerns: (1.) preserving God’s unity by labeling him as the only eternal and necessary being and (2.) interpreting various *Quranic* descriptions concerning God that emphasize God’s uniqueness and the absence of any likeness between him and other beings, while ascribing different qualities to him. The former concern pertains to the ontological side of the problem, namely whether divine attributes refer to entitative realities, and the latter to its semantical side, i. e., how to understand the meanings of the predicates that are commonly ascribed to God and other beings.<sup>20</sup> The early *Mu’tazilite* scholars al-Najjar (d. c. 220 / 835) and Dirār b. ‘Amr (d. c. 200 / 815) endorsed negative theology in terms of explaining God’s attributes by rejecting the entitative reality of his attributes at an ontological level and explaining the meaning of the affirmative propositions in negative terms on a semantical level.<sup>21</sup> For instance, the proposition that “God is good” is interpreted as “God is devoid of evil”. It seems to me that even designating God by negative terms necessitates the presumption of some positive quality. One can claim that God is the truthmaker of the propositions like “God is devoid of evil” in virtue of himself, however, to presume this, one must have a concept of God in mind. Otherwise, it would not be possible to explain why it is justified to refer to God as being devoid of evil but not as being devoid of good. What this theory fails to explain is how God, as an ontological ground, can accommodate

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Harry A. Wolfson, *Philosophical Implications of the Problem of Divine Attributes in the Kalam*, in: JAOS 79 (1959) 73–80, at 73.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 76.

certain predications. This issue of grounding was picked up by the later *Mu'tazilite* theologians and the negative theology approach was rejected by them mainly because of the affirmative language that is employed in the Quran about divine attributes.

Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. c. 321 / 933) theory of states (*ahwāl*) is one of the most significant and influential theories which foreshadows Avicenna's theory of concomitance and seeks to explain how God grounds divine attributes, without allocating to divine attributes an independent ontological reality. To understand this theory, one needs the basic knowledge of the *Mu'tazilite* ontology of that era. In *Mu'tazilite* ontology, there were three entities with an ontological reality, which are God, atoms and accidents. Atoms (*juz'iyya*) were considered to be the constitutive and indivisible parts of the physical reality and the bearers of the properties (accidents) and change, while accidents were taken to be "entitative beings (*ma'ānī* or *dhawāt*) inhering in the bodies and producing their qualities."<sup>22</sup> Consider the example of knowledge in human beings. To predicate of a human being knowledge implies an accident, "an entity of knowledge" in him by virtue of which the predication that "he is knowing" is grounded. However, the predication that "God is knowing" cannot be regarded as implying an entitative reality in God by *Mu'tazilite* scholars due to its implication of distinct knowledge in God. To avoid this implication, Abu Ali identified God's attributes with the act of description having no extralinguistic reality. However, if the descriptive term / the attribute "being knowing" has no extralinguistic reality and is identified with "the act of description or attribution (*wasf*)", then there occur two problems: (1.) The predicate "being knowing" happens to have two different ontological realities, that is, one for human beings in the form of accidents and one for God and accordingly; (2.) the impossibility of knowing the properties without the knowledge of their grounds.<sup>23</sup> As an alternative, Abu Hashim's state theory claims that predicative terms cannot be reduced to the act of description or attribution, and he introduces a new ontological category apart from existence and non-existence, namely, states. Ascribing an ontological reality to the attribution gives the theory the advantage of distinguishing between the grounds of attribution and the attribution itself and "allows for a univocal understanding of two subjects' [for instance] being living, irrespective of whether or not they are alive for the same reason."<sup>24</sup>

However, there are two issues to be clarified. First of all, how can we make sense of the states as an ontological category apart from the categories *existent* and *non-existent*? Second issue concerns the main problem that the present article deals with, viz., how is God said to ground his states? The states theory as further developed within the *Bahshamī* theology proposes a theological analysis of the typologies of attributes that seems to provide an explanation concerning the two issues raised above. In his paper, "Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. c. 321 / 933) Theory of 'States' (*ahwāl*) and its Adaption by Ash'arite Theologians", Jan Thiele names five categories in the classification of attributes. The first

