Avicenna’s Philosophical Approach to the Qur’an in the Light of His Tafsîr Sûrat al-Ikhlâş

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As one of the most outstanding philosophers (falâsîfâ) in the Muslim world, Avicenna (Ibn Sînâ, d. 428/1037) showed a great interest in the Qur’an and in Islamic religion in general. Although in most of his works he quotes ayas from the Qur’an, the way he uses and interprets them has not been studied thoroughly until now. Modern research mainly considers Avicenna as an Arabic Aristotelian, whose thought reflects an Alexandrian, Neo-Platonic reading of Aristotle. True as this may be, the Islamic elements in Avicenna’s writings are all too often bypassed as mere superficial and secondary concessions to his religious and cultural environment.

In order to clarify Avicenna’s approach to the Qur’an and to establish the nature of his philosophical reading of the Qur’anic text, we are currently preparing an annotated French translation of his six small treatises on Tafsîr. As a preliminary result of our research, the present article raises the question of the relationship between Avicenna’s metaphysics and the Qur’an, based on his Tafsîr Sûrat al-Ikhlâş (Q. 112).

Avicenna’s Risâla al-adhawiyya fi amr al-ma‘âd contains a passage about the aims of tafsîr al-Qur’ân, which serves as a perfect introduction to his philosophical reading of Sûrat al-Ikhlâş. He claims that the task of the philosopher when interpreting the Qur’an is to assert tawhîd: the absolute unity and uniqueness of God. The numerous ayas describing God in anthropomorphic terms are to be taken in a metaphorical sense: they are only images meant for the common people, who would be confused and led astray by a theoretical exposition of tawhîd, as their minds are unable to understand it. Avicenna then gives the following definition of tawhîd:

To acknowledge that the Creator is one, that He is sanctified above the how many and the how, the where and when, position and change, so
that the belief might arise that He is one essence, and cannot possibly have an associate in species, nor have an existential (wujūdī) part – be it a part that has a quantitative existence or that exists in the mind – and that this essence cannot be outside nor inside the world, nor be subject to a precise localisation. [However,] it is forbidden to expose this to the common people.

Next, Avicenna argues that the Torah and the Qur’an, when speaking about the essence of God, had to use anthropomorphic expressions, since they are the only ones accessible to the common people. The aim of any philosophical reading of the Qur’an is therefore to restore pure tawḥīd by interpreting, allegorically, the figurative language of the Prophet.⁵

Applying this general principle as exposed in his ʿAdḥawiyya, Avicenna devoted a tafsīr to Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, which comprises one of the longest of his Qur’ānic commentaries.⁶ This treatise is particularly important for our present purpose as Avicenna uses here his main metaphysical concepts – such as huwiyya, wājib al-wujūd, mumkin al-wujūd, lawāzīm, muqawwimāt – in order to interpret the revealed text.⁷ However, if the tools used by Avicenna are philosophical, his aim is theological: it is to establish the radicality of tawḥīd by a philosophical analysis of every word of the sura. Although this sura – also known as Sūrat al-Tawḥīd and al-Ṣamadiyya – is generally considered as the purest expression of God’s unity and uniqueness in the Qur’an, the text still needs, according to Avicenna, a philosophical exegesis in order to prove that what is said about God in the four ayas of the sura is in no way contradicting His absolute simplicity. The author’s main point is that in the first two ayas, only huwa refers to the Necessary Existent in Himself, whereas all the remaining words (Allāh, aḥad, al-ṣamad) are necessary concomitants (lawāzīm) caused by the Necessary Existent. As we shall see, this radical interpretation, which is at variance with all previous commentaries on Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ,⁸ although being in line with Avicenna’s general conception of the divine attributes,⁹ raises some startling questions.

Without entering into all details of the complex argumentation developed in this very condensed text, Avicenna’s interpretation of Q. 112 can be summarised as follows.

