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Avicennian DDS: the divine essence, knowledge, and power

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Abstract

In the Islamic tradition, there's a long standing controversy over the relationship between God's attributes and His essence, giving rise to diverse theories with significant theological implications. In one respect, these views are broadly categorizable into three: A1, the doctrine of divine complexity (DDC), A2, the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS), and B, the doctrine of divine anonymity (DDA). The entry focuses on DDS, specifically explaining the Avicennian version, and defends it against some objections from some recent DDC proponents.

Keywords: divine simplicity; Avicenna; divine essence; knowledge; power; Islamic philosophy

The First does not become multiple due to the multiplicity of His attributes. For each one of His attributes, when verified, is the other attribute in relation to Him. Thus, His power is His life, and His life is His power, ..., and likewise for the rest of His attributes (Avicenna 2013, 118).

Introduction

In the Islamic tradition, both historically and in our own day, the question of the relation between the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) and their bearer (*dhāt*), that is, the divine essence, is a major issue in philosophical theology, with important implications for other areas of inquiry – especially for how we understand theological data in transmitted or scriptural sources. So it's not surprising that in a tradition that has one main scriptural source in common, views differ significantly on the matter. As a result, a number of competing theories, semantic and ontological, among various schools, and even within the same school, have been proffered. Broadly speaking, one way we can divide the competing views is in the following manner: semantically speaking, either a view (A) allows that we can truly characterize God in a non-equivocal way or (B) it does not. If (A), then, ontologically speaking, either it (A1) affirms attributes of God as items additional to the divine essence or (A2) it does not. Thus, we then have three broad positions: A1, A2, and B.

In the contemporary literature, A1 is known as the doctrine of 'divine complexity' or 'complex theism' or 'neo-classical theism' (let us call it 'DDC' to save keystrokes). In the Islamic tradition, this view is adopted by at least two groups: Ashari (e.g., Ghazālī 2021, 195

and 203) and Maturidi (e.g., Šābūnī 2020, 62–69) theologians. These two groups allow real ascriptions of predicates like ‘power’ and ‘knowledge’ to God in statements of the form ‘God is F’. However they hold that ‘God is F’ is true in virtue of an attribute or property over and above His essence that characterizes it – for example, God is knowledgeable by a knowledge-property subsisting by Him, or powerful by a power-property subsisting by Him. According to DDC, then, the divine essence-attributes relation is not one of identity. Rather, the divine attributes are items (*ma‘ānī*) distinct from, but subsistent by, the divine essence.

As for A2, this view is known as the doctrine of ‘divine simplicity’ (DDS). In the Islamic tradition, DDS is adopted by at least three groups: the Islamic philosophers (*ḥukamā’*), some Mutazili theologians, and Twelver Shi’i theologians. Like proponents of view A1, all three groups in this A2 category allow for real or literal ascriptions of predicates like ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ to God, in true statements of the form ‘God is F’. But, unlike proponents of view DDC, they hold that, in the case of certain attributes, it’s the case that God is F essentially, that is, in virtue of His very essence, not something else – for example, God is knowledgeable by His essence, not by something other than it, that is, an attribute of ‘knowledge’ subsisting by His essence. According to A2 or DDS, then, God’s attributes are said to be identical to His essence; they are not metaphysically real or positive items (*ma‘ānī*) additional to it.

As for B, the pure equivocity view, the ontological account they proffer is to construe the divine attributes as neither additional nor as identical to the divine essence. This view has no name in the literature, but in the Islamic tradition it has had proponents, for example, a group of thinkers known as Ismailis.¹ For our purposes we can call view B ‘the doctrine of divine anonymity’ (DDA). Ismaili proponents of DDA don’t allow for real or literal ascriptions of predicates like ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ to God in statements of the form ‘God is F’. Rather, for them when we say ‘God is F’, we are only figuratively or metaphorically ascribing F to God. What there really is behind these metaphorical ascriptions is a certain, sui generis non-causal attribution: so, to say ‘God is F’ is really to make a certain non-causal explanatory claim about God, that is, that ‘God originates F’, that is, in something else, x, which F really does characterize. Thus, on this account ‘God is a knower’ in that God originates ‘knowledge’ in literal knowers, for example, human beings, or ‘God is powerful’ in that He originates ‘power’ in what literally has power, and so on. It is not to really characterize God Himself by an attribute, whether negative or positive.²

This then is a broad and brief outline of the main views on offer in the Islamic tradition on this question.³ Now in the contemporary philosophy of religion scene, exchanges, mostly from within a Christian context, have taken place between proponents of views A1 and A2, in which DDS, as opposed to DDC, has received the lion’s share of criticism.⁴ In what follows, being myself committed to DDS, my (secondary) aim in this article will be to contribute to this lively exchange, and in two ways. First, I’ll unpack and explain how DDS is to be conceived according to the Avicennian (*mashshā’ī*) view specifically.⁵ That will occupy the bulk of the article. Once clarified, and we have a good grasp on just what DDS amounts to in the Mashshā’ī tradition, in the second part I turn to briefly defending the account against two (historic but revitalized) objections recently leveled at DDS by some proponents of DDC from within an Islamic context.⁶ Hopefully, the latter part further clarifies and strengthens the account proposed for consideration in the former part.

DDS in Avicennian philosophy

As I said, views A1 and A2, unlike B, are in agreement that our conceptual apparatus can truly describe divinity. Where they part ways is over what this involves on ‘God’s side’ (so to speak): DDC says it requires more than just the divine essence, that is, attributes or properties (corresponding to our predications) subsisting by that essence. DDS, on the contrary,

denies the need for any additional metaphysical layer, maintaining that all that's required is just the divine essence but considered (as we'll see below) in various ways.

The DDS Islamic philosophers teach can be distinguished into two claims – one negative, the other positive. On the one hand, the negative thesis (NT) states:

DDS-NT: God has no metaphysical, physical, or logical parts

This claim amounts to a denial of all real complexity or parthood from the divine: God is simple in that God is not a composite or whole made up of parts in any sense of part.⁷ It seems that all members of view A2 accept DDS in this DDS-NT sense.⁸ The positive thesis (PT), on the other hand, is a claim about the relation between the divine essence, the attributes of perfection that characterize It, and said attributes. The thesis says:

DDS-PT: The divine attributes are identical to the divine essence and to each other

DDS-PT is a more specific claim, one over and above NT; one can accept NT but not PT.⁹ As for those that accept PT, they diverge among themselves over how to best explain the divine essence-attribute identity.¹⁰ The Islamic philosophers have their own distinctive take on this, which I now want to unpack.

To clarify their view, two questions their account tries to answer should be distinguished. The first is:

Q1. How is each divine attribute to be understood?

And the second one is:

Q2. How is the identity relation between the divine essence-attributes to be understood?

Q2 asks about the nature of the identity relation; in what sense is there an identity between the divine essence and attributes? Q1 asks specifically about each divine attribute, that is, what sort of item it is on DDS. In what follows, I will briefly address Q1, then turn to a treatment of Q2.¹¹

Q1

As I said, for Islamic philosophers God is an existent having no metaphysical structure; all real complexity is negated of Him. Now one kind of complexity is the composition between a bearer or possessor of an attribute (i.e., an essence, *dhāt*) and the attribute itself possessed. In the Islamic tradition, adherents of DDC allow this kind of complexity to characterize God: for they hold that 'God' does not refer to just the divine essence alone, nor the divine attributes alone, but rather the referent of 'God' is their combination or whole, that is, the divine essence together with the divine attributes.¹²

For the Islamic philosophers, ruling out this type of composition is part of the argumentation for DDS-NT. According to them, the main issue with allowing this kind of composition in God is that it contravenes God's intrinsic necessity of existence (something on which all parties to the debate agree).¹³ Thus, given DDS-NT, and the Islamic philosophers' acceptance of true statements of the form 'God is F', for example, God is a knower, God is powerful, and so on, such true descriptions – against proponents of DDC – cannot be taken as being grounded in properties or attributes distinct from, but subsistent by, the divine essence, and with which they metaphysically make up or compose God. But, given that the Islamic

philosophers allow for substantive non-equivocal predications of God, how then are such attribute-ascriptions to be construed for them?

To understand the Avicennian account in particular, we need to begin with our attribution of ‘existence’ (*wujūd*) to God. For the Shaykh, the proposition that ‘God exists’ is demonstrable. Thus, on the Avicennian view, we can truly say ‘God exists’ or that ‘God exists of necessity’ – indeed, that ‘God is the intrinsically necessary being’ (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihī*). But, it also turns out that God’s (intrinsically necessary) existence must be identical to Himself or His essence. That is, His existence cannot be something additional to His essence; rather, it just is Him. Now existence for the Shaykh is a positive notion; so, describing God as (necessarily) existing is describing Him in a positive way, that is, it is to characterize Him in affirmative terms.