<sup>22</sup> Sabine Schmidtke, *The Mu'tazilite Movement (III): The Scholastic Phase*, in: id. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, New York 2016, 159–180, at 171.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jan Thiele, *Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. c. 321 / 933) Theory of 'States' (*ahwāl*) and its Adaption by Ash'arite Theologians*, in: Schmidtke, *Handbook of Islamic Theology* (see fn. 22), 364–383, at 368.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

two categories are directly relevant to grounding and state theory concerning divine attributes. The first category of attributes incorporates “the attributes of essence” (*sifāt al-dhāt*) that describes the subject’s very essence, i. e., as they are in themselves.<sup>25</sup> The attribute of essence refers to the ground through which the subject is qualified by other terms and is itself in no need of further grounding. For instance, an atom’s “being atom” is its attribute of essence. On God’s attributes of essence, there was not an explicit agreement among *Mu’tazilite* scholars, however, God’s “being eternal” seems to have appeared as the most preferred candidate for this role. The second category of attributes is the states that are necessarily entailed by the attribute of essence. Unlike the attribute of essence, these attributes do not describe the subject in its fullness. In the case of atoms, occupying space is a necessary entailment of being an atom, and this state occurs with the actual existence of the atom, but it does not define the very essence of the atom. God’s states, such as being necessarily existent, being omnipotent, being omniscient and being living, are necessarily entailed by his attribute of essence.<sup>26</sup> However, how the attribute of essence of “being eternal” grounds these states rather than any other states is not clearly explicated. Yet, the states theory seems to have foreshadowed Ibn Sina’s modal analysis of God’s essence and his concomitant theory which he, as will be explained, develops and modifies the theory further by providing a fuller explanation of the grounding of divine attributes.

#### 4. An Alternative Grounding of Divine Attributes: Ibn Sina’s Modal Analysis and Concomitance Theory

Ibn Sina is known as the first philosopher to make a systematic distinction between existence and quiddity (*māhiyya*). What makes his distinction more authentic is his basing it on a modal analysis of being. Accordingly, Ibn Sina mentions three modal categories that are necessary, possible, and impossible. For him, if something is not logically contradictory or does not fall under the category of impossible, then it is either necessarily existent or possibly existent / contingent. The very characteristic of contingent beings is to have a quiddity that is separable from their existence, and their existence is added to this quiddity when they are realized in the external world:

“You must know that everything that has a quiddity is realised either as existing in individuals or as conceived in the mind, only inasmuch as its parts are present with it. If it has a reality other than its being in existence in one of these two modes of existence, and it is not constituted by it. Then existence is a concept added to its reality – [either as] a concomitant [or as] a non-concomitant.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 372–374.

<sup>27</sup> *Avicenna*, Remarks and Admonitions. Logic, Shams C. Inati (Trans.), Belgium 1984, 54.

The fact that existence is to be added to the quiddity implies that quiddities are entities that precede the actual existence of objects, and the concrete existence is not constitutive of quiddities. Ibn Sina notes it as follows:

“Humanity, for example, is in itself a certain reality and quiddity, and its existence in individuals or in the minds is not constitutive of it but is [only] added to it. If concrete existence were constitutive of it, it would have been impossible to represent the concept [of humanity] in the soul, free from that which is its constitutive part. And thus, it becomes impossible for the comprehension of humanity to be realised as existing in the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

However, he separates himself from the Platonic realism as well by arguing that universals cannot exist as individuals, for an individual cannot be predicated of many, stating that “a universal is not an actual existent except in thought (*andisha*)” and “the identical form of man-qua-man cannot be knower like Plato.”<sup>29</sup> Ibn Sina’s elimination of Platonic realism and nominalism as the explanatory source of the existence of quiddities while accepting their realities suggests a sort of theistic conceptualism which attributes a higher / divine mental reality to quiddities.<sup>30</sup>

According to Ibn Sina’s theory, any contingent being (as realized in the external world) suggests two things: a quiddity that precedes the individual and an existent being which realizes the quiddity in question by conferring / adding existence upon / to it. However, as Ibn Sina also points out, had each existing being possessed a quiddity, then there would have occurred an infinite regress since each existent being would have had a quiddity and been in need of a priorly existent being that confers existence upon its quiddity. There are two ways that this regress can terminate. It can either terminate at a quiddity or at an existent being. Had it terminated at a quiddity, the actual existence could have never occurred. This is because quiddities do not have any causal power to bring about existence but can only be actualized by an already existent being. So, the regress must terminate at an existent being. This being either possesses a quiddity or not. If it has a quiddity, then its existence is to be preceded by this quiddity, and that would bring us back to the regress problem. Thus, the only remaining option is that this existent being does not have any quiddity apart from being existence as such and is the source of existence. One might ask whether existence itself cannot be a quiddity. However, if we take existence to be a quiddity, the quiddity of existence must be considered distinct from its actuality based on the distinctive characteristic of quiddities. Accordingly, to realize the quiddity of existence, we will need existence prior and external to this quiddity. This implies a contradiction since the quiddity of existence is realized after the existence of existence. In this case, existence becomes additional to its quiddity and the quiddity in question cannot signify existence. Due to the same reason, existence cannot be an accident either, for an accident, like blackness, cannot exist as such