**Qul huwa Allāhu aḥad (Q. 112:1)**

Avicenna takes the word huwa as referring to the 'absolute He' (al-huwa al-муţlaq), whose 'ipseity' (huwiyya) is not dependent on another being, as ‘He is He by His own essence’ (huwa huwa li-dhāṭīhi). This is the Necessary Existent (wājib al-wujūd) whose quiddity (māhiyya) is identical with His existence (wujūd): His essence is that He exists. The absolute huwiyya cannot be expressed by any name (ism); it can only be explained (sharḥ) by the concomitants (lawāzīm) that necessarily follow from His
being,¹⁰ and not by His constituents (*muqawwimāt*), since He has no constituents at all, His essence being absolutely one.¹¹

As the ipseity of the Necessary Existent is in itself unknowable, it can only be approached by its concomitants:¹²

The ipseity of the first principle (*al-mabda‘ al-awwal*) has a great number of concomitants, but these concomitants are disposed in a certain order (*mutarattaba*); moreover, the concomitants are caused (*ma‘lūlāt*). From that which is the One, the True, the Simple, in all aspects, only one thing can proceed (*yasdur*), be it in a descending order, from Him onwards, vertically and horizontally (*‘alā‘l-tartib al-nāzil min ‘indahu ūlān wa-c‘ārdan*), so that the close concomitant (*al-lāzīm al-qarīb*) is more able to make known (*ashaddu ta‘rifan*)¹³ (the first principle) than the distant concomitant (*al-lāzīm al-ba‘id*).

This passage obviously describes the emanation of the chain of beings, starting with the cosmic Intelligences, one by one (as from the one only one can proceed, according to a well known Neo-Platonic principle), in a descending hierarchical order. Although it is not clear what Avicenna means by ‘ūlān wa-c‘ārdan’,¹⁴ the doctrine contained in this passage is truly Avicennian. According to the Neo-Platonic inspiration of Avicenna’s cosmology, based on emanation, all ‘creatures’¹⁵ necessarily proceed from the perfection of the Necessary Existent: so they are His *lawāzim* or necessary concomitants. Being unknowable in His ipseity, the Necessary Existent can only be known through His ‘creation’, i.e. through the hierarchy of beings that proceed from Him. The higher a being is situated in ‘the great chain of being’ (to use Arthur Lovejoy’s famous expression),¹⁶ the more it is able to ‘make known’ the Necessary Existent.¹⁷

Besides close and distant concomitants, Avicenna furthermore distinguishes in his *Tafsīr* relative and negative concomitants:¹⁸

Among the concomitants, some express a relation (*iḍāfiyya*) and others a negation (*salbiyya*). The relative concomitants are more able to make known (*ashaddu ta‘rifan*) than the negative. But what makes known in the most perfect way is the concomitant that is both relative and negative.

This distinction between ‘relative’, ‘negative’ and a ‘combination of both’ is generally used by Avicenna in his classification of the divine attributes: besides negative attributes which express God’s otherness from creation and relative or positive ones which express His relation to creation, there are attributes combining both negative and positive aspects.¹⁹
Indeed, turning in his *Tafsîr* to the next word of the Qur’anic aya, *Allāh*, Avicenna states immediately after the passage translated above:

This is why this ipseity is called Allāh, as the deity (*al-ilāh*) is the one with whom all the other beings are in relation, whereas he is not related at all to them. The absolute deity (*al-ilāh al-muṭlaq*) is the one who is disposed in such a way to all beings: the fact that others are related to him expresses a relation (*idāfi*), the fact that He is not related to something else, expresses a negation ... So we have shown that the name *Allāh* encompasses both [i.e. relation and negation], without any possible doubt. The aya thus continues by mentioning *Allāh*, as what reveals the meaning of the word *huwa* and explains it.

Therefore, ‘the divinity’ (*al-ilāhiyya*) is the first concomitant of the Necessary Existent, as it expresses at the same time a negative and a positive relation: it is a negative concomitant in so far as it denies that the quiddity of the Necessary Existent is distinct from his existence; it is also a positive concomitant, as it implies that the Necessary Existent is the first principle (*al-mabda’ al-awwal*).

The first principle has no closer concomitant than the necessity of existence (*lā yalzamuha lāzīm aqdam min wujîb al-wujûd*). Hence it is the Necessary Existent. By means of His existence, it belongs to Him that He is the principle of all that He is not (*bi-wāsiṭat wujûdihi yalzamuha annahu mabda’ al-kull mà ‘adâhu*). The addition of these two things is the divinity (*wa-majmū’ ḥādhayn al-amrayn huwa al-ilāhiyya*).

In other words: the unknowable essence of the Necessary Existent manifests itself by its closest concomitant – ‘the divinity’ – expressed by the name Allāh. Such is the meaning of the first two words of the sura.

