Ibn Sīnā's Negation of Apophatic Theology: Bringing an End to Debates

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Abstract

Although apophatic theology has attracted considerable scholarly attention, studies remain flawed both in terms of research methodology and fragmented analysis, neglecting in-depth examination of prominent philosophers. This study addresses this gap by exploring Ibn Sīnā's perspective, a pivotal figure in Islamic philosophy. Exploring existential, cognitive, and linguistic dimensions of his writings, the study elucidates his approach to theology. This study argues that his theological framework remains integrative and harmonizes apophatic (negative) and positive methods, rejecting absolute negation while affirming the relative capacity of human cognition to comprehend the divine. He acknowledges both the transcendence of God and the limitations of the human intellect, integrating knowledge and ontology to demonstrate that a complete understanding of God and His attributes necessitates both negative and affirmative approaches. While recognizing the necessity of apophatic approaches due to the omnipotence of God and the constraints of human cognition, he diverges in his explanations of God and existence, rejecting the idea of attributing qualities of the Divine to His beings, attributing qualities to God, and emphasizing the apophatic discourse in the cognition of God and His attributes comprehensively.

Keywords

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Introduction

Ibn Sīnā is one of the most influential figures in the history of philosophical thought, especially in the history of Islamic philosophy. This philosopher and renowned physician made significant contributions in various fields such as metaphysics, logic, mathematics, physics, and medicine, leaving behind a legacy that has shaped centuries of intellectual discourse. In the realm of metaphysics, one of the topics that has attracted the attention of thinkers before and after him is apophatic theology. Throughout the history of thought, there has been a current that denies any resemblance between the existence and attributes of the divine with the existence and attributes of beings, refraining from accepting any affirmative knowledge or explanation and going so far as to suggest that humans are incapable of having an affirmative approach to this issue, warning of dangers and harms such as improper assimilation and falling into idolatry. This is called apophatic theology and has a long-standing tradition.

Apophatic theology focuses on what cannot be known or expressed about God, contrasting with positive theology, which addresses what can be affirmed. In Islamic thought, this is often termed *tanzīh* (transcendence/purification), emphasizing God's complete transcendence beyond any human or creaturely likeness. The debate centers on whether understanding God requires *tashbīh* (assimilation), *tanzīh* (transcendence/purification), or a balance of both. This research explores Ibn Sīnā's stance on apophatic theology, analyzing whether he supports it, to what extent, and in what context–whether he solely negates descriptions of God's essence and attributes or also incorporates positive elements. By examining his own works, the study aims to clarify his theological approach and its nuances. The inquiry is motivated by the significance of apophatic theology and its diverse interpretations across intellectual traditions.

Before exploring apophatic theology *(ilāhiyyāt-i tanzīhī),* two key questions must be clarified: 1) Does "theology" here refer only to knowing or speaking about God, or does it extend to ontology, epistemology, and semantics? 2) Does "apophatic" imply absolute negation and transcendence, or a more relative, qualified denial? This distinction is crucial because the term's broad usage has led to varied interpretations, with scholars debating its meaning and even attributing opposing stances to thinkers like Ibn Sīnā. Apophatic theology broadly encompasses various areas, though scholars differ in their approaches. Most Muslim thinkers emphasize God's absolute transcendence and reject any similarity between the Creator and creation, with very few

exceptions. Merely affirming God as a necessary being *(wājib al-wujūd)* does not necessarily make a thinker apophatic, as few extend this reasoning to equate divine and created existence. Simply believing that a thinker rejects comparisons between God and creation is not enough to classify them as apophatic, as this would include nearly all theologians. Apophatic theology is not simply the opposite of positive theology but a nuanced approach balancing human understanding of God with His absolute transcendence. It serves as a method to navigate between knowing God and acknowledging His ineffability beyond all human frameworks.