But the Avicennian view also allows for a whole host of other true descriptions of God, for example, that God knows, that He is powerful, and so on. These sorts of predications, however, cannot be taken as being positive in status – that is to say, we shouldn’t understand them as referring to distinct positive realities characterizing God. The Avicennian commitment to DDS-NT forbids this; for, otherwise, divine simplicity would be violated, and consequently divine necessity of existence. Instead, for the Shaykh these other predications we truly make of God are to be understood as either negative or relational descriptions of His (necessity of) existence which, again, is something positive and identical to Him, that is, His essence.

So granting this, we can then say that the Avicennian allows for three kinds of true descriptions of God: positive, negative, and relational. But the positive only has one instance, and it serves as the basis of the negative and relational ones. The general rule or principle to be followed here, which is meant to preserve necessity of existence and unity, is this:

[T1] It must be known that His attributes return to [either] a negation, or a relation, or a combination of the two. If, then, the attributes are of this description, then they, even if multiplied, won’t destroy [divine] unity and won’t contradict necessity of existence (Avicenna 1981, 24).

Divine knowledge and power

Let us then consider divine knowledge and power specifically. What do they return to on DDS-NT? According to the Shaykh, the former amounts to a negation, while the latter to a combination of a negation plus a relation. More precisely, divine knowledge returns to the divine essence’s necessity of existence considered with a certain negation, and divine power returns to that essence, but taken together with a negation and relation. Let me now unpack each in turn.

To understand the negational basis for divine knowledge, we first need to grasp what, in general, ‘knowledgeableness’ or the aptitude for knowledge involves on Avicennism.

For the Shaykh, knowledgeableness consists in enjoying a certain mode of existence – namely, an existence that is free of matter and its concomitants. Thus, according to the Shaykh, if an entity, *x*, exists in a way devoid of matter and its concomitants, then *x* is knowledge-able, that is, apt for being characterized with knowledge. Now, according to the Shaykh, anything that exists separately from matter and its concomitants exists in one of two ways: either it exists of itself (*qā’im bi-nafsih*) or not, in which case it exists in something else, *y*. Accordingly, if, then, *x*, in addition to existing apart from matter and its concomitants, also exists of itself, then *x* is not only knowledge-able but also as a matter of fact actually knowing of something – namely, itself. That is, *x* would be something that enjoys

actual self-knowledge. If, on the other hand, *x* does not exist of itself, but rather exists in another, *y*, that itself exists of itself (and is separate from matter), then *x* is not only knowable to *y*, but is actually known by *y*. Likewise, *y* would not only be knowledge-able of *x*, but would actually know *x*. Thus, *y* would be something that has, in addition to actual self-knowledge, actual other-knowledge as well, that is, knowledge of *x*.

Given this, it is evident how knowledgeableness, on the Avicennian account, is something negative in consideration. For it is the negation of an association, on the part of an existent, with matter and its appurtenances. The Islamic philosophers generally call this ‘abstraction from matter’. Thus, in the divine case, divine knowledge would then be a negation in the following manner: the necessary existence of the divine essence, as unconnected to matter or anything bodily, is apt for truly being ascribed with knowledge – that is, it is, as such, fit for knowledgeableness or ‘knowledge-apt’, whether self-knowledge or other-knowledge. Thus, God, the Necessary Existent, insofar as He exists totally unmixed with matter, is a ‘knower’ or ‘knowing’ (*‘ālim*):

[T2] For the meaning of knowledge is the occurrence of a reality as abstract from corporeal coverings. And if it’s established that He is one, abstract from body and its attributes, then this reality [i.e., Himself] in this manner [i.e., as abstract from ‘corporeal coverings’] occurs for Him. And all that for which an abstract reality occurs is a knower – there being no requirement that this be itself or something else (Avicenna 1981, 24–25).

Hence, according to the above analysis, God’s being a knower does not involve Him possessing an ontologically positive item, that is, a knowledge-property, as additional to His essence. Rather, it consists in just the fact that He enjoys an (intrinsically necessary) existence that is free from matter and its concomitants. And this fact, being a negative item, does not really or positively compose anything with the divine essence, and so does no damage to the necessity and unity of the divine essence.

What about divine power? On the Avicennian view, power (*qudra*), generally, is the ability to do (something) on the basis of the agent’s wish or volition. So, if an action obtains or does not obtain from an agent because the agent wished, wanted, or willed it, then that agent is rightly said to be *capable* or *powerful*. Now divine want or volition, for the Shaykh, is understood as causal efficacy (*ta’tīr*) – the ability to existentiate something. Divine power, then, returns to divine knowledge in the following way: if it is true that God brings something into existence and fully knows it (claims established on independent grounds), then it is true that He acts voluntarily and so *eo ipso* it is also true that He is a powerful agent – irrespective of whether or not His volition is mutable (Avicenna 1981, 28). The Shaykh states:

[T3] Power is that an action proceeds from something by a wish[/want]. And you have come to know that the action that proceeds from the First, exalted be He, proceeds from Him by volition. Hence, He acted because He wished to; and had He not wished to, He wouldn’t have acted. ... And the judgment that a thing is powerful does not change ... regardless of whether change is applicable to the wish or change is not applicable to it (Avicenna 2013, 70).

The qualification in the last sentence is important since, again on independent grounds, God’s knowledge and volition turn out to be immutable according to the Avicennian view. So on that view, the immutability of divine knowledge and volition does not preclude God from ‘power’ being truly predicable of Him. On the basis of the above, then, it is clear how divine

power is to be conceptualized: it is the divine essence's necessary existence considered with a negation and a relation. The negative aspect consists in the divine essence as knowing (in the sense clarified earlier), while the relative one consists in the divine essence as related to all that He voluntarily existentiates – more specifically, to all that He is satisfied to know Himself to bring about or have causal influence over

[T4] We've shown ... that the knowledge of the order of the good, in the respect of Him knowing that it is from among the effects of the perfection of His existence, is the [divine] volition. So if you've come to know that, then you've learned that the powerful is he from whom the action proceeds in agreement with volition, and he who if he wishes he does, and if he doesn't wish he doesn't do (Avicenna 1981, 29).

If then divine power on Avicennian DDS-NT is a negation-plus-relation, then divine power is not, as it is on the DDC view, a property possessed by the divine essence, and subsisting by It. Rather, like divine knowledge, it is just the divine essence, but considered a certain way, though a way different from how divine knowledge is considered. And this negative-relative composite item is nothing factually positive outside the mind considering the divine essence. Understood as such, divine power for the Shaykh, like divine knowledge, does not add some ontologically positive item to the divine entity – and thereby really or objectively, that is, mind-independently, compose something with that essence.

This much suffices for our purposes as far as DDS-NT goes. But here, one might raise a worry: given the above analysis of the divine essence-attributes relation in connection with DDS-NT, how does it make sense to identify the divine essence with negations, or relations, or with both? For if, on DDS-NT as the Avicennian understands it, divine knowledge is a relation and divine power is a negation-relation, then it seems incoherent to say, per DDS-PT, either that 'His essence is identical to His knowledge' or that 'His knowledge is identical to His power'.

To resolve this, we turn to addressing Q2.

Q2

Let me begin by first getting an obstacle out of the way to a proper understanding of DDS-PT in an Avicennian framework. The impediment concerns two ways one might understand the identity claim between the divine essence and attributes, if one is coming from an analytic philosophy background. For, at first blush, one might take DDS-PT to be committed a set of statements like:

- (i) There exists a property or attribute F,
- (ii) The divine essence instantiates F, and
- (iii) The divine essence is identical to F

Or, alternatively, by DDS-PT one might take the Avicennians to say something like:

- (i) There exists a property or attribute F
- (ii) F is possessed by the divine essence, and
- (iii) The divine essence is identical to F

On both views, we have cases of concrete identity. On the first construal, DDS-PT ends up saying that the divine essence both exemplifies, for example, 'knowledge' and is the very same as it; and the second construal of DDS-PT ends up saying the divine essence is the very same thing as a property it has or possesses.