As He indicates by His word *huwa* that the pure and simple ipseity is a reality that cannot be expressed otherwise than [by saying] that He is He, and given the fact that the only way to make it [i.e. this ipseity] known, is by one of its concomitants, He mentions immediately after this the concomitant which is the closest to it: the divinity, that combines two concomitants, a negative and a positive one.

From the preceding passages it appears that Avicenna applies in his *Tafsîr* the term ‘concomitant’ (*lāzīm*) both to the beings proceeding from the Necessary Existent and to His attributes, or at least to the name Allāh and the property of ‘divinity’, which are explicitly designated as concomitants of the absolute *huwiyya*.

Next, the aya states, according to Avicenna’s interpretation, that the Necessary Existent’s inaccessible essence, manifested through its concomitant Allāh, is ‘one’
This means that His essence is absolutely one in itself, having no constituents, while its multiple concomitants are all caused. As 'He is He by His own essence', there is no kind of division in Him. He can only be said 'one' in an analogical way (bi'l-tashkik), as His unity, distinct from the numerical one, transcends the different forms of unity which are peculiar to the beings caused by Him.

After this lengthy philosophical analysis of the first aya of the sura, which takes up two thirds of the whole Tafsir, Avicenna is now able to explain the remaining three ayas.

**Allāhu'l-ṣamad (Q. 112:2)**

Relying on the current interpretation given to the problematic word al-ṣamad by the muftassirūn, who understand it in two quite different ways, as meaning either 'what has no hollowness' (lä jawf lahu) or 'the master' (al-sayyid), Avicenna takes the term in both senses. As a concomitant of the same kind as al-ilāhiyya, its first sense is negative – the Necessary Existent has no quiddity which is distinct from His essence – and its second sense is positive: the affirmation that He is the principle of all beings (mabda' al-kull). In this way, the word al-ṣamad confirms the meaning of the name Allāh, which expresses the same negation and affirmation.

The first two ayas thus refer to the unknowable huwiyya of the Necessary Existent, which is revealed by its closest concomitants: Allāh and al-ṣamad.

**Lam yalid wa-lam yūlad (Q. 112:3)**

This aya, according to Avicenna, states that the Necessary Existent is the principle of all beings, but without affecting His absolute unity. All things proceed from His liberality (jūd) by emanation (fayd), but it is impossible that something similar to Him proceeds from Him, as nothing can participate in His quiddity nor can share the same quiddity with Him. The quiddity of the Necessary Existent is identical with His existence, whereas the possible existents proceeding from Him have a quiddity distinct from their existence. Hence, He has no 'children', as 'He has not begotten' (lam yalid). 'He was not begotten' (lam yūlad), as 'He is He by His own essence', and does not depend on anything else.

**Wa-lam yakun lahu kufu'an aḥad (Q. 112:4)**

The last aya of the sura contains the logical conclusion of what precedes. The Necessary Existent has no equal: nothing shares the same quiddity with Him; nothing is equal to Him in the necessity of existence. He is the only Necessary Existent by Himself; hence He is absolutely one and unique.
After summarising his interpretation of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, Avicenna concludes his *Tafsīr* with the following statement:

As the ultimate aim of those who pursue the sciences in their totality is the knowledge of God’s essence and attributes (*ṣifāt*) and the way His actions proceed from Him, and as this sura refers to the path which reveals and points to all that concerns the study of God’s essence, it is certainly equivalent to a third of the Qur’an.

This is exactly the goal of any philosophical reading of the Qur’an, according to Avicenna, as he clearly expressed it in his *Risāla al-adḥawiyya*.

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However impressive Avicenna’s reading of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* may be, his interpretation of the first two ayas raises a doctrinal problem. Throughout his *Tafsīr*, he repeats time and again that *Allāh* and ‘the divinity’ (*al-ilāhiyya*), along with *al-ṣamad*, are close concomitants of the Necessary Existent, that are ‘making known’ His ipseity which is unknowable in itself, in the same way as His ipseity is ‘made known’ by the hierarchy of beings emanating from it by necessity. In other words, the *Tafsīr* presents as concomitants, caused (*mal-lūl*) by the Necessary Existent, both the multiplicity of emanated beings or ‘creatures’ (which is common Avicennian doctrine) and of divine attributes such as *al-ṣamad*, even going as far as to qualify the name *Allāh* and ‘the divinity’ as caused concomitants of the Necessary Existent. Or, to put it in still other terms: Avicenna seems to introduce an ontological distinction between, on the one hand, *huwa* – which refers to the uncaused ipseity of the Necessary Existent – and, on the other, *Allāh* and *al-ṣamad*, the closest concomitants of the Necessary Existent which, as concomitants, are caused by Him.