Literature Review

Scholars have been interested in examining apophatic theology, particularly through the lens of Ibn Sīnā, both exclusively and analogically. A few offer a general overview of negative theology while failing to provide a detailed and specialized examination of the exemplary perspectives. One work (Ali Khani, 2013) provides a cursory review of the views of certain thinkers from Greek, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions–excluding Ibn Sīnā–and before attempting to outline a moderate Quranic approach by citing critiques of negative theology, with a focus on the divine. Another (Abbasian, 2008) explores the multifaceted dimensions of negative theology, distinguishing between God's essence and His attributes from a composite Quranic perspective. Others focus on the epistemological dimension of negative theology by adopting Quranic evidence and prophetic sayings (Afzali, 2007), while a few provide a comprehensive definition of negative theology and proceed to explain its foundational elements (Kakai & Bahrai, 2008) or offer a broad overview of the discussion and its origin (Tawakkuli, 2007; Chase, 2002). The literature also compares Ibn Sīnā's views with those of other thinkers, yet fails to comprehensively address all aspects of negative theology. Some studies focus on speaking about God (Muzaffari, 2018; Abbasi Husayn Abadi, 2016) and the attributes of God (Abbasi Husayn Abadi, 2017), often reducing them to negation and relational frameworks. Others, such as Gurjiyan and Afsharpur (2018), highlight Aquinas's indebtedness to Ibn Sīnā rather than offering an independent exposition of their views.

Among these works, two are specifically dedicated to Ibn Sīnā, but an examination of these reveals that they diverge from the focus of the present study and do not negate the necessity of this research. Some

thinkers (e.g., Nasr Isfahani et al., 2019) have examined the tension between revelatory and rational propositions, seeking to resolve this dilemma, an approach that has drawn some criticism. Others attempt to demonstrate his negative theological stance in the areas of ontology, epistemology, and language. The present study does not accept this view and argues that he cannot be unequivocally regarded as an advocate of negative theology (Tabarai et al., 2018).

Despite appreciating the scholarly efforts and utilizing the findings of existing works, no study has yet been identified that meets the following criteria: 1) Specific focus on Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) rather than a general or comparative analysis; 2), address ontological, epistemological, and linguistic dimensions; and 3), demonstrate Ibn Sīnā's intermediate apophatic perspective and refute the attribution of an absolute commitment to negative theology to him. Hence, the present study seeks to fill in the gap by drawing on three aspects of his writings to reveal his approach.

Existential Aspects

Belief in apophatic theology may be proven, justified, and explained in two ways: one is through the distinction, non-identity, and lack of any similarity between God and His creatures in essence and attributes, and the other is through negating attributes from God.

Diversity

Some thinkers have considered the belief in the distinction/dissimilarity of the existence of God from other beings as a subset of apophatic theology (Tabarai et al., 2018). If we expand the scope of apophatic theology to include this perspective and pass by it due to the lack of contention in the formulation of the term, we must examine the position of philosophers in this matter. However, before that, we need to pay attention to the fact that sometimes the distinction is in the instance, sometimes in the concept, and sometimes in both. In other words, is there a distinction between the existence of God and the existence of creatures, such that there is no identity between the two, or is the concept of existence attributed to God different from the concept of existence attributed to His creatures, and the common verbal existence between these two is not equivocal? The discussion of verbal commonality

regarding the attributes of the Creator and the created beings is similar.

If the belief in the verbal commonality of existence between God and His creatures is considered as a case of apophatic theology, it must be acknowledged that Ibn Sīnā is not among those who advocate for apophatic theology in this regard. He considers the concept of existence to be univocal, not equivocal. In *Dānish-nāmah-yi ʿAlāī* (2020, p. 36), the rejection of verbal commonality or nominal commonality among the ten categories is explicitly stated as follows: "People who do not have a keen perception think that the word 'existence' is common to those ten categories, just as each of those ten things has one name, while the meaning of that name is not one, and this is not correct. For if it were so, our statement about essence would be that it is what exists, and the meaning of the existence of essence would be nothing but the essence itself. Likewise, when it was applied to quality, its meaning would be nothing other than quality. Therefore, if someone says, 'a quality exists,' it would be as if he said, 'a quality of quality.' And when you said, 'an essence exists,' it would be as if you said, 'an essence of essence.'" Ibn Sīnā gives an example of univocal commonality and admits that the existence attributed to distinct things has a unified meaning (Ibn Sin, 1985, p. 10), and elsewhere, using the terms "unified meaning" and "agreed-upon meaning," he expresses the absolute univocal commonality of existence, which includes the Necessary Being (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 34). He also clarifies the analogical nature of the attribution of existence and affirms that the analogical *(tashkīkī)* attribution is derived from the univocal commonality of existence (Ibn Sina, 1991, p. 218).