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 54 f.

<sup>29</sup> *Avicenna, The Metaphysica of Avicenna. A Critical Translation-Commentary and Analysis of the Fundamental Arguments in Avicenna’s Metaphysica in the Danish Nama-i ‘ala’i (The Book of Scientific Knowledge)*, Parviz Morewedge (Trans.), New York 1973, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Investigating whether this reality alludes to God’s mind or to the Intellects is not directly relevant to the present paper’s aim.

without attaching an already existing being. So, the whatness of existence cannot be understood through a separate quiddity, for what we refer to by existence is nothing other than actual existence. Moreover, the modality of existence as such cannot be contingent since realization of a contingent being presupposes an external being. However, as already pointed out, existence as such cannot be realized by an additional thing; it is rather the principle of realization / individuation. Therefore, existence as such is necessary in a sense that it does not need any cause to be realized and actual from all eternity.

Ibn Sina calls the source of existence / existence as such the “Necessary Existent” (God). For him, the absolute necessity cannot be a quiddity that is separable from the “Necessary Existent”. For, if something precedes absolute necessity, then it should be something either contingent or necessary. If this is something contingent, then necessity is caused by something contingent, which renders it contingent as well. That is, we cannot ascribe necessity to it anymore. Therefore, the former option is invalid. The second option, which suggests that absolute necessity is the cause of the Necessary Existent, is not valid for him, either, since he argues that a common quiddity cannot be realized or come into existence without the Necessary Existent itself. If we take the necessary existence to be a common essence, then it needs the Necessary Existent to be realized and to gain external existence. To put it differently, if absolute necessity is caused by something necessary, then the quiddity of necessity comes posterior to its exemplification, that is, in order to individuate its quiddity, the Necessary Existent must exist prior to its quiddity, which is contradictory.<sup>31</sup>

Ibn Sina is aware of the implications of denying any quiddity to the Necessary Existent in terms of attributing to God any qualities that the *Quranic* descriptions about God require. In *Logic of Remarks and Admonitions*, he proposes a predication theory that incorporates three kinds of predications. The first one is the essential predications that constitute the definition of beings in reference to their *genus* and *differentia*, like the definition of human being as rational animal. The essential predicate is “the constitutive” in the sense that “the subject requires for the realization of its quiddity” but not for its external existence.<sup>32</sup> This is the ground through which the subject is qualified by other attributes and seems to correspond to the first category of “attributes of essence” in *Bahshamī* theory. For Ibn Sina, the necessary existence is the ground of divine attributes, and “there is no quiddity for the Necessary Existent other than its being the Necessary Existent” which is its “thatness [*Inniyya*].”<sup>33</sup> It might sound confusing that while denying any quiddity to God, he claims that the Necessary Existent’s quiddity is its thatness. As explained before, he does not associate any quiddity with God in reference to an abstracted mental entity or property. But as the referent of the term “the Necessary Existent” and as its “whatness”, Ibn Sina denotes its “thatness”, suggesting that “whatness” and “thatness” are conceptually inseparable for the Necessary Existent.

The second category of attributes is the non-constitutive concomitant accidental attributes “which accompany the quiddity without being a part of it,”<sup>34</sup> although they are inseparable

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Avicenna, The Metaphysics of the Healing*, Michael Marmura (Trans.), Utah 2005, 274–277.

<sup>32</sup> Id., *Remarks and Admonitions* (see fn. 27), 54.

<sup>33</sup> Id., *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (see fn. 31), 276.