This observation initially led us to have some doubts about the attribution of the text to Avicenna. But after closer study, these doubts have almost entirely disappeared, although a main difficulty subsists.

The manuscript tradition is unanimous in ascribing the *Tafsīr* to Avicenna. According to one of its editors, al-Khaṭīb, and also to Mahdavī, there are no less than 39 manuscripts, the oldest dated one being MS Chester Beatty 3045, copied in 699/1299. There exist several commentaries on the *Tafsīr* (for instance by Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Asc ad-Ṣādiqī, d. 918/1512); furthermore, the treatise was translated into Persian, Turkish and Urdu. All manuscripts, translations, commentaries and editions present it under the name of Avicenna.

Even stronger than this external evidence is the internal evidence we obtained by a close study of the contents of the treatise: the terminology is undoubtedly Avicennian; moreover, we were able to trace for almost every passage of the *Tafsīr*, parallel
passages in the main works of Avicenna, such as the ‘Logic’ and the ‘Metaphysics’ of the Shifā', the 'Logic of the Orientals', the Ishārāt and the Ta‘liqāt. Of all this, we can only briefly present here some samples.

The main arguments of Avicenna’s reading of Sūrat al-Ikhlās are summarised at the beginning of the fourth chapter of Book 8 of the ‘Metaphysics’ of the Shifā', but without any reference to the Qur’an. Avicenna states here that the Necessary Existent is one, that nothing is sharing with Him an equal rank and thus that nothing other than He is a necessary existence:35

He is the principle (mabda’) of the necessitation of the existence of everything, necessitating (each thing) either in a primary manner or through an intermediary. If the existence of everything other than Him derives from His existence, He is (the) first; ‘The Necessary Existent does not become multiple in any respect whatsoever and His essence is utterly unitary, pure truth’; ‘What we mean by our statement that He is one in essence and does not become multiple is that He is as such in His essence. If, thereafter, many positive and negative relations (idāfāt ī‘ābiyya wa-salbiyya) become attendant on Him, these are necessary concomitants of the essence that are caused by the essence (lawāzīm li‘l-dhāt ma‘lūla li‘l-dhāt); they exist after the existence of the essence, are not constituent of the essence (layṣa muqawwim li‘l-dhāt), and are not parts of it.’

In this passage of the ‘Metaphysics’, Avicenna uses his doctrine of the concomitants in order to establish the absolute unity and uniqueness of the divine essence, just as he does in the Tafsīr. Although the notion of concomitants is central to Avicenna’s logic,36 as it is to his metaphysics, it is mainly in his Ta‘liqāt that he applies it to tawhīd, in a way which closely resembles the Tafsīr. Thus, he writes in the Ta‘liqāt:37

The nature (kunh) and the essence (ḥaqqā) of the First cannot be grasped by human minds. He has an essence (ḥaqqā) for which we have no name. The necessity of existence is either the explanation (sharḥ) of the name of this essence or one of its concomitants. In fact, it is the most particular (akḥāṣṣ) and the first of its concomitants, as it belongs to it without the intermediary of another concomitant. As to all the other concomitants, some of them exist through the intermediary of the others. In the same way, oneness (al-wahda) is the most particular of the concomitants [of this essence], as it is the real oneness that belongs to it, whereas all the other [kinds of oneness], have necessarily a quiddity [distinct from] existence. But [real oneness] belongs to the most particular of its attributes (ṣifāt), as nothing shares with it in existence and trueness, existence and trueness being interrelated.
This is indeed very close to what Avicenna says in his Tafsîr: the absolute huwiyya of the Necessary Existent cannot be expressed by a name (ism); it can only be explained (sharh) by its concomitants (lawâzim); ‘there does not belong to Him a closer concomitant than the necessity of existence’ (‘lâ yalzamuhu lâzim aqdam min wujûb al-wujûd’).38

In another passage of the Ta’liqât, Avicenna states that:39

The concomitants of the First proceed from Him, as they are not present in Him. For this reason, they do not introduce any multiplicity in Him, as He is their principle (mabda‘) ... The concomitants of the First, in so far as He is their principle, proceed from Him; they are not linked to Him from something else, nor are they present in Him. His attributes (ṣifât) are concomitant to His essence (lâzima li-dhätihi), in so far as they proceed from Him, not in so far as they are present in Him. For this reason, He is not multiplied by them, as He is the one who makes them necessary. These concomitants and these attributes are concomitant to His essence as He is He, what means that He is their cause (sabab), and not something else ... The concomitant of the First can only be one and simple, as from the one only one can proceed. The next concomitant is the concomitant of His [first] concomitant; the third concomitant is the concomitant of [the second] concomitant, and so on. The multiplicity of the concomitants of the First appears in this way.