Ibn Sīnā writes: "The truth is that things share in the existence and subsistence of the concept derived by the mind," and "rather, existence in all of them has a unified meaning in the concept," and furthermore, he considers univocal commonality of existence to be self-evident and beyond explanation, and adds: "And whoever denies it is deceiving himself by diverting his thought from the purpose to elsewhere" (Ibn Sina, 1985, p. 60) At the same time, he mentions a reason for the absolute lack of equivocal commonality of existence, not only among the ten categories, but in general, for the purpose of admonition and not argumentation: "If existence were to fall on what it falls on with the sharing of the name, then the meaning and reality of our saying 'a thing does not go beyond the two sides of a contradiction,' is what was supposed to have two sides, and does not go beyond them" (Ibn Sina, 1991, 219). He reiterates this point in his other works as well (Ibn Sina, 1985, p. 60; 2020, p. 37).

However, judgment regarding the distinction between necessary

existence and contingent creatures is a preliminary matter. It is well-known that the Ashʿarites advocate for the intrinsic diversity of external existences (*Sharh Mantiq al-Hikmat*, p. 24); however, at least in the case of Ibn Sīnā, his statements and evidence indicate that he did not hold such a view and believed in the unity of the reality of existence, not in diversity and multiplicity. He states: "As for the issue in the realm of existence [revealing his skepticism], one must know that existence in the essences of existents does not differ in kind, but if there is a difference, it is due to intensity and weakness. The essences of things that attain existence differ in kind, while what they partake of existence does not differ in kind. For a human being differs from a horse in kind by virtue of its essence, not its existence" (Ibn Sina, 1991, p. 41). In this statement, he explicitly declares the lack of a difference in the kind of existence of beings and emphasizes their analogical distinction, without making any exceptions, but rather asserts the lack of a difference in the kind of existence in an absolute manner, which includes the distinction in the existence of the Creator and the created beings. He clarifies that the difference in kind between a human and a horse is due to their essence, not their existence, which clearly indicates his disbelief in the distinction of existences. Similarly, Ibn Sīnā highlights the absence of distinction in external existences and raises the question of how someone like him can believe in the univocal commonality of the concept of existence and, at the same time, believe in the distinction of external existences. In other words, how can one abstract a unified concept from existences that are completely differentiated?

Furthermore, he has introduced the analogical attribution of the concept of existence to external instances: "And also because existence entails what falls under it with distinction" (Ibn Sina, 1991, p. 218), and distinction in attribution means that the concept of existence does not apply equally to external beings, and external instances in their individuation of existence exhibit differences. However, "The origin of the analogical nature of the term and concept of existence lies in the external reality of instances, not in the concept itself; that is, the analogical nature of the concept of existence arises from the distinction of external existence and is a reason for it, and it makes no sense for someone to consider the concept of existence as doubtful, but not consider external existences as doubtful" (Firuzjai, 2017, p. 90). Finally, it should be added that doubting speculation in external existences is to accept their lack of distinction. Additionally, in a statement recently attributed to him, Ibn Sīnā recalls that if there is a difference between the existences of essences, such as a difference due to intensity and weakness, which is a type of analogical difference, this kind of speculation

is only compatible with the lack of distinction in external existences.

He says: "An existence derived from the other, being related to the other, is dependent upon it, just as independence from the other is essential for necessary existence in itself. An existence that is essential for something cannot be separated from it, as it is innate to it" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 178), and he continues: "Existence is either in need of the other, so its need for the other is essential for it, or it is independent of it, in which case it is not essential for it, and it is not correct for existence that is in need to be independent, just as it is not correct for existence that is independent to be in need, otherwise their realities would change and alter" (p. 179). These statements are used to show that Ibn Sīnā "has raised the difference in existence to independence and need concerning cause and effect, and in this way, he has explicitly stated the analogical difference in the existence of cause and effect." (Firuzjai, 2017, p. 91) In this statement, he acknowledges that we are faced with two types of existence: One is the necessary existence in itself that is independent, and the other is the existence related to the other that is needy, and this independence and need are essential for these two types of existence. Therefore, the commonality of these two types of existence lies in their existence, and their difference lies in the manner of their existence. In other words, our encounter with the commonality and difference of these two types of existence is within existence itself, not elsewhere, and this kind of difference is an analogical difference. Now, since he believes in the analogical difference between the necessary existence in itself *(wājib al-wujūd bi-al-dhāt)* and possible existence in itself *(mumkin al-wujūd bi-al-dhāt)*, how can he also believe in their distinction in existence?