<sup>34</sup> Id., *Remarks and Admonitions* (see fn. 27), 56.

from the subject. Ibn Sina gives the example of a triangle, the constitutive parts of which are three sides and the necessary concomitant of which is “having two angles equal to two right angles.”<sup>35</sup> This category is reminiscent of the second category of the *Bahshamī* states theory, according to which attributes in this category are considered to be the states necessarily entailed by the attribute of essence. For both *Bahshamī* theology and Ibn Sina, divine attributes are the necessary entailments of God’s essence but neither constitute nor add anything to divine essence. But their difference is that Ibn Sina does not attribute any incomprehensible ontological status to the attributes in this category. Besides that, the *Bahshamī* analysis was not able to clearly explain how God’s attribute of essence grounds divine attributes.

It seems to me that Ibn Sina’s predication theory can provide an explanation as to how the Necessary Existent grounds divine attributes. Ibn Sina employs mainly three ways in which he describes how the Necessary Existent explains various divine attributes. The first way is the negation of some qualities from the Necessary Existent such as non-existence, being caused, or involving matter. It is, for example, denuded of matter in terms of not being associated with any quiddity or composition. Any individual existent denuded of matter is a thinking being, so by virtue of being the Necessary Existent, God is an immaterial thinking being. Relational qualities constitute the second kind. They are the concomitants of the Necessary Existent in relation to the creatures. The Necessary Existent’s being the ultimate source of the contingent beings as explained previously is included in this category. His being the source of other existents depends on the sufficient-reason principle that presupposes a necessary (uncaused) existent, which is the ultimate source of the contingent beings. Thus, by virtue of being the Necessary Existent, God grounds his attribute of omnipotence. The third category is the combination of the former two. For instance, having free will is a combination of his being omniscient and his being the source of other existent beings. So again, by virtue of being the Necessary Existent, God grounds his attribute of being free. Once the positive properties are grounded in God, other properties can easily be negated on this basis.

According to al-Ghazali, the concept of the absolute existence, i. e., “[e]xistence without quiddity and a real [nature] is unintelligible.”<sup>36</sup> He argues that just as it is impossible to comprehend “an unattached non-existence”, the absolute existence without reference to any quiddity cannot be comprehended. For him, existence can only be made sense of in relation to a determinate “real nature”. He argues that “[n]othing remains with the denial of reality save the verbal utterance ‘existence’, having basically no referent when not related to a quiddity.”<sup>37</sup> Al-Ghazali deems Ibn Sina’s attempt to identify God’s essence with his necessary existence in order to avoid the incomprehensibility of his notion of God to be unsuccessful since being necessary, for al-Ghazali, refers only to the “denial of [a] cause [for his existence]” and “[t]his [denial] is [pure] negation, through which the reality of an essence is not established.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>36</sup> *Al-Ghazali, The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Michael E. Marmura (Trans.), Utah 2000, 117.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 118.

Indeed, Ibn Sina's attempt to draw an identity between God and the absolute / necessary existence might not be regarded as negative as al-Ghazali asserts. His analysis of the absolute existence can be considered as an endeavor to determine the characteristics of the absolute existence. Although Ibn Sina's concomitance theory might be taken to draw on a kind of *via negativa* in terms of God's nature, this negative language seems to pertain only to a methodological negation. By methodological negation, I refer to the way of negative reasoning which is designated for reaching God's attributes or the attributes of the absolute existence; the negation does not necessarily have to be related to God's nature ultimately. More precisely, even though Ibn Sina infers the attributes of God by negating some relations to him, it does not mean that these negations presuppose a totally incomprehensible transcendence in God. On the contrary, they necessitate some affirmations regarding God's nature. What Ibn Sina seems to be concerned with is the idea that nothing, even his attributes, can precede God in any sense since He is not exemplifying anything to fulfill his existence. He is, rather, a mode of existence, i. e., the Necessary Existence, from which the perfections such as wisdom and goodness follow necessarily.

