

# AVICENNA ON THE *IMPOSSIBILIA*: *THE LETTER ON THE SOUL* REVISITED

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ABSTRACT: Jean R. Michot edited, introduced, and studied a short treatise, titled “The Letter on the Disappearance of the Vain Intelligible Forms after Death” (or *The Letter* for short). Following O. Ergin, G. C. Anawati, Y. Mahdavi, and for two reasons of his own, Michot attributed *The Letter* to Avicenna. He rightly pointed out that *The Letter* is significant and interesting “because, while concerned with an eschatological question, it refers to fundamental psychological, epistemological and metaphysical topics”. Deborah Black, who afterwards scrutinized *The Letter* and discovered deep philosophical and logical problems with it, provided an interpretation of Avicenna’s view on “fictional beings”, e.g., the *phoenix*, on its basis. In a passing note, however, Dimitris Gutas raised serious doubt on the authenticity of *The Letter*. Yet in another recent study, Thérèse-Anne Druart suggested using a different interpretation of Avicenna’s epistemology developed by Jon McGinnis, according to which divine emanation collaborate with “real” abstraction in human intellection, to resolve the “apparent difficulties” or “incoherencies” of *The Letter*. Last but not least, before the genesis of the recent literature on *The Letter*, al-Ḥā’irī al-Māzandarānī, in his classic study of Avicenna had speculated that *The Letter* is written by Abū-‘Abd-Allāh Ma’sūmī, Avicenna’s disciple, on an examination occasion.

Here, I will confine my attention to the study of the philosophical content of *The Letter*. *The Letter* “argues” for a basic principle according to which the impossible forms (or the *impossibilia*) are both imaginable and intelligible, attempts to explain how one can “intellect” the *impossibilia* and concludes that after death the *impossibilia* dissolve from the rational soul and one cannot “intellect” (apprehend) them again. My main question is this: As far as the philosophical and logical content of *The Letter* is concerned, is *The Letter* consistent with Avicenna’s view in his major works? I will give a negative answer to this question for four reasons: First, *The Letter*’s alleged explanation of how one “intellects” the *impossibilia* is not in alignment with Avicenna’s explanation of how one “apprehends” the *impossibilia*. Second, *The Letter*’s “argument” for the claim that the *impossibilia* are intelligible because they are universal does not employ Avicenna’s notion of universality. Third, *The Letter*’s structure is incoherent in a way that Avicenna’s view is not. The problem of internal incoherency of the *Letter* is not the problem of overdetermination of the *impossibilia* as intelligible *ma’ānī* through emanationist and abstractionist ways of cognition. The issue, rather, is that the only way that these *ma’ānī* can be conceived is through the faculty of imagination, broadly construed, and *The Letter* disproves this very statement after approving it. And fourth, *The Letter*’s central presumption, that is, after death the faculty of the imagination will no longer be active, is questioned by Avicenna, at least on two different occasions. Unless one supposes that Avicenna changed his views on a range of fundamental topics such as intelligibility, universality, estimation, and imagination, in a single short treatise (for which there is no independent evidence), it can reasonably be concluded that *The Letter* is not Avicenna’s and hence should not be relied upon in interpreting his philosophy.