But this is decidedly not what the Avicennian philosophers intend by DDS-PT. So both accounts of DDS-PT should be rejected. The first view because that sort of account, aside from the fact that it seems incoherent, presupposes a kind of Platonism about properties, that is, that they exist as abstract objects to which concrete entities bear a certain relation. So ‘God is knowledgeable’ would mean something like: there exists an abstract entity ‘Knowledge’ to which the divine essence bears a relation, that is, that of exemplification or participation or what have you. That’s just a non-starter for the Islamic philosophers; for, outside the mind, they only recognize the existence of non-repeatable, that is, concrete, things. As for the second view, it is equally incoherent, insofar as it identifies two categorically different beings: an inherent feature (a concrete property) with a non-inherent entity (the concrete possessor of it). Again, for the Avicennian philosophers, that’s just a wrong-headed way to think about DDS-PT from the get go. So we should forget any such accounts.

To properly understand the DDS-PT thesis of the Avicennian philosophers, it is best to start with the contrast case, that is, the relation between an attribute, such as knowledge, and an essence, in creatures – specifically, human souls.

Previously, we learned what, on the Avicennian view, suitability for truly being described as ‘knowing’ consists in – namely, a thing’s existing as unmixed with matter and its concomitants. We also saw how, as the basis of our true description, this was something negative or privative. However, on the side of the entity described as existing in that way, there’s something factually positive obtaining for it insofar as it exists in that way, that is, as separate from matter. But, again, this positive fact is not something distinct from, and on the same ontological plane, as it were, as that entity – such as a property subsisting by it. Rather, that positive fact is its immateriality understood as its intellectuality. For, according to the Islamic philosophers, being intellectual is what being immaterial positively consists in. And an aspect of this intellectuality is a certain other positive fact, which is phenomenological in nature, that is, a something it-is-like to be an intellectual entity. And that positive phenomenological fact is that immaterial/intellectual entity’s being in a certain ‘revelational state’ (*ḥāla inkishāfiyya*), where that state’s what-it-is-like consists in a disclosure or a ‘representation’ (*tamaththul*), that is, of something, happening to or obtaining for the entity ‘experiencing’ it. For the Shaykh, this revelational state actually characterizes anything that is knowledge-apt, that is, that exists apart from matter. Indeed, it is just what knowledge is, phenomenological speaking. Let us call knowledge so understood ‘knowledge^P’. Thus, on the Avicennian view, if entity, *x*, exists immaterially, then *x* is necessarily apt for enjoying knowledge^P, that is, for being in such a phenomenological state – a state in which something is being revealed to *x*. So the fact that *x* exists without matter explains why knowledge^P can obtain for *x* at all.

Now, the obtainment of knowledge^P for *x* can take place either in virtue of the very essence of *x* or not. In the latter case, for *x* to be truly characterized by knowledge^P, something additional to *x*’s essence is needed. The Avicennians call this additional item a ‘form’ (*ṣūra*), *F*. And this item, *F*, on their view, is also said to be ‘knowledge’, but in a different sense from the phenomenological one. This new sense is a metaphysical sense of knowledge. Let me explain this further.

Consider some human knower, *K*. According to the Mashshā’īs, when we truly ascribe knowledge to *K* in, for example, saying ‘*K* knows’, in one sense we mean knowledge^P, that is, that *K* knows in the phenomenological sense. Here, we are saying that there’s a certain state of revelation that obtains for *K*, that is, some revealing is going on for *K*. As noted, this is a state in which a disclosure (of something) obtains (for *K*). In this respect, knowledge is the fact of *K*’s being in a state where something is represented (*tamaththul*) to *K*. The Islamic philosophers and their DDC opponents accept knowledge^P; it is non-controversial, a basic datum of experience among them. But, where there’s disagreement is about the

underlying nature of this phenomenological fact. And this is where other, more metaphysical, senses of knowledge are distinguished. For the Avicennians, there are two such senses.

Under one metaphysical sense, knowledge^P's underlying reality consists in a certain feature, F, characterizing K as an attribute. From this point of view, F is an externally existing property of K (on par with any other such property that K might have (e.g., K's height)), inhering in K as in a subject, and falling under the Aristotelian category of 'Quality' specifically. This is the respect in which one says: 'K has or possesses (an item of) knowledge', for example, K has mathematical knowledge. Call this metaphysical sense of knowledge 'knowledge^{M1}'. The second, metaphysical sense of knowledge, is this F but considered as 'mental content'. From this perspective, F is *not* an item on a par, metaphysically speaking, with any other externally existing property of K; rather, it is an item that enjoys a special ontological status in K, that is, a mode of being the Shaykh calls 'mental existence' (*wujūd dhihni*). This is the respect in which one says: 'K knows' that is, some object of knowledge, like some proposition, for example, K knows that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. Call this 'knowledge^{M2}'.

With the above distinctions in place, consider Zayd and some mathematical proposition p (e.g., the Pythagorean Theorem). We can ask the following question: what does it take for Zayd to gain knowledge^P of p? That is, what does it take for p to be revealed or represented to Zayd? In particular, does Zayd's essence suffice for the obtainment of that state of disclosure (of p) or no? Evidently, it does not suffice (never mind for now the reasons for thinking why it does not). Therefore, something additional to Zayd's essence is needed for p to be revealed to him. What is this additional item?

For the Mashshā'ī philosophers the answer turns out to be: a form, F. Thus, they hold that once this F comes to exist for Zayd, it comes to characterize him as a property or an attribute would (=knowledge^{M1}), and this property in turn represents or reveals (= knowledge^P) some conceptual content to him, that is, that of p (=knowledge^{M2}). So the revelational state (=knowledge^P), that is, that Zayd enjoys, is a trace or feature of the property or attribute (=knowledge^{M1}) that comes to inhere in him. Thus, insofar as Zayd is 'propertied' by F, we have knowledge^{M1}; insofar as there's a *representation* of p occurring to Zayd in virtue of F, we have knowledge^P; and insofar as some determinate conceptual content is being revealed to him by F, we have knowledge^{M2}. The upshot of this is that Zayd is something ontologically 'needy' or 'poor', that is, dependent on something else, namely F (=knowledge^{M1}), for actually knowing^P p (=knowledge^{M2}). Put another way, for phenomenological access to p, Zayd's essence needs to be metaphysically supplemented with some ontological item, that is, some qualitative property/attribute trope (=knowledge^{M1}).

However, for the Islamic philosophers, this requirement for accessing p is not due to anything about knowledge^P per se. Rather, it is due to something about the knower, K, that is, Zayd in our case – ultimately, it is the fact that Zayd happens to be a certain kind of existent, that is, a contingent being. Thus, the Islamic philosophers leave it an open question whether there may be K that is not in need of an item like F for p's disclosure to it. And in fact, for them it turns out that there is such a K, and necessarily so – namely, the Divine knower or God. On the Avicennian view in particular, in God's case, based on independent considerations about divine necessity of existence, a given object of knowledge – whether, say, Himself or something other than Himself – is represented to God not only (i) without dependence on an external cause but also (ii) without dependence on something that, though not external, is metaphysically non-identical to Him – namely, an attribute or property or a form, F, additional to His essence, subsisting by that essence. In other words, the divine essence, unlike Zayd's essence, suffices for God's being knowing, that is, of Himself and other things. To use the example mentioned above, the divine essence suffices for God's having, and so for our truly ascribing to Him, the trace or feature of F in the normal case, that is, knowledge^P (of p).

Hence, given the above distinctions between the three senses of ‘knowledge’, the DDS-PT thesis, that is, that Divine knowledge is identical to the divine essence can accordingly be taken in three ways:

1. Divine knowledge^P is identical to the divine essence
2. Divine knowledge^{M1} is identical to the divine essence
3. Divine knowledge^{M2} is identical to the divine essence

From these three, I say that the Avicennian view of DSS-PT must be understood only in way 2. As for ways 1 and 3, to read Avicennian DDS-PT in those senses wouldn’t even be wrong; it would just be straight up incoherent. For if we take it in way 3, we’d be saying that God is identical to (some) mental existent (represented to Him). That makes no sense. And if we take it in way 1, we’d be saying that God is identical to a state of representation (to Him of some mental existent). That makes no sense either. So, the account must be taken in way 2; the reason is because knowledge in that sense, that is, as knowledge^{M1}, you’ll recall, refers to a metaphysical item, F, of which knowledge^P is a feature. What DDS-PT, interpreted in sense 2, then says is that the divine essence is identical to this metaphysical item, which is to say that, in the divine case, God is identical to that which is the source or ground of knowledge^P. The upshot of this interpretation: the divine essence, on the Avicennian view, turns out to be self-subsistent knowledge^{M1}.