In support of this, it is appropriate to mention the views and interpretations of several later philosophers after Ibn Sīnā regarding his perspective on this subject. Mullā Ṣadrā who in some cases strongly criticized the views of the Peripatetics, including Ibn Sīnā, and disagrees with them, states the following: "Thus, there is no contradiction between what we have arrived at regarding the unity of the reality of existence and the distinctions of its levels in terms of precedence, posteriority, certainty, and weakness, and what the proponents of the philosophy of the ancients have arrived at in terms of the difference in their realities upon examination" (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 7). As is evident, Mullā Ṣadrā did not consider attributing the diversity of the realities of existence, or the distinction between beings, to the Peripatetics as accurate, and he understands their intention to be the distinctions of the levels of existence *(marātib-i wujūdī)* or analogical difference.

Ḥāj Mullā Hādī Sabzvārī, who attributes the perspective of

distinction among existences to the Peripatetics in his comprehensive work, after mentioning the viewpoint of Suhrawardī on the unity of the reality of light, writes the following in his annotations: "And the statements of the Chief Shaykh in *al-Shafā* and *al-Mabāḥith* call for the fact that the disyinction of existences is not in their essence, but in their corresponding essences, and that existence accepts intensity and weakness, and the two different realities are not one intense and the other weak, rather, the claim of distinction on its surface is considered absurd, as existence is simple. If the levels of existence were to differ, their essences, such as light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance, power and impotence, would also differ. If that were the case, it would necessitate confusion in knowledge and praise" (Sabzvari, 2009, p. 391).

Sabzvārī, in this statement, explicitly states that not only did he not interpret distinction from the teachings of Avicenna in his two books, but he also understood speculation, and furthermore, he considers the assertion of distinction to be so absurd that it requires looking beyond its surface. Among contemporaries, Muṭahharī (1990, p. 240) expresses that in all of Ibn Sīnā's works, there is no evidence of the multiplicity of distinction among existences. He also states that within the works of Ibn Sīnā, who is renowned as the leader of the Peripatetics, there are sentences that are completely contrary and opposed to the perspective of the distinction of existences.

However, if someone, holding on to this statement by Ibn Sīnā, "Thus, it is necessary that each single category of beings be distinguished from the other in itself, like blackness from whiteness" (Ibn Sina 1991, p. 218) strives to claim that he believed in the essential distinction of beings, it must be said in response that such an interpretation of this statement is not accurate. The inappropriateness of such reasoning lies in the intention of using "beings" as references to essences that have become manifest in existence. The evidence for this claim is provided by examples he mentioned: blackness and quantity. In fact, in this statement, he is attempting to express the point that essences existing in a general matter, whose essence and nature are essential, do not share a commonality and thus have intrinsic distinctions, and the commonality of such essences is necessary and non-essential. He does not consider existence as a quidditative or generic matter, and therefore, the essence or nature of any of the beings is not essential, but rather something outside of their essence, yet necessary for their essence. Therefore, existence for the essence of certain beings is something external and necessary, and these beings are innately distinct in their nature, not in their existence as beings (Firuzjai, 2017, pp. 93-94). What

confirms the appropriateness of this interpretation is this statement: "For a human being differs from a horse in kind due to its essence, not its existence." (Ibn Sina, 1991, p. 41) Furthermore, other statements by Avicenna can support the assertion of the essential distinction between God and other beings, some of which are mentioned below.

"His existence is distinct from all other existences, and His rationality is distinct from all other rationalities, for His rationality is that He is from Himself, that is, He is the primal and highest source for it, and the rationality of others is that He is present within them, that is, that He is the enabling principle of their being" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 472). In this statement, he clarifies that the necessary existence is distinct from the rest of the beings, just as His rationality is distinct from all other rationalities. Regarding the reason for the distinction between the rationality of the Necessary Being and the rest of the rationalities, he explains that the rationality of the Necessary Being is the active principle, while the rationality of the non-necessary is the passive principle. He further states: "The existence of every being is for the First, because it emanates from Him, and His existence is for Himself, so His existence is distinct. There is nothing of the same kind as His existence, and He is the meaning referred to outside His existence for others. He is not a participant in His own existence, which is specific to His existence, and the perfection of His existence is the same as the meaning of His existence. His perfection is that He is not a participant in His own existence" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 472). In this statement as well, he has expressed the distinctiveness of the Necessary Existence, as he also mentions the non-participation of anything with the Necessary Existence in its own existence. Some may interpret the phrase "There is nothing of the same kind as His existence" as an indication of the lack of similarity between the Necessary Existence and the existence of other beings, and the complete distinctiveness of these two from each other.