This again is very close to the argument developed in the Tafsîr.40

Explaining further in the Ta’liqât that there is no plurality in the Necessary Existent by Himself, Avicenna states that there cannot be a diversity of attributes in His essence: if this were the case, the attributes would be constitutive parts of His essence, so that His essence would be dependent on these parts and would no longer be one. In consequence, all the attributes are concomitants of his essence:41

The oneness in the First proceeds from Him (‘anhu) and is in Him (fi-hi) as it is one of His concomitants.

As we have seen, Avicenna establishes in his Tafsîr Sûrat al-Ikhlâs, with philosophical arguments taken from his metaphysics, God’s absolute unity and uniqueness, which is not hampered by the multiple concomitants proceeding from Him. At the same time, he states that God’s essence, unknowable in itself, is revealed to the human mind by its concomitants. This notion of ‘concomitant’ is central to the treatise, whereas the term ṣifât (‘attributes’) only occurs once, at the very end of the Tafsîr.42 Nevertheless, if we read the text carefully, it is clear that Avicenna means here by ‘concomitants’ both God’s attributes and the beings proceeding from Him.
The parallel passages from the Taʾliqāt confirm this: all the attributes are concomitants, but not all the concomitants are attributes.

Although this selection of passages taken from the ‘Metaphysics’ of the Shifa and the Taʾliqāt, which could be easily multiplied, sufficiently proves that the doctrine exposed in the Tafsīr is genuinely Avicennian, there still remains a major problem: the author states explicitly that Allāh and ‘the divinity’ (al-ilāhiyya) are concomitants of the Necessary Existent proceeding from Him and thus caused by Him. The unknowable huwiyya of the Necessary Existent reveals itself by the name Allāh and ‘the divinity;’ the latter, as a concomitant expressing at the same time negative and positive relations, seems to encompass all the divine attributes. By establishing an ontological distinction between huwa and Allāh, Avicenna’s Tafsīr seems at variance with the previous interpretations of the aya, which all place the two terms somehow on the same level, huwa being considered as a pronoun introducing Allāh. Avicenna’s exegesis on the contrary, aims at establishing a radical tawḥīd, devoid of any form of tashbīh: even the name Allāh and ‘the divinity’ cannot be applied to the huwiyya of the Necessary Existent. We know of no other texts by Avicenna in which Allāh or ‘the divinity’ are qualified as concomitants or attributes of the Necessary Existent.

Jules Janssens has rightly noticed the absence, in the Tafsīr, of any reference to creation: the concomitants proceed from the Necessary Existent by emanation (fayḍ, šudūr). Rather than being an indication in favour of the fact that the Tafsīr was written at a very early stage in Avicenna’s life, as Janssens assumed, we would suggest that the absence of creation could be explained in the light of Avicenna’s interpretation of the sura. If he had claimed that all concomitants and attributes, including Allāh and ‘divinity’, are ‘created’, Avicenna would have been very close to contemporary Ismāʿīlī theology. According to Ismāʿīlī authors, such as Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sījestānī (d. after 361/971) and Ḥāmid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), the name Allāh and all the divine attributes do not refer to the Creator (mubdiʿ), but to the first created being (al-mubdaʿ al-awwal), the Intellect.

Of course, this is not Avicenna’s opinion! Nevertheless, his Tafsīr implies that God, as He reveals Himself in the Qur’an, is ‘caused’ by an emanation proceeding from the Necessary Existent. This seems at first sight a daring statement and it is perhaps for this reason that Avicenna avoided using the term ‘attributes’ in his Tafsīr. However, it is more likely that this assertion should not be understood too radically, as becomes clear from the post-Avicennian tradition.