One might take issue with me here, noting that my rejection of readings 1 and 3 is surprising given that for the Shaykh, in the case of God’s self-knowledge, the intellect/er (i.e., the knower, K), the intellection, and the intelligible are identical. My response is that nothing I’ve said is inconsistent with that identity thesis. For we need to keep in mind that there’s a distinction between the concrete object (that’s known or intelligible) and the mental item representing it. Likewise for the concrete act of intellection and the phenomenology of that act. On the Avicennian view, in self-knowledge – whether human or divine – the intellect/er, that is, K, is identical to the concrete object that’s intelligible, that is, K itself, and to the concrete activity or actuality of the intellection, that is, the being of K itself. But K is *not* identical to the mental item (= knowledge^{M2}) represented to K, nor to the phenomenological state, that is, the feature of being revealed/represented (i.e., knowledge^P) to K.¹⁴

So if then the divine essence = self-subsistent knowledge^{M1}, this entails that the divine essence, as self-subsistent knowledge^{M1}, suffices for having knowledge^P. That is to say, with respect to knowledge^P, God’s essence alone, qua self-subsistent knowledge^{M1}, plays the metaphysical role that, in the creaturely case, an essence and an attribute additional to it play together. Thus, when Avicennian philosophers say:

God’s knowledge is identical to His essence

This means: the divine essence, as self-subsistent knowledge^{M1}, all by itself, that is, without the consideration of anything else, achieves that which, in the creaturely case, would only be realized with the conjunction of an essence plus some attribute F, for example, a knowledge-property or form, that’s distinct from that essence. One more time: God, by His essence alone, secures or guarantees knowledge^P of p, that is, the representational or revelational state wherein some mental content (conceptual or propositional) is disclosed (to God). In the creaturely case, on the other hand, the obtainment of knowledge^P of p for Zayd relies on an essence and attribute, F, in combo. Neither Zayd’s essence alone, nor the distinct knowledge-property by itself, that is, without a subject to characterize, can result in p’s disclosure (to Zayd). So, for any p knowable by Zayd, both essence and an attribute, F, must come together for p to be representationally accessed, that is, by Zayd. But not so

with God; He, being self-subsistent knowledge^{M1} – insofar as He is an intrinsically necessary, immaterial self-subsistent being – knows^P anything He can know^P (Himself and others) purely in virtue of Himself. This is the import of the ‘*li-dhātīhi*’ locution in the following two texts. One is about divine self-knowledge specifically, wherein the Shaykh states:

[T5] When He is described as a ‘knower’, its meaning is that He is of Himself (*li-dhātīhi*), not due to another cause extrinsic to Him, such that He is abstract from matter totally, and there obtains for Him due to His abstraction from matter that which is abstracted from matter completely i.e., His essence, which [essence] is – in virtue of that by which abstraction occurs for it i.e., Himself – an intellecter of Itself. And in virtue of It being the abstract entity to which there occurs something, which is also His essence, [His essence] is an intelligible. [And all this takes place] essentially and not by the mediation of another item different from Him and entering upon Him, like e.g., an intellect, mediating in the way mentioned. Thus, His essence is His [being] intellect, since it is intellect that is the item by which something is upon the description mentioned and, with regard to the First, His essence is the item by which He is upon the description mentioned. For that He is intellect, intellecter, and intelligible are in Him one thing. The verification of this from another angle is that the intellect, in reality, is the form of the intelligible and its occurrence. And the essence of the First is intelligible for Him; thus, His essence is His [being] intellect, and so He is intellect, intellecter, and intelligible (Avicenna 1992, 229).

The other text is divine perfection and knowledge generally. It runs as follows:

[T6] The knower *li-dhātīhi* [in virtue of itself/its essence], the perfect in virtue of itself, and the agent in virtue of itself, is one who has no need for other than itself [/its essence] for that thing. And so that thing always exists for it, and there’s no potency in it at all. Hence, our statement ‘He is a knower due to His essence’ means He is not in need of a knowledge through which He knows things – since knowledge is nothing but the forms of the things known, and thus He isn’t in need of the things known for the obtainment of His knowledge of them (Avicenna 2013, 497–498).

In light of the preceding, then, if we suppose F (=knowledge^{M1}) could exist on its own, then the Avicennian view urges that God’s self-sufficiency for knowledge^P is what F, in the familiar case, would be like if it had aseity as opposed to existing dependently, that is, by means of a subject such as Zayd. For, as the Shaykh says, if a knower like Zayd enjoys an occurrent or actual episode of knowing^P some p only because of knowledge^{M1}, that is, only when a metaphysical item or form, F, comes to exist in him, then if F could exist on its own, F itself would be more worthy of, and more suitable for, having actual knowledge^P of p than Zayd himself:

[T7] And this form, if it makes what is other than it an intellect in actuality in belonging to it, then if it could be self-subsistent, it would then be more deserving of being an intellect in actuality. For if a part of fire [i.e., heat] could exist of itself, it would be more deserving of burning [than the fire itself] (Avicenna 1984, 15).

On Avicennian DDS-PT, therefore, the divine essence, lacking all the imperfections and limitations (present in Zayd and F) that come with contingency as well as association with

matter, is a fortiori or all the more truly said to be 'knowing' than them or anything else. In this respect, it is, basically, like a Platonic Form of knowledge.¹⁵

The same considerations, *mutatis mutandis*, apply with respect to the attribute of 'power' (*qudra*). For, on the one hand, 'power' can be taken as a metaphysical item (call it power^M), characterizing something, and in virtue of which that thing can exercise causal influence or bring about effects (*ta'thir*). On the other hand, 'power' can be taken as the very exercise of causal influence itself (call it power^P). Now in the creaturely case, power^P is truly had by something because that thing possesses power^M, that is, as a property or attribute inhering in it. That is, a creature enjoys causal influence (=power^P), which is the trace or effect or feature of power^M, by means of an essence and an attribute-property G (metaphysically) working in tandem. For example, consider the burning (=causal influence) of some cotton. This phenomenon takes place in virtue of (among other things) the fire (an essence) and its property of heat (an attribute) together. Or take the moving of a rock; that phenomenon takes place in virtue of Zayd's essence-plus-attribute complex (e.g., Zayd with his motive power).

But in the divine case, again on independent considerations establishing DDS-NT, the divine essence by itself suffices for having the causal influence it has, that is, for having power^P – an influence that is only achieved, in the non-divine case, by a distinct attribute of power^M along with the essence it characterizes. Thus, with respect to causal influence, the divine is like what, as the last sentence of T6 above indicates, the power^M to heat would be like if it could subsist on its own. Hence, the divine essence, just as it was self-subsisting knowledge^{M1}, is likewise self-subsisting power^M. That is, the divine essence is as it were the Platonic Form of power. As such, there's no reliance, in God's case, on a property distinct from, and subsisting by, His essence for achieving what power^M achieves, that is, causal influence.

[T8] The First, then, when He is described as 'powerful' for example, its meaning is that He is of Himself – not due to another cause extrinsic to Him – such that there proceeds from Him what He wants if He wants, and there does not proceed from Him what He doesn't want, if He doesn't want – [proceeding] essentially and not by the intermediary of another item different from Him that enters upon Him, like e.g., a power by the mediation of which He is as He is. ... Thus, His essence is power, since power is that item by which something is upon the description mentioned, and the essence of the First is the item by which He is upon the description mentioned (Avicenna 1992, 298).

Consequently, when the Islamic philosophers say

God's power is identical to His essence

They mean:

God's power^M is identical to His essence

That is, that the divine essence by itself or without the consideration of anything else, insofar as it is self-subsisting power^M, accomplishes that which, in the creaturely case, would only be realized with the conjunction of an essence and some attribute G, where G is a power-property.

On the basis of the above considerations, then, we can in a general way put the Avicennian DDS-PT thesis, that is, that

The divine attributes are identical to the divine essence

like so:

God's essence alone is sufficient for God having the perfections or traces of F

This in turn entails that the divine essence suffices for our truly predicating F's perfections or traces of It. Then, where $F = \text{knowledge}^{M1}$, DDS-PT would say:

God's essence alone is sufficient for God's having the traces or perfections of knowledge^{M1}

which, in turn, would mean (where p is among the perfections or traces of F, that is, p is the representational content of F)

God's essence alone is sufficient for p to be revealed or represented to God

In sum, we'd be saying something like: for any p that is knowable^P, that is, representable or revealable, to God, God's essence suffices for knowing^P p.

And likewise with the attribute of power. On DDS-PT, the identity of God's essence and power means:

God's essence alone is sufficient for Him to be powerful^M

which is to say:

God's essence alone is sufficient for exercising causal influence

Let it be known that this view does not entail that the divine essence in itself is not literally characterized by knowledge and power, but only metaphorically – as if It just brings them about without the need for anything additional (as in creatures) but in itself it is devoid of them.