However, careful attention to these statements and others by Avicenna reveals the intended meaning behind his interpretations and makes his intention of distinction apparent. He has another statement that is similar to the first statement, but has a continuation that clarifies his intention further. Furthermore, other statements by him can be used to support the assertion of essential distinction between God and other beings, some of which are mentioned below: "Just as the existence of the First is distinct from the existence of all beings in themselves, so too is His rationality distinct from the rationality of all beings; and similarly, all His states cannot be compared from one of His states to another, so it is necessary to understand this in order to be safe from likening Him, may

He be exalted, to anything else" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 472). While Avicenna acknowledges a shared essence of existence between the Necessary Being (God) and contingent beings, he emphasizes their fundamental distinction to avoid likening God to creation. He argues that although both possess existence, the Necessary Being's independent, self-sustaining nature sets it apart from dependent beings. Similarly, while God's attributes (like knowledge) differ in perfection from those of His creatures, this does not imply absolute dissimilarity–there remains some conceptual commonality, just not identity.

When Ibn Sīnā asserts God's distinctiveness, he means that the Necessary Being's existence is self-derived and unique–not shared with or dependent on any other being–while contingent beings derive their existence from Him. His emphasis on distinction does not imply absolute separation, as he also affirms that all existence flows from God, suggesting an ontological connection. Additionally, Ibn Sīnā's use of terms like "distinct" does not always denote complete difference, as seen in his other writings where he rejects numerical multiplicity in the divine essence (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 322).

Ibn Sīnā distinguishes the Necessary Being's existence from contingent beings by framing it as an active, self-derived principle, while contingent beings are passive and dependent on the First Cause (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 276). He clarifies that this difference lies in the mode of existence (independent vs. dependent) rather than in the essence of existence itself, emphasizing that while both share the meaning of existence, they are unequal–the Necessary Being's existence is self-sustained, whereas contingent beings derive theirs from it (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 276). This "distinction" reflects an ontological hierarchy, not absolute separation, as the Necessary Being remains the source from which all existence flows (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 276).

Ibn Sīnā mentions the difference in existence based on its nature in the following terms: precedence and posteriority, self-sufficiency and need, and necessity and possibility. In other words, the difference in existence between a causal entity and its effect falls into three categories of difference: the difference between what comes first and what comes later, the difference between what is self-sufficient and what is needy, and the difference between what is necessary and what is possible. Regarding the difference in precedence and posteriority, since the existence of the effect is derived from the existence of its cause, the existence in the initial stage is for the cause and then for the effect. In other words, the existence of the cause is primary, and the existence of the effect is posterior. Additionally, in terms of the difference in self-

sufficiency and need, it is evident that the cause is not in need of its effect for its existence; rather, it is either completely independent of the effect or in need of another cause, and in any case, it is not in need of its effect.

As for the difference in necessity and possibility, it is clear that if a cause is the cause for every effect, then it is absolutely necessary in comparison to all effects, and if the cause is specific to a particular effect, then it is naturally necessary in comparison to that specific effect. In both cases, the effect can possibly exist and takes its necessity from its cause, but the cause in no way takes its necessity from its effect; it either does not take its necessity from another source, or if it does, that source will not be its effect. With this explanation, the difference between a causal entity and its effect becomes clear: If the cause is necessary in essence, then the necessity of its essence and the possibility of its effect exist, and if the cause is necessary in relation to something else, then the cause has necessity in comparison to its effect, but the effect has inherent possibility. Therefore, the necessity of the effect is always derived from the cause, but the necessity of the cause is never derived from its effect (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 277-278).

To clarify further, it should be noted that sometimes distinction stands opposite to similarity and sometimes opposite to likeness. Therefore, merely encountering the interpretation of difference or distinctiveness does not necessarily imply a denial of similarity but may indicate a denial of likeness. Considering the entirety of Ibn Sīnā's statements and foundations guides the reader of his works towards the understanding that his intention of distinction between the necessary being and contingent beings is a rejection of likeness rather than a rejection of similarity. This is why, in one of the previous statements, he explicitly stated that the reason for advocating distinction is to prevent the intellect from likening the Necessary Being to contingent beings. In other words, Ibn Sīnā asserts an intermediary foundation between complete distinction between the necessary and the contingent and between the likeness of the necessary to the contingent, which means accepting similarity while acknowledging the fundamental difference between the necessary and contingent existence.