Whether Ibn Sina's notion of the Necessary Existent corresponds to the God of philosophers, namely, a concept of God that is Neoplatonic in nature, or to the God of Islam has been controversial. For Parwiz Morewedge, Ibn Sina's concept of the Necessary Existent does not exactly correspond to the theistic notion of the perfect being, the God of Islam in particular since, as Morewedge argues, the Necessary Existent is not a substance, and, thus, it is not an individual.<sup>39</sup> It is true that Ibn Sina dismisses any categorical classification for the Necessary Existent and places it above all categories, including substances; however, as argued above, this relates to his ontological grounding of being and does not necessarily entail that the Necessary Existent is not an individual. Despite apparent Neoplatonic features in his exploration of the Necessary Existent, Ibn Sina's concept of the One is distinguished from that of Plotinus, which disregards the One as an individual, by clear theistic characteristics. As Jules Janssens points out, Ibn Sina does not appear reluctant in appealing to the *Quranic* description of God and even in defining "the goal of metaphysics as being the knowledge of God-Allah, *ma'rifa bi-Allah*" and also exploring God's attributes in association with the *Quranic* divine names.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Ian R. Netton argues that Ibn Sina uses a "dual style of designating the divinity, negative and positive" between Neoplatonism and *Quran* by ascribing positive attributes to God only in a relational way without referring to any quiddity as an ontological grounding.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, there is undeniable tension between Ibn Sina's overall notion of God and the God of Islam since his notion of the Necessary Existent comes as a full package with some other metaphysical presumptions. Among them are the eternity of creation, the emanation scheme in a non-interventionist fashion, and God's lack of knowledge of particulars. However, it seems to me that anyone who endorses an Avicennan style of the ontological

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Parwiz Morewedge, Ibn Sina Avicenna and Malcolm and The Ontological Argument, in: *The Monist* 54 (1970) 234–249, at 239.

<sup>40</sup> Jules Janssens, Ibn Sina's Ideas of Ultimate Realities. Neoplatonism and the Qur'an as Problem-Solving Paradigms in the Avicennian System, in: *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 10 (1987) 252–271, at 263.

<sup>41</sup> Ian R. Netton, *Allah Transcendent. Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, Oxon 1994, 160.

grounding concerning divine attributes does not have to buy into the full-package of his concept of God with further controversial metaphysical presumptions. She can make use of Ibn Sina's theory insofar as it eliminates the problems that theistic conceptualism, theistic activism, and the doctrine of divine simplicity encounter concerning divine attributes. First of all, it gives a satisfactory explanation on how divine attributes are ontologically grounded in God without violating divine aseity or sovereignty. In this regard, it accommodates the intuitions of the theistic activist that God's existence should be the ontological ground of his nature and that he should not be exemplifying any property that has an independent reality apart from God, without being confronted with the bootstrapping objection. Similarly, it can complement the truthmaker theory as combined with the doctrine of divine simplicity in that it takes the Necessary Existent to be the truthmaker of the propositions and properties that are ascribed to him and by providing an alternative identity thesis where divine attributes are taken to be the descriptive states of the various aspects of the Necessary Existent.

Ibn Sina seems not to be committed to a unified theory of predication for God and contingent beings. His predication account for contingent beings can be interpreted as a theory of exemplifiability where a certain quiddity precedes the existence of the substance, whereas in his predication account for God, the substance precedes the concomitants. His two-fold theory not only offers a solution to the problem of the ontology and semantics of divine attributes, but also might be promising in providing a holistic account for the analysis of abstract objects from a theistic perspective, which is the topic for another paper.

Der Aufsatz argumentiert dafür, dass Ibn Sinas (Avicenna) Analyse der Existenz in modaler Hinsicht und seine Theorie der Konkomitanz in Bezug auf Gottes Eigenschaften die Probleme jener zeitgenössischen Theorien lösen können, die einen nicht-nominalistischen und nicht-platonischen realistischen Rahmen annehmen. Dabei werden zunächst drei zeitgenössische Ansichten zu den abstrakten Objekten, nämlich der göttliche Konzeptualismus, der theistische Aktivismus und die göttliche Einfachheit, analysiert, und dann die Probleme angesprochen, mit denen sie konfrontiert sind – unter besonderer Beachtung des Problems der Gründung der göttlichen Attribute in Gott. Anschließend wird eine prominente Mu'tazilitische Prädikationstheorie, die Zustandstheorie (*Ahwāl*-Theorie), untersucht, da sie Ibn Sinas Lösung des Gründungsproblems antizipiert. Schlussendlich wird analysiert, inwiefern Ibn Sinas Prädikationstheorie, die erhebliche Ähnlichkeiten mit der Zustandstheorie aufweist, dem Theisten helfen kann, das Gründungsproblem zu lösen, ohne die göttliche Aseität oder Souveränität zu verletzen oder zum Bootstrapping-Problem zu führen.