This is a *wahm* (mistaken understanding). To repel it, go back again to the example the Shaykh gives T5–6: that of the self-subsistent heat or intelligible form. Suppose there's a heat-trope, h, ontologically independent of a substrate. It would be true to say of h – in the strictest and most literal sense in fact – both that, for example, 'h is hot' and that 'h heats (other things)'. Same thing with the intelligible form that self-subsists (were there such a thing): we'd be asserting a truth if we say of it 'it knows or intellects', that is, the content it is taken to reveal to the subject in which it normally inheres. In fact, it would be more truly knowing of that content than that subject. Likewise in the divine case, that is, with the divine as self-subsistent knowledge and power. In this respect, God would be a 'knower' and 'powerful' in the most literal and paradigmatic sense and truly said to be a 'knower' and 'powerful' in the strictest sense.

One of the later scholars, Mīr Sayyid Jurjānī, likely taking into account passages like T5–8, crisply summarizes the general doctrine of the Islamic philosophers we parsed in some detail above by elucidating their intent behind DDS-PT as follows:

[T9] The meaning of what [the philosophers] mention is not, as you imagine it, that there's here an essence having an attribute and the two are really united.¹⁶ Rather, its meaning is that His essence, exalted be He, [is such that] there results from Him

what results from an essence and an attribute together. For example, your essence is not sufficient for the revelation of things to you; rather, for that, it depends on an attribute of knowledge which subsists by you. [This is] unlike His essence, exalted be He; for it does not depend, for the revelation of things and their manifestation to Him, on an attribute subsisting by Him. Rather, all things understandable are revealed to Him in virtue of His essence, exalted be He. Thus, His essence, by this consideration, is the reality of knowledge. Likewise is the case with power; for His essence, exalted be He, is causally efficacious by itself, not by an attribute additional to it, as it is with our essences. Hence, [His essence] is, by this consideration, the reality of power. In this manner, then, are the essence and the attributes identical in reality and different in consideration and concept. What it returns to, when verified, is a negation of the attributes,¹⁷ but with [an affirmation of] the occurrence of their effects and fruits from the essence alone.¹⁸

In sum, with regards to both knowledge^{P-M2} and power^P, God's essence alone, that is, without a knowledge^{M1} and a power^M superadded to it, does for God what a superadded knowledge^{M1} and power^M do for creatures.¹⁹

The identity among divine attributes themselves is given the same treatment on the Avicennian account. That is, their identity is to be understood in terms of a reduction; God's power^M returns to, or just is, God's knowledge^{M1}, which itself returns to, or just is, God's essence. Hence, divine power^M returns to, or just is, the divine essence. As result, on Avicennian DDS-PT, the identity of divine knowledge and power entails that:

God's knowledge^P is sufficient for God's power^P

Or more specifically, that:

God's knowing^P that He is powerful^P over x suffices for God's causing x to exist (=power^P)

In other words, x's being represented or revealed to God as subject to His causal influence guarantees God's actual causal influence over x, that is, His actually bringing it into being.

[T10] And we only mean by our statement 'He is powerful in actuality' that His power is His knowledge. Hence He, qua powerful, is a knower; that is, His knowledge is the reason for the procession of the act from Him. It is not the case that His power is due to a motive that calls Him to it. Thus, His power is His knowledge (Avicenna 2013, 129).

What DDS-PT does not require is that the divine attributes be identical in the sense that the aspects in which the divine essence can be considered by our minds are identical, so that, for example, the negative aspect qua which there's a disclosure, that is, to the divine essence, is identical to the relational aspect qua which there's an enactment, that is, by the divine essence. For this would be to identify considerations of the mind, which is nonsensical. Rather, since the divine essence is full and pure disclosure and full and pure causal influence (in the way explained earlier), then, in the divine case, in a real sense, that is, metaphysically, divine knowledge^{M1} (= the divine essence) is the same as divine power^M (= the divine essence). Consequently, in God's case, an epistemic state (= knowledge^P) is or guarantees a causal state (= power^P); for, as T8 says, the divine essence's cognizing is the

explanation of the divine essence's agency. Thus we have here in the divine case a single metaphysical entity that is identically (maximally) cognitive and (maximally) capable:

[T11] It has been confirmed that the very thing He cognizes, which is that which He intellectually grasps of the all, is the cause of the all, and it is identical to the principle of His action, which is the existentiation of the all. Hence, a single *ma'ānā* from Him is a cognition and a disposition for existentiation (Avicenna 1984, 20).²⁰

What obtains in the divine case shouldn't be so incredible to us (though it is quite extraordinary). For we can relate to it in some sense. For consider a given piece of practical knowledge one might have, for example, of some craft or art. This item is both a piece of knowledge and a power or disposition, that is, to effect or influence something. It is said to be 'know-how' precisely in that respect; it is both an epistemic state and a capacity to act (in a given way) or execute. In the divine case, this is also true, but of course without any of the usual limitations. Among these is the following: in the creaturely case, merely knowing^P something (and so merely having knowledge^{M1-M2}) is not enough for bringing that thing into existence in actuality. For we depend on a whole host of things for realizing the (causal) influence required for existentiation, among them being a distinct power^M, that is, attribute-property inhering in us. The Shaykh explains the contrast between Creator and creature in this regard like so:

[T12] The intelligible form which occurs in us ..., were it by its very existence sufficient for the generation [in the external world] of the artificial form ..., then our intelligible would be identical to power. But that is not the case. On the contrary, its existence does not suffice for [the external realization], but depends on a renewed volition Due to that, the very existence of this intelligible form is not power nor volition As for the Necessary Existent, it is impermissible that His essence be a bearer of a volition or a power different in quiddity, or of capacities varied in quiddity, that are other than the intelligible essence that is Himself (Avicenna 1984, 21).

According to the Islamic philosophers, the above account of DDS-NT and DDS-PT has the consequence that in conceiving God, that is, as the Necessary Existent, the notions of being knowing or being powerful (and other attributes) are extractable from, and truly predicable of, Him in virtue of His essence alone. For the divine essence, as the Necessary being, has no positively objective composition; it is a monolithic, metaphysically structure-less being. But this entity can be beheld in various ways by us, where these ways amount to distinct conceptual considerations (of the divine essence) that serve as the basis for our making true distinct predications of that entity. And these distinct beholdings arise from our mentally comparing or relating this Necessary Existent to something else, either by way of negation, affirmation, or both. So for example, when we see that the simple divine essence exists in a way unmixed with anything material, we negate a relation to matter from that essence, and this serves as the basis for our extracting a notion from that divine essence (which notion we call 'knowledge') and for then (truly) predicating that notion of It. And when we relate the simple divine essence to some other things, along with a consideration of its knowledge and volition (notions we've already extracted), we extract another notion from It (which notion we call 'power') and for then (truly) predicating that notion of It. And so on.

Thus, as a consequence, when we truly predicate knowledge or power of the divine essence the preceding analysis requires that what makes such statements true cannot be, as on alternative views like DDC, the something other than the divine essence taken together

with It – like an intrinsic attribute or property, F, additional to, or subsisting by, It. Rather, what grounds the truth of those judgments of ours would just be a single entity, that is, the divine essence alone, albeit beheld in various ways – either relationally, negationally, or both. In other words, God’s essence by itself, metaphysically speaking, though objectively considered a certain way, mentally speaking, serves as the truth-maker of such predications. This is unlike in the creaturely case, where, again, what makes it true that ‘Zayd is knowledgeable’ or ‘Zayd is powerful’ is not Zayd himself (i.e., his essence alone) but rather Zayd together with something else metaphysically different from his essence, that is, a qualitative property (we call ‘knowledge’ or ‘power’) inhering in him.²¹

Conceptual identity of divine attributes

The Avicennian account goes further. For in addition to the extensional identity of the divine attributes just discussed, that account is also committed to their conceptual sameness. That is, not only do the notions of knowledge and power, when predicated of God, have a single referent and truth-maker (*miṣdāq*), as we just saw, but such notions, when ascribed to God, also have a single understood content (*mafḥūm*). Thus, according to the Shaykh, even the determinate objective content (*ma’nā*) one conceives from ‘divine knowledge’ is the same as the *ma’nā* one conceives from ‘divine power’ (and likewise with other attributes of perfection). He states:

[T13] Thus, it is not the case that His volition is different in essence from His knowledge, nor different in understood content from His knowledge. And it was shown that the knowledge which He enjoys is identical to the volition that He has, and likewise it was shown that the power that He has ... is not an [additional] attribute of His essence nor a part of His essence. Rather, the *ma’nā* that is the knowledge He has is identical to the power He has (Avicenna 1984, 21).

How are we to understand this conceptual sameness thesis regarding the divine attributes?