Some mufassirūn, posterior to Avicenna and manifestly under his influence, introduce a ‘gradation’ within the three words which form the first aya of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ. This is the case in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Tafsīr, according to which the three terms refer to three different ‘stations’ (maqāmāt) among ‘those who seek (the divine knowledge)’ (al-ṭālibūn). Hamza and Rizvi summarise al-Rāzī’s text as follows: ‘huwa signifies the
undifferentiated one essence that alone requires existence through itself and through whom all other essences are brought into existence, at the level of huwa there is no existence except God. The next term is that of differentiation: God exists – the Lord over His creation which also exists. The third level is that of re-uniting multiplicity to the One.’

In a similar way, the Sufi ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 736/1336), a disciple of Ibn al-ʿArabi, uses the terms huwa and Allāh to denote different aspects of the divine being. Thus huwa is “an expression for the pure unitive reality, for the essence qua essence without consideration of the attributes,” while Allāh signifies “the essence with the totality of the attributes.” The same distinction is made by Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640):

Huwa Allāh is one single reality and one essence. What is expressed by the two [terms] is on the one hand the necessary existence (al-wujūd al-wājibī) and the unique essence (al-dhāt al-ahādīyya), on the other hand what encompasses the totality of the attributes of perfection and the most beautiful names. The object of the two approaches we mentioned is a unique simple reality, which is, according to the first approach, ipseity (huwīyya), and according to the second, divinity (ilāhiyya); in the same way it is, according to the first expression, existence (wujūd), and according to the second, name (ism) and attribute (sīfa).

This is probably the key leading to a correct understanding of the ontological distinction Avicenna introduced in his interpretation of the first aya of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ: the unknown and unknowable huwīyya of the Necessary Existent reveals itself through the attributes of His divinity. Avicenna could therefore be considered as a main source of what was to become a major topic in later Sufi and Twelver Shiʿī theology: the distinction between the Deus absconditus and the Deus revelatus, to use Corbin’s terminology.

Further investigations are needed before we will be able to fully measure the influence of Avicenna’s philosophical reading of the Qur’an on later tafsīr. Much further research is also necessary before we may answer the question raised at the beginning of this article: to what extent Avicenna’s metaphysics were influenced by his reading and understanding of the Qur’an? For the time being, our study of his Qur’anic commentaries clearly shows that the references to the Qur’an occurring in his philosophical works are not just superficial and secondary ‘foreign’ elements in his thought.

NOTES
1 On the religious orientation of Avicenna’s philosophy, see the inspiring remarks of Jules Janssens, ‘Ibn Sinā (Avicenne): un projet “religieux” de philosophie?’ in Jan R. Aertsen and


6 There exist no less than four different editions of Avicenna’s *Tafsîr Sûrat al-Ikhlâs* (or *Tafsîr al-Samadiyya*): (1) The oldest one, published in Delhi in 1893–4 under the title *Tafsîr Sûratay al-Ikhlâs waʾl-Falaq*, was not accessible to us; (2) Next, the treatise was printed in Muhyiʾil-Dîn Şâbî al-Kurdi’s *Jâmiʿ al-badâʾi* (Cairo: Matbaʾat al-Saʿâda, 1917), pp. 15–24, from an unknown manuscript; (3) Ḥasan ʿĀṣī, al-Tafsîr al-Qurʾānî, pp. 104–13, based his ‘critical’ edition on three manuscripts (Damascus, Zâhiriyâ 3512; Istanbul, Nuruosmaniye 4894; Istanbul, Ahmet III 3447) and on the version printed by al-Kurdi; (4) ʿAbd Allâh ʿAbd al-Rahmân al-Khatib, *Tafsîr Sûrat al-Ikhlâs liʾl-shaykh al-raʾis Abî ʿAlî al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sinâ*, al-Machriq 76 (2002), pp. 123–39, ignoring ʿĀṣī’s edition, used three other manuscripts (Dublin, Chester Beatty 3045; Qum, Kitâbahâne Marʿasî 243; Istanbul, Sîlîyemâneyyâ, Bağdathî Wahha Efendi 143) and the Delhi edition of 1893–4. In our forthcoming book on Avicenna’s philosophical *tafsîr* we will discuss the important textual variants occurring in all these editions. All references in the present article are to ʿĀṣī’s edition.