It should be noted that it is not rational for someone to simultaneously accept two conflicting principles: The similarity between a causal entity and its effect and the complete and absolute distinction between the necessary and the contingent. Now, considering the contradictions between these two principles, if Ibn Sīnā believes in the complete distinction between the necessary being and contingent beings, he

cannot at the same time believe in the existence of similarity between the necessary and the contingent. However, later points indicate his belief in the similarity between the necessary and the contingent. The first evidence is related to the external distinction of existences: Can one believe in the external distinction of existences in the sense that all existences share a common essence but differ in the intensity and weakness of existence, while having no commonality among themselves and having complete distinction between them?

Ibn Sīnā's statements about the Necessary Being as the superior source of existence–where the giver's reality exceeds the recipient's (Ibn Sina, 1984, pp. 268 & 270, 278)–contradict the notion of complete distinction between the Necessary and contingent beings. His emphasis on the shared "reality of existence" and the principle that "the giver of a thing is not devoid of it" (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 278) implies an ontological connection, not absolute separation. This argument suggests that while the Necessary Being transcends contingent beings hierarchically, it cannot be wholly divorced from them in essence. Thus, Ibn Sīnā's framework allows for distinction without total dissimilarity.

Ibn Sīnā's assertion that the Necessary Being's existence–along with His attribute of goodness–appears in everything (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 472) contradicts the claim that he upheld the absolute distinction between the Necessary and contingent beings. Some scholars mistakenly equate the Necessary Being's lack of shared essence with total separation, overlooking Ibn Sīnā's nuanced distinction: While rejecting ontological partnership, he acknowledges a derived similarity between the Necessary Being and contingent beings. By emphasizing the Necessary Being's unique causality and transcendence, he avoids likening it to creation without denying all relationality. A holistic reading of Ibn Sīnā's works confirms that his "distinction" denotes hierarchical distinction, not utter dissimilarity.

Attributes of the Divine

One of the questions that can challenge apophatic theologians in the realm of ontology is whether, regardless of whether humans can know God's attributes or describe him, and whether God possesses any attributes all? Throughout the history of thought, two major answers have been given to this question: One is that God does possess attributes, and the other is the negation of attributes from God. The second group, in a sense, falls among the proponents of apophatic

theology. They deny attributes such as knowledge, power, will, and life from God because they believe that proving independent and additional attributes for God would lead to associating partners with Him and affirming the existence of more than one God (Shahristani, 2000, p. 60).

Now, we must see what Ibn Sīnā's response to this question is. To find this answer, we need to delve into the aspects that Ibn Sīnā discusses regarding the necessary attributes of the necessary existence by virtue of itself. In his various and diverse works, he extensively delves into the discussion of the necessary attributes and addresses general aspects such as definition, division, addition or essentiality, change in divine attributes, and the conceptual and practical unity of these attributes with the essence, as well as specific aspects such as presenting each attribute individually and its meaning. Exploring these aspects is beyond the scope of this article. What is important and decisive for this paper can be found in three sections of Ibn Sīnā's discussions: One in the division of attributes and its comparison with divine attributes, another in the mention of each individual divine attribute, and the third in the discussion of the rulings of the divine attributes.

In his *al-Taʿlīqāt*, Ibn Sīnā divides the attributes of objects into four general categories: first, essential attributes such as being physical for a human; second, accidental attributes such as describing an object as white; third, essential attributes such as describing a human as knowledgeable; and fourth, relational attributes such as being a father or being on the right side. It is then mentioned that there is a fifth category of attributes that falls outside of these four categories, which is, in fact, not an attribute but rather being without attributes, such as describing a stone as dead, where being dead is not something other than the absence of life in the stone. Furthermore, it is stated that the Necessary Being does not have essential attributes in the sense of being inherent in His essence and being a part of His essence, but He does have essential attributes in another sense. Similarly, He does not have accidental attributes but has additional attributes and being without attributes (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 566).

After explaining that negations and additions, meaning negative and additional/positive attributes, do not lead to multiplicity in the essence, Ibn Sīnā concludes: "The necessary attributes of the Necessary Being are either necessary for Him, so there is no multiplicity in them as mentioned, or they are accidental to Him from an external source, and this is either in an additional/positive sense or in a negative sense, so there is no multiplicity in them" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 569) Upon careful

consideration of this matter, it becomes clear that Ibn Sīnā, in addition to positive and negative attributes, also affirms essential attributes for the Necessary Being, but not in a way that would imply there are parts to His essence and lead to composition in His essence. Therefore, it cannot be said that he, like some others, absolutely denies attributes from the essence of the Necessary Being.