Note first that the Shaykh does not say ‘power’ *as such* and ‘knowledge’ *as such* are the same in their formal accounts (*ma’ānī*). Rather, he says it is power and knowledge *as they pertain to the divine essence* – hence *divine* power and knowledge – that have the same *ma’nā*. Thus, the identification is between the natures of power and knowledge as qualified, that is, by a relation to the divine essence, not between the two absolutely taken. So yes, knowledge and power considered in the abstract, that is, apart from the concrete entity they characterize, do not have the same *ma’nā*. But as descriptors of the divine essence, that is, with respect to the divine essence as what they describe (*mawṣūf*), they cannot, given DDS-NT, have distinct *ma’ānī*. For according to the Shaykh, distinct understood contents (*mafḥūmāt*) in the mind entail distinct extra-mental realities to which those notions correspond. Thus, if the understood content of F is different from that of G, then the extra-mental counterpart of F is different from that of G (Avicenna 1992, 112). Hence, if the divine essence, as the arguments for DDS-NT show, is absolutely simple, which is to say lacking all real composition or multiplicity, then different notions, that is, revealing really distinct realities, aren’t extractable by the intellect from that essence alone (cf., Zabihi 2005, 41). Otherwise, there would be, as a matter of fact, some layer of positively real or objective composition embedded within the divine essence prior to the intellect’s reflection on it, serving as the basis of its extractions. And in that case, we don’t really have DDS-NT anymore.

The intellect’s different beholdings of the divine essence, however, is not inconsistent with the objective simplicity of that essence. That is because, for the Shaykh, there’s a distinction between:

(i) F and G are different in meaning (*ma'nā*)

and

(ii) F and G are different in consideration (*i'tibār*)

On the Avicennian view, a *ma'nā* is just some semantic content that is represented by a concept. As such, it is not necessarily mind-dependent, a mental item.²² An *i'tibār*, on the other hand, is a mental act. As such, it is necessarily mind-dependent.

Thesis (i) holds when F and G can be understood independently of each other. That is, if you can understand F without understanding G, then F and G are different in their *ma'nā*. For if they can be understood one without the other, this requires that they have distinct conceptual content, which in turn correspond to distinct realities. Otherwise, that is, if the two can't be so understood, then F and G are different only in consideration. In this case, their positive conceptual content is shared – the difference between them may be that we get F when that single positive content is taken with say a relation, and G with a negation. Further conceptual analysis might then reveal certain, mind-independent priority-posteriority relations between those conceptual considerations (*i'tibārāt*). Thus, with respect to the issue at hand, for the Shaykh to say that the divine attributes are also the same conceptually is to say that they have a single, positive conceptual content in common. And that happens to be: (intrinsic) necessary existence. In other words, if we were to prescind from the negative/relational features of F and G (as they're predicated of God), we would see that they're identical in *ma'nā*, that is, having one, positive conceptual content in common.²³

Given the preceding points, what is disallowed by the Avicennian in the divine case then is (i), but not (ii). This is because, for the reasons mentioned, the former entails objective, positive composition, but not the latter. Accordingly, on the Shaykh's version of DDS, the divine essence can be looked at in different ways (e.g., now as knowing, now as powerful, etc.), but this need not be due to the derivation of distinct *ma'ānī* from it. What it involves instead is beholding different priority and posteriority relations within a single understood content (*ma'nā*) – namely, the divine essence's being a necessary existent. One first beholds it as a (intrinsically) necessary existent, one then views that as knowing, then as powerful, and so on. These considerations have an objective order and, as noted in T1 by the Shaykh, they all amount to that necessity of existence taken with either some relation, or a negation, or both. So understood, none of them impugns the necessity or simplicity (in sense DDS-NT) of the divine essence. For such beholdings of the divine essence, that is, as intrinsic necessary existence, are not, as noted, reflective of different *ma'ānī*.²⁴

So, given DDS-NT, the divine essence, qua the intellectual revelation of something to Itself – whether that thing is its very self or something else – is said to be 'knowing': '[T14] [His knows] in that He intellectually grasps His essence and what His essence necessitates of the modality of the being of the good in the all, ...'. (Avicenna 1984, 20).

And this 'knowledge'-consideration is negational, that is, it is based on taking the divine essence, as the necessary existent, without any connection to matter and its concomitants. As for divine power, that is the divine essence but qua what is revealed to It as admitting Its causal influence, that is, being existentiable by It: '[T15] The power that He enjoys is His essence being an intellecter of the all, an intellection that is the [causal] source of the all, not derived from the all, and a [causal] source in virtue of itself, not dependent on the existence of anything else, ...'. (Avicenna 1984, 21).

This 'power'-consideration is a negation-relation composite, that is, it is based on taking the divine essence as associated with that over which It knows Itself to exercise causal influence. The same reasoning, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to the rest of the divine attributes.

In every case, the conceptual content remains the same, that is, the divine essence as the necessary existent; what differs is the respect in which that content is beheld by the mind – now in a way termed ‘knowing’, now in a way termed ‘powerful’, and so on. The Shaykh concludes the account:

[T16] And hence it’s shown that what is understood from the life, knowledge, power, generosity, and volition that are said of the Necessary Being is one thing. They are neither [additional] attributes of His essence nor parts of His essence. As for life in the abstract, knowledge in the abstract, and volition in the abstract, they are not one in understood content. However, abstractions are mental, and existents are not abstract. Rather, to all what is permissible that it have. And our discussion only concerns Him and the knowledge and power by which it is permissible to describe the Necessary Existent (Avicenna 1984, 21).²⁵

Conceptually, that is, in terms of *ma‘nā*, knowledge and power, as said of the Necessary Existent, are, on independent grounds, the same. Under this consideration, we’re talking about knowledge and power as they extra-mentally exist, that is, as descriptions of some subject. But, knowledge and power generally taken, that is, apart from the specific subject to which they’re applied, are not conceptually the same. Under this consideration, though, we’re talking about knowledge and power as they exist only in the mind, since general things are mind-dependent. Given certain facts about the nature of the subject we apply them to, our application of them to that subject will have to be qualified. For such terms are ambiguous (*mushakki/ak*), not univocal or equivocal. Hence the difference between the divine case and the creaturely case is in our respective predications.

Alright that much should suffice by way of clarifying DDS on the model of the Islamic philosophers in general, and the Avicennian model in particular. Let me now turn to briefly addressing some objections leveled against that account by proponents of DDC.

Against DDS: objections and responses

Recently, two objections to DDS have been presented from some proponents of DDC within the Islamic tradition.

Objection I

One of them goes like this: if the divine attributes of knowledge and power were the same as the divine essence, the two attributes would be identical with each other. And if that were so, then whatever one is true of so is the other. In that case, the divine essence would be subject to the divine power; for the divine essence knows itself. This is problematic; for it would mean the divine power has a causal influence on the divine essence, that is, that it brings the divine essence into being. But clearly, the divine essence, being intrinsically necessary, isn’t subject to divine power. Hence, the range of the two attributes is different. But if so, then the two are not identical. And thus, contra DDS, the two also aren’t identical to the divine essence either.

This argument comes from the Asharite theologian ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdadi in his book on the principles of religion. He writes:

[T15] If His knowledge was His essence, and His power was His essence, His knowledge would be His power, and all His objects of knowledge would be objects of power for

Him. And this entails that His essence would be an object of power for Him, just as it is an object knowledge for Him (Baghdadi 1928, 91).

Some contemporary opponents of DDS who are moved by this argument formulate it as follows (Muhtaroglu 2020, 4–5):

1. God's essence is identical with divine power and knowledge. (divine simplicity thesis)
2. Divine power is identical with divine knowledge. (transitivity of identity)
3. The logical scope of divine power is identical to the logical scope of divine knowledge. (corollary of 2)
4. God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine knowledge. (by definition of divine knowledge)
5. God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine power. (3, 4 the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals)
6. God Himself or His essence cannot be included within the scope of divine power (otherwise it goes against divine eternity and perfection)
7. Divine simplicity thesis is false. (5, 6 contradiction)

Response

In light of the distinctions drawn in the preceding, it should first be noted that the identity claim in 1 is to be understood as 'sufficient for' in the way explained earlier. Accordingly, premise 1 should be parsed in one of two ways. Either saying:

1*. God's essence is identical with divine power^M and knowledge^{M1}

Or as

1** God's essence is identical with divine power^P and knowledge^P

So if we take 1 in sense 1*, and maintain the same senses of knowledge and power throughout the rest of the argument, it would read:

- 1*. God's essence is identical with divine power^M and knowledge^{M1} (divine simplicity thesis)
- 2*. Divine power^M is identical divine knowledge^{M1}. (transitivity of identity)
- 3*. The logical scope of divine power^M is identical to the logical scope of divine knowledge^{M1}. (corollary of 2)
- 4*. God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine knowledge^{M1}. (by definition of divine knowledge)
- 5*. God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine power^M. (3, 4 the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals)
- 6*. God Himself or His essence cannot be included within the scope of divine power^M (otherwise it goes against divine eternity and perfection)
- 7*. Divine simplicity thesis is false. (5, 6 contradiction)

On this reading, premise 2* of the argument in 1*–7* is true. For what it states is something like: that in virtue of which God is causally efficacious is the same as that in virtue of which God is revealed to, that is, the divine essence (= God). However, as for premises 3*–6*, they make no sense, and so aren't even truth-apt (so as to be considered false). For, on this reading divine power^M and knowledge^{M1} is a concrete entity, that is, the divine essence. And for the Islamic philosophers, 'logical scope' is a property of concepts (mental beings). Thus, it

is a category error to ascribe logical scope to a concrete entity. Hence, the argument against DDS in 1*-7* fails.