8 This becomes obvious at once when we look at the rich collection of commentaries on Q. 112 translated in Feras Hamza and Sajjad Rizvi (eds), *An Anthology of Qur’anic Commentaries. Volume I: On the Nature of the Divine*, Qur’anic Studies Series, 5 (Oxford and London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2008), pp. 491–575, of which the first six (pp. 495–512) are prior to Avicenna. Unfortunately, the editors of this volume did not include Avicenna’s philosophical exegesis of the Qur’an in their project.


10 Ibn Sinâ, *Tafsîr Sûrat al-Ikhlâs*, p. 106. In Avicenna’s technical terminology, the ‘concomitant’ (läzîm, pl. lawâzîm) is ‘that quality which necessarily attaches to the
essence – by virtue of the essence – yet without being a constituent of the essence’ (Shams C. Inati, Ibn Sinâ. Remarks and Admonitions. Part One: Logic (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), p. 17). In other terms, the läzïm is a ‘necessary attribute of a given quiddity’; cf. Tiana Koutzarova, Das Transzendente bei Ibn Sinâ. Zur Metaphysik als Wissenschaft erster Begriffsnah und Urteilsprinzipien, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies, 79 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), who translates läzïm as ‘notwendiges Attribut der Washeiten’: ‘Für die Begriffsinhalte “Seiend” und “Eines” verwendet Ibn Sinâ im allgemeinen, d.h. bei der Bestimmung ihres Verhältnisses zu den Washeiten als solchen – den Ausdruck lawâzïm, der als “Attribute” oder “untrennbar folgenden Bestimmungen” wiedergegeben werden kann’ (p. 123). In this first part of his Tafsîr, Avicenna thus states that the Necessary Existent cannot be named and known in Himself, but only through the concomitants that by necessity proceed from Him.

11 Ibn Sinâ, Tafsîr Sûrat al-Ikhlâs, p. 107. This is common Avicennian doctrine: the Necessary Existent has no constituents as He is free from any kind of composition, such as matter and form, genus and differentia, etc.; cf. Wolfson, ‘Avicenna’, pp. 143–4.


13 On the technical meaning of ta’rîf in Avicenna’s writings, see Goichon, Lexique, p. 221.

14 This puzzling sentence has an exact parallel in the Kitâb al-ishârât, ed. Sulaymân Dunyû, Dhakhâ’ir al-‘Arab, 22 (4 vols, Cairo: Dâr al-Ma‘ârif, 1985), vol. 3, p. 278 (‘fi silsilat al-tartîb al-nâzîl min ‘indahu tâlân wa-‘ârdân’) where it appears in a similar context related to the emanation of a hierarchy of beings (including the cosmic Intelligences) out of the Necessary Existent. Naṣîr al-Dîn al-Tûsî comments on this passage as follows (also p. 278): ‘the science of the First is an act that belongs to Him by His essence and this science encompasses the totality of the existents. He apprehends intellectually what succeeds to Him in the order of being, namely the first caused existent, which, in its turn, is the cause of what succeeds to it in the order of being. Knowing a cause perfectly means to know all the concomitants that necessarily proceed from this cause. Thus, the First apprehends intellectually all the things caused by the first caused existent, because all these things belong to a chain of beings that proceed from the first caused existent and end at it. This descending chain can be either vertical (tâlân) or horizontal (ârdân).’ By ‘vertical’, al-Tûsî means the chain of the caused beings that are put in an order ending at the first caused existent. By ‘horizontal’, he means the chain of accidents (hâwâdîth) that are put in an order not ending directly at the first caused existent, but nevertheless related to it insofar as this chain of accidents needs the first caused existent in order to exist. This need is like a transversal link that establishes a kind of equality between all the elements of the horizontal chain with respect to God. Thus, for al-Tûsî, the contingency of the accidents is reduced by this horizontal link between the accidents and the first caused existent. The whole passage should be taken into account when interpreting Avicenna’s theory of God’s knowledge of the particulars. It has to be noticed that al-Tûsî does not use here the term a’râd for ‘accidents’, but rather hâwâdîth, obviously in order to avoid confusion with ‘ârdân (as have some modern scholars; cf. Janssens, ‘Avicenna and the Qur’ân’, p. 188). The distinction between a vertical and a horizontal emanation was later adopted by al-Suhrawardî in his doctrine about the emanation of light; see his Kitâb hikmat al-ishrâq, ed. Henry Corbin in Suhrawardî. Œuvres métaphysiques et philosophiques, vol. 2 (Tehran and Paris: Institut français d’Iranologie de Téhéran et Adrien Maisonneuve, 1977), pp. 138–9.