(b) In numerous instances, Ibn Sīnā has affirmed attributes for the Necessary Being and provided explanations about them. It is unnecessary to explain that all of these attributes are not merely negations or additions. Some of these attributes are highlighted: The Necessary Existence is the Perfect Existence, meaning on the one hand, He possesses all perfections potentially, and on the other hand, He has an essential necessity of existence. Additionally, the Necessary Existence is the Most Perfect, meaning it is the source of existence for all beings and their perfections (Ibn Sina, 1985, p. 355). The Necessary Existence by virtue of itself *(wājib al-wujūd bi-al-dhāt)* is pure goodness (Ibn Sina, 2985, p. 355). He is the truth, and there is nothing truer than Him. Similarly, the Necessary Existence is pure intellect (Ibn Sina, 1985, p. 356). In a section on metaphysics, Ibn Sīnā proves and explains the attributes of the will, power, wisdom, and existence for God (Ibn Sina, 2020, pp. 379-387). He also discusses the attribute of life for the Necessary Being (see chapters five and six, Ibn Sina, 1985). In another instance, he attributes certain qualities to the Necessary Being and writes: "So the Necessary Existence, who is at the pinnacle of perfection, beauty, and glory, who conceives His essence with that pinnacle of beauty, and perfection, with complete understanding, and with the rational and reasonable conception that they are one in reality, His essence to Himself is the greatest lover and beloved, and the greatest refuge and delight" (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 369). Lastly, it is necessary to mention another attribute that Ibn Sīnā has detailed in various works: knowledge of self and other than self (see chapters six and seven, Ibn Sina, 1984)

(c) Another piece of evidence indicating that Ibn Sīnā does not deny the existence of attributes for God and does not consider the attributes of God to be limited to negative or additional attributes are the discussions where he speaks about attributes. For example, he explains the simplicity and non-composition of the divine essence and states that the multiplicity of necessary attributes does not lead to multiplicity in His essence: "The First does not multiply for the sake of the multiplicity of His attributes because when each of His attributes is realized, the other attributes are realized in relation to it, so His power is his life, and his life is his power, and they are one, for He is living in that He is

powerful, and powerful in that He is living, and likewise are all His attributes" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 118). Similarly, when he explains the meaning of the Necessary Existence in essence and its attributes, it becomes evident in his words that he affirms attributes for the Necessary Being: "The meaning of the Necessary Existence in essence is the essence itself, and that it is necessarily existent by virtue of itself *(wājib al-wujūd bi-al-dhāt)*, and that each of His attributes actually does not contain power, possibility, or potentiality. So, when we say He is choosing and He is powerful, we mean that in reality He has always been and always will be, and we do not mean what people commonly understand from them" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 121)

As evidenced by these passages from Ibn Sīnā's works, it can be clearly understood that he firstly affirms attributes for the Necessary Existence in essence, and secondly, some of these attributes are not negative.

Cognitive Aspects

This section examines whether human beings can attain knowledge of God's necessary existence and attributes, focusing on Ibn Sīnā's perspective: Does he view such knowledge as purely unattainable or as a mix of negation and affirmation? Two key distinctions are noted: 1) Knowledge can be either comprehensive (grasping essence) or superficial (partial understanding), and 2) knowledge often combines negative and positive elements, potentially offering a fuller understanding than purely one-sided approaches. The analysis seeks to determine if Ibn Sīnā's epistemology allows for meaningful, albeit limited, knowledge of the divine.

Ibn Sīnā asserts that humans cannot grasp the true nature of things–including tangible elements like water or fire–as they only perceive qualities and appearances, not essential realities (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 71). This limitation extends to divine knowledge, as he explicitly states humans cannot comprehend the "reality of the First" [God] (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 72), reinforcing his view that metaphysical truths transcend human understanding. His skepticism about knowing even physical realities underscores the greater impossibility of fully knowing God's essence.