Alternatively, we can take 1 in sense 1**. Then, again keeping the same senses of knowledge and power throughout, we get:

- 1**. God's essence is identical with divine power^P and knowledge^P (divine simplicity thesis)
- 2**. Divine power^P is identical divine knowledge^P. (transitivity of identity)
- 3**. The logical scope of divine power^P is identical to the logical scope of divine knowledge^P. (corollary of 2)
- 4**. God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine knowledge^P. (by definition of divine knowledge)
- 5**. God Himself or His essence is included within the scope of divine power^P. (3, 4 the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals)
- 6**. God Himself or His essence cannot be included within the scope of divine power^P (otherwise it goes against divine eternity and perfection)
- 7**. Divine simplicity thesis is false. (5, 6 contradiction)

But on this reading, 1** and 2** are unintelligible. If so, 3** can't follow as a corollary from 2**. Thus, this argument, too, fails.

One might balk at the specifications I've made to 'identity' and 'power' and 'knowledge' when explicating the *hukamā's* version of DDS in dealing with the above objection. Why is that an issue though? I mean, suppose someone opposes the theologians (*mutakallimīn*) by urging the following piece of reasoning:

God is a thing

Every thing is subject to divine power

Therefore, God is subject to divine power

The minor premise of this argument is based on Quran 6:19, while its major comes from Quran 11:4. The conclusion says that God falls within the scope of divine power. But, they would agree, that is inconsistent with God's perfection.

How would the Asharite handle this argument? Plausibly, he may deal with it by specifying the middle term, that is, 'thing,' by saying something like: 'in the major it means "the incipient thing" (*hādith*) or "the contingent thing" (*mumkin*), but in the minor it means something else'. Then he'll specify divine power and its scope accordingly.

But if so, the DDS proponent is then well within his epistemic rights to do the same, that is, make relevant specifications, that is, by, for example, distinguishing various senses of (divine) knowledge and knowledge (in dealing with Baghdadi's argument in T1). Nothing about doing that per se is excluded by a commitment to DDS, and especially not when DDS is properly understood. And what the preceding analysis has really shown is that the objection fails to even address the DDS Islamic philosophers defend, since it fails to properly understand it insofar as its premises fail to accurately reflect their distinctive theory.

One might push back again, this time rephrasing the initial objection in terms the Avicennian just employed in clarifying his own account, as follows:

- i*. God's essence is identical with divine power^M and knowledge^{M1} (DDS)
- ii*. Divine power^M is identical divine knowledge^{M1}. (transitivity of identity)

- iii* God's knowledge^P is sufficient for God's power^P (the entailment of 1* and 2* as the author states)
- iv*. God's knowing^P that He is powerful^P over x suffices for God's causing x to exist (=power^P) (the entailment of 3* as the author states)
- v*. God Himself or His essence is included within his knowledge.
- vi*. God's knowledge of himself is sufficient for God's power^P over himself. (3*, 5*)
- vii* God's knowing^P that He is powerful^P over himself suffices for God's causing himself to exist (=power^P) (5*, 6*)
- viii*. God causes himself to exist.
- x*. 1* is false.

Response

First, I didn't say iv* is an entailment of iii*. I said it is a specification of iii*. That is, iv* is a precisification of what iii* states. Second, if that is so, then v* should be read in light of that specification. And when read in its light, v* would really say something like:

v** God knows^P that He is powerful^P over Himself/His essence

And what this means, given what I said earlier, is that God's essence/God Himself is revealed to God *as subject to His causal influence*. Thus, God's essence or Himself being (as v* has it) 'included within His knowledge^P' would mean, given iv*, that God knows^P Himself/His essence as subject to His power^P, that is, as subject to His causal influence. But if so, I don't grant v** at all; for it is decidedly false. To be sure, God of course (I maintain) knows^P Himself, but definitely not as subject to His causal influence. The argument that is laid out in i*-ix* is, therefore, unsound.²⁶

Objection 2

The other objection comes from Taftāzānī in his *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā'id*. There, we get the following, terse *ilzāmī* argument against DDS²⁷: 'And it follows upon you²⁸ ... that the Necessary is not self-subsistent, ... (Taftāzānī 2020, 168).

When unpacked, the line of reasoning in it is said to go like this (Muhtaroglu 2020, 5–6):

- (1) Divine attributes are identical with God's essence. (divine simplicity thesis)
- (2) Divine attributes are dependent beings. (since all attributes are dependent)
- (3) God is a dependent being. (1, 2 the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals)
- (4) God is independent of anything. (by definition of God)
- (5) Divine simplicity thesis is false. (3, 4 contradiction)

Response

There are several ways to address this argument. The one we opt for here, in light of the previous considerations, goes as follows: the DDS proponent would reject (2) as false. For the divine attributes, if DDS is true, are not dependent beings – they are just the divine essence, in the sense specified precisely. Thus, given DDS, they would be independent beings but identical to God. Hence, the argument in (1)–(5) simply begs the question with that premise. This is because that premise already presupposes that attributes (whether divine or not) are additional to the subject they characterize – insofar as they are dependent on it. But, again, that's precisely what DDS denies in the divine case. For the Islamic philosophers, the additionality or identity of an (divine) attribute is no more part of its definition as is its

being originated or eternal. And were the DDS proponent to grant (2), he'd simply be giving up DDS thereby (and there'd be no need to go through the rest of the argument). Hence, it seems to me the only way (3) would follow is if the DDS proponent grants (2), which is to say the only way (3) would be forced upon him is if he holds, inconsistently, that the attributes are somehow *both* identical (i.e., per (1)) and also additional (i.e., presupposed by (2)). But, no proponent of DDS holds that, nor would they do so. Hence, I conclude that Taftāzānī's argument is either unsound or question-begging.

Conclusion

In the present article, I've done two things. First, I explained what DDS amounts to according to the Islamic philosophers – specifically, the Mashshā'īs/Avicennians – in both its negative and positive senses. Second, I presented two classical objections to it that have been recently defended, and offered responses to both, showing that they're no good.

دمحل ال اعاع لولو

Notes

1. Arguably, a group among the Mutazila also held a view like B. According to these folks, to attribute F to God is really to attribute a certain – neither existent nor non-existent – 'mode' or 'state' (*hāl*, pl. *aḥwāl*) to God – e.g., the state of 'being a knower' (*ālmiyya*) or the state of 'being powerful' (*qādiriyya*). For details, see Frank (1982, 258–268).
2. See e.g. Sijistānī (Al-Sijistānī 2011, 77–82), where view A2 is argued against. For further discussion of the Ismaili view in general, see Kars (2019, 23–55).
3. All of them revolve around a notion the Quran renders non-negotiable, i.e. that of '*tanzīh*' or divine transcendence. Accordingly, if we suppose *tanzīh* as a spectrum, its two extremes would be Ismailism (the side of excess) and Atharism (the side of deficiency). Its middle – the virtuous mean – would be the doctrine of the *ḥukamā'*, especially the Avicennians among them (or so I'd argue). However, if one is going to err here, it is better to do so on the side of excess. For, as the First Teacher states somewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, sometimes one extreme is more conducive to the middle than the other.
4. For some of the literature on DDS, see Vallicella (1992, 502–525); Rogers (2000); Brower (2008, 3–30); Dolezal (2011); Hasker (2016, 699–275); and Scharlt (2018, 51–88).
5. In the rest of the article, I'll be using *Mashshā'ī* and Avicennian interchangeably.
6. See Muhtaroglu (Muhtaroglu 2020, 1–12).
7. For the various senses in which something can have parts or be composite according to Islamic philosophers (Saeedimehr 2007, 191–199).
8. One might wonder here: shouldn't the Ismailis be considered proponents of DDS in this DDS-NT sense, since it seems they'd negate all complexity of God? My answer would be: properly speaking, no. For, on their principles, lacking parthood (in one or more senses of 'part') is grounds for a similarity relation with creatures. This is why they insist that God transcends the attributes of both bodies and non-bodily, spiritual entities. For example, Sijistānī (Al-Sijistānī 2011, 44), states in general terms that:

It is obligatory upon the believer, if he wants knowledge of his Creator, that he divest Him from all features of the two [created] worlds. For He, exalted be His majesty, is greatly above that by which the spiritual world is marked – in terms of the negation of attribute[s], of limit, of vision, of being pointed at, of place, and of time. And He is exalted and sublime over that by which the physical world is marked – in terms of attribute[s], limit, vision, place, and time.