23 On the technical meaning of *tashkīk*, see Goichon, *Lexique*, p. 162; Acar, *Talking about God*, pp. 36–41; Roshger, ‘Note’, p. 174, n. 20. Although a central term in Avicenna’s doctrine about the divine attributes, it only occurs once in his *Tafsīr* (p. 109, line 15).


25 Five pages (106–10) of the eight in ʿAšī’s edition of the *Tafsīr* are about the first aya of the sura.


31 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlās*, p. 113, lines 20–2. Avicenna’s statement that Sura 112 is worth one third of the whole Qur’an alludes to a *ḥadīth* reported by Ubayy b. Kaʿb and mentioned, for instance, by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 32, p. 160: ‘Ubayy reports: the Messenger of God said: whoever recites the sura *qu ḫuwa’llāhu aḥad*, it is as though he has recited a third of the Qur’an’.


37 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Taʾlīqāt*, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Badawī (Qum: Maktab al-Aʾlām al-Islāmī, 1404 AH), pp. 185–6; cf. p. 183: ‘The necessity of existence by itself, although it has the appearance (ṣīgha) of something composed, is not composed [in itself]. It is rather the explanation (ṣharḥ) of a notion (maʿnā) for which we have no name, i.e. that its existence is necessary. Indeed, the essence of that whose existence is necessary lies in the fact that its existence is necessary by itself, as there does not exist such a thing for which the necessity of existence is an accident.’


41 See also the important parallel passage from the *Ishārāt* mentioned above, note 14.

42 The grammatical problems raised by the syntactic structure of aya 1 and the position of huwa in it, were solved in different ways both by the mufassirūn and by modern Arabists; on this, see Edwin E. Calverley, ‘The Grammar of Sūratu’l-Ikhlāṣ’, *Studia Islamica* 8 (1957), pp. 7–10; Rubin, ‘Al-Ṣamad’, pp. 197–200; Ambros, ‘Die Analyse von Sure 112’, pp. 223–7.

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45 Acar, *Talking About God*, pp. 33–4, although referring to Avicenna’s *Tafsīr* on this point, does not mention the problem at all.


47 See Daniel De Smet, *La Quiétude de l’Intellect. Néoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l’œuvre de Hamid ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (Xe/Xe s.*)*, Oriantalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 67 (Louvain: Peeters, 1995), pp. 35–6, pp. 177–80, pp. 195–6. An anonymous Ismāʿīlī taʾwil of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, published by Rudolph Strothmann (Gnosis-Texte der Ismaïliten (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1943), pp. 39–40) goes even further by affirming that the whole sura does not refer at all to the Creator (mubdiʾ), but only to the first created being (al-mubdaʾ al-awwal), i.e. the Intellect.

48 Avicenna has devoted another of his works to *ʿilm al-tawḥīd*, namely the *Risāla al-ʿArshiyya* (ed. Ibāḥīm Ḥallāl (Cairo: Jāmīʾat al-Azhar, n.d.)), written for ‘some people’ who had asked him to compose a treatise about the truthfulness of *ʿilm al-tawḥīd*. The doctrine he develops here about God’s attributes is different from the one exposed in his *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*. In the *Risāla al-ʿArshiyya*, God’s attributes are described as ‘not being added to His essence’ (ṣifātuhu lā takūna zaḥīda al-dhätihī), p. 21). He next states that if the attributes were added to the essence, they would be in potentiality and the essence of God would be a cause for them, thus preceding them. He concludes that all the attributes are either ‘negative’, or ‘relative’ or a combination of both (p. 23). However, he does not seem to make an ontological distinction between God’s ipseity and His attributes. Rather than supposing a shift in Avicenna’s doctrine about the divine attributes, it seems that the discrepancy between the two works is due to a difference of perspective. In *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* the perspective is strictly ontological, as is proved by its terminology: Avicenna uses here philosophical terms such as ‘ipseity’ and ‘concomitant’, without mentioning ‘creation’ at all, whereas in the *Risāla al-ʿArshiyya* he uses the terms ‘essence’ (dhāt) and ‘attributes’ (ṣifāt) and refers to ‘creation.’ Avicenna appears here to have a more ‘traditional’ approach, aiming to show that there is no multiplicity in God’s essence, as His attributes are all related to His knowledge of creation. In consequence, we cannot reach His essence through His attributes.