However, it should be noted that what he denies in these instances is not the possibility of affirmative knowledge of God, even in a general and superficial sense. Instead, in such cases, Ibn Sīnā is attempting to

express the limitation of human capability to understand the essence and reality of God, as he has stated similarly in another instance: "The First cannot be comprehended by the senses and the true essence of human intellect" (Ibn Sina, 2012, p. 560) Referring to the works of Ibn Sīnā and carefully examining his statements, some of which are mentioned in this paper, shows that he considered a general and comprehensive knowledge of God to be possible for humans and he himself sought to elucidate this through various explanations and arguments.

Ibn Sīnā pursued a balanced approach, affirming both divine transcendence and limited human knowledge of God while avoiding extremes: complete agnosticism or anthropomorphic assimilation (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 343). His discourse combines negation and affirmation to acknowledge reason's partial capacity to know God while preserving divine incomparability, as seen in his insistence that the Necessary Being shares no rank or existence with creation (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 37). This dual emphasis reflects his caution against either denying reason's role or overstating its grasp of God's essence. Ibn Sīnā employs both affirmative and negative theology when describing God, affirming His omniscience and causal role (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 358) while negating all creaturely attributes (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 354). He paradoxically denies "proof" for God–rejecting finite categories–yet presents Him as the self-evident source of all existence. This dual approach balances rational demonstration of divine causality with apophatic reverence for God's transcendence.

Ibn Sīnā's works demonstrate a dual approach to divine knowledge: While affirming the human reason's capacity to attain a limited positive understanding of God's attributes, he consistently emphasizes divine transcendence and the intellect's inability to fully comprehend God's essence. Rejecting purely negative theology as insufficient, he combines positive and apophatic methods–asserting divine attributes like knowledge while rigorously negating any creaturely limitations or comparisons. This balance is particularly evident in his treatment of God's necessary existence, where he affirms divine omniscience yet denies its similarity to mutable human knowledge, maintaining both God's perfection and ineffability.

Linguistic Aspects

This section examines whether language can positively describe God's essence and attributes or must rely solely on negation. Focusing on Ibn Sīnā, the analysis reveals that he never restricted himself to purely

negative theology, as evidenced by his extensive affirmative discussions of divine attributes throughout his works. The preceding sections' content demonstrates his balanced approach, combining both positive descriptions and apophatic denials when speaking about God. Ibn Sīnā employs both negative and positive language about God, rejecting pure negation as insufficient for comprehensive theological discourse while simultaneously safeguarding divine transcendence against anthropomorphic comparisons. His approach aligns with mainstream Islamic philosophy, which avoids absolute affirmation or negation when describing God's attributes. Thus, if apophatic theology requires exclusive negation, Ibn Sīnā cannot be classified as purely apophatic, as his method integrates both modes to balance knowability and transcendence.

Findings

The negation in this paper, within the context of negative theology, does not imply absolute negation. By examining the three dimensions discussed in the paper, we can avoid framing negative theology as the direct opposite of positive theology. Ibn Sīnā's approach serves as an exemplary model, as his method seeks to balance the possibility of human cognition with the transcendence of the divine realm. This means that while human cognition is possible, it is inherently relative. Thus, we both recognize and do not recognize God in a relative sense, and Ibn Sina has not solely spoken about God and His attributes using a negative method, but has also utilized the positive approach. He does not advocate an absolute distinction between the existence of God and His creations. He is not a denier of the attributes of God and actually affirms certain attributes for God. The reason for his approach is that Ibn Sīnā believes that only this combination is sufficient and necessary for the limited human intellect to grasp and express the knowledge of God and His attributes adequately and comprehensively. He accepts both the absolute transcendence of God and the limitations of human cognitive ability, acknowledging the inadequacy and insufficiency of the negative method in expressing all that can be known and articulated about God. Therefore, in his view, a complete and satisfactory account of God and His attributes must encompass both positive and negative methods, as both are necessary for a full and comprehensive understanding and expression of the divine essence and attributes.

Through an examination of Ibn Sīnā's discourse on divine essence and attributes, we observe that he utilizes knowledge and ontology – positioning the human as the knowing subject and God as the object of

knowledge – to navigate both apophatic and positive approaches. This forms the foundational discussion of the paper. Thus, considering the knower requires no parallelism and acknowledging the divine's hidden essence necessitates no absolute coordination. If someone is labeled as adhering to apophatic theology, meaning they only believe in the possibility of purely negative knowledge of God and His attributes, and they deny the possibility of any positive knowledge and speech about it, then surely Ibn Sīnā is not in agreement with apophatic theology.

◨ **Conflict of Interests**

◨ The authors declare no competing interests.

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