Thus, if for Sijistānī a commitment to radical *tanzīh* requires holding that even negations entail some sort of likeness, then by his lights true statements of the form 'x is not F' and 'y is not F' establish a genuine similarity relation between x and y. In this regard, consider the criticism leveled at Mutazili and Twelver Shi'i theologies (accounts with which you'd think – if you didn't know better – he'd sympathize) in Sijistānī (Al-Sijistānī 2000, 91):

Another group are the people of justice (as they claim) from the Mutazila, the Kharijites, and the Rejecters (*rawāfiḍ*) – who uphold the negation of attributes, qualities, and instruments. They don't realize that it [i.e., that negation] doesn't suffice for knowing the true object of worship, since that of which attributes,

qualities, and instruments are negated is some of His creation [i.e., the First Intellect], which it does not befit the majesty of the real Originator to be similar to.

Among the ancients, i.e., outside the Islamic tradition, the Platonist Damascius, from whom the Ismailis seem to have taken, would reject both theses of DDS. See Greig (2020), ch. 5.

9. For example, one might accept that the divine essence has no parts but deny that it can be ascribed attributes such as knowledge, power, volition, etc. Among the ancients, arguably Plotinus denied DDS-PT or, if he accepted it, didn't do so unqualifiedly, i.e., he did so for some properties, like power, but definitely not others, like knowledge.

10. One might challenge the distinction I'm making between the positive and negative theses of DDS by saying something like: the distinction may not be significant as DDS-PT can also be stated in a negative way e.g., 'there's no metaphysical difference between God's essence and attributes'. In response, I'd say the following: the distinction between the two is more than just linguistic. In fact, even saying 'there's no metaphysical difference between God's essence and attributes' itself is enough to show this; for that statement *presupposes* that there are attributes for God, while the content expressed by DDS-NT neither presupposes this nor entails it. For that thesis just denies parthood of God, saying nothing more (either negatively or positively) beyond that. DDS-PT, on the other hand, presupposes that certain kinds of attribute (i.e., attributes of perfection or 'great-making properties', etc.) exist for God, then says something more about the relation between God and said attributes (identity thesis), and then specifies the nature of that relation (see rest of the article). So, the distinction between the two theses is quite significant.

11. I will limit myself to a discussion of two divine attributes, i.e., knowledge and power, given their importance for all Islamic schools in this debate, and also because one argument (in Muhtaroglu 2020) against DDS-PT we'll consider in section II specifically appeals to those two.

12. Here are two examples from two different camps. First is Al-Ghazālī (2021), 202 (who's an Ashari):

For when we say 'God (the exalted)' we have referred to the essence with the attributes, not to the essence independently. For the name 'God' is not truly applicable to an essence reckoned as free from attributes of divinity.

The second is Ibn Taymiyya (2000), 77 (who's an Athari):

Due to this, it may be said '[the attributes] are other than the essence', but not said 'they are other than God'. For the expression 'the essence' evokes its difference from 'the attribute', unlike the name of God the exalted. For it includes the attributes of His perfection.

13. The details of their argument I leave aside.

14. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer raising the issue.

15. My last statement shouldn't be taken as implying that Avicenna endorses Platonic Forms (something he is known to strongly reject). Rather, I'm saying insofar as God, on the Avicennian view, is self-subsistent existence He is also, on that view, self-subsistent knowledge or self-subsistent intellectuality. For, on the Avicennian view, knowledge is immaterial being which, positively speaking, is just intellectuality. I hope to further elucidate this point in another place but grasping this much of it is key to really appreciating DDS-PT as construed by the Islamic philosophers.

16. This is a rejection of the two incorrect interpretations (1 and 3) noted above.

17. i.e. as additional to, or distinct from, the divine essence.

18. Jurjānī (undated lithograph), 480. Towards the end of the passage, Jurjānī says that the essence and attributes are 'identical in reality and different in consideration and concept'. As we'll shortly see though, on the Avicennian view specifically, the divine attributes are also identical in concept, though they differ in consideration.

19. In the tradition, this sort of view is known as the 'proxy (*nijāba*) theory', i.e., of the relation between the divine attributes and essence. It is attributed by some (the earliest seems to be Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī d. 1289 AH/1873 CE) to some of the Mutazila as a distinct theory. However, two things: first, the theory is a version of the DDS-PT thesis, not an independent view alongside it. Second, though some Mutazila held to DDS-PT, there's no evidence that they held to this reading of the identity thesis. For a study of the (erroneous) attribution of this theory to some of them, see Qhaemi and Ahmadvand (2020, 33–57).

20. Another reviewer worries that the Avicennian view seems to reduce the causation relation to the identity relation, which seems incoherent. In response, I would say that's not what has happened. Rather, what's going on is simply this: when the Avicennian says, e.g., God's knowledge is identical to His essence, this means God's essence alone necessarily and sufficiently explains His being knowing. That's a perfectly coherent claim. So, no worries.

21. For a truth-maker account of DDS, see Brower (2008) and Brower (2009); Saenz (2014); Beebe (2019); Prawl (2019); and Saenz (2021). For my part, I think the truth-maker account is basically right, but I would modify it in

several ways (in keeping with Avicennian principles), which ways (I would argue) alleviate some of the concerns raised in the literature just noted. That, however, is a story for another day.

22. For the semantics of *ma'nā* in Avicenna, see Mousavian (2022, 95–140).

23. For further clarification of the conceptual identity thesis in Avicennian theology, see Firuzjāi (2018, 65–83).

24. Saeedimehr (2007, 193) raises two objections about the Avicennian conceptual identity view. The first is this:

As we saw, Ibn Sīnā himself interprets the meanings of each of the divine attributes as denoting His necessary existence along with a special kind of relation or negation. So, one may wonder whether the meaning of each of these attributes could not differ as the result of different considered relations or negation. To put it in a clearer way, it seems that according to Ibn Sīnā's analysis of God's attributes, the aforementioned relations and negations come to be components of the meaning of those attribute terms (when applied to God) and therefore they must have different meanings, since it is evident that each compound must change due to the change of at least one of its components. ...

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The response: what you deem to be a 'different meaning' the Shaykh would deem a 'different consideration' – given how he understands, as explained earlier, what it is for say *x* and *y* to be 'different in meaning' and 'different in consideration'. Thus, the objection, and so the disagreement, seems merely verbal.

The second objection is this:

The other problem with Ibn Sīnā's account is that he gives two distinct meanings of the attribute terms applied to God and man. So, the meaning of 'will' in 'divine will' is not the same as in 'human will'. This claim requires the attribute terms being equivocal when they are applied to God and His creatures and, as seems clear enough, a theory that requires this sort of equivocality would have to be considered a kind of 'negative theology', a view that Ibn Sīnā hardly could accept.

The response: the non-identity in meaning between divine and human will does not by itself entail that 'will' in the two cases is equivocal. It only entails that it is not univocal, which is consistent with the Shaykh's view, according to which 'will' (and other attributes of perfection) is *mushakka'ik* (analogical/ambiguous) as applied to God and creatures. Also, there is, non-problematically, a sense in which Avicennian theology is 'negative' or apophatic, i.e., insofar as it does not recognize any positive (divine) attributes in God other than (intrinsic) necessary existence.

25. Mullā Ṣadrā raises an objection to Avicenna's conceptual identity thesis about the divine attributes. For that objection, see Mullā Ṣadrā (Mulla Sadra 1981), vol. 6, 145. For responses to it, see Zabihi 2005, 41–43, and Firuzjāi 2018, 65–83.

26. Shout-out to the anonymous reviewer who raised the objection.

27. By an *ilzāmī* argument, I mean an argument that forces, on the basis of accepted premises, an untoward consequence upon the interlocutor.

28. i.e., upon proponents of DDS, like (some) Mutazila and the Islamic philosophers